60 years of progress?

Elizabeth’s Britain

Hacking scandal: it will spread
Will Self: seduced by advertising
Eliot Spitzer: back from disgrace
Stephanie Flanders: the Occupy verdict
Richard Dawkins: betraying Darwin
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In the 60 years since Princess Elizabeth acceded to the throne, Britain has become a better place to live. More people think that than think the opposite (see YouGov’s extensive survey for Prospect, p38); those under 40, and in London and the south, are markedly more cheerful. Those who demur might read, in Simon Jenkins’s panorama (p30), his reminder of past attitudes to women, children and gay rights and to actions now defined as crime. It is easy to forget how much has changed.

True, Britain has lost most of the rest of its empire in that time; its military has shrunk; its population soared, and its countryside become more cluttered. These have provoked a real sense of loss. As Peter Kellner puts it (p38), the polls paint a picture of a country that is “nervous, and small ‘c’ conservative.” Many cite immigration as its worst feature, the most startling result of the survey. But pride in a tradition of liberty and a culture of tolerance and openness to the world is also loud (p40).

Is that a contradiction? Yes, of a peculiarly British kind. In the national identity, there has long been a tussle between apparently incompatible strands. The worldly individualism that has led to the pre-eminence of the City has always vied with the belief in community that underpins the National Health Service. The independence that (rightly) kept Britain out of the euro has fought with a desire of tighter regulation, set aside those values at the heart of British life. At its worst, that national ability to walk both sides of the line produces paralysis, mediocrity and an insidious disdain for change. At its best, it represents resilience and a rebuff to extremism. It is striking that each political party could read in these poll results support for its own most passionate themes. But it is the particular tragedy of the Lib Dems that although they stand for the freedoms which so many cite as the country’s finest quality, they have failed to turn that into a strong political voice. They could still do so. In the necessary reviews of the role of the City and media now underway, it would be regrettable if ministers, in pursuit of tighter regulation, set aside those values at the heart of British life.

Voicing those principles may now be Britain’s most valuable contribution abroad. Europe faces in acute form the growing problem of western democracies: how to hold on to their values during radical economic change. Oliver Kamm and Victor Sebestyen (p18 and p19) warn of the EU’s weakness in defending its own values; as Victor puts it, if it remains silent in the face of the latest assault on political freedoms in Hungary, it is hard to see what it is for. That is a point which William Hague, as foreign secretary, should make. The Diamond Jubilee celebrates not just the longevity of a monarch but the endurance of values central to British identity, which are absent or under threat in much of the world.
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JUNE 2012 · PROSPECT · 5
If I ruled the world
Jon Snow

Give power back to the people

If I ruled the world, I’d try to recognise my limitations and deal with the local—my family, my community, my local council, my country. I’d hope that by doing so I would inspire others to do the same, and so help construct a more rational world.

Robin Cook described Britain in 1994, as “the most centralised state in Europe.” Nothing much has changed since, despite Scottish and Welsh devolution. I recently travelled to Rome sitting next to an MP who talked to me about his constituency workload. When we dissected his responsibilities, he agreed that local councillors should be dealing with over 80 per cent of what he is doing.

Why are those councillors fuelling MPs’ postbags with issues that should have been resolved at the local level? It is largely because they are powerless, poorly paid (if at all), and almost invariably have a mandate of often well under 30 per cent of those eligible to vote. They are, in any case, subject to the whims and wills of central government and can do little or nothing to resist. Neither they nor we wield much influence on our local lives.

I would change this by giving local government the capacity to raise revenue in taxes. The current level of council tax is centrally influenced and capped. It represents little more than 20 per cent of local authority needs. Local taxation raises the awareness of the taxpayer to local expenditure. If voters felt they had the power of local influence, would they not become more politically engaged? Doesn’t the capitalist system tell us that money is power? The central provision of health, education, and security seems to leave political control feeling remote, incapable of responding to local need and demand.

In my new localised world, beyond defence, foreign affairs, and strategic economic planning, national government would be about handing power back to the people. Organic, bottom-up reform would deliver local leaders and town halls with real influence. The United Kingdom would thus become the sum of its parts, rather than the current disempowered parts of it sum. As the experiences of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish devolution indicate, dispersing power from the centre works.

This is a model that would work internationally. If we continue to ignore the power and importance of the local, we shall inherit a very dysfunctional global community. I would toil to concentrate the European Union on its original concept—a Europe of the regions. History speaks well of Catalonia, Bavaria, our own Highlands and Islands regions and Devon and Cornwall. These are regions that have profited from European economic development, but they are also the spheres in which political association is made possible. This is not about the Big Society; this is a rediscovery of the Small Society, the community, and the extended family—humankind’s most natural organic existence.

For myself, in my present locality, where I do not rule, I live, work, and nurture the NGO that I chair in one London borough. But my dealings with local power, such as it is, are limited, and almost all such dealings are driven from the centre. At home, my council tax is essentially centrally ordained. I have never been offered the chance to affect how money is spent in my local neighbourhood. The project for the homeless I chair has warm relations with local power, but the money we receive is largely centrally dictated and directed, even if delivered by local officials. Many of them yearn to change to the rules, but those rules flow from Whitehall. Our project works with young homeless people. We provide “day support” that is accepted by our local council as vitally needed, but Whitehall’s funding is only interested in the hostels to house them.

The school where I was a governor, and where my children were taught, has been largely purged of either local regulation on funding—the ministry is God. And my doctors’ surgery, and the hospitals it feeds, are governed from the centre. The individual doctors guarantee its brilliance in spite of the burgeoning bureaucratic burden flowing from the centre.

If I ruled the world I might have to keep going back to the drawing board, but at least I’d be sharing power and engagement with the people I live amongst. I might even find myself having to talk to the neighbours about what we could do together to manage and improve our lives.

Jon Snow is presenter of Channel 4 News, and the chair of the New Horizon Youth Centre.
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Prospect recommends

Six things to do this month

Theatre

Gatz
Noël Coward Theatre, London, 8th June-15th July

The scene: morning in a shabby, empty 1980s office with clunky desktop PCs and brick-sized mobile phones. A man enters, sits at his desk and tries to switch on his computer. Fails. Tries again. Fails again.

Going through the papers on his desk he comes across a paperback, and for want of anything else to do, opens it and begins reading aloud. Some eight hours later he finishes with “And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” The book is F Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby and this bravura production comprises a complete reading of its text. The narrator is joined by a dozen other colleagues. Absorbed at first in their office work, they soon become drawn into personifying and voicing Gatsby’s characters.

The experience is compelling and intimate, not so much watching a dramatisation as collaborating in an intensifying reading. Its morality tale of idealism and ecstatic materialism in 1920s New York and Long Island is more inventive and poignant (and funny) for the physical absence of cloche hats and cocktails. Yes, the whole performance lasts eight hours (including three intervals). No, it’s not a minute too long. Ian Irvine

Poetry Parnassus
Southbank Centre, 26 June-1st July

What is the difference between a poem and a song? In a spoof YouTube video the Pulitzer prize-winning poet Paul Muldoon wryly claimed to detect an allusion to King Lear in the lyrics of Ke$ha’s hit song “TiK ToK” (sample lyric “oh oh oh”). But he will reflect on the question more seriously this year when he delivers the Poetry Society’s Annual Lecture, “The Word on the Street—Parnassus and Tin Pan Alley.” Muldoon’s poetry, laced with obscure words and far-flung puns, has earned him the nickname the “Puck of Princeton” (where he teaches) and he is just as bracing as a lecturer.

His address will be a highlight of the Poetry Parnassus, a six-day festival of poetry at the South Bank Centre, presided over by Simon Armitage. Planned to coincide with the Olympics, poets from all 204 countries represented in the games will gather for a marathon of readings, essays and workshops. Fittingly, there will be a tribute to Ted Hughes, who championed foreign writers as co-founder of the journal Modern Poetry in Translation. “The amazing boom of translation,” Hughes told The Paris Review in 1995, had had the greatest effect on poets after the war, including his wife Sylvia Plath: “And she never heard the Beatles.”

David Wolf

Wittgenstein: philosopher and photographer

Exhibition

Wittgenstein—Philosophy and Photography
Atrium Gallery, London School of Economics, 28th May-29th June

In contrast to the image of the armchair-bound philosopher holed up in his study, Ludwig Wittgenstein was, at various points in his life, a soldier, a gardener, a teacher, a hospital porter, an architect, and, as a new exhibition at the LSE shows, a keen amateur photographer.

This exhibition, first shown last year in Cambridge, presents pictures taken by Wittgenstein alongside images by friends and relatives, and quotations from his writings and correspondence. The photos reveal a more playful side of the philosopher. In one, he has convinced a friend to pose like a Hollywood gangster in homage to one his favourite film genres (although he was a fan of trashy films in general, and westerns above all). Beyond the personal insights, these images are also philosophically rich, sometimes serving as visual representations of Wittgenstein’s theories. He created one image, for instance, by combining three separate photos of his sisters and one of himself. The result is a ghostly composite portrait of what appears to be a single person—an eerie illustration of his “family resemblance” argument. Just as family members may look alike without all sharing one particular physical feature, so certain groups of things (such as games or artworks) that seem to be connected by a single shared essence are in fact linked by overlapping resemblances.

But whether your interest is philosophical or biographical, this exhibition is a rare opportunity to see a different side of one of the great thinkers of the past century.

David Wolf

Opera

Billy Budd
London Coliseum, 18th June-8th July

The most extraordinary moment in Benjamin Britten’s outstandingly dramatic opera Billy Budd contains neither singing nor acting. At the action’s tension-filled climax, admired Captain Vere is about to withdraw with Billy to tell him that, because of the letter of the law at sea, he must be hanged. Instead of the anticipated head-to-head of explanation, regret and consolation, Britten empties the entire stage and the orchestra simply plays a succession of 34 evenly spaced chords, one after another. As chilling as it is unex-
PrOSPEcT rEcOmmends

pected, the moment attaches a lightning-rod to the audience’s imagination.

Originally commissioned for the 1951 Festival of Britain, the libretto—co-written by EM Forster, no less—offers hugely theatrical opportunities for its ship-bound, all-male cast, from scenes of pain and extreme pathos to the explosive roar of the orchestra and chorus at full pelt crying “Blow her away...” This new English National Opera production is marshalled by expert Britten conductor Edward Gardner. It also has the bonus of being designed by Paul Steinberg and directed by David Alden, whose knockout, expressionist take on Peter Grimes at ENO in 2009 won numerous awards, not least for lighting wizard Adam Silverman, whose ability to evoke the dazzle of the sea is simply breathtaking.

David Benedict

Film

Prometheus

On release from 1st June
Remember the ape flinging the bone into the sky in Kubrick’s 2001? We look to the past to understand the future, and, in the case of much science fiction, the other way around. Ridley Scott’s Prometheus will take us back to a time before the spaceship of his 1979 Alien set out on its ill-fated mission. According to the director, Prometheus is not a prequel but shares “DNA” with the earlier film.

This is Scott’s first excursion into 3D (the film will also be available in 2D). The director, who likes to superimpose his special effects onto real sets, extended the largest stage at Pinewood by a further 150 feet to create vast architectural structures amid desolate landscape.

And along with the action, expect the cosmic mythology suggested by the title. Viral videos show Guy Pearce as the smooth dictator of the cyberindustrial complex Weyland, Michael Fassbender as the perfect robot David, and an alien with a sticky, cartiligenous resemblance to the monsters that stalked their way through the 1979 original. It all looks heavy on the Kubrick but with extra oomph. How can you not be excited? Don’t disappoint us, Ridley Scott.

Francine Stock

Art & Design

Heatherwick Studio

V&A, 31st May–30th September
Architect, engineer, sculptor and designer of the new London doubledecker bus and 2012’s Olympic flame cauldron, Thomas Heatherwick is perhaps Britain’s most inventive design entrepreneur. Now director of a 60-person studio, Heatherwick is unfairly notorious for his ill-fated work “B of the Bang,” a 56m firework-like sculpture symbolising the crack of the starting pistol, which was erected in Manchester for the 2002 Commonwealth Games and dismantled for safety reasons in 2009. Far more typical are the ingenious Rolling Bridge at Paddington Basin, which curls back up off the canal into an octagonal ball on the towpath, and the beautiful “Bleigiessen,” a sculpture consisting of 142,000 glass spheres suspended upon 27,000 steel wires, which tumbles through the air of the vast atrium of the Wellcome Trust’s London headquarters. Heatherwick even designed the clever car park and entrance at Guy’s Hospital, rerouting traffic and wrapping the boiler unit that powers the hospital in a vast undulating metal mesh “boiler suit,” through which light glows at night.

To accompany their British Design 1948–2012 exhibition, the V&A is honouring this particularly English genius with his first major retrospective. Featuring over 150 objects, with drawings and other documents, this exhibition sheds light on the process by which his team’s off-the-wall ideas become objects or buildings that amuse and amaze us.

Emma Crichton-Miller
Bored Boris?

On winning the London mayoral contest, Boris Johnson was quick to reignite his rivalry with the prime minister, telling his team that in winning they had “survived the rain... the budget, and the endorsement of David Cameron.” But according to some close to the mayor, he is deflated after victory. Unless Johnson can find a way of standing for parliament while serving his second term as mayor, as first suggested in this magazine last year, he may find himself locked into the London job during the next Tory leadership contest. According to *Just Boris*, the biography by Sonia Purnell, Johnson told an aide earlier this year: “the last thing I really want to do is endure another four years of boring meetings with Transport for London.”

Now, Purnell tells *Prospect*: “Of course he also has to do mundane things like judge Busker of the Year competition while Cameron swans off to banquets at the White House.” City Hall insiders say the smart money is on Boris standing for parliament before his second term is up in 2016.

Hague’s local difficulty

Are the coalition’s domestic problems getting in the way of pressing international questions? On 19th April world leaders gathered in Paris for a conference on Syria, called by Alain Juppé, then the foreign minister under Nicolas Sarkozy. Many went well out of their way to get there, including Hillary Clinton, who flew in from a trip to Brazil. There was one notable absentee: William Hague, the foreign secretary who was prevented from jumping on the Eurostar for the summit because he had to vote for the controversial finance bill.

Lord Adonis MP

Andrew Adonis, the former Cabinet minister, has made a return to the heart of Labour politics, brought in by Ed Miliband to advise on industrial policy. *Prospect* has learned of an intriguing possibility that Lord Adonis, appointed to the Upper House by Tony Blair, may make a return to the Commons. A friend says he wants the mandate of being elected. He backs an elected second chamber, but that prospect seems remote. Yet life peers cannot renounce their place in the Lords. Hereditary peers can do so, which is how Sir Alec Douglas-Home and Tony Benn shed their titles and escaped the Upper House. Adonis’s chances of being called to stand as an MP may depend on Nick Clegg’s ability to push through Lords reform.

Blair the evangelist

Tony Blair popped up at the Royal Albert Hall on 14th May as the “mystery” guest of a “leadership conference” organised by the evangelical London church, Holy Trinity Brompton. He surprised his fellow Christians with this anecdote: “I had to do some address to the country when I was prime minister. You know the American president finishes an address to the American people by saying ‘God bless America.’ I had the idea of finishing my address by saying ‘God bless Britain.’ This caused consternation in the whole system. A committee was convened, and we had to discuss it. I remember we had this debate on and off but finally one of the civil servants said in a very po-faced way ‘I just remind you prime minister, this is not America’ in this very disapproving tone, so I gave up the idea.”

Hollande packs his bags

France is getting used to the “Mr Ordinary” style of new president François Hollande. Standing through the sunroof in his small Citroën hybrid, he got drenched, coatless, on the Champs-Elysées on the day he took office. Behind the scenes, he has been in a dispute with French security, who want him to move out of the modest apartment he rents in the 16th arrondissement of the Left Bank with his partner Valerie Trierweiler. Hollande’s presence is causing chaos in the road, which has been closed, to the annoyance of neighbours. Security want him to move into the not-so-ordinary Elysée Palace.

In fact

Saturday 14th April was the first homicide-free day in El Salvador for nearly three years. 
*Reuters*, 16th April 2012

The number of cyclists killed in the UK has risen during three of the last four recessions.
*Department for Transport*, December 2011

German police shot 85 bullets in 2011. Forty-nine were warning shots, 36 shots at suspects; 15 people were injured, six were killed.
*Der Spiegel*, 8th May 2012

Milton Keynes is the most popular place in the country for first-time buyers.
*Daily Mail*, 26th April 2012

The Chinese share of global art sales is 41.4 per cent.
*Financial Times*, 12th May 2012

An estimated 4,267 Londoners die prematurely each year because they breathe polluted air.
*BBC*, 25th April 2012

Nearly 15 per cent of people worldwide believe the world will end in their lifetime.
*Global Public Affairs*, 1st May 2012

In Alabama, you can still get a $1,000 tax deduction for building a radioactive fallout shelter.
*The Atlantic*, April 2012

The longest dry spell in UK history happened in Sussex in 1893, when it did not rain for 60 days.
*Metoffice.gov.uk*

“Music festival? Follow that cloud”
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Modern Babylon

The Archbishop of Canterbury (May) appears so fixated on the problems of markets that he seems unable to pin blame where it belongs. It is notable, for example, that he criticises “profit” orientated tendencies in education at a time when government control is at its zenith.

It is perfectly possible for people to obtain education, library services, books and music through markets whilst taking a completely high-minded and non-materialistic view of education. Markets provide an effective means for signalling what people really value to those who are in a position to meet their needs. Until the 1940s much education worked in that way—as do the markets in books and CDs today. Indeed, Prospect itself operates in a market for high-minded ideas! It is also possible for government to provide education whilst taking a wholly materialistic and utilitarian view, as has increasingly been the case since the 1980s. The more government has taken control of education from the market and civil society, the more utilitarian education has become.

Philip Booth
Editorial and programme director, Institute of Economic Affairs

Perhaps we are finally having a sensible discussion on civic virtue. If the Skidelskys are repairing to Aristotle as the starting point, all the better. It seems to me his virtues—temperance, prudence, courage and justice—are more than adequate for the life well led. The problem for western culture is that we have subsumed them to the false morality of liberty. The church and the state have been complicit in this—a version of the city’s name. In his book, Modern Babylon, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s description of a life free from the tyranny of universal exchangeability. The other was Hugh Hefner’s vision of urban sophistication at the birth of Playboy magazine in the 1950s (Rachel Shteir, “Playboy goes west”). A neat, if unintended, illustration of the truth of that great American idiom, different strokes for different folks.

Joshua Doctor
London

Chinese revision

Communist involvement in drugs is an unproven allegation (Chris Patten, May). What’s not in doubt is that the place was awash with opium when the Kuomintang were in charge, and that drug addiction, which vanished under Mao, made a small return after “opening up.”

I’m glad to see that Chris Patten is finally using the proper name for Beijing: in his book, East and West he insisted on saying “Peking,” long after China had changed the official English version of the city’s name.

GM Williams
Via the Prospect website

Miliband: must do better

Currently Labour is too divorced from the reality of the communities we represent, and the lives of too many of our members (“I’m Labour’s biggest critic,” May).

But what is needed now is more meat on the bones. Miliband should be looking to get parliamentary candidates selected and organised arranged—and soon, if the abstract objectives of “engagement” are to be achieved.

The current way of doing things is broken. Changing it will take willpower, hard work, time and crucially money.

Mark Ferguson
Editor, LabourList

Letters

Eastern promise

Sam Knight presented an interesting perspective on Poland (“Europe’s Star,” May). Indeed, the country is doing well in these uncertain times.

Poland has also created a straw man in the right to happiness, which to my mind is a better approach.

Jonathan Haidt (“Last hope for the left,” April) show that one can maximise human flourishing, community harmony by recognising that most people value “the ingroup, authority and the sacred,” not just autonomy and altruism. Goodhart makes the excellent point that a diverse community can become more harmonious through mutual allegiance. For example, in the late 1970s the US military recognised that a focus on individual rights was harming cohesion and effectiveness, and so they switched emphasis to mutual duties. This greatly reduced racial antagonism; today the military is probably the least racially antagonistic part of a highly racially divided society.

It seems to me then that for those liberals who favour the total victory of rights-autonomy, then atomised, mutually hostile societies are necessary or even desirable, since autonomy, not human happiness, is the overriding goal, and all else is dispensable. Haidt and Goodhart appear to wish to reconcile autonomy with human happiness, which to my mind is a better approach.

Simon Newman
London

The war on drugs

Luis Rubio highlighted significant political and security obstacles to the potential success of any legalisation of drugs in Mexico (“Lost war on drugs,” May). However, he has also created a straw man in claiming that those who advocate institutions, with one of the highest rates of students in Europe attending technical universities. Low labour costs, although previously considered as one of the catalysts for growth in Poland, have now become a thing of the past. So even if some jobs are relocated, other more sophisticated employment opportunities will become available in Poland.

Barbara Tuge–Erecituska
Ambassador of the Republic of Poland
legalisation see it as a panacea.

In reality, most serious analysts make the distinction between legalisation and decriminalisation, and see such legislative changes as only one necessary element of a successful strategy. Other programmes would also need to be implemented, including separating the law enforcement and military elements of tackling drug-related organised crime; disarmament and reintegration programmes for former cartel members; and radically increasing funding for drug education and treatment programmes in the United States.

The difficulties that Rubio has highlighted are nothing compared to the failures of the current “war on drugs”: a strategy that is destroying the countries of Latin America in order to protect those of North America. Alternative strategies, including legalisation, must be seen as imperative.

Chris Abbott
Executive director, Open Briefing
& co-author of “Rehabilitating the war on drugs”

Iraqi legacy

Robert Fry (“A strategic own goal,” May) is right when he says western intervention in Iraq released energies across the region that we cannot control and never fully understood. This is one of the great challenges for strategic thinking: rolling the geopolitical dice—even for clear and good motives—without more than a hazy sense of what scores might come up and whether we are capable of responding to the next round.

But that existential uncertainty about the effects of our actions in different parts of the world is worse now than it was 30 years ago. The generation of post-colonial diplomats and officials who understood the dynamics of regions like the greater Middle East has not been replaced by a cohort with the same background and deep experience.

The communications revolution puts efficiency way above experimental understanding in modern diplomacy. That is not likely to change, so our diplomacy would do well to think in 18th-century terms and draw expertise from the commercial sectors working across such regions. The fences between public diplomacy and commerce have long been too high.

Michael Clarke
Director general, Royal United Services Institute

Causing offence

Sam Leith may be right to believe that the “troll” Liam Stacey was jailed for the racist element in his tweets (“The age of the troll,” May), but he is wrong to think “there’s no law against being offensive in general.”

The Public Order Act 1986, Part I Section 4A (inserted into that Act by Section 154 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994) makes it a crime intentionally to use “abusive or insulting words” so as to cause “alarm or distress” to another person. The concept of racial or religious aggravation was added by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, Part II Section 31 as further amended by the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, Part 5 Section 39.

The legislation allows the defence of being “inside a dwelling” and having no reason to believe the offending words could be heard or seen outside it; so a well-contained domestic row is not necessarily a criminal offence.

Stephen Hargrave
London

Monkeys and typewriters

Surely Martin Rees (“One universe among many,” May) is wrong in suggesting that the number of failures on the part of the typing monkeys aiming to reproduce the works of Shakespeare “that would precede eventual success is a number with about a million digits.” As the occurrence of a successful outcome is the result of random events, it is just as likely to arise immediately as it is to be at any other stage of the exercise.

Similarly, it cannot be definitely stated that a replica of our Earth “would” occur far beyond our horizons; it could equally well be immediately proximate.

Neil Sinclair
Kingston

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For all the modish talk of modernisation, all too many of the bad headlines and public relations blunders that have beset the coalition have sprung from an old-fashioned, old-chums-all-together way of conducting the serious business of government. This amateurish culture is far from the purposeful professionalism of Margaret Thatcher’s days. A typical example was the ruination in 2010 of some perfectly sensible proposals to improve the management of the national asset of commercial forestry which ended up in an unmannerly row between the Forestry Commission and the National Trust on one side and the government on the other.

Foolishly, I thought that the treasury would have learned from the discomfiture of other departments and taken rather more care in the presentation of the budget. Not so, however. Certainly part of the problem arose from the duplicitous tactics of the Liberal Democrats who, with eyes on the forthcoming local elections, shamelessly leaked budget proposals for partisan advantage. But George Osborne was not free from blame. His casual presentation of the progressive loss of tax relief for pensioners as an administrative tidying up, as well as the needless muddle over proposed changes to tax relief on charitable giving, led to controversies which obliterated both the substantial rise in the basic tax threshold and his arguments against the Balls-Miliband agenda of a return to the policies which led to the debt crisis.

The storm of adverse comment from even usually supportive newspapers and commentators seemed to start a snowball of criticism and bad publicity rolling. This then gathered pace until it overwhelmed hundreds of sitting Conservative councillors at the local elections weeks later.

There can be little doubt that the inherent problems of coalition government account for some of the troubles. It is time that David Cameron came to grips with the hard fact that the prime concern of his Lib Dem “partners” is to ensure that there will not be a Conservative majority after the next election, since that would leave a powerless rump of a party with neither relevance nor future. To that end, Nick Clegg seems ready even to abandon his cherished proposal to create a senate, elected by proportional representation to ensure a permanent Lib Dem blocking minority. This is the apparent price of an unspoken deal with Labour to thwart the redrawing of constituency boundaries that would equalise the electorates and remove the gross bias in favour of Labour which has grown over recent years.

Unhappily it is now “the Quad,” that is the junta comprised by Cameron, Clegg, Osborne and Danny Alexander, the chief secretary to the treasury, which makes government policy. It is here, and not in the Cabinet, that the Lib Dems have equality of numbers. That heightens the discontent of Conservative backbenchers; some are now muttering their doubts over whether the Prime Minister is, at heart, a Lib Dem rather than a Conservative.

Political anoraks apart, at this stage of the electoral cycle, the public are more concerned with the coalition’s ability to deliver on the policies which immediately affect their lives. This is not, in general, a chip-on-the-shoulder bleat about the expensively educated rich boys at the top of government.
The re-election of Boris Johnson showed that even amongst a predominately Labour-inclined electorate, delivery counts for more than perceived social class.

The unpopularity of the coalition arises from doubts that the chancellor’s economic policy will create the conditions for growth and prosperity, the apparent inability of ministers either to explain or implement their proposals, and an irritation at the time and money expended on what voters see as irrelevant or undesirable objectives.

To a very large extent, that springs from a failure to persuade the man in the street of the sheer awfulness of the government’s inheritance from the Blair-Brown years. The scale of the debts piled up by New Labour is so far outside normal experience that it has to be translated into understandable terms. For example, interest on these debts is now greater than our spending on education and defence. I am sure, at least I hope that I am sure, that ministers understand that reducing the deficit is not the same as reducing our debt and the burden of interest on it, but I doubt that the majority of voters do. Nor has it helped to indulge in macho talk about “the cuts” whilst public expenditure is still rising at an unsustainable rate. How a government riddled with former public relations professionals can be so maladroit at conveying its messages is a puzzle.

Perhaps the answer to that puzzle lies in the very uncertainty about the message it wants to convey. Cameron rightly took the view that having a clear political programme based on a coherent political philosophy is little use unless one is in office. What he seems not to accept is that to be in office without such a programme has a considerable downside too. Wanting to be in the saddle without a clear view of where to ride the horse is all too likely to result in the rider being thrown off and the horse bolting.

Cameron’s allies would object that this is an unfair assessment of the roots of the government’s problems. For them both the route to electoral success and to success in government is to be found in “the middle ground.” By definition, however, shifting one’s party towards the middle ground is bound to move the middle itself towards one’s opponent. On the other hand, searching for the common ground on which your opponent’s supporters stand alongside your own is a very different matter. Moreover, there is plenty of such common ground between traditional Tories and traditional Labour supporters. Welfare reform, ensuring that welfare dependency never pays better than work, lower taxes, effective immigration control, schools that teach basic skills rather than political correctness, a tougher line against drunkenness and disorder which plague our city streets, a feeling that in hard times the welfare of our sick, disabled and elderly should come before overseas aid, impatience with multiculturalism, the belief that we can govern ourselves and make our own laws without the “help” of Germans, French, Greeks or Belgians: these are all the concerns of the middle ground. These are the issues which would bring disenchanted one-time Tory voters and disenchanted Labour voters alike to support a government, whether it flew a red or blue flag.

A government which dealt with these matters would gain the confidence of the electorate and the leeway to do what is necessary to solve our economic problems.

The question now is whether the coalition has the will, the ability or the time to do what needs to be done. The recent local elections confirmed not just the unpopularity of the governing coalition partners, but of political parties in general amongst middle ground. These are the issues which are bound to move the middle itself towards the “help” of Germans, French, Greeks or Belgians. How a government riddled with former public relations professionals can be so maladroit at conveying its messages is a puzzle.

The welcome to the world of the 99 per cent. When you say you stand for nearly everybody, you can expect nearly everybody to sympathise. What you can’t expect is a lot of agreement on what to do. The Occupancy Handbook (Back Bay, £12.99) is not, strictly, a guide to the pop-up protests that appeared in more than 1,000 cities around the world in the autumn of 2011 (some of which have returned, now, with the sun). I would bet that most of the 50-plus contributors—among them distinguished economists and thinkers like Paul Krugman, Martin Wolf and Paul Volcker—have spent little time at St Paul’s or Zuccotti Park. If any.

But taken together, the articles in this dense and wide-ranging book do help explain why, to quote the introduction, Occupy Wall Street “has the rare distinction of being a protest movement that even the objects of its attack can find little fault with.”

Spectrem Group, a consulting firm for rich people, claims that 68 per cent of millionaires favour raising taxes on millionaires. Though that might simply be because they’ve miscalculated. Other research suggests that half of the top one per cent mistakenly believe they’re in the lower 99. The writer Michael Lewis has some fun with this in a short, typically acerbic contribution, a “strategy memo” addressed to the top percentile. “That any human being can earn 344 grand a year without having the sense to identify which side in a class war he is on suggests that we should limit membership to actual rich people.”

Faced with any campaign for change, defenders of the status quo usually resort to the standard trope: the proposals are either too modest to make a difference, or too ambitious to ever be feasible. The...
Occupy movement has so far escaped this standard attack, only because it has largely failed to produce concrete proposals of any kind. Is this a problem? Many commentators have tended to think so. But contributors to this volume offer two kinds of arguments to defend the dearth of specifics.

One is the anarchist answer, given here by David Graeber, who has been closely involved in the movement. (He’s credited with coming up with the phrase “we are the 99 per cent.”) He suggests the lack of concrete demands is itself a part of the protest. You don’t ask the authorities for anything, because that would suggest the “system” was legitimate. Many who gathered in Zuccotti Park might buy this. Those who are only metaphorically inside the Occupy tent would not. Martin Wolf is not known for his anarchism. Nor Paul Volcker. Nor Nouriel Roubini. (Being a contrarian doesn’t count.)

The other defence is historical. Various authors point to past popular social campaigns—like the populists and the progressive movements in America in the years around the turn of the 20th century. Programme-wise, these movements were also a mess. But that didn’t matter. What mattered was the idea that animated them: outrage at the way the concentration of economic power by the so-called “robber barons” was concentrating political power as well.

Over time, the authors argue, that outrage worked its way into the bloodstream of the body politic. The progressive movement faded away but America did eventually get anti-trust legislation, a progressive income tax, and other reforms which helped keep a lid on inequality for several decades. Is that what the Occupy movement should be about now? Breaking up monopoly power and taxing the rich until they squeal?

Many want to stop the financial system being able to hold the rest of the economy hostage. Nearly all also favour much higher taxes on the very rich. But if you take seriously the complaints gathered together in these 500-plus pages, that is only the start.

Paul Krugman speaks for pretty much everyone in this volume when he says “we won’t get good economic policies until inequality is curbed.” But he knows, better than most, that the causes of rising inequality are many and complex. This isn’t something that financial regulations alone can fix, and nor can a few more progressive taxes.

As many contributors point out, the health and education systems play a big part in cementing inequalities—particularly in the US. And so does the increasingly interwoven relationship between money and politics. In the words of Martin Wolf, if the boundary between those two is not well policed, “the bazaar (the sphere of the market) consumes the forum (the sphere of politics).”

For many of the authors, campaign-finance reform in the US is the golden key to unlock other changes that are long overdue. Perhaps. But can it change the structure of the global economy to increase the demand for unskilled workers in the west? Can it make it harder for the managers of a large company—or bank—to capture nearly all of the economic rents? Or any easier for governments to extract tax revenues from the likes of Google? Can it make the squeezed middle (and upper middle) feel like paying higher taxes, to help the bottom? I wonder.

I recently interviewed Ron Paul, the maverick libertarian congressman running for president. I suspect he would find himself agreeing with a lot of the articles in this book—particularly the ones that say America is now a giant stitch-up by government and big business. So might the conservative thinker Ferdinand Mount, who has just written a book on inequality. So, for that matter, would Karl Marx. But that is where the agreement among them would probably end.

In years to come, we might say the Occupy movement was a catalyst for a radical shift in policies in America, just as the progressives laid the way for many Roosevelt reforms in the 1930s. Or, we might see The Occupy Handbook as a reflection of a rather peculiar time in our political culture, when anyone who was anyone became both hopelessly depressed about the way the world was heading—and oddly utopian about the scope to change it. Stephanie Flanders is the BBC economics editor
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One Friday in April, 11,541 red plastic chairs were laid out along Sarajevo’s main street. Each commemorated a civilian killed in the Serb siege of the city 20 years previously. That assault lasted longer than the Nazi siege of Leningrad. The Bosnian war of 1992-95 killed almost 100,000 people in a country the size of Scotland. Its anniversary sparked media commentary but not much introspection. The war was a human catastrophe for Bosnians and a disaster for European and transatlantic diplomacy.

Intervention in foreign conflicts is always risky. In Bosnia, western states decided in advance against it and thereby showed the costs of ideological inflexibility masquerading as realism. Not intervening did not mean that nothing happened. It meant that an aggressor was enabled to commit genocide.

Because the violence accompanied the dissolution of the old Yugoslav federation, western policymakers assumed that this was an intractable conflict born of ancient hatreds. In reality, the politics were simpler. This was a racist war of aggression by one state against a smaller neighbour. It is a truism that atrocities were committed on all sides. But overwhelming responsibility lay with Slobodan Milošević, the Serbian President, and his plenipotentiaries Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, now on trial at The Hague.

The European Union and United States granted diplomatic recognition to Bosnian independence in April 1992. They hoped to stabilise the rapidly dissolving Yugoslavia. The policy was not wrong but it was futile, because it reckoned without the character of Milošević, a thuggish and intellectually limited apparatchik with a penchant for ballot-rigging, whose only true friend was his unstable and equally fanatical wife.

Milošević’s intentions were hardly obscure. He signalled them with an inflammatory speech in 1989 on the 600th anniversary of the Serb defeat in Kosovo by the Turks. He envisaged an ethnically “pure” Greater Serbia and initiated a campaign of expulsion, torture, mass rape and murder. With his similarly unsanitary counterpart in Croatia, Franjo Tudjman, he engineered a cynical division of Bosnia.

Milošević judged that the member states of the EU and Nato would give rhetorical support to Bosnian independence but recoil from any wider commitment. He was right. Western policy could scarcely have been better calculated to ease his way.

An international arms embargo preserved a gross disparity in force. The tanks and heavy artillery with which Bosnian Serb forces pounded Sarajevo came from the former Yugoslav national army. Western policy not only abjured military intervention: it ensured that the forces of Bosnia’s legitimate government could not mount an effective defence either. Only with the genocide of 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica in July 1995 did international handwringing end. Nato air attacks did what they were intended to do. Bosnian Serb forces melted away. Even then, international agreement at Dayton later in the year took their advances as an established fact and implemented a de facto partition of Bosnia. Milošević remained a threat to the region for years afterwards, till the failure of his assault on the province of Kosovo in 1999 and one attempt too many to rig an election caused his downfall.

The implications of this history remain largely unmentioned in western policy. First, the case for interventionism does not rest on the case with which constitutional democracy can be transplanted in emerging states. Because western-style democracies are rare, and some states (such as Afghanistan) have proved resistant to them, it is fashionable for critics of intervention to claim to be realists. In reality, they are more usually sophists. Liberal-democratic internationalism, for all its limitations, holds out some hope of avoiding a Hobbesian world in which aggression is rewarded.

Secondly, nationalism has a justification and its variants need to be distinguished. Support for national claims does not mean acquiescing in every irredentist territorial demand. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an example of a clash of competing and legitimate nationalisms; justice demands that each be represented in a territorial accommodation. The Serb assault on Bos-

Oliver Kamm

We failed in Bosnia

The tragedy of 20 years ago makes the case for action
exposed the Serb concentration camps at Omarska and Trnopolje.

Fourthly, Bosnian Muslims were the target of calumnious misrepresentation in western media while they suffered genocide at home. These were not jihadist fanatics; they were an integrated population of an ethnically mixed, unitary state. A few became radicalised quite unnecessarily by western policy failure, thereby giving further impetus to the right-wing fringe that cannot distinguish between Islam and theocratic fanaticism.

Western failure in Bosnia was almost total. The reputations of its authors have barely been scathed by it. 

Oliver Kamm is a leader writer for The Times

Victor Sebestyen

Threat to Hungary

If the EU ignores this assault on democracy, then what is it for?

Voters from Athens to Bradford, via Paris, have been loudly saying “A plague on all their houses” to the established parties that have presided over the economic mess in Europe. As the financial crisis deepens in several countries, extremists offering simplistic solutions from a past era may well emerge as winners in elections or as coalition partners in national governments. That is a potential threat to democracy, as serious for Europe as the financial crisis. But the European Union looks as though it will be as weak in dealing with the political and social threat as it has with the economic one.

Take the spineless way European leaders have dealt with the challenge posed by Hungary over the last couple of years, where there continues to be a crisis of democracy. A small parochial story illustrates a wider point. In Budapest, the rapper Dopeman has been under criminal investigation on potential charges of “insulting the state.” The lyrics of one of his songs mock the Hungarian national anthem and crudely satirise leading government figures. As a cause célèbre, a gangster rapper with dubious musical ability may not seem of great significance. But his story is a depressingly familiar one in contemporary Hungary.

Two decades ago, Hungary seemed the Eastern bloc country that could most easily adapt to the western way of life. But it has been transformed into the most autocratic state in the EU, while the rest of Europe has stood idly by.

The Dopeman case is also full of ironies. When in the 1980s the current prime minister Viktor Orbán was a firebrand dissident, he was a passionate devotee of rock music, which the Communist regime thought subversive. And he too was once threatened with that Soviet-era charge against troublemakers of slandering the state. In 1988, as one of the founders of Fidesz (it means “The Alliance of Young Democrats”) and the voice of the student-led protests, the recent law graduate was hauled in for questioning by the police. “You’ve broken the law by starting this group,” his interrogator told him. “And which law exactly is that?” Orbán replied. “I don’t know... you’re the lawyer, you tell me.”

For 20 years Orbán has been the best known politician in the country. Hungarians have liked him and loathed him by turns. Formidably clever, he is the kind of leader who makes the weather. He has rebranded Fidesz from a liberal Party that used his favourite slogan, “Don’t trust anyone over 35,” into an aggressively nationalist, populist, Christian group dominated by him.

Since the fall of Communism, Hungary has been the worst governed of any of the former Eastern bloc states, including Orbán’s first term, which lasted four years from 1998. Successive administrations borrowed too much, spent too much, lacked the courage to make essential reforms and were mired in sleaze.

But essentially there was consensus about the kind of country Hungary aspired to be: a modern liberal democracy within Europe. It was only when Orbán won an overwhelming second election victory two years ago, with 52 per cent of the vote and 68 per cent of the seats in parliament, that the direction changed. Orbán began to remake Hungary in his image, as he had remade Fidesz.

Hungary is in a desperate economic plight, saved from bankruptcy only by handouts from the International Monetary Fund and European Union. Few of Orbán’s “reforms” address this financial catastrophe, which is on a par with that of Greece. They are mostly about politics: Orbán’s determination never to lose an election again, and about national or cultural symbolism.

Fidesz hacks have been handed nine-year terms on a media authority that has Soviet-era powers over the press, broadcasting and the internet. One of Orbán’s best friends heads a judicial authority with hire-and-fire powers over judges and prosecutors. Her husband, a Fidesz MP, wrote the new constitution which renamed the republic of Hungary “the land of the Hungarians,” a formulation that includes minorities.
in neighbouring Slovakia and Romania. Orbán is gerrymandering the electoral system, which could now give Fidesz a permanent majority.

Hungary’s only independent radio station has been threatened with closure. Dozens of “opposition” journalists have been fired from state-run outlets.

It is easy to exaggerate. Orbán was elected in a fair election. More mature nations also have a “winner-takes-all” political mentality. Anti-Fidesz demonstrations proceed unhindered. The noise outside the door in Budapest at 4am is still the milkman, not the policeman. Yet increasingly the worry in Hungary is that Orbán’s “man of destiny” ambition is to create, effectively, a one-party state with Fidesz as the Party.

For most of the EU, engrossed by the debt crisis, events in a small country outside the eurozone barely registered until recently. Yet Hungary is a worrying example of what can occur in countries on the periphery of Europe where democracy has shallow roots.

In the last 18 months, nine European governments have lost power: Ireland, Portugal, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Greece, and Romania

Jahangir Amuzegar
Myths about Iran
The west just doesn’t get it

Though Iran remains the intense focus of western media and politicians, it is largely misunderstood. Common notions of the Islamic Republic are that it is: a puritanical and religious state; dominated by an autocratic dictator; presided over by a fanatical xenophobe; burdened by an economy that is collapsing due to sanctions; developing the nuclear bomb. But these are all myths.

First, Iran is theocratic only to a degree and is not puritanical. It has a written constitution, separation of powers, periodic elections and a judicial system. The country’s civil and penal codes are not strictly Islamic and women enjoy more civil and political rights than in most Islamic countries. Leadership is not hereditary and several grand ayatollahs are openly critical of the notion of velayat-e-faqih, the theological concept that gives jurists custodianship of the people. Gourmet dining, alcohol, gambling, drug use and pleasures of the flesh are tolerated and enjoyed by both rulers and ruled.

Second, the powers of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are limited. He is neither a supreme religious authority, nor personally above the law. His occasional fatwas (religious edicts) are often ridiculed, his proclamations issued from the bully pulpit ignored. He is the titular head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but his powers are circumscribed by the constitution. Unlike Machiavelli’s ideal prince, Khamenei is neither widely respected nor truly feared. He is routinely obeyed only because he has convinced other members of the ruling oligarchy that, in any shake-up, they would all come out losers.

Third, President Ahmadinejad’s religious fanaticism and his repeated references to the imminent return of Imam Mahdi are nothing but a political stratagem, designed to clip the clergy’s wings. As for Ahmadinejad’s regular grandstanding against the United States, this too has been largely an act, a parroting of Ayatollah Khomeini’s fulminations against the “Great Satan” in the 1980s. In fact, among Iran’s current political leaders, Ahmadinejad is probably the most ardent closet advocate of a resumption of diplomatic relations with the United States. He is the only president of the Islamic Republic who has congratulated an American president on an election victory. He has written to both Presidents Bush and Obama proposing dialogue. On his annual trips to New York for the United Nations General Assembly, he has repeatedly asked to meet US leaders, to no avail. During his last trip, in September, he welcomed the establishment of a hotline between Iranian and American naval units in the Persian Gulf, to avoid unintended mishaps. And his many suggestions for solving the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program have been the most conciliatory of any Iranian leader. Iranian rumour has it that the alleged plot to assassinate the Saudi envoy in Washington was hatched by Ahmadinejad’s enemies, to nullify his pro-American leanings.
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Fourth, Iran’s economy has been damaged by sanctions. Annual economic growth has slowed to 2-3 per cent. Inflation is over 20 per cent, and unemployment is in the high teens; private estimates are much higher in both cases. Iran is economically weaker and more chaotic, isolated and altogether more vulnerable than before. Yet, with $100bn or more in receipts from oil and non-oil exports estimated for this year, reserves of $120bn in cash and gold, a healthy balance-of-payments surplus, a relatively small and serviceable foreign debt, and thriving smuggling in both directions, the Iranian economy is not collapsing. It will endure—as long as oil stays above $100 per barrel, and exports remain over 2 million barrels a day.

Fifth, the claim that Iran is bent on acquiring nuclear weapons is largely a fabrication of certain political groups in the US and Israel. These groups point out that: four of Iran’s neighbours are nuclear-armed; no country possessing an atomic bomb has ever been attacked; Iran cannot afford to match its adversaries in conventional weapons; and there can be no other reason for Iran’s decision to enrich uranium to 30 per cent in a small, underground facility. Iran’s nuclear programme, the argument goes, will lead to a regional nuclear arms race and poses an existential threat to Israel.

This ignores Tehran’s repeated objection to nuclear weapons as Islamic sins. It also overlooks the defensive nature of Iran’s security doctrines: Iran has not invaded any country in the last 200 years, but has been repeatedly invaded. Although a report from the International Atomic Energy Agency in November 2011 suggested that Tehran has been involved in “efforts to master the technology needed for atomic weapons,” an effort to master relevant technology is vastly different from actually building the bomb.

Finally, both the Iranian clergy’s alleged suicidal inclinations and the idea of “hereafter-fixed mullahs” are complete fictions. A cursory look at the ruling clergy’s way of life—multiple wives, spacious living quarters, luxury cars, foreign bank accounts—attests to their love of life and fear of death. Shiite clerics in Iran may reject certain aspects of western culture, but they are hardly suicidal.

These misconceptions have practical consequences. The exaggeration of Ayatollah Khamenei’s authority distracts attention from the multifaceted nature of power in Iran. The myth of Ahmadinejad’s hostility to the US obscures the profound mistrust on both sides as the real source of the negotiation impasse. The myth of Iran’s collapsing economy and the possibility of popular uprising has made the west reluctant to give ground in its nuclear negotiations. And, the fiction around Iran’s nuclear ambitions has complicated normal relations with neighbours and the international community.

A clearer understanding of these myths may not end the west’s Iranian conundrum, but it might lead to less posturing by politicians and more effective policies for dealing with it.

Jahangir Amuzegar served in Iran’s government before the 1979 revolution as minister of finance and ambassador-at-large. He was on the executive board of the International Monetary Fund, representing Iran and other countries between 1974 and 1980.

Moganshan, east China
Landslide prevention
Mark Kitto

They are widening the road to make it easier to turn up a junction right below our coffee shop, where there is a sharp hairpin. On busy holidays, intrusive traffic jams turn to gridlock and I joke with customers that we should charge them for the show. From our perfect viewing platform it is fascinating to watch the cars and buses disentangle themselves. Now there will be no more jams. We’ll miss the entertainment.

There was almost no more coffee shop terrace too. The excavations into the hillside caused a large crack to appear. The foreman in charge of the works told me, “You could patch it up but it won’t last the year. You should get the local government [who commissioned him] to fix it.” After a heavy overnight downpour the crack became a crevasse. The foreman put barriers up and told us not to go near the edge. We got in touch with the government office. They said it was not their problem. We told them we were concerned some of our customers, predominantly foreign families with children, might be injured, or worse, if the terrace collapsed. Safety of foreign “guests” in China is unusually paramount. The government overdoes the precautions. (They also love telling foreigners they can’t go somewhere, Tibet for instance, “for your own safety.”) This time it didn’t work.

Thanks to a word from our landlord the head of the government office came to the site. He refused to pay the foreman to make the terrace safe. The foreman refused to carry on working below without the head’s guarantee in writing that he took responsibility. The head refused to sign. There was a long stand-off until the head of the government office backed down, with bad grace. He agreed that the terrace should be fixed. I hope the foreman gets paid in full. Then again, he’s drunk off his head most afternoons so if he doesn’t I am sure we can compensate him ourselves from the bar.

Cop town

Much is made of China’s ever increasing defence spending; less about the money spent on internal security, including the police. I don’t have the figures for our local town’s force, but I can’t help noticing how over the years, while the town has certainly grown in size and population, the police presence has increased way out of proportion. Every afternoon at knocking off time, between 4 and 5.30pm, the streets are flooded with cops. They are everywhere, as if they were street-lining for a parade. Every crossroad with traffic lights is manned by at least four or five of them. One junction I regularly use is manned exclusively by five police women, all day long. It is on the edge of town and sees very little traffic. They are quite pretty.

The town has its very own SWAT team. (Yes, they call them SWAT teams even though the acronym means nothing to a local.) There must be at least 80 of them because they drive around in two full coaches with an armoured support vehicle behind. They patrol the streets on foot in groups of eight, as if Armageddon is round the next corner. In the evenings, once everyone has eaten, including the cops, the non-SWAT police come back out and set up roadblocks to catch drink drivers. They form a ring of steel round the town.

Police are everywhere. And this is in a town that could be compared in size to Huntingdon in Cambridgeshire: smallish, flat and with a few factories on the outskirts. I can’t help thinking this excessive presence is thanks to the local force being brought up to strength and kept there—and having to be kept busy in the meantime—in preparation for that nightmare scenario: social instability. Must cost a fortune. 

Mark Kitto’s coffee shop is in Moganshan, a mountain resort near Shanghai.
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Man on a mission

“Computer hacking is next,” says the MP who has forged a career from the Commons probe

“We’re not through this scandal yet,” says Tom Watson, the MP who has spearheaded parliament’s probe into phone hacking in Rupert Murdoch’s newspapers. “Computer hacking is next and it may dwarf what we have seen so far.”

Computer hacking is currently the subject of an investigation by the police, named “Operation Tuleta,” which only has a handful of officers and a relatively low profile. In July last year, the Metropolitan police confirmed that “Some aspects of this operation will move forward to a formal investigation. There will be a new team reporting to Deputy Assistant Commissioner Sue Akers.” Referring to this inquiry, Watson says: “I have seen evidence that strongly suggests computer hacking was more widespread across a number of industries. By this I mean the use of ‘Trojan’ devices used to illicitly disclose the content on hard drives.”

He adds: “The police inquiry has quite a long way to go before the full scandal is revealed.”

Tom Watson cuts a solitary figure, for a man at the heart of a campaign against Rupert Murdoch’s media empire that is making headlines around the world. At his suggestion, we meet in his office in Portcullis House at what he seems to regard as an opportune moment: during the debate over the Queen’s Speech, when the rest of
Westminster has thronged into the House of Commons, MPs packing the green benches and journalists crowding into the press gallery above the chamber. Watson, who has an obsessive streak and is utterly preoccupied with his pursuit of the truth on phone hacking, has been regarded warily for years by many in his party for his role in internal battles. But his success in his quest, and his prominence on the Culture, Media and Sport select committee of the Commons has brought him back into the party fold, even if that is a role he regards with some unease.

Watson stayed up all night completing his submission to the Leveson inquiry into media standards, which began in July with a remit to investigate phone hacking at News International, the British arm of the Murdoch empire, as well as to consider media ethics and regulation. For Watson, recent months, in which the committee (working in parallel with the Leveson inquiry) has published its report on phone hacking, mark a culmination of years of battle. His often lonely investigations into the Murdoch stable of newspapers in Britain, and its relationships with the police and politicians, without much support from his own party, led him to question his own sanity, he says. These years also cost him his marriage. Today he feels vindicated; he is “feeling pretty good, actually.”

Watson describes the News Corporation titles—The Sun, the now-closed News of the World, The Times and the Sunday Times—as “the ultimate floating voters—with menace. They are absolutist. Their way of looking at life is binary.”

Watson regrets policy changes under Labour aimed at adhering to Murdoch’s will. “We clearly had policy pre-’97 on cross-media ownership that didn’t find its way into legislation post ’97. Though I’ve never met a minister who said they’ve taken a policy position because of the Murdoch position, I’ve also never met a minister who doesn’t know what are the corporate goals of Murdoch’s company.”

Watson also disapproves of his fellow Labour MPs’ willingness to start writing for the new title that Murdoch started in February to replace the News of the World. “I felt disappointed that some of my colleagues would lend their reputations to the Sun on Sunday so quickly,” he says, quoting Hamlet: “O, most wicked speed to… incestuous sheets.” So far, Ed Balls, Yvette Cooper and David Miliband have contributed to the new title. “Don’t get me wrong, I know they need to communicate through these columns. But the way the Sun on Sunday was published in an act of bravado—I thought there should have been a respectable time period before they jumped in.”

However, he is enthusiastically supportive of Ed Miliband. “I really admire Ed Miliband and I believe in him and I owe him a debt of great loyalty for the decision he took to get up at prime minister’s questions and call for the BSkyB bid to be shelved and for Rebekah Brooks to go. That was a massive moment in Labour history.”

Until then, Watson felt isolated against what he saw as corruption across three pillars of the British establishment—the media, the police and politicians—to a point when his immersion in the pursuit began to consume his life. “There were wild thoughts going through my mind and it was a bit like shouting into a vacuum. I’d seen a lot of evidence that showed very deep contact between News International journalists and very serious people from the criminal underworld, that they’d had for many years.” Watson took a debt of great loyalty for the decision he took to get up at prime minister’s questions and call for the BSkyB bid to be shelved and for Rebekah Brooks to go. That was a massive moment in Labour history.”

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James Murdoch have been a factor in his recent slide in the polls, giving the impression of government by a club of cronies. Yet here, Watson offers an olive branch. “I think there is still a moment where David Cameron can do something really amazing with this. He can utterly recalibrate the relationship between British politics and the British media. I think his window of opportunity is nearly closed, and I think his conduct in the past month has made the chances of that diminish, but it’s still possible for him to rescue the situation and you know I really want him to do it. He would have my full support if he did.”

“David Cameron can utterly re-calibrate the relationship between British politics and the media”

Watson wants to see changes in press regulation: “The Press Complaints Commission (the British media watchdog) is the most damaged brand in the UK and it’s got to go,” he says. Instead, he wants “light-touch regulation with an arm’s length regulator a million miles away from government with powers that would allow an editor to put a matter right when it’s gone wrong.”

On ethics, he wants a form of oath taken by journalists: “The ethics thing has been laid bare and there is a lot you can do with journalists. You can develop standards that people adhere to—not quite the kind of oath that doctors adhere to, but the industry is changing and you can restate a set of ethics that is codified in some way.”

He is confident that Lord Leveson and Robert Jay, the lead QC on the inquiry, “have got the terrain pretty much mapped out… I’m also now convinced that they probably know what has to be done, which is there are certain ‘no nos’—you can’t have massive state regulation, but so too you can’t have laissez-faire any more.”

When the second select committee report was published on 1st May, it concluded that Murdoch was not “fit” to run an international company, a judgement that provoked criticism of Watson for over-reaching his brief. The committee’s vote was split along partisan lines, 6–4, with Labour and the sole Liberal Democrat voting it through against the Conservatives. Louise Mensch, the highest-profile Tory MP on the committee, claims that the question of whether Murdoch was fit to run a company was not investigated by the committee.

Mensch and Watson, the two stars of the committee, can often be seen smiling sardonically while the other is talking, and Watson confirms the suspicion that in private, they get on. “I think she’s the most honest member of the committee. I fundamentally disagree with her on nearly every point. But she believes this stuff. I think she’s naive but she believes it. People question her motives but she’s just flipp ing strong willed and dogmatic. I like her a lot.”

Mensch, elected MP for Corby and East Northamptonshire in 2010, offers a symmetrical compliment: “Tom Watson was the biggest surprise to me when I got into parliament. I’d heard all the stories—Brown’s consigliere and so forth. I thought of him as a Dark Lord of the Sith. Turns out he is the most likeable guy imaginable, totally straight and takes no crap from anyone. He genuinely believes News Corp is a force for evil and he acts accordingly. I diametrically disagree with him. But [he is one of] his party’s biggest talents.”

What next for Watson? As Labour’s deputy chair and director of campaigns, he has been brought back into the heart of the party under Ed Miliband, whose own ascension to the top job Watson helped to coordinate behind the scenes. He can take some credit for Labour’s gain of over 800 council seats in the local elections on 3rd May. But the longer seems torn about his future.

“I genuinely don’t know what I’m going to do in my private and political life. I would like to stand again but my seat has been cut in half [in the proposed boundary changes] so I might not be able to stand again. The strange thing about this whole affair is that I do genuinely lack personal ambition now. There are things I do because I enjoy it and I’m very ambitious for Ed Miliband but I don’t have to do it. I can do it in whatever capacity. You know if he wanted me out of the shadow cabinet tomorrow I wouldn’t be unhappy.” He laughs. “In fact I’d probably be relieved.”
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N
owadays a book with the title “Finance and the good society” is likely to appear, at best, a contradiction in terms and, at worst, a sick joke. It is a measure of Robert Shiller’s intellectual courage, or perhaps his foolhardiness, that this understandable hostility to finance did not daunt him. He believes strongly that finance makes an essential contribution to the good society.

This latest book from Shiller is a thought-provoking, lucid, wide-ranging and largely convincing explanation of why this is so. Shiller falls into the category of idealistic, yet practical, reformers on whom so much of human progress has depended. This book demonstrates these qualities perfectly.

Shiller has won a deserved reputation as being among the world’s most prescient analysts of financial excesses. When he defends finance, we should pay attention. Yet how, the reader must wonder, can any reasonable person defend finance after the recent epidemic of greed, knavery and folly, which resulted in the biggest financial and economic crisis since the 1930s? A part of the answer is that Shiller defines finance very broadly:

“At its broadest level, finance is the science of goal architecture—of the structuring of the broadest arrangements necessary to achieve a set of goals and of the stewardship of the assets needed for that achievement. The goals may be those of households, small businesses, corporations, civic institutions, governments, and of society itself. Once an objective has been specified—such as payment for a college education, a couple’s comfortable retirement, the opening of a restaurant, the addition of a new wing on a hospital, the creation of a social security system or a trip to the moon—the parties involved need the right financial tools, and often expert guidance, to help achieve the goal. In this sense, finance is analogous to engineering.”

The implication of Shiller’s definition is that finance is not just about the financial sector, narrowly defined. It is not even about the market economy. It concerns public finances as well as private and so public purposes as well as private ones. It is a necessary aspect of any complex society in which people seek to plan their activities. It is a vital part of an economy that relies on decentralised decision-making within a market-governed division of labour.

We cannot do without finance. Yet, for Shiller, finance is not just a necessity that has to be tolerated. It is a means of achieving valuable ends via peaceful means. “The key to achieving our goals and enhancing human values,” he argues, “is to maintain and continually improve a democratic financial system that takes account of the diversity of human motives and drives... It must be a system that redirects the inevitable human conflicts into a manageable arena, an arena that is both peaceful and constructive.”

All this may seem high flown. But Shiller is no naïve believer in efficient markets. On the contrary, he has written two celebrated books on financial manias: Irrational Exuberance, on the stock market boom of the 1990s, and The Subprime Solution, on the housing bubble of the 2000s in the US. He is the co-author, with George Akerlof, a winner of the Nobel prize in economics, of Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy and Why it Matters for Global Capitalism. He is an admirer of Keynes and is himself a financial innovator.

This is a man to be taken seriously, even by critics of finance. Shiller is well aware of the “excess volatility” of asset markets and the disruption they can bring with them.

How then does Shiller lay out his argument? He does so by dividing the book into two halves.

The first half is about roles. Because finance touches every aspect of the economy, the roles that interest him are wide-ranging: corporate management; asset managers; bankers; investment bankers; mortgage lenders; financial traders; insurance; the designers of markets; the providers of derivatives; lawyers and financial advisors; lobbyists; regulators; accountants; educators; financiers of public goods; policy makers; trustees and managers of non-profit institutions; and even philanthropists.

Because finance is such a broad range of activities, all these dif-
different roles must be properly performed if it is to work. On balance, it has, partly because of the activities of governments. The result, he argues, has been a history of innovation and improved standards that have, despite the many problems, helped people live better lives. Even in the crisis, much of this complex system continued to work well.

Think of a world without life insurance or property insurance, without pensions or health insurance, without banks or credit cards, without mortgages, bond markets, equity markets or commodity markets. Yet every one of these was, at some point, a financial innovation, distrusted and, not infrequently, abused. Laws had to be introduced, accounting had to be established and regulation has to be imposed. Yet all these erstwhile innovations have now become essential elements of contemporary life.

Yet think, too, of how much better all this could be if we could improve such contracts further. Shiller argues, for example, that “we need more active trading of derivatives for such things as consumer prices, GDP, longevity, and real estate risks.” He wants mortgage contracts that adjust their terms to the state of the housing market automatically. He wants government bonds that adjust to the state of the economy. He wants better advice, paid for by the state. He wants more finance and better finance.

The problem, argues Shiller, is not with the fundamental idea of transferring resources from those who have it, but do not need it, to those who do not have it, but do need it. The problem is more with the often inflexible execution of this idea. Thus, flexibility needs to be built into contracts, to minimise the cost of unnecessary bankruptcies and the resulting distress. The same applies to insurance. It makes an essential contribution to the good life. The problem is that we face too many risks—over the choice of career, for example—that we cannot currently insure at all.

In short, the modern world does not make full use of the potential of finance and suffers from too many of the drawbacks. This is the theme of the second half of the book, in which Shiller examines our many and varied financial discontents.

The list, again, is long: excessive belief in elegant financial theories; a proclivity for incontinent risk-taking matched by equally inordinate conservatism in response to novelty; a willingness to offer, and accept, excessive quantities of debt; the tendency for insiders to exploit the ignorance of outsiders; the willingness of regulators to encourage dangerous practices (the zero risk-weighting afforded to sovereign debt being a powerful recent example); the pro-

clivity towards speculative bubbles; and the recent explosion of inequality.

This does not exhaust the scope of this discussion. Shiller examines the limitations of philanthropy, which he believes is too small; even in the US, only 2.2 per cent of national income was given away in 2010. Much needs to be done to promote greater giving. He considers, too, efforts to distribute ownership more broadly through society. He even evaluates the goals of life and the role of the pursuit of wealth among them.

This, then, is not a book about finance, as we normally conceive that area of economic activity. It is not even a book about financial capitalism, broadly defined. It is about the role of financial arrangements in pursuit of the good life. The range is extraordinary, but, inevitably, it also makes the discussion of many topics brief, even superficial.

Much in this book is admirable: its range, its imagination, and its pragmatic and eclectic approach to reform. The moral vision, too, is impressive. Shiller is right that the rise of commerce is a part of the reason why society has become less violent and war among great powers less acceptable. He reminds us of the stupid and catastrophic view, widely held a century ago, that conquest brought not just glory, but wealth. This was indeed the “great illusion” Norman Angell wrote about in his famous book with that title.

Today, we do understand that the positive-sum game of peaceful exchange is far more rewarding than the negative-sum game of war. We admire the conquests of a Steve Jobs far more than we do those of some bloody-handed warrior. This is genuine moral progress.

Above all, Shiller is right that finance is the handmaiden of a decentralised market economy. We cannot live without it. But it is here, in the core of the contemporary economy, that the discussion is weakest.

By and large, Shiller is optimistic about human motivations. He does not consider the extent to which the impersonal nature of modern financial interaction makes it easy for individuals and organisations to behave destructively, indifferent to the mayhem they cause. The victims, being nameless and faceless, do not really exist. He underestimates, too, the extent to which insiders—financial professionals and managers—seek to rig the game for their advantage and the great difficulty in changing that situation. Shiller wants to make finance more democratic and humane. But he surely underestimates the difficulties of so doing.

Yet perhaps the most striking defect of the book is its limited discussion of how to make the system as a whole more robust. It looks so much to the stars that it ignores the rock-strewn ground under our feet.

One of the more striking sections is on the failure of official institutions to foresee the current crisis. That makes efforts at so-called “macroprudential regulation,” with which the Bank of England is to be charged, seem hopeless. The implication is that the financial system needs to be more robust. We may be unable to predict financial earthquakes, but we can make the buildings more quake-proof.

A big part of making the system robust must come from lowering leverage in both financial institutions and society. One part of the solution needs to be elimination of the favourable treatment of debt in our tax codes. Another part must be more equity in financial institutions. This is an important area for the sort of financial innovation that so interests Shiller. But he hardly discusses the requirements. Indeed, the discussion of the fragility of the current financial system is strikingly limited. What I would expect to read is a full discussion of how, in crucial aspects, finance needs fewer “middle men” than at present or, at least, entirely different forms of middle men.

On the big point, however, Shiller is right. Like it or not, we have to live with finance. It is an indispensable aspect of our lives. We will never make it perfect. The challenges are too great for that. But it can be made more useful and less damaging; more democratic and humane, as he himself would put it. That is a huge agenda. This book is certainly not the last word on how to achieve it. But it makes a valuable contribution.

Martin Wolf is chief economics commentator at the Financial Times

“Shiller looks so much to the stars that he ignores the rock-strewn ground under our feet”
Sixty years of progress?

Britain is a better place today

SIMON JENKINS

My memory of the Queen’s coronation in June 1953 is still vivid. In February the previous year we had been summoned to school assembly to be told of the death of George VI, greeted with what we assumed were “compulsory” tears. Elizabeth, then 25, acceded to the throne immediately, the event commemorated by this year’s jubilee. I watched the later coronation on a neighbour’s new television. It seemed a distant tribal ritual in which overdressed priests fussed round the sacrifice of a 27-year-old maiden in a strange hat.

My overwhelming recollection of the 1950s is of continuity and security. On the classroom wall was a map liberally painted red. Great Britain was a world power that had just triumphed—“alone” so it was implied—in an epic war against evil Germans. Movies and magazines depicted nothing else. Churchill’s Tories were back in power. All was in its rightful place. On the morning of the coronation it was announced, as if inevitable, that a British expedition had conquered Mount Everest.

To look back on those days from the standpoint of gloomy 2012 is not easy. The difficulties of the present can make any past seem a golden age. Besides, 60 years is an arbitrary chunk of history from which to draw conclusions. Yet some things about this epoch are irrefutable. Britain’s GDP today (adjusted for inflation) is roughly four times what it was in 1952. Its welfare state, though straining at the edges, is incomparably more extensive. Its health and education are better. Britain is not just more prosperous for virtually all its citizens, it is more tolerant, generous, caring, creative and outward-looking. It is almost certainly more fun.

Britain in the 1950s was deeply conservative. The expansion of secondary education after 1944 was making little impact on the class system. The idea of new grammar schools as a social conduit for working-class children was, except for a tiny number, a myth. Post-school education was available to barely five per cent of young people. Slums existed everywhere, in town and in country. Abortion was illegal and divorce difficult. Most people believed in capital and corporal punishment and in the criminality of homosexuals. As Jonathan Miller was later to remark, “England was stuck in the thirties until the sixties.”

The war against Hitler infected everyone and everything. The nation was left impoverished and cities derelict. Streets were gap-toothed with bomb sites, buildings everywhere blackened. Though fewer lives were lost than in the first world war, millions had been disrupted and families dislocated. The novels of Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Powell, like the plays of Terence Rattigan, reflected a society bruised and confused. Homes were broken in every sense. The immediate post-war divorce rate was ten times the pre-war level and remained high.

For all that, the war’s impact on Britain was not as shattering as it might have been. For continental Europe it had been socially and economically catastrophic. The allies inflicted on Germany a humiliating partition and reconstruction that was to prove much to its benefit. Mass migration of labour shattered not just communities but traditional patterns of work. Politicians were of necessity open to change. Governments slashed defence spending and rebuilt industry and agriculture behind a wall of cartels and protectionism.

In Britain, however, the fact of victory validated old certainties. A torrent of war movies paraded the virtues of patriotism and class. If war had revealed faults in the political economy, triumph suggested they could be overcome by planning and “cradle-to-grave” welfare. The hardships of the 1940s—shortages, rationing, national service—were accepted with deference. High taxation was “the price of victory.” Meanwhile, as David Edgerton has pointed out, Britons continued to spend more on defence in the 1950s than they had throughout the interwar period. Through into the 1980s, Britain was still a

Simon Jenkins is the author of “A Short History of England” (Profile)
“warfare state” more than a welfare one.

Progress appeared as a mild utopianism, typified by the picturesque twee-ness of the 1951 Festival of Britain. The “new Britain” meant new towns and new houses. Socialist planning was widely accepted as the basis of economic recovery from war. But there was little call for a dismantling of classes and institutions, little pressure for changes in industry, finance, public administration or the professions. Labour’s demand for “the nationalisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange” meant little more than the wartime command economy harnessed to the cause of reconstruction. State regulators bought out shareholders of mines, docks, railways and factories, often leaving the old directors in place. Private corporations simply became public ones. The condition of Britain, warts and all, was governed by a remarkable political consensus.

Social statistics cannot reflect the gulf between the 1950s and now. Survey definitions cannot account for yesterday’s lower expectations and higher tolerance of cruelty and unfairness. Figures showing a rise in crime since the 1950s are baseless, since laws were relatively minimal and antisocial behaviour, petty thieving, casual violence and the abuse of women and children were accepted to a degree inconceivable today. Many children in slums still did not wear shoes. I remember government dentists coming to my school and using pliers to extract decayed teeth on the spot. The template by which we judge the past is changing all the time.

The population has risen from 50m in 1952 to 62m in 2012, boosted by the post-war baby boom and rescued from drastic ageing by inward migration. Infant mortality plummeted and male life expectancy rose from 65 in 1952 to almost 80 today. In schools teacher-pupil ratios have improved by a quarter. The proportion of young people in education post-16 has soared to 45 per cent. Almost all the so-called slums were cleared by the 1970s. Public housing was built on an industrial scale, such that Britons were probably better sheltered than any comparable nation in Europe. In 1952 barely a third of Britons owned their homes. By 2009 tax incentives and more lenient suburban planning had driven this to a peak of 70 per cent. These were advances on a par with the age of Gladstonian liberalism, a century earlier.

History tends to present a nation’s progress as a series of lurches and retrenchments, whereas the truth is usually more gradual. But Britain’s progress over the past 60 years does have distinct phases. In the 1950s, complacency was soon to collide with post-war reality. This came first in foreign affairs with the Suez crisis of 1956, when America refused to stem a run on the pound, putting a humiliating end to Britain’s imperial reach over the Arab world.

Reality dawned more insidiously as the reinvigorated economies of Europe began to compete with Britain’s traditional industries of coal, steel, cars and shipbuilding. Although world trade continued to favour Britain, the state of the economy moved to the centre of the political stage. Macmillan could win the 1959 general election on the plausible basis that most Britons felt they “had never had it so good,” and dismiss a concern for growth as a passing fad, “like the twist.” But from the early 1960s political debate moved away from the assumptions of men and women of the pre-war era.

The most visible sign of change emerged in a renaissance in London’s cultural life. Anti-establishment sentiment stirred in the theatre and literature and spread to fashion, music and the BBC. Miniskirts paraded in Carnaby Street and the King’s Road. The first “mini” car was produced by British Leyland in 1959. The Beatles and Rolling Stones swept the pop charts on both sides of the Atlantic. Writing was by “angry young men” (not yet women) such as John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, Kingsley Amis and John Wain.

The magazine Private Eye first appeared in 1961. The BBC’s late-night show, That Was The Week That Was, broadcast satire that was savage even by today’s standards. In 1966 Time magazine hailed the maturity of “Swinging London.” A self-satisfied metropolis responded by permitting ugly concrete hotels and “point blocks” to rise above its once restrained skyline, as at Centre Point, the Euston tower, Stag Place, Victoria, and around Hyde Park. The rot started when Macmillan overruled local planners to allow a Hilton hotel in Park Lane.

Yet conservatism was deep enough to survive the miniskirt and the Beatles. A devaluing currency could stave off commercial decline for a while, but in the early 1970s Britain saw its first actual recession since the 1940s. It was derided by the American statesman, Dean Acheson, as “having lost an empire and not yet found a role,” and the economy was rocked by the “British disease,” a combination of industrial strife, government inertia and trading failure. It sank fast down the
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European ratings in GDP to below France and Italy. While recent historians have restored some dignity to the 1970s—it was not exceptionally strike prone nor did recession last more than two years—the period of the “three-day week” and the “winter of discontent” spawned an overwhelming defeatism. Two elections in 1974 were conducted on the slogan of “Who governs Britain?” Inflation the next year hit 25 per cent. Britain was the sick man of Europe, crawling into the new Common Market on the pleadings of its leaders rather than the conviction of its people. The foreign secretary, James Callaghan, reportedly remarked, “When I am shaving in the morning I say to myself, if I were a young man I would emigrate.”

The means by which the country hauled itself back to recovery in the 1980s have been controversial ever since. The Thatcher years (1979-90) were dramatic and divisive. They began with an engineered recession, with mass bankruptcies and inflation driven down to five per cent by 1983. But the defeat of Argentina’s invasion of the Falklands the previous year and the crushing of left-wing militancy in the unions and local government brought a new direction and purpose to government. Thatcherism and privatisation supplanted welfarism as the dominant ethos of the day. By 1995 virtually the entire utilities and trading sector nationalised in the 1940s had returned to private hands. It is hard to imagine a Britain in which the state supplied not just gas, electricity and water but railways, airlines, ports, coal mines, steelworks, telephones, shipbuilding, car-making, oil-drilling and even computing. The structure of the private sector changed radically. Extractive and manufacturing industry went into rapid decline, with services rising from 30 per cent of output at the start of the Queen’s reign to 70 per cent at the dawn of the 21st century. Britain’s balance of traded goods, in surplus throughout recent history, lurched into the red from 1983 and never recovered, the gap being covered largely by financial services.

Margaret Thatcher remains an enigmatic figure. She never enjoyed strong popular support, and trailed behind most prime ministers in opinion poll approval. But she reflected a steeliness that had long been absent from British politics, built, so she claimed, on the growing aspirations of a neglected “lower middle class.” The face and fortune of Britain undeniably changed in the period. Apart from a blip in 1991, the British economy grew continuously each year from 1983 to 2008. Thatcher paraded on the world stage, often with her friend, Ronald Reagan, as the “iron lady.” She was the most celebrated British leader since Churchill. By 1993, Douglas Hurd, then foreign secretary, could boast that the nation was “punching above its weight.”

Thatcher’s “supply side” reforms—weakening the power of labour and bringing competition to bear on public and private sectors alike—were not reversed by her successors, John Major and Tony Blair. Labour under Blair went even further after coming to power in 1997. He left in place Thatcher’s union reforms and curbs on local councils, and turned the majority of public investment over to private finance, much to the gain of the newly deregulated City of London.

Some aspects of government did not change. Thatcher had been fearful of reforming the public sector, backing away from privatising railways or the health service because of the unpopularity it might incur. She let social and housing benefit rise unconstrained, and services such as health, welfare and education continued to grow steeply. Blair, for all his professed radicalism, fared no better in this respect. The government share of the nation’s output hovered around 40 per cent throughout the 1990s and soared under Labour, achieving a peacetime high of 48 per cent in 2009.

This spending came to rely heavily on government debt. In the private sector a political obsession with private housing sucked savings from productive industry and left home-owners over-borrowed. The predictable result was a similar crisis in 2008 to that which had afflicted Britain 30 years before, albeit one that was now replicated across Europe and America. Britain celebrates the royal jubilee with its economy where its politicians promised it would never again be: in recession.
The turn of the 21st century had seemed to offer the same gilded horizon as had spread before the nation in 1952. The advent of the internet in the 1990s and the computerisation of swathes of the economy liberated millions from the drudgery of the factory and the typing pool. Most Britons, even those in receipt of welfare payments, now had access to a television, a car and a regular holiday. For all its suddenness, the second recessionary dip in 2012 saw the nation’s prosperity regress only as far as 2005. But the good times had lasted so long that bad times proved hard to stomach.

Delving into the national psyche over time depends in part on generations. To older people, the most remarkable shift in outlook over 60 years has been a declining obsession with class, however much Britons may still differ in accent and style. Thatcher infuriated the old left by declaring that she never met a member of the working class who did not want to escape it. As Lawrence James points out in The Middle Class: a History, by the turn of the 21st century, a posh accent had lost its cachet and indeed was often a liability. Social surveys showed two thirds of Britons considering themselves “middle class,” with the result that “a version of classlessness has been achieved simply through more and more people becoming middle class.” Even the Queen had flattened her vowels: “May hesband and I” became “my husband and I.” Nor is there any longer a class tinge to what passes for public morality. Swearing on stage, the cult of football, and attitudes to sexual behaviour and the importance of marriage all transcend class boundaries. Marriage and the family continue to decline. Divorces have risen four-fold since 1950, while five times as many people live alone. The proportion of babies born out of wedlock has risen from 3.5 per cent to 40 per cent. Two notable changes that took place in the 80s and 90s—perhaps ironically years of Conservative dominance—were the general acceptance of Britain as a multiracial community and homosexuality as a normal aspect of private and public life.

That said, much about Britain has remained the same. Britain remains a world leader in medicine, the law, higher education, science and the arts. London can claim to be on a par with New York in drama and literature, music and art. While smaller countries can boast a more efficient welfare state, Britain remains a mostly civilised and caring place offering hospitality, however grudgingly, to the world’s distressed. It is a liberal and open society, its political life less tortured by xenophobia and self-interest than that of most of America and Europe. The nation may be passing through a periodic spasm of political cynicism, but it is taking the medicine with fewer illusions and pretensions than it did 60 years ago. Only a pessimist would deny modern Britain the benefit of the doubt.
Who are we?

Our sense of “Britishness” is fading, but newer forms of collective identity are emerging, says DAVID GOODHART

Do the British people still exist? When the Queen ascended the throne in 1952 her subjects, for all their class and regional and even national differences, thought of themselves quite consciously as forming a community and sharing a culture—a people with certain things in common and a special allegiance to one another.

The British, although an “old” people, were also busily renewing themselves in the early 1950s—the BBC and especially the NHS were both recent inventions and the welfare state and national service gave Britishness a solid grounding in everyday life.

To most of us, most of the time, national identity is no more than a background noise, but in the post-war decade it was quite a loud noise. I recently met a senior civil servant who remembers as a boy at a west country grammar school in the 1950s deciding to become a scientist inspired by the early developments in civilian nuclear power; he saw this explicitly as an exciting national project that he wanted to be part of.

A lot has happened in the past 60 years to muffle or disrupt that background hum—economic and cultural globalisation, European integration, large-scale immigration, devolution, the decline of external threats and above all the vast increase in incomes which has allowed us to live freer, more mobile and less collectivist lives. The very phrase “the British people” now sounds anachronistic, associated with Michael Foot or Enoch Powell back in the 1970s.

There is often a sense of regret about that weakening of national identity, especially among older people; and politicians in the past decade or so have tried with limited success to halt or even reverse the process.

They are right to try. Living in a rich, individualistic and diverse country with what seems like fewer opportunities to see fellow citizens as collaborators in a common project, ordinary national feeling has become a progressive and binding force. Collective action is easier when people share at least elements of a common culture and ascribe to some common norms. And many of the things that we take for granted—democratic accountability, equal rights, the welfare state, redistribution between regions, classes and generations—not only take place within a national idiom but are underpinned by an idea of the specialness of fellow national citizens.

Yet, as Michael Sandel has put it: “In our public life, we are more entangled, but less attached, than ever before.” We need some sense of “emotional citizenship” to underpin those political and welfare transactions even while repudiating the racial and chaunistic form of nationalism that was the norm in 1952 (well described in David Kynaston’s Family Britain: 1931-1957).

And the raw material of national attachment still seems to be there even if we, especially the English, struggle to find a comfortable way of expressing it. The number of people who were very proud to be British fell from 67 per cent in 1981 to 45 per cent in 2003. But the number who felt “somewhat” proud or very proud in 2003 was still a healthy 86 per cent. This does not look like a crisis of national identity even if people are now identifying more strongly with their core country—England, Scotland or Wales.

What seems to be happening is that national expression is adapting to a more fluid and individualistic society, one with fewer collective projects or the kind of external threats that inspire solidarity. It is like the shedding of a skin: as we move further away from the purposes and symbols of one national period—the British imperial and then post-imperial period—we gradually take on the shape of another.

Britishness itself is less intensely felt than in the first half of the 20th century, which leads naturally to a looser relationship between the constituent nations, possibly including independence or home rule for Scotland. It is also perhaps less focussed on the formal symbols of a top-down Britishness—flag, royal family and so on—and more on the common life of citizens. According to a recent Demos pamphlet “A Place for Pride,” less than a third of people strongly agree that the Queen makes them proud of Britain; they are proud nonetheless.

What about the emergence of England in this story? For most of the Queen’s reign England and Britain have been interchangeable for the majority of her English subjects, and English nationalism has been the preserve of eccentrics and extremists and largely shunned by the elite.

The English imperial elite in the 19th and early 20th century often saw nationalism itself as something rather vulgar, for lesser breeds. This disdain for the national came to be adopted in more recent decades by left-wing and liberal England, reinforced by guilt about empire and anti-racism.

Indeed, one of the reasons that England and Englishness has struggled to emerge from under a British blanket is that it has been a dominant nationalism in an egalitarian age—it cannot draw on the small-nation solidarity of the Irish or Danes or the anti-colonial spirit of many countries in Africa and Asia.

The English are only semi-literate in the language of modern national identity but the Scots, by rearranging the union, present an opportunity for the English to learn to speak it normally and robustly, like the Scots do themselves. What might that mean? A national story which sees England as special but not superior; a blurring of the rigid distinction between civic...
(political) and ethnic forms of identification; an understanding that there are many ways to be English; and finally more public and institutional forms for the expression of that moderate English national feeling.

Out of this could be emerging a new sense of English national identity, with a residual Britishness for state occasions. It will be weaker than in 1952 but more open, and could help to keep the show on the road. I think Her Majesty would approve. David Goodhart is editor at large of Prospect and director of Demos.

We’re the new Victorians

There are strong echoes with the 19th century, says Maria Misra

Over the last few weeks I have had the fascinating task of helping to select 60 people “whose actions have had a significant impact on lives in these islands and/or given the age its character” for a forthcoming BBC Radio 4 series. Entitled The New Elizabethans, we had, it seemed, been invited to update the story of “Good Queen Bess.” And initially such parallels appeared plausible enough: a 60-year saga of stability emerging from conflict (post-reformation or post-imperial); of elitist culture turning popular (Shakespeare then, the “classless society” now); and of a revivified economy (driven by globalisation in both cases).

But as we chewed over the choices, a very different era came to mind: not so much new Elizabethans, but neo-Victorians, or at least new late Victorians. If there has been a revival in the last 60 years, it has been of the cosmopolitan London-centric entrepôt of the fin de siècle, not of good old “Merrie England.” The era from the 1870-1914 saw finance triumph over industry as the country’s pre-eminent economic interest, setting the scene for the accelerating inequality and plutocracy that would reach its apogee in the age of Good Queen Bess but only fully matured under Victoria, to re-emerge.

Mass immigration underpinned the cosmopolitanism of both eras: of Jews from eastern Europe in the 1890s and 1900s and of former imperial citizens since the 1950s. Both proved socially traumatic and produced xenophobic backlashes, though post-1980s Britain has been rather more successful in integrating diverse ethnic groups. That Britain has undeniably benefitted from this openness is proved by the strikingly high proportion of immigrants of all types on the BBC’s list.

The big difference, of course, is empire. The 1880s and 1890s were the high point of imperialist wars, and Rudyard Kipling exhorted his readers to take up the “white man’s burden” to much middle-class acclaim. British soldiers have certainly fought in several post-imperial wars in the last 60 years, from Malaya in the 1950s and Oman in the 1970s to the Falklands in the 1980s and Afghanistan in the 2000s, but these conflicts have had little cultural resonance—remarkably few on our list were soldiers.

Aristocracy, in contrast, has made a dramatic comeback. David Cameron is not quite as grand as Lord Salisbury, but he is still a descendant of the county gentry; modern bankers disport themselves on grouse-moors much as their “gentlemanly capitalist” predecessors did; and our appetite for country house dramas seems to be unquenchable.

Neither can international elites get enough of English aristocratic culture—indeed, it is as much part of Britain’s national brand now as it was in the 1890s, something undoubtedly helped by the global popularity of Harry Potter’s Hogwarts. Just as Indian princes and Argentinian ranch-owners dispatched their sons to Eton and Oxford, so now the scions of Russian oligarchs and Chinese party panjandrums descend on England’s playing fields. For hardline “Maoist” Bo Xilai, only Harrow and Oxford University could provide a suitable education for the new vanguard of the Chinese proletariat.

The parallels also extend to popular culture. While Victorian music hall may not have been quite as commercial as today’s TV talent shows, Simon Cowell had his predecessors in the variety impresarios of the late 19th century, and stand-up comics were perennially popular. Satire—something we tend to think of as post-1960s phenomenon—was always part of Victorian burlesque, as George Leybourne and others gently parodied aristocratic “Champagne Charles.”

Popular culture since the 1960s, however, has been rather less gentle in its hostility to elites—and this impulse has infused British culture with much of its energy—from Monty Python to Johnny Rotten. It is Britain’s creative industries—music, fashion, advertising and design—that have really excelled in the present age, and they have undoubtedly drawn on reserves of frustrated resentment at our extraordinarily resilient elite with its apparently indestructible “Brideshead” elo.

Victorianism redux appeared most unlikely in 1952 when it seemed that Britain, along with the rest of Europe, would become a land of boffins, bureaucrats, and beer-and-sandwich corporatism. But the collapse of social democracy in the late 1970s allowed Britain’s ingrained commercialism, first nurtured in the age of Good Queen Bess but only fully matured under Victoria, to re-emerge.

So how long will this neo-Victorianism last? Will the “Williamites” of 60 years’ hence still be financiers and gentlemanly capitalists? It would certainly be foolish to rule it out. If George Osborne gets his way, London will become the world centre for renminbi trading, the handmaiden of Chinese capitalists, as it was for Americans and oil sheikhs in our era. It is unclear whether the fabric of British society can survive the resulting inequality and economic instability. But that, of course, is another question.

Maria Misra is a fellow of Keble College, Oxford.

David Cameron is not quite as grand as Lord Salisbury, but he is still a descendant of the country gentry

Maria Misra is a fellow of Keble College, Oxford.
What do we want?

A green and pleasant land, with fewer immigrants

PETER KELLNER

The typical Briton loves our countryside, National Health Service and David Attenborough, but thinks immigrants, welfare scroungers and yobs are letting Britain down.

Overall, YouGov’s latest survey for Prospect suggests that we are preparing for the Queen’s diamond jubilee celebrations in a nervous, small-c conservative mood. Unlike much of the rest of Europe, our progress has been uninterrupted by revolution, invasion or occupation for some centuries. This helps to explain our reverence towards those features of our national life that suggest reassuring permanence. When people are asked to pick the best features of Britain today, three of their top four are our countryside, history and monarchy. The fourth, the NHS, is of course a more recent invention; however, as Andrew Lansley has discovered, it is now regarded with conservative veneration in the sense that politicians tamper with it at their peril.

Our present economic problems have narrowed our outlook further. Down the years, people in different ideological locations have been stirred by dreams of, variously, a low-tax society, an end to class divisions, greater tolerance, and a clean, green future. But when YouGov invited people to imagine a “British dream” (nodding with due humility to the American version), we found that these come way down the list of today’s national ambitions.

Rather, we want the flipside of our perceived current failings. We yearn for more rewards for hard work, fewer immigrants and more honest politicians, journalists and police officers. If there is a British dream, it is less about marching confidently towards Churchill’s sunlit uplands than clambering out of the hole we fear we are in.

No wonder politicians fill the bottom three of the list of living Britons we most admire: Tony Blair, David Cameron and Tony Benn. Only Margaret Thatcher avoids the relegation zone, coming eighth out of 15. (We derived our list from responses to an earlier survey, when we asked people, unprompted, to nominate candidates they personally admire.)

David Attenborough just pips the Queen to first place; they are followed closely by Richard Branson and Stephen Hawking. Perhaps these names offer a clue to a sub-conscious (or, in some cases, conscious) belief that Britain could be Great again if politicians got out of the way. Those of us who believe in liberal democracy should be terrified, if unsurprised, that a mere 5 per cent consider our political system to be one of best things about today’s Britain.

Peter Kellner is President of YouGov

Best things about Britain today, %

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Countryside</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHS</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History/national pride</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monarchy/Queen</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty/freedom of speech</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being an island</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC/the arts/culture</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inventiveness</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity/multiracialism</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for people in need</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather/climate</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of community</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Special relationship” with the US</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being part of EU</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our political system</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Worst things about Britain today, %

(*see also breakdown opposite)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefits culture/welfare scroungers</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-social behaviour/Crime</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of respect</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic weakness/unemployment</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High taxes</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being part of the EU</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty/inequality</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism/intolerance</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our political system</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class system</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subservience to the US</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather/climate</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monarchy/Queen</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dreams for a better Britain, %

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More meritocratic values</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer immigrants</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More honest politicians/journalists/police officers</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steady job opportunities for all</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater respect for our traditions</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faire/rmore equal society</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better standard of living for our children’s generation</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater sense of justice</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every family to have a decent home of their own</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting out of the EU</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower taxes</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaner/more sustainable environment</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More tolerant society</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competing more effectively in the world economy</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending class divisions</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*See closer analysis on opposite page
Those broad-brush observations conceal some notable differences:

- The over-60s feel far more strongly than the under-40s that to fulfil the “British dream” we need fewer immigrants and departure from the European Union.

- Four of our five female nominees for greatest living Briton attract more support from women than men: the Queen herself, Judi Dench, the Duchess of Cambridge (aka Kate Middleton) and Joanna Lumley. But the fifth, Margaret Thatcher, appeals more to men than women.

- The over-60s—that is, those people who have lived throughout the Queen’s reign, tend to say that Britain has changed for the worse since she came to the throne; the under-25s disagree by a margin of three-to-one.

Above: Britain’s favourite Britons. The Queen comes in second place, while politicians make up the bottom of the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Views vary widely on two of “the worst things”</th>
<th>Britain: a better or worse place than in 1952?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The number of immigrants, %</strong></td>
<td><strong>Better, %</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Being part of the EU, %</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voting intent</strong></td>
<td><strong>Better, %</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LibDem</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td><strong>Better, %</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>25-39</td>
<td>43</td>
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<td>40-59</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Region</strong></td>
<td><strong>Better, %</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mids/Wales</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results in full online
Best and worst of Britain

Figures from public life share their views

Mario Vargas Llosa, novelist
Best: Its profoundly democratic spirit, visible in every aspect of social life. I’ve never encountered another society which practices the virtues of tolerance, co-existence within diversity, and respect towards others, to the same extent. Institutions have a greater influence than in other countries, and there exists a spirit of solidarity which emerges, above all, in testing times.
Worst: Its resistance to accepting that in our age borders are disappearing and the idea of nationhood is going to lose substance. Britain lags behind other countries in accepting that integration, first with Europe, and then with the rest of the world, is absolutely essential for maintaining a high quality of life and making the most of modernity.

Lady Hale, Justice of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom
Best: The good old British sense of humour, not appearing to take anything too seriously (while actually doing so), broad-mindedness, and fair play—women never would have got anywhere without the support of men who were prepared to put their sense of fairness above self-interest. The Church of England, at its best the embodiment of those virtues. The weather, always giving us something to talk about.
Worst: The great British class system, still remarkably resilient, perhaps because it is also so flexible. The Church of England, at its worst. And the weather, of course.

Brian Eno, musician
Best: Cultural creativity, ingenuity and verve.
Worst: Awe at privilege and celebrity, and disdain towards those without either.

Martha Lane Fox, entrepreneur
Best: The diversity, calibre and integrity of talented people: community leaders, charity bosses, small business owners, well-known faces in music, fashion or the arts.
Worst: Our inability to celebrate our talent and our failure to unlock even more of it through more equality of opportunity.

Swaran Singh, professor of psychiatry
Best: Every important public matter is subject to wide consultation. All voices, whether weak or powerful, are patiently considered. It is democracy in action. Everyone has a say.
Worst: On every important matter, everyone insists on having a say. All views, from those based on hard evidence to those driven by ideological purity or single-issue fixation, are considered. It is democracy in paralysis. Everyone feels dissatisfied with the outcome.

Margaret Drabble, novelist
Best: BBC talk radio, drama, short stories, fiction.
Worst: Our ludicrous, sycophantic, poisonous class system. Those who think it’s gone away deceive themselves. It’s still endemic.

David Bailey, photographer
Best: Humour.
Worst: Hypocrisy.

Grayson Perry, artist
Best: The thread of humour that runs through nearly every exchange and conversation. As the anthropologist Kate Fox observed it is not the quality of our humour that is notable but the quantity. We use humour to protect us from that ultimate foreign sin, earnestness.
Worst: How it has given in to the forces of the blessed market. No one seems to be able to persuade the populace that Furniture Village is not a community.

Simon Callow, actor
Best: Complexity and diversity; a profound sense of history which is challenged at every turn; comedy breaking through each disaster.
Worst: A perverse rejoicement in failure; a depressingly perennial ambivalence towards the arts; a befuddled political system which is close to standstill.

David Kynaston, historian
Best: The overwhelming lesson of the last century is that nothing matters more than tolerance, and fortunately we still live in a largely tolerant society.
Worst: I have come to loathe—indeed, feel completely intolerant about—the continued existence of private education, which seems to me fundamentally at odds with any progressive vision of the future.

Shamit Saggiar, political theorist
Best: London and a few other places are a microcosm of the world.
Worst: Despite living here for more than four decades, very few people can say or remember a name as straightforward as mine. Britain’s sense of its manners is exaggerated, which can lead to patronising unfairness.

Joanne Segars, chief executive, National Association of Pension Funds
Best: Our ability to absorb the best of other cultures. No other European country would have chicken tikka masala as its national dish. I love getting on the bus and hearing as many different languages as there are seats.
Worst: We’re too unequal—bad for economic stability as well as social cohesion. Intergenerational inequality will be a serious problem unless people in work today start to save more for their old ages.

Iain Dale, political commentator
Best and worst: Its people. The British are the most innovative, creative, entrepreneurial in the world, but can be the most coarse, brutal and rude. It was ever thus. But anyone facing a battle would want the British on their side. Britain has taken over from France as the world’s cultural and gastronomic capital.
It is still true that to be born here is to have won first prize in the lottery of life.

John Carey, critic
Best: The countryside.
Worst: The threat of its destruction.

Peter Marks, head of the Co-operative Group
Best: A tremendous sense of communal identity, whether it’s the incredible response to national charity appeals or the spontaneous reaction to the death of Claire Squires, the marathon runner.
Worst: The weather.

Trevor Phillips, chairman, the Equality and Human Rights Commission
Best: Our collective optimism. The certainty that everything will be better again once we’ve all had a nice cup of tea.
Worst: Our collective amnesia—the certainty that everything used to be better.

Shami Chakrabarti, director, Liberty
Best: The world’s oldest unbroken democracy, where people of different backgrounds and views have rubbed along together in rela-
Sixty years of progress?

Joseph O’Connor, writer
Worst: The notion that all foreigners belong in a sitcom.

George Monbiot, journalist
Best: Remarkably little violence.
Worst: A continued appetite for exporting violence to other parts of the world.

Sonya Dyer, artist
Best: Our social contract, the NHS above all.
Worst: We don’t defend it strongly enough.

Alain de Botton, writer
Best: The spirit of tolerant humorous scepticism: the very opposite of fanaticism.
Worst: A pervasive cynicism and envy, reflected in the media.

Bhikhu Parekh, political theorist
Best: A variety of cultures, traditions and points of view which nurtures critical self-analysis and guards against conformity.
Worst: Deep social and economic inequality, its corrupting influence in all spheres of life, and the total failure to deal with it.

Mark Miodownik, scientist and engineer
Best: Free museums, cups of tea, and the central role of the joke in all public activities.
Worst: The British do not love the very thing that makes them human: engineering.

Geoff Dyer, writer
Best: The beer, the Premiership, Wimbledon.
Worst: A culture of inefficiency and the acceptance of apology as a substitute for improvement; the assault on the English language overheard in the streets of London every day, jobs, the Premiership.

John Humphrys, journalist
Best: Tolerance. We don’t go in for revolutions or (much) rioting.
Worst: Tolerance. We put up with too much crap—mostly of the bureaucratic kind.

Timothy Garton Ash, historian
Best: Our sense of humour: gentle but always present, like the rain—what I miss most whenever I am abroad.
Worst: Airport trolleys. You would think that this sceptor’d isle, once the workshop of the world, now proud to be a hotbed of innovation, could manage to make a trolley on which the wheels point in the same direction.

Tariq Modood, professor of sociology, politics and public policy
Best: A relaxed, fluid and pluralist view of what it is to be British; a culture of judging British institutions by a higher standard than those elsewhere.
Worst: A degraded sense of public service so those who are most self-regarding and on the make are objects of adulation and imitation.

Naomi Alderman, novelist
Best: Our capital city is the most ethnically diverse of any city in the world and has the lowest level of ethnic violence for its size.
Worst: The Tory party. Our cabinet has more old Etonians than non-white people.

Matthew Oakeshott, politician
Best: We are a fair-minded, tolerant, unselfish and compassionate society. Money talks, but not too loud.
Worst: It’s changing. Especially at the top of business and politics.

Harriet Lamb, executive director, Fairtrade Foundation
Best: The public have taken Fair-trade to heart—really inspiring.
Worst: The loss of so many independent stores, small businesses and small farmers.

Richard Dowden, Royal African Society
Best: Children speaking 26 mother tongues in school, an experiment in common humanity unprecedented since the Tower of Babel and a platform for leadership in global affairs.
Worst: The failure to enjoy and take advantage of this amazing opportunity.

Norman Lebrecht, novelist
Best: The universal belief that a cup of tea can make any hurt better.
Worst: The cold reality—it can’t.

Clockwise from top: Mario Vargas Llosa, Margaret Drabble, Grayson Perry, Sonya Dyer, Tariq Modood, Martha Lane Fox.
Return of the sheriff

Eliot Spitzer, the scourge of Wall Street, crashed out of politics in 2008 after a sex scandal. Could he make a comeback?

HEPHZIBAH ANDERSON

Eliot Spitzer has been taking chess lessons. He has the time for such things these days. It might seem that teaching, writing an online column and working at the family real estate business, not to mention hosting a live television show each weekday, would leave the father of three with scant opportunity to indulge in hobbies. But Spitzer has proven himself notoriously good—or bad, given how it all ended—at multitasking, having formerly spent his days as the headline-grabbing, opinion-splitting governor of New York state and more than a few nights as Client Nine of the Emperor’s Club VIP prostitution ring.

His marriage has survived but those private transgressions cost him his public office. Since his resignation in 2008, he has found desk space at Spitzer Engineering, the property firm built by his father Bernard. It’s here that I’ve come to meet him early to a dentist or a doctor. In the life and times of Eliot Spitzer, this is the only identifying detail in a modest lobby that might easily belong to a dentist or a doctor. In the life and times of Eliot Spitzer, this is a colossal comedown. The receptionist doubles as his assistant.

In this city whose minutes pass with such fabled celerity, he is still seen as the state’s disgraced Democratic governor more than four years after he was found to have been frequenting prostitutes and became the “luv guy” of tabloid sensation. Nobody is willing to overlook his tumble from grace, but nor can they forget the glittering promise of his political career. As governor—and before that, attorney general—Spitzer was a crusader, championing a wealth of causes from the environmental and the educational to the guy we wanted in public office,” says Lloyd Constantine, one of Spitzer’s lieutenants, whose book Journal of the Plague Year ended their 25-year friendship. “Eliot was way ahead of virtually anybody in power on two huge issues and to some extent suffered for it: crony capitalism and executive compensation.”

Today, Spitzer’s office at the family firm is the office of a family man. Pictures of his daughters—the eldest about to graduate from Harvard—line a sideboard, and there, in front of them, a tidy stack of printouts charting the new chess moves he must learn. He admits that for the moment, his competitiveness outstrips his talent, but he nevertheless plays to win. All of which invites the question: what game is this crusading knight playing now? Is he merely biding his time, eying a return to public life? Is redemption possible in an era of censorious and partisan politics?

“The answer is I don’t know,” he says when I ask would he, could he. “I don’t spend a lot of time worrying about it. I’m busy.” From the mouth of a man who still seems every inch the politician, it’s tempting to read his refusal to say no as a yes. At 52, the caricature-ready face with its domed forehead, juj ears, and jutting chin, is flanked by temples now flecked with white, but he is letting nothing slip. His tie is tight enough to have shrunk the knot at his throat into a scarlet fist and in true politico fashion his deep-set, deep-blue gaze is unflinching. He sits like a man relaxed but you can see the control in the way he holds that pose, his deep-set, deep-blue gaze is unflinching. He sits like a man relaxed but you can see the control in the way he holds that pose, and hear it in the way he announces he’s revealing a secret when he tells you that the coffee at Spitzer Engineering is not good.

“I wasn’t tough enough,” the man once known as “the Hammer of Wall Street” now says. Using a dusty, forgotten law called the Martin Act, pursuing antitrust suits and suing high-profile figures including the former chairman of the New York Stock Exchange, his tactics divided people. He didn’t win a single case but then many were settled long before trial, thanks partly to the threat of lengthy, expensive legal cases in a state where white-collar jails are non-existent, and to his ability to mobilise public outrage through the media. What’s not debatable is his prescience. Within months of Spitzer’s downfall, the financial world came tumbling down alongside him. His media career ensures that, attorney general—Spitzer was a crusader, championing a wealth of causes from the environmental and the educational to the electoral. And then there was his war on crony capitalism.

Could he make a comeback? Among his detractors—on Wall street in particular—the outrage is equally vigorous. “There’s a recognition that this was the guy we wanted in public office,” says Lloyd Constantine, one of Spitzer’s lieutenants, whose book Journal of the Plague Year ended their 25-year friendship. “Eliot was way ahead of virtually anybody in power on two huge issues and to some extent suffered for it: crony capitalism and executive compensation.”

Whether for or against, the strength of feeling that this man arouses is largely undiluted by the passing of time. Among those who saw him as the great liberal hope, the nation’s first Jewish President in the making, the man who was finally going to bring order to Albany, the centre of New York state’s terminally venal government, the frustration remains intense. What was he thinking? Among his detractors—on Wall Street in particular—the outrage is equally vigorous. “There’s a recognition that this was the guy we wanted in public office,” says Lloyd Constantine, one of Spitzer’s lieutenants, whose book Journal of the Plague Year ended their 25-year friendship. “Eliot was way ahead of virtually anybody in power on two huge issues and to some extent suffered for it: crony capitalism and executive compensation.”

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Spitzer’s older siblings, sister Emily and brother Daniel, are a lawyer and neurosurgeon respectively. In the weeks and months following his resignation, the media flung him on a couch and tried to understand why a man at the pin-

Hephzibah Anderson is the author of “Chastened” (Vintage)
nacle of his career would throw it all away with hookers. He was a little over a year into his first term when he was identified as “Client Nine,” the man caught on a federal wiretap arranging for a woman from an escort firm to travel from New York and meet him in a Washington hotel room. It seemed like career suicide. The fact that it’s such a cliché doesn’t blunt the urge to understand. Until then, the single scene from his childhood most retold by the media unfolded at the family dinner table. Three times a week, Bernard and his wife Anne would dine with their kids, a meal that became a masterclass in debating. (Anne actually taught a class in critical thinking at Marymount Manhattan College.) Following Spitzer’s disgrace, the same scene was recast as the crucible of a repressed, tightly wound man who would, sooner or later, crack.

What got him through those first few weeks, he says, was pure determination. “You don’t quit. You just don’t quit. Quitting is the easy way out.” If his motivation for the mistake itself remains obscure to him, moving past the immediate crisis did show him things about himself, things he’s reluctant to share. “I’m not in public life right now, I don’t need to answer every question. Every day you learn something, I hope. That’s what life is about. There are ways of learning—you can get kicked in the head, you can read a book. Reading a book is probably easier. But you learn.” While that metaphor doesn’t allow for the fact that he pretty much kicked himself in the head, the fact remains that there were easier routes he chose not to take at the time of his resignation. He could quite plausibly have claimed sex addiction, for instance. The way intrepid conspiracist and author of Three Days in May: Sex, Surveillance and DSK, Edward Jay Epstein, sees it, he might even have swivelled the scandal away from his own culpability and hinted at a set-up. “The political downfalls of Spitzer and Dominique Strauss-Kahn both turned on the well-timed release of information about their sex lives,” says Epstein. “In both cases we now know their enemies knew about their sexual vulnerabilities, so the intriguing issue is: did they use their knowledge in an after-the-fact conspiracy to create a sex scandal?”

A lawyer by training, Spitzer has always had great faith in rules, regulations and cold, hard facts. If anything, that faith appears to have been strengthened by the admission of his own human frailty. The cases he made against Wall street as attorney general were the result, he says, of the elimination of what had been effective structural guidelines.

“Bankers are self-interested, they’re crooks and they’re bad people, and the people in Washington didn’t get that”

“there was a reason to separate commercial and investment banking. There’s a reason to say if you have a federal guarantee, you don’t get involved in proprietary trading [trading with the bank’s own cash]. The bankers said ‘Oh don’t worry about us, we’ll mediate these conflicts of interest’ and ‘trust us, we’re smart, we’re wise’ etcetera, etcetera. Well, that was false. They’re neither smart nor wise; they’re self-interested, they’re crooks, and they’re bad people, and the public and the people in Washington didn’t get that. And so here we are now.”
By tightening financial regulation, Congress has seemed to retrospectively endorse his foresight, though it hasn’t gone far enough in Spitzer’s eyes. The JOBS Act, he says, should have been called “the Bring Back Fraud to Wall Street act.” What really irks him is that Wall Street feels no shame. It’s not surprising that he is such a big believer in the corrective properties of that ruddy-faced emotion, but he would have liked to see handcuffs, too. “There should have been criminal cases brought. There were frauds committed. They think they create wealth—they don’t. The people who create wealth are in Silicon Valley, the engineers in the labs, people who build buildings, not people on Wall Street who move money back and forth with sticky fingers.”

A lot of what Spitzer did to earn the monicker Sheriff of Wall Street might have made him into a patron saint of the Occupy movement, but after initial enthusiasm, his stance towards the movement has become sterner. “What it did was kind of remarkable,” he says. “It took political and economic conversation that at the time was exclusively about austerity, cutting budgets and entitlements and the rest—things we need to think about—and turned the political debate. The question is what do they do next, and I’m not sure that Occupy’s May Day re-emergence gave us a blueprint. I was hoping that they would come up with something a bit more articulable. The problem is that there wasn’t a leadership. That was at one level the beauty of it but also the undoing of it. Organisations have a structure for a reason. It’s not because structure’s malevolent, it’s because you need a decision process.”

He still thinks there are things Obama could have done better where the economy is concerned, starting with his choice of advisors (his CNN debut in 2010 began with a call to fire the treasury secretary, Tim Geithner), but says that with six months to go until the election, the president is in good shape, even if the second term will be a tougher win for him than his first. “We were in a canoe going over Niagara Falls and we have survived and now we’re making our way back, and we’re doing it despite horrendous pushback by the Republican party,” he says. “The backdrop bizarrely is Europe, and my argument has been, we’ve been conducting the largest macroeconomic experiment in history. Europe went to austerity and has demonstrated that these types of policies are simply not going to help us transition to the economy we need. So I think Barack can make an argument, but he’s making it in a context where people are saying what have you done for me lately, and it’s not as easy an argument as hope and change was four years ago.”

“I’ve always believed there are three numbers that determine the outcome of this race. One is the unemployment number; the second is the price of housing, in terms of are people’s homes going up or down in value, and they’ll probably still be dropping but the question is how do they feel about that; and the third is the price of gas. Those numbers determine how we feel emotionally about the economy.”

Spitzer loves numbers. On Viewpoint, his new hour-long show that strives to delve beyond the headlines in search of facts each weeknight, there is always a number of the day, which Spitzer analyses between interviews with guests. Emotions, on the other hand, are not a subject he is comfortable discussing. Four years down the line, has he gleaned any fresh insights into the question of what made him do it? “What can I say? We’re flawed,” he offers, ducking behind a Woody Allen quote then trailing off into an embarrassed silence: “If God exists, he’s an underachiever—you know, he created something that...”

In a land famed for its second acts, Spitzer has already notched up more than his fair share of scenes, hopscotching
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—John Gallagher, The Observer
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from corporate lawyer to attorney general to governor of New York, then crossing the floor to join the media. Counting back through his careers, he sometimes loses track himself. On the set of Viewpoint over at Current TV, I recently watched him chat off-air during a commercial break, praising his “witnesses” before quickly correcting himself: “I don’t know why I’m calling them witnesses. Guests, they’re guests.”

The network, whose co-founder is Al Gore, still bills Spitzer as the Sheriff of Wall Street. He talks like an insider, pointed in his use of first names, speaking not only of Barack but also “Mike” [Bloomberg], whose tenure as mayor of New York he praises despite differences of opinion, and “Hillary,” with whom he overlapped in office (she was a senator while he was attorney general). “I know Hillary, but I don’t know what she’ll do,” he says when I ask about the likelihood of her mounting a presidential bid in 2016. “I hope she runs—I think she would be a great candidate. She would get the nomination in a heartbeat, I don’t think there’s any Democrat who could stand up to her just by dint of experience, wisdom, the base she has. I don’t want to say there’s any buyer’s remorse right now but I think there are a lot of people who still wish—there’s a reservoir of support for her that is very real, and whether that could be defeated by anybody is doubtful in my mind.”

In social and sexual mores, it’s often noted that Manhattan is a good deal more conservative than its pop culture and politics convey. In 2010, for instance, the Emperor’s Club VIP member found himself blackballed from New York City’s Harvard Club. But though the journey back from political disgrace of a sexual nature is a long one, it can be done. Bill Clinton has managed it with relative alacrity. For Ted Kennedy and Gary Hart, the passage was more arduous, yet each got there—Kennedy from Chappaquiddick via (and this probably helped him, ironically) a failed presidential bid in 1980 to a second act in the Senate that almost eclipsed the scandal in his obituaries. Likewise, Gary Hart emerged from a solitary few decades writing histories and novels to become an influential voice on foreign policy and national security. As Constantine sees it, the only thing standing between Spitzer and political rehabilitation is an awareness not of what he did to his family and his reputation, but of the effect those misdemeanours had on all the causes that were riding on his shoulders. “He was the guy who was going to change things. He was very much a future president. There has to be recognition that he has fully internalised that,” he says.

In 2010, Spitzer dismissed claims that he was considering bids for state comptroller, New York state’s chief financial officer, or for the US Senate. Though he similarly shrugs off suggestions that he might run for mayor of New York City, the word “no” does not pass his lips when I press him on it. It would certainly be a tough task given his stance on Wall Street. When I asked Norb Vonnegut, a Morgan Stanley private wealth manager turned novelist, what he would make of a mayoral bid, he was briskly dismissive. “You’re kidding, right? During 2008, Spitzer’s resignation was the one trade that Wall Street cheered.” Yet in the cozy overlap of Manhattan’s media and intellectual worlds, it doesn’t take much to fuel chatter of a bid for social rehabilitation. In April, for instance, he set tongues wagging by hosting a book party for Ian Bremmer’s Every Nation for Itself.

Ari Melber, political correspondent for The Nation and a national staff member on John Kerry’s presidential campaign, believes a return to politics would be welcome. “On the economy and financial regulation, Eliot is one of the smartest and most accomplished Democratic politicians in the country,” he says. “Those issues are not exactly fading away, so his views will be relevant for a long time and he would begin any potential campaign with an enviable policy record. If he did run—and I have no reason to think he will—Eliot’s political challenge would reflect the wider problems in today’s politics: an obsession with scandal above all other topics; campaign coverage that elevates personal ‘narrative’ over public policy; and a partisan establishment that punishes Democrats more than Republicans for personal problems,” he adds, noting that David Vitter, the Louisiana senator whose phone number featured in the records of the “DC Madam,” doesn’t need to plot a “comeback” because he never left.

Back in his office at Spitzer Engineering, Spitzer continues to dance around the subject of a second political act. “Do I miss it? Sure. I’m not going to pretend I don’t miss it, but life is long and there are many different ways to live.” The nicest thing about not leading his former life, he says, is “not feeling the responsibility every day to wake up and try to change things in a context where change is very, very hard. Comparatively, the things I’m doing are easy.” And that, perhaps, is the biggest clue to his long-term game strategy, because, surely, easy is never going to satisfy a mind like Spitzer’s.

Having gone through New York’s notoriously tangled state budget with him, Constantine recalls Spitzer’s meticulous mind. He knew every line item, whether it related to schools or the construction of a new bridge. Together with Spitzer’s wife, Silda, Constantine attempted to persuade him not to resign back in 2008. His survival would not have been guaranteed, but he’d have had a chance. It was a chance he declined to take, so determined was he not to be seen as a hypocrite. “At that moment, he elevated his own sense of himself above his responsibility,” Constantine argues.

Having had the foresight to stand up to Wall Street and to pursue financial reform so determinedly, that responsibility, in his supporters’ eyes, was great. It’s what keeps him topical, and what makes him so very hard for many to forgive. [2]
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Weda Bay is not a place you’ve ever heard of, so don’t pretend.

It was not a place I’d ever heard of until a couple of months ago, either, and I’ve been trailing around the outer reaches of Indonesia’s 17,000 islands on and off for over 20 years. I tripped into Weda at the start of this year, attracted by tales of phenomenal economic growth, galloping corruption and parties, lots of parties. In the seven years since I last lived in Indonesia full-time, the country has gone through a frenzy of democratisation.

Travelling around this enormous nation, you see the clash between this new world and the old traditions, such as whale-hunting, eating the eggs of now-endangered turtles, or the funeral ritual of taking tea alongside the body of the deceased. Though Indonesia’s government keeps a low profile, the economy is booming, partly thanks to its abundant resources—a point not lost on China. As the world’s largest Muslim-majority country, it could prove a model for others, if democracy can tame the more radical strains of Islam here. But government is splintering and shattering into local fragments, in a way that makes future success hard to take for granted.

This summer has seen a bit of hand-wringing because growth in the first quarter of 2012 slowed to 6.3 per cent—but
the country is still growing nearly eight times faster than Britain. So what is the Indonesian government doing right? Actually, very little. But Indonesia continues to thrive, despite its leaders; the question is whether it can keep it up.

Weda Bay is in Halmahera, a misshapen octopus of an island top and right in the Indonesian chain that sprawls from just east of Malaysia to just north of Australia. It’s a neglected child of the Moluccas, the spice islands whose cloves and nutmegs first drew European adventurers to this part of the world in the 16th century. When I was last in Halmahera in 1989, there were no proper roads, no public transport. I hitched a ride through the jungle in an open-top army jeep (perhaps a relic of General Douglas MacArthur’s 1944 campaign to wrest the Pacific back from Japanese control). There was no electricity anywhere: fireflies twinkled in the jungle like Christmas fairy lights.

Now, as I arrive at the scruffy dock that forms Halmahera’s main port, I’m faced with dozens of flash new SUVs—they speed passengers across the island on smooth blacktop roads while on their plasma screens pop singers gyrate and bemoan their broken hearts. Their drivers steer with one hand; the other is reserved for Blackberry messaging.

Is this the kind of consumer David Cameron was thinking of when he visited Indonesia in April, talking of fantastic opportunities for British exports? Perhaps. But this new wealth is the upside of two things: a commodities boom and the decentralisation of political control. The downside is a new, grasping feudalism, a culture of personal patronage that is fertile soil for both corruption and conflict.

Corruption and conflict tend to undermine wealth. If they are to prevent that, the leaders of this kaleidoscope nation need to reshape a coherent Indonesian identity out of the country’s multicoloured and increasingly disparate fragments.

Indonesia is essentially a make-believe nation. It was brought into notional existence in 1945 with a declaration of independence of unsurpassed vagueness. It reads, in its totality:

“We the people of Indonesia hereby declare the independence of Indonesia. Matters which concern the transfer of power etc will be executed carefully and in the shortest possible time.”

There’s a lot wrapped up in that “etc”—not least some consensus about what constitutes “Indonesia.” Sukarno, the visionary demagogue who blurted out the declaration of independence after the defeat of Japan in the second world war and became the new country’s first president, took it to mean the remains of the former Dutch colony, the Dutch East Indies. But that colony itself was a shape-shifting beast without cultural, linguistic, religious or even geographical coherence, its only raison d’être the fattening of purses in Amsterdam and Rotterdam.

Resisting attempts to nudge the country towards federalism, Sukarno—and later and much more effectively, his successor Suharto (who assumed office in 1968)—turned Indonesia into a republic whose quest seemed to be the fattening of purses in the capital Jakarta. Foreign companies were licensed to suck oil and minerals out of the resource-rich extremes of the country, Aceh in the far west, for example, and Papua, over 3,000 miles to the east. The limbs got some roads, a few primary schools, a hospital or two. But most of the cash flowed in to the Javanese heartland that takes up seven per cent of Indonesia’s land and squashes in 62 per cent of its population. Nice for the Javanese. Not so nice for the people whose wealth was being slurped and scratched out from under them. If they protested, Suharto simply stamped on them. For people in the less productive outer islands, places like Halmahera, independence simply meant being neglected by the Javanese rather than by the Dutch.

When Suharto was finally ushered out of power following the Asian financial crisis in 1998, Indonesia was administratively one of the most centralised states in the world. Politically, however, the regions were roiling: Suharto’s successor Vice President BJ Habibie, an aeronautical engineer with little political experience, reacted by allowing East Timor, a former Portuguese colony that was only “integrated” into Indonesia in 1976, to hold a referendum on independence in 1999. No one but Habibie was surprised when the territory broke loose, with a definitive 79 per cent favouring independence. Now Jakarta worried that if it gave other provinces more power, the rest might follow. So the chimerical Habibie handed power not to the country’s 26 provinces but to its districts. At that time there were 293 of them—trifle compared to today’s 497, perhaps, but a daunting number to become the primary unit of government.

The legislation underpinning this colossal transformation was cobbled together in just a few months; many, many “ecteras” were left hanging. It became effective in 2001, when I was working as an epidemiologist for the Indonesian ministry of health, studying the country’s HIV epidemic. Suddenly, we had no idea who was responsible for what. Overnight, brand new districts were supposed to be running health services but had no competent staff; provinces were supposed to be providing training and oversight but had no budget. At the centre, we carried on writing national guidelines for everything from syphilis screening to tuberculosis treatment, with no clue how those guidelines might make it to the rock-face of the districts, with whom we were no longer allowed to communicate directly.

Despite a couple of mop-up laws that have tried to “clarify” roles and responsibilities, in far-flung places such as Weda the power of the elected district head, or Bupati, is near absolute. The very word Bupati is derived from upeti: someone who collects tributes. It’s often translated as “Regent,” nicely reflecting the imperious nature of the beast. The amoeba-like splitting of districts, the result of lobbying by the rich and locally influential, continues to create yet more thrones from which self-serving kings (and, very rarely, queens) can reign supreme.

Weda is the throne room for Central Halmahera, a district that is home to all of 30,000 souls. The most comprehensive travel website for Maluku dismisses it as “a scruffy village with muddy roads.” But what I find is a little island of asphalt laid in divided highways, with brand new Legoland housing, a boxy two-storey hotel, and electricity 24 hours a day—all sure signs of progress in Indonesia.

Capping it all, up on the hill, three palatial buildings: the Bupati’s office, the district parliament and the ministry of public works (that’s the office that the current Bupati used to work in before he ascended the throne). Next to the Bupati’s office is the state guest house. A project information board ▶
outside the guest house helpfully tells us how much it cost: £73,300, “paid for with money collected from your taxes.” You could build a school for that. Oh wait, that’s the budget not for the guest house, but for the wall around the guest house.

The Bupati is from Weda; he moved the district capital to his hometown at the beginning of his current five year term. Now it’s re-election year, and he’s kicking it off with four days of parties. Friday is the wedding of his eldest daughter. On Saturday, his second daughter will get married. This allows them to double up on the decorations around the hotel they’ve taken over: the larger than life-sized photo-hoardings, for example. Daughter One posing in front of metropolitan skyline. Daughter Two, dreamy in satin robe. Mum and Dad on holiday in exotic foreign location. Dad in his official uniform, under the banner headline “Proven!” with a list of his achievements while in office.

Presumably this is intended to impress the 7,000 guests invited to the weddings, among them the provincial governor, the head of the provincial police, and some assistant minister types from Jakarta. It’s a lavish gesture, given that a Bupati’s official salary is about £400 a month.

The demarcation between what one does for the electorate, and what one does for one’s political party can seem small. On Sunday, with all the wedding guests still in town, we celebrate the “birthday” of the PDIP political party, to which the Bupati belongs. Hundreds of red silk flags flutter in the sea breeze, thousands of people in newly-acquired red T-shirts declaring “I’m a Big Fan” throng behind marching bands. The Bupati’s face adorns the silicone chests of the local transgenders, who bump and grind from a carnival float. I join this frenzy of democracy and march past the man himself. There he stands outside his house, flunkies on either side, gripping, grinning, greeting, and generally behaving like a royal.

On Monday another birthday, this time the 12th anniversary of the creation of the district and the 4th anniversary of its move to Weda. It’s a three-line whip for the civil servants—that’s most of the town’s adult population. They watch ceremonial dances, tap their feet to more drum majorettes—in gold lamé this time—and listen to a lot of speeches praising the Bupati, a man who, it would seem, is much loved by all.

Until, that is, you move a few kilometres out of the centre of his fiefdom, up to the dreary one-rat town of Lelilef. Then you are in nickel territory, the mineral that made this little local eruption of wealth possible. Long ago, just before his demise, Suharto awarded a big nickel exploration and mining contract to Weda Bay Nickel, now a French-Japanese joint venture that threw a bone of 10 per cent of its shares to the Indonesian state mining company.

Then came decentralisation, and with it huge uncertainty about who had the right to issue contracts for exploitation of local resources. The local government thinks it, not Jakarta, should get the royalties from the mine. An environmental NGO is challenging the licence, saying it is at odds with environmental regulations. The local population has thrown in its two cents both for and against the mine.

“All the good jobs are going to outsiders. For us, it’s just jobs like security guards, where you have to wear a uniform and go to work every day,” says a teenager with betel-nut-stained teeth and alcohol on his breath. He tells me proudly that he torched a company speedboat last month, then zooms off on a new motorbike, bought with money his father made by selling land to Weda Bay Nickel. (Later that night, with even more alcohol on his breath, he drives the bike into the sea.)

Local elders, on the other hand, have tried to counter the bonfires with pro-mine demonstrations. “Those kids can’t even make it to school every day. What do they want, jobs as engineers?” says a grey-haired man who is investing his own Weda Bay windfall in a fishery business.

Local political machinations, repeated over and over again in each of Indonesia’s fiefdoms, do not foster rapid returns on investment. It has been 14 years since the Weda Bay Nickel licence was first signed, and the company is just beginning to break ground. Jakarta is hardly helping investors feel secure. In March, out of nowhere, the government unleashed a new thunderbolt: foreign investment in mining will be limited to 49 per cent after ten years of production (the figure used to be 80 per cent).

There’s another little drama playing out in Weda Bay. Knowing how to get a rise out of the corporate social responsibility department, environmental NGOs have lazily targeted Weda Bay Nickel, which has elaborate and expensive plans to minimise damage to the local environment. The NGOs have not squeaked about the real villain of the piece, a Chinese company that is shovelling nickel out of the ground (and sediment on to the stunning corals) before a ban on raw metal exports comes into effect in 2014. I ask one activist why no one targets the company that threatens marine life and long-term eco-tourism revenue. He shrugs. “Chinese companies, they are all shits, what’s the point?”

Democracy is inherently inimical to long-term investment. That’s especially true in Indonesia, where individual candidates chop and change their political affiliations with every election and where there’s no longer-term political incentives to protect. Delivering long-term benefits at one remove—invest now to protect the environment so that in the future we can build up a tourism business that will put rice on your table and a motorbike under your bum—that’s just too hard to sell right now. Or so I found in Pulau Banyak (“Many Islands”), a small group of, well, many islands off the southwest coast of Aceh, the region that was flattened by the tsunami in 2004.

Under moonlight on an otherwise deserted beach, I watched a giant sea turtle plop her ping-pong-ball eggs into a nest that she had diligently scrabbled out of the sand. With staff from a conservation NGO, we measured her up and left her in peace to drag herself back down the beach, leaving great tractor marks in the sand behind her.

It’s not hard to spot a new turtle nest. In the daylight the next morning, we see it quickly enough. And we spot three men digging at the nest with hunks of wood, loading the eggs into a sack.
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We start purposefully down the beach towards them; I have no idea what we’re going to do when we get there. Turtle eggs are protected by international and indeed Indonesian law. The NGO I’m with has a memorandum of understanding with the environment ministry in Jakarta to run this research and conservation project. The district government, including the recently deceased Bupati and the chief of police, have signed a local ordinance forbidding the collection of all turtle eggs, in accordance with the convention on international trade in endangered species (CITES) to which Indonesia is a signatory. This local ordinance has been in force quite successfully for six years. But there’s been a recent splitting of sub-districts, and a senior official of one sub-district likes turtle eggs for his tea. He’s let people in “his” area know that, and now they are robbing nests with impunity. What authority do staff from an NGO headquartered in another, now enemy, sub-district have in confronting turtle-egg thieves working with the approval of their local chieftain? They can wave a memorandum from Jakarta for all they are worth. Jakarta is a very long way away. As it happens, the egg-snatchers scarper before we reach them and the “mine’s bigger than yours” test of authority never takes place.

The turtle-egg incident highlights another question that taxes Indonesian leaders: to what extent should the government try to impose modern, nationally standardised laws on this impossibly diverse nation? Lots of people in Aceh like turtle eggs for their tea. Along with ganja sauce, they are a staple of the local cuisine. The goody-two-shoes western-influenced environmentalists who would seek to ban their sale are an affront to Acehnese dignity. (That may sound trivial, but combined affronts to Acehnese dignity led to a gruesome 30-year war against the Dutch in the late 19th century, and a nearly 30-year war against the Indonesian state a century later.)

The most common response to the national modernity versus local tradition dilemma is to legislate at the central level, then ignore at the local. The government signed the CITES convention in 1978, protecting many of Indonesia’s favourite foodstuffs. But in the main market in Banda Aceh, the provincial capital, turtle eggs are sold openly: 20,000 rupiah (about £1.30) for a pyramid of seven eggs.

Several thousand miles to the east in Lamalera, where I spend a day bobbing about in a smallish wooden canoe hunting whales with harpoons, locals went further to protect their traditions. Just before I arrived, they threatened to burn down the Bupati’s office if he enforced a ban on whale-hunting. He issued a local regulation giving the hunt a green light; they promptly went out and speared six sperm whales. When I get to Lamalera, throughout the whole village great, dripping hunks of whale meat hang, drying in the sun. A shrivelled offering from an earlier catch is served to me for tea. It makes turtles eggs, which I’ve always thought of as fishy snot-bombs, seem positively palatable.

The fragmentation of government is an asset in preserving weird and wonderful traditions, as I see roughly 150 miles to the south, on the island of Sumba. Though there are doubtless health and safety regulations relating to dead bodies in a drawer in some ministry in Jakarta, in Sumba I am casually invited to tea with an old biddy who died a week earlier (pictured above, left). She sits serenely in her house, receiving guests. Following an old ritual, every day for a week preceding the funeral, hundreds of people troop in to pay their respects, giving her presents of cloth, daggers, rice. I lay betel nut in her lap; she is unmoved. Guests cluster around the corpse, drinking tea, chatting. Fluttering around in the background, vaguely triumphant, is Dead Granny’s junior wife. “They’re dying in order,” explains my friend Lakabobo. “Number One died three years ago. This is Number Two,” she indicates her dead sister-in-law. “That’s Number Three.”; a wizened bundle with a betel-red scar for a mouth grins a toothless acknowledgement of her fate. Number
Four, much younger, mingles triumphantly. Her time has not yet come. Eight or nine pigs will be slaughtered for each day that the corpse receives her guests, over 40 in total. On burial day, I watch seven buffalo, one cow (for the Muslim guests) and one horse spurt their life-blood into the dirt in front of Granny’s house. A local regulation, aiming to reduce the destruction of wealth that these traditions demand, has set a limit of five dead beasts per ceremony. As I’m handed a dripping clump of buffalo-meat to take home, it doesn’t seem polite to ask about it.

The atomisation of the nation also functions as a job-creation scheme. Every one of the country’s 497 districts has its own parliament with at least 20 elected members, each with their own flash SUV. Every government department has an office in each district. The civil service nationally has swollen by over a quarter in the last five years alone: there are 4.6m civil servants on the books, more and more of them hired from any given Bupati’s “Tim Sukses”—his election campaign supporters. It’s not surprising that the civil service board in jakarta estimates that only about 20 per cent of them are competent in their jobs.

Is the splintering of Indonesia good for business, and thus the economy, and thus, eventually, people’s welfare? Most would say no. Indonesia’s infrastructure is shockingly poor; that needs fixing before all else. I have met Indonesian fishermen who would rather take their two-man canoes across 17 hours of open sea to sell their tuna fish in the Philippines. There, cold storage and a runway will get tuna to market in Tokyo at A-grade prices. If they sell their fish back home, it will sit in a polystyrene box surrounded by penny-bags of ice until the next slow ferry to a major port; it could be five days until it gets to market.

Poor infrastructure rots the price of fish. But government in Indonesia is now divided into such small units that it is hard to make large investments with public funds. And private firms don’t even know who they should be bribing any more. A green light from jakarta can lead in to a swamp at the district level. A local yes can turn out to be a provincial no.

As Indonesia shatters administratively, it becomes less efficient, more corrupt, more prone to local conflict, and less likely to implement standardised regulations. But, paradoxically, it also becomes richer: the country grew at a cracking 6.4 per cent last year, and not only because it is overly blessed with increasingly valuable commodities.

More localised corruption is less efficient overall, but it trickles money into more pairs of hands than the previous “centre-takes-it-all” model. Some of the country’s 237m people are using that money to tap the country’s extraordinary natural wealth in small but personally productive ways: turning an unproductive piece of farmland into a SUV taxi service via sale to a nickel mine, for instance, or tripling the price of a tuna catch with a 17-hour run to the Philippines.

As David Cameron said, Indonesia is a country with extraordinary potential. If it realises that potential, it is likely to be despite its government, not because of it.
When I was in my mid-teens I went to stay with my American uncle who, following a pioneering triple-heart bypass operation (he was always an early-adopter, for reasons that will soon become clear), had retired to Montserrat in the Caribbean. There are lots of things I still recall about that month in the intense sun—the sulphurous fumaroles on the top of the island, ones that years later were to erupt to such devastating effect; the red hair and dark faces of the kids at the two-room primary school where I helped out for a while; the deepening aquamarine of the water inside the reef that I obsessively snorkelled through, awed by the billiard-table-sized rays, and often shadowed by a lone barracuda in the mid-distance (an entity I cannot imagine I’d exhibit such sang-froid towards nowadays).

But what I remember most about Montserrat—and not only remember passively, but often actively recall—are the jingles for Radio Antilles and an advert that was frequently aired on the station. The jingle was a small masterpiece of the art that began low down and soulful with a solo voice: “Got a feelin’ deep inside/ It ain’t somethin’ I can hide...” before swelling to a great

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gospel-choir conclusion: “Feel the spirit, feel it! Feel the spirit of the Car-i-bbean! Radio Antilles, the big R-A!” Just typing these words almost 40 years later brings a happy smile to my lips—altogether devoid of irony. But then there’s the advert, which was for the brand of cigarettes my uncle—despite his recent extreme arterial re-plumbing—still smoked by the carton, and packets of which I frequently purloined so as to covertly smoke one in a lush tropical covert. The advert took the form of a little playlet:

SMALL BOY: Daddy, why do you smoke State Express 555s?
FATHER: I smoke them, son, because they’re the taste of success.

SMALL BOY: Daddy, when I grow up I’m gonna smoke State Express 555s.
FATHER: You do that, son.

Outrageous, no? Surpassing outrageous, in fact, more like flatly unbelievable—and yet it was so. I know it, not because I came to some years later when the anti-smoking drive had picked up speed and thought, wow!, that was one hell of an unethical advertisement, but because even at the time I realised it was distinctly beyond the pale. Indeed, I have been retelling that little piece of shameless indoctrination year in, year out ever since. Nowadays, when I recite it for my youngest son, who is ten, it actually seems rather less outrageous and simply wreathed in the wispy blue-grey quaintness of the past.

The curious thing about the moral valency of this State Express 555 advert was that already, by the age of 15 or so, I was a serious smoker, and there’s no doubt in my mind that cigarette advertising had played its part in convincing me that smoking was cool. Indeed, I can envision the cigarette advertisements of the early 70s—and, more especially, the pack designs—better than I can any other commercial information from subsequent decades. Yet while being fully persuaded of the virtues of the product (both qua product, and the merits of various brands in respect of each other), I nonetheless was already perfectly aware of both how damaging cigarette smoking was, and how specious advertisers’ claims for it were. This would have been in the mid-1970s, when cigarette advertising—apart from loose tobacco and cigars—had already been banned on British television for a decade.

Cigarettes are an interesting phenomenon when it comes to the history of advertising and an understanding of its contemporary impact. There is simply no comparable example of a product remaining widely available, in a range of many different brands, while its advertisement has been almost completely banned. That cigarette smoking has declined is undeniable, but if this could be attributed to the restriction of advertising alone it would be a powerful confirmation of the model on which most advertising has traditionally been based: that of effective persuasion. Of course, we would also—if such a bizarre analysis were remotely possible—have to assay the impact of anti-cigarette advertising in all its forms: government health warnings, public information films, etc, etc. That young people continue to embrace the habit cannot any longer be a function of their being rationally convinced that the benefits outweigh the downsides, as there is absolutely no one, either corporately or even individually (with the possible exception of David Hockney), who’s prepared to make that case.

In his book Seducing the Subconscious: The Psychology of Emotional Influence in Advertising, Robert Heath writes persuasively about the reasons for the longevity of the Marlboro cowboy in the British popular subconscious. Despite the cowboy only appearing in a billboard campaign that ran for three months in 1974 (and then only in the background of an image predominantly of steers moiling in dust), Heath discovered that his students of advanced advertising theory at the University of Bath, born between 1989 and 1991, could still instantly recognise the eponymous puffer on the range. Heath deduces several factors that led to the Marlboro cowboy riding on across our psychic terrain: first there was the very publicity that surrounded the banning of the cowboy, then there was the way Philip Morris (the cigarettes’ manufacturer) continued to suggest the cowboy’s presence for three years after the initial ban by showing fences with saddles on them, or spurs lying by barn doors, together with the slogan “Welcome to Marlboro Country.” Heath goes further, arguing that the separate elements of the Marlboro cowboy’s image—ruggedness, toughness, machismo—had long been absorbed by the collective subconscious, and hence
could be readily triggered in potential consumers by images as glancing and allusive as the “red rooftop” packaging symbol that remained on Ferrari Formula 1 cars until 2008.

Heath’s book is far more persuasive than any advertisement, no matter how top-loaded the latter may be with accurate information. His basic thesis is that far from advertising persuading consumers to buy a product at all, or favour one brand over another, it largely works by creating emotive associations. His is an alternative history of the progress of advertising towards its current state of psychological sophistication, one that largely discounts the conscious efforts of Madison Avenue’s so-called “mad men” (and their British Charlotte Street counterparts) in favour of what he terms their ability to “subconsciously seduce.” His thesis depends on a lengthy journey through cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, and a firm grasp on how—so far as we know—the human mind actually does work (rather than how we would like it to work). But the slug lines are clear enough. Firstly, chuck out that Cartesian “thinking I” once and for all, and accept that self-consciousness is more like the monitor of the computer-mind rather than its central processor. And secondly, advertising succeeds more the less we pay attention to it.

That’s right: the less we pay attention to it. When I began thinking about the subject of this article I sat there for a while in a warm glow of satisfaction thinking about how it was that—apart from the aforementioned State Express 555 advert on Radio Antilles—I could barely recall, unprompted, any adverts, let alone ones currently running on TV, radio, and web page, or plastered on the billboards ranged around Vauxhall Cross where I live. Was it, I considered, my innate resistance to late capitalism in all its manifestations—a socialism that I concede is rather more emotive than it is practical—that made me such salted earth for advertisers’ broadcasting? Or was it possibly that over the years I had become more and more detached from the commercial zeitgeist, its steady go-round of innovation, promotion and obsolescence? After all, I don’t drive a car, fly only when I have to and have worn the same style of clothes for years. My mobile phone is a decade old—my computer over five. I spend a good part of each day simply declining to have new software added to it by its wonky internet connection. And while I’m not exactly the Unabomber—yet—I am seriously considering a ten-year-programme that will, once all my children have left home and are self-sufficient, leave me peacefully “off-grid.”

Then I pondered the matter more and felt still more pleased with myself, because it occurred to me that while I do indeed have a visceral antipathy to advertising of all forms, born of being the child of bien pensant left-wingers, I nonetheless also care about it, am interested in it, and when—in the past—I’ve seen an advert I admire for its pizzazz and chutzpah, I think I have the honesty to admit this. Why wouldn’t this be so? For advertising is also in my blood. State Express 555-smoking Uncle Bob was one of the original mad men himself: creative director of the huge US ad agency Leo Burnett and latterly senior vice-president of D’Arcy McManus Masius, Bob took a part in the creation of the Pillsbury Doughboy, one of the most successful branding exercises of all time. When I was a kid my mother spoke in hushed tones of going to Bob’s office on Madison Ave-

Ads for the “Marlboro Country” campaign of the 1970s (top), Silk Cut in the 1980s (above) and the Health Education Council in 1970 (right)
the Sterling Cooper agency, who is obsessed by Japanese culture and the writings of Ayn Rand, and who often comes out with gnomic but compelling statements that suggest it is he who truly intuits the nature of the relationship between advertising and sales. John Wanamaker, the American industrialist, is quoted by Robert Heath as saying: “Half of my advertising is wasted, but I don’t know which half.” I suspect that Bert Cooper would know which half was wasted, and also that he’d know it wasn’t the half that seemed salient.

Heath tells us that “advertisers may think their creativity makes us like ads more and pay more attention to them,” but that in fact the opposite is the case: “the more advertisers attempt to subconsciously seduce us with creativity, the more we like it, the less we feel threatened by it, and the less attention we feel we need to pay to it. So the more creative advertising is, the less attention we pay, and the less well we recall the message it is trying to get over.” You might’ve thought this would be the death knell for all, not just half, of conventional advertising, but on the contrary Heath demonstrates quite clearly—at least to my satisfaction—that it is precisely when we pay no conscious attention to advertising that advertisers can get to work on our subconscious with complete effectiveness.

This is not, Heath hastens to add, because they are using sinister subliminal techniques, the so-called “hidden persuaders” identified by Vance Packard in his 1957 book of the same name. Heath points out that the evidence of subliminal techniques working at all was nonexistent, and really the whole furore about them missed the point: the subconscious “persuaders” in advertising are those that appeal to our emotions rather than our reason. There’s no rational basis as to why we should visit a website for a car insurance comparison quotation on the basis of a cuddly-looking meerkat’s linguistic confusion—and yet we do. Advertising makes us feel good about things—and the purchasing of them—by associating these with other things that we like unequivocally. Back in the 1980s, when Thatcherism was beginning to chomp its way through British culture, there may have been revulsion at the way traditional lifestyles were being chewed up and spat out, but there was also a sheer exhilaration in the business of consumption itself that had never really been felt before.

This exhilaration was evident in a whole swathe of advertisements that not only exalted products and services, but simultaneously ironised their own exaltation. Again, Heath points out that an advertiser that pokes fun at its own product is perceived by the consumer as so confident in its worth that it can afford to do so (after all, that’s how we interpret such behaviour at an interpersonal level). If you like, British consumer capitalism took such ironic confidence to new—and very creative—heights in the late 1980s and into the 90s. In many ways the British advertising of this period was probably the best in the world. (The iconic Carlsberg advert created by Saatchi & Saatchi actually first ran in 1973—and was voiced by Orson Welles no less—but I think it fair to say it was the shape of things to come, and not just in lager but politics as well).

So, thinking on my inability to summon up campaigns more recent than those iconic ones of a quarter-century ago, and wondering whether it was me or it, I started paying a bit more attention to contemporary TV advertising, only to discover myself massively underwhelmed. Indeed, at the time of writing I find it hard to summon up any memory of what I’ve seen in the past month or so, excepting this aperçu: that eBay, Ikea and at least one mobile phone company seem to feel that the distinguishing—and sexy—characteristic of modern life is a sort of flat-pack concept, whereby the protagonists of their ads move seamlessly from one interior to another. Err... that’s it. When I put it to friends that contemporary advertising was pretty creatively uninteresting, they agreed, and surprisingly—to me at least—they seemed instinctively to know why, being hip both to Robert Heath’s subconscious seduction theory, and, more instrumentally, to the reorganisation of the advertising industry that presaged, although by no means anticipated, the impact of the web.

In his book The Daily You: How the New Advertising is Defining Your Identity and Your Worth, Joseph Turow gives a sharp insight into the way the advertising industry was organisationally primed to take advantage of the web by the hiving off of media buying from other agency functions. In the days of the mad men, media buying was done in house—think of the bespectacled Harold Crane, frustrated short story writer and creator of the Sterling Cooper TV department—but in the 1970s and 80s British agencies started hiving off this function in order to make it possible for them to represent clients with similar products while, apparently, minimising conflicts of interest. Media buying was seen as a dull and functional task compared to the Don Draper style creative flights, but in a world of subconscious seduction the placement and ubiquity of advertising becomes far more important than its actual articulated message.
Moreover, advertising space and airtime buyers always depended for their efficacy—or so they would tell clients—on quantifying metrics that somehow demonstrated just how much a given advert would be seen in a given medium. This put them—in pole position when it came to exploiting the potential of the new internet-based media.

Turow’s thesis boils down to this: the “click” that we make when we select a link on a webpage was the biggest gift to advertisers since the invention of moveable type. It enabled the market research departments of advertising media buyers to cement for the first time the connection between the message and the product. True, display advertising in new media is still very much the poor relation of network broadcasting despite the damage the web is inflicting on good old moveable type. But then it hasn’t been display advertising as traditionally understood that’s enabled Facebook to offer its shares for sale with a company valuation of £59bn, oh no. What’s enabled that is the simple and often mindless “click,” which Turow follows on its vermiculation through virtual space, hollowing out a wholly new and commercially exploitable realm.

Back in the 1980s and 90s when an advertiser wanted to reach new prospects through either advertising or marketing, they would approach a list broker, who would come up with computerised lists of suitable prospects according to income, geographical area, demography—even previous purchasing history. But now the click and the cookie that registers our search histories do all this for them by feeding back such information automatically as we sleepwalk our way through the shiny, happy world of the web. Above-the-line advertising no longer needs to be creatively cutting-edge, because the dull and insensate electronics beneath our fingertips ensures that clever and unscrupulous capitalists know everything about our purchasing habits required to flog us either more of the same, or more of the similar.

Turow paints in pixels a landscape in which there are advertising haves and have-nots, in which when you go on to this or that page—whether it be a commercial site, or even that of a thoughtful politics and current affairs periodical—it knows you’re coming and adjusts its banner advertising, its pop-up ads are now found on petrol pumps, on TV screens in cabs, on smartphones—even on stairs, like these for a salon in Mumbai computerised lists of suitable prospects on the basis of their brand at all—and yet is nonetheless stealthily and effectively sold to all the time.

Ads on petrol pumps, ads on TVs in the back of cabs, ads on smartphones—and, that particular killer app, product placement. Back in those halcyon days of Maurice and Charles Saatchi, the big, clever, creative ad lumbered through the world—it could hug you to death, certainly, but you could see it coming. Now, in the latest movie schlockerdämmerung, Avengers Assemble—which I had the misfortune to doze through with my aforementioned ten year old this weekend—a Motorola phone or a Toyota car just happen to be picked out by the eye from the CGI maelstrom of disintegrating New York. Heath observes that product placement—which has recently become permitted for the first time on British TV—is so insidious because we think of characters in soaps as our friends and neighbours, so their imbibing of this drink or slapping on of that unguent stands as a personal recommendation. I’m not sure that I want to use the same phone as my new—but undoubtedly fast—friend the Iron Man, but what I wouldn’t mind is his colossal turn of speed, because that’s what’s needed if I’m going to out-swim the silent barracuda of advertising which loiters lazily in the periphery of my vision, seemingly innocuous but actually quietly replete—because it’s already taken a big bite out of me. Uncle Bob would, no doubt, approve.
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The television show *The Wire* resurrects the classical Greek vision: some conflicts are beyond resolution

JOHN GRAY

When asked earlier this year which of the characters in *The Wire* was his favourite, President Obama chose Omar Little, a shotgun-wielding gay man who makes a living by robbing drug dealers. Holding to a code that bars any assault on people not directly involved in crime, Omar testifies to the persistence of a kind of honour in the struggle for urban survival. A politician whose career has been founded on projecting an inspirational image, it is not surprising that Obama is drawn to an authentically inspiring fictional creation.

But among many high-placed fans of *The Wire*, it may be the current US attorney general who deserves special note. Speaking in May 2011, Eric Holder made a personal plea to the writers David Simon and Ed Burns to do another season of the series, or better yet a movie. Created by Simon using his experience as a police reporter and Burns’ work as a homicide detective, and first shown ten years ago on June 2nd, 2002, *The Wire* gained a following—never very large, but passionately loyal—for its unsparring depiction of life in the city of Baltimore, primarily seen through the eyes of its police, drug dealers and politicians. Holder’s plea may have been a jokey public relations exercise designed to display his media awareness. Simon’s response was in deadly earnest. He and Burns were ready to go to work on a sixth season, he replied, “if the department of justice is equally ready to reconsider and address its continuing prosecution of our misguided, destructive and dehumanising drug prohibition.”
That the president and attorney general are so familiar with the series underlines its enormous resonance. But while much of the debate surrounding *The Wire* has focused on the concrete political issues it addresses (such as America’s drugs policy), one of the show’s greatest achievements has been widely overlooked. *The Wire* presents a damming portrait of inner-city life in America without the prospect of redemption. It has none of the faith in the ultimate triumph of justice and the saving power of goodness that shows through many of the most hard-boiled thrillers. Taken seriously—as the series was undoubtedly meant to be, though it contains many scenes of black comedy—*The Wire* plants a compelling question mark over the creed of nearly all of those today who insist they have no religion: the belief that the intractable conflicts that are the stuff of tragedy are slowly being left behind.

Simon has acknowledged the influence on the series of ancient tragedians such as Euripides, Sophocles and Aeschylus. Like the Greek dramatists he shows humans enacting fates they cannot escape. As Simon put it in a 2007 interview with Nick Hornby, he lifted his thematic stance “wholesale” from the Greeks, aiming “to create doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality. The idea that...we’re still fated by indifferent gods, feels to us antiquated and superstitious... But instead of the old gods, *The Wire* is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces. It’s the police department, or the drug economy, or the political structures, or the school administration, or the macroeconomic forces that are throwing the lightning bolts... In much of television, and in a good deal of our stage drama, individuals are often portrayed as rising above institutions to achieve catharsis. In this drama, the institutions always prove larger, and those characters with hubris enough to challenge the postmodern construct of American empire are invariably mocked, marginalised, or crushed. Greek tragedy for the new millennium, so to speak.”

In ancient Greek tragedy the protagonists were shown as the playthings of the gods. Human actions were scripted by powers beyond human control or comprehension. In *The Wire*, human beings go to their ruin because of what they and others have unknowingly done. In some interpretations, this is the true meaning of Greek tragedy: the arbitrary meddling of capricious deities in human affairs is a metaphor for the fact that human beings neither understand nor truly determine their own actions. Whether or not the classical Greek dramatists understood tragedy in this fashion, it is hard to imagine a world view more subversive of 21st-century piety and hopes.

For most of *The Wire*’s audience in America and Britain, the idea that human beings are—or may someday become—authors of their lives is an article of faith. To be human, it is believed, is to be—at least ideally—autonomous, shaping your life according to your choices and plans. In this view the tragedies that are shown in Greek drama can only be relics of a primitive past. No doubt human beings will always suffer pain and disappointment; but the fatal undoing of their lives that comes from being caught in a web of destiny, which is the central theme of Greek tragedy, reflects a magical mode of thinking. Empowered by advancing knowledge, so the argument goes, we need not submit blindly to fate. While it will never achieve the perfection of which some may dream, the human world can become ever more transparent and open to understanding. Even if it will always be bordered by chaos, human life can be increasingly governed by reason and morality. Arising from errors that can be rectified over time, tragic conflict need not be a permanent condition.

There can be little doubt that most of those who admire *The Wire* subscribe to some version of this comforting catechism. Meliorism—the belief that humanity is gradually ascending to a higher level of civilisation—is, after all, the most commonplace of contemporary faiths. One of its tenets is the belief that civilised life is the normal condition of modern societies; the practical task is to extend this condition to those sections of the species that have yet to enjoy its benefits. But a chronic condition of violence and entrapment is not an outlier on the fringes of civilised existence. As *The Wire* shows, it is the ongoing experience of large parts of the population in one of the world’s largest democracies.

Re-envisioned in a de-industrialised American city, in *The Wire* the elements of tragedy are played out in an urban wasteland. In the course of 60 episodes broadcast over five seasons between 2002 and 2008, the interwoven strands in which the protagonists are entangled were shown reaching beyond the drug gangs into industry, education, politics and the media. In the second series labour unionists are making deals with organised crime in an attempt to revive the city’s port, while the third shows a police officer’s Dutch-style attempt to decriminalise drug use in a restricted zone being thwarted by politicians, the media and senior echelons of the police. The fourth series dwells on the struggles of the city’s school system, while the fifth focuses on how the media (in the shape of *The Baltimore Sun*, where Simon worked for a time) retreats from reporting conditions in the schools and instead prints stories that are torn out of context or fabricated. The police are morally flawed, with the pivotal character of detective Jimmy McNulty acting impulsively and self-destructively. But however flawed these characters may be, they are not monsters. If some seem to be amoral, it is because in the environment in which they operate moral behaviour has been proved to be dangerously dysfunctional. The journalist who confects his reports of life in the city is rewarded with a Pulitzer prize, while colleagues who question his methods are demoted. A lack of moral sense is the price of a humanly tolerable life, while for those on the street holding to a code of honour can be the fast track to death.

The wiretap—which the police use to listen in to the phone calls of the drug dealers—is like the oracle in Greek drama, whose cryptic utterances are clues to an unfolding order in events. The messages that are intercepted may be hard to interpret. Even when the meaning is clear, acting on them may not prevent ruin. The dealers whose phones are tapped and the cops who do the tapping are not characters in a morality play in which good and evil contend for victory. Above all, both are in a situation they cannot change. It is this unalterable necessity that makes their condition tragic.

But it would be wrong to think of *The Wire* as a straight translation of Greek tragedy into a 21st-century setting. Simon has said that “Omar and [kingpin drug dealer] Stringer had to die.” But they do not die because they challenge the gods. It is the society in which these characters must act that ordains their ends. In challenging the institutions that shape their lives they may be
displaying a type of hubris—the inordinate human pride that the Greek tragedians mocked; but the projects that bring about their ruin are mostly attempts to realise normal human needs and desires. The protagonists want to live, and enjoy a life that is not shaped by fear; they need a degree of respect from others, while wanting to be able to live on good terms with themselves. If they serve the institutions that police the city, it is not because they are necessarily callous or venal. They are looking for a modicum of security and success, without which their lives would hardly differ from those of the underclass.

Moved by similar needs and seeking much the same goals, the underclass and those who serve the ruling institutions are both powerless. Stringer Bell—a capable, ambitious (and also highly amoral) dealer who wants to use the proceeds of the drug trade to set up legitimate real estate businesses—comes to grief by giving bribes to a corrupt senator, while alienating his own corrupt lawyer by cutting him out of the deal. It is Stringer’s strengths that undo him: aiming to make his way as legitimate businessman, he exhibits the enterprise and strategic forethought that is required for success in the economy of capitalism. He even keeps a copy of Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations on his bookshelf. But he cannot escape the fate to which he was consigned by the accident of his birth—any more than can Omar, who kills him at the end of the third series. When Stringer is killed by Omar and an enforcer from New York, it is because Omar’s grandmother has been fired on by Stringer’s men while going to church. When Omar is himself killed, it is because he acted independently in hijacking a heroin shipment and incurred the wrath of the drug gangs. Omar is shot by a young gang member, who at the end of the series is shown being led away in handcuffs in the custody of the police. In the world of The Wire, no display of intelligence and will-power can break the fatal chain of events.

From one point of view, The Wire is an exercise in realism. The reality it depicts is violent and profane. In “Old Cases,” an episode in the first series, McNulty and a colleague visit the site of the murder of a black college student. For nearly five minutes, while examining the crime scene and looking at photographs of the dead woman, the two detectives communicate with one another using only the word “fuck” and variations on it. The scene may have been a response by Simon and his co-writer to those who objected to the liberal use of expletives in the series: this is how detectives talk, the writers were saying. Repeating “fuck” while looking at photographs of the murdered woman testifies to the loss of affect that comes from too much contact with death and violence. The detectives are hard-pressed professionals, who are able to do the job only on condition that their normal human responses are in some degree suspended. Falling back on the profanity testifies to the difficulty of articulating any response to a situation in which random murder has become a normal part of life. At another level the repeated use of “fuck” and its derivatives composes a litany to meaninglessness, a succession of expletives that is as devoid of sense as the deaths that are being investigated. At this point the series plunges deeper than Greek tragedy to approach the crueller genre of absurdist comedy. If the exchange between the detectives has dramatic precedents, it is in the stoically playful banter that is rehearsed in the plays of Ionesco and Beckett.

Moving from realism to the theatre of cruelty, The Wire mounts a bitter assault on the ideology that has reduced to absurdity the lives that are chronicled. Simon has described the series as “a political tract masquerading as a cop show,” and it can readily be seen as a workerist critique of finance-capitalism. Many classicists, including Daniel Mendelsohn, have argued that the Greeks too saw tragedy not just as a form of popular entertainment in which myths were re-enacted but also “as a form of political dialogue” in which power and the nature of freedom were explored and contested. Continuing this tradition, The Wire is an exercise in de-mystification, unveiling the forces that configure everyday experience. The lives that unfold in the series are markers for a hidden reality, which is the flow of capital between the criminal economy and the capitalist market. The ultimate object of the series is not then any kind of moral conflict, not even of the kind that is represented in tragedy. The true subject matter of The Wire is the flow of money. As one of the detectives puts it: “This is the thing that everyone knows and no one says. You follow the drugs, you get a drug case. You start following the money, you don’t know where you’re going.”

In its role as a political tract, The Wire is a polemic against the idea that the unrestrained market is the embodiment of individual liberty. Simon has used the series to expose the contradictions of this atavistic ideology: supposedly aiming to enhance
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choice, the reinvention of the free market has left the majority of people more exposed to random events and arbitrary power than before. Like the dim remnant on the left that insists communism has yet to be tried, neoliberal will say that the free market still does not yet truly exist. Against this fantasy of market freedom, The Wire is saying: Look, this is how capitalism works.

But another interpretation of the detective’s observation about money is possible and plausible: in the political economy of The Wire, the origins and destinations of money are ultimately unknowable. Behind the bribes and the pay-offs, the buying and selling of influence, there is no hegemonic power controlling the action in the way a master-puppeteer might shift marionettes around on a stage. With all their political clout and their massive though volatile wealth, the financial elites are themselves contending with a chaos they cannot understand or control. Far more able to deal with market shocks than the underclass, America’s elites are also exposed to the entropy of history. With much of America’s financial system effectively nationalised as a result of the crisis that began some years ago, the version of capitalism that is the target of The Wire belongs in the past. Operating in a globalised world containing powerful rival capitalisms, America cannot return to the free market even if that is what its ruling elites most want. Whatever type of economy eventually emerges, there is nothing to say it will be a significant improvement.

If The Wire is interpreted along these lines, its subject matter is not capitalism but a postmodern condition in which humans can no longer grasp the world they have made. The Wire’s protagonists are defeated by chaos. The disorder that brings them to ruin is a densely structured kind in which disparities of power are being constantly renewed; but since none of those who struggle with it can understand or control its workings, it is still chaos.

At this point a question arises: Can these vain struggles be described as tragic? Even if the ancient Greek tragedians did not believe in the gods, they assumed a kind of order in the world; it was against this order that tragic heroes rebelled. But can there be tragedy in a world that is at bottom chaotic? This was the question posed by George Steiner in his seminal book The Death of Tragedy, first published in 1961.

In his intensely controversial study of Greek drama The Birth of Tragedy (1872), Nietzsche—a classical philologist—argued that the tragic sense of life was undermined by the rise of Socratic rationalism, which provided a universal framework for human action. Greek tragedy accepted that life is meaningless, Nietzsche argued, but overcame the lack of meaning by presenting a spectacle in which destruction and ruin acquired life-affirming beauty. In his no less controversial study, Steiner agreed that tragedy was undermined by rationalism, but it was modern rationalism—the rejection of metaphysics and the rise of science rather than the Socratic faith in reason—that subverted belief in moral order. Interestingly, Steiner argued that tragedy was also compromised through the influence of Christianity, which promises the rectification of wrongs and final redemption. His claim that theism and tragedy are diametrically opposed may be overdrawn—faith in justice is profoundly questioned in the book of Job, even if Job ends by accepting the divine will—but it is true that Christianity has no place for final tragedy. If Homer’s Iliad is the canonical expression of the tragic sense of life, Dante’s Divine Comedy articulates a vision in which no tragedy can ever be absolute.

Steiner’s analysis helps clarify why The Wire is so challenging. In rejecting theism, modern meliorists have not renounced the hope of redemption. Instead they have transposed a Christian narrative into a succession of political projects. Whether it is a fantasy of market freedom or one in which the market is abolished, modern politics is haunted by myths of redemption. In the prevailing anti-tragic world view, human institutions are the result of human action and can therefore be altered by human decision.

The lives that are shown in The Wire confound this seemingly obvious inference. What is done cannot be undone; history cannot be repealed by human will. The workings of necessity that have shaped the past will also shape the future. Serious politics accepts this fact. Redemptive politics only magnifies the waste of life: the drug war, which is supposed to deliver society from the evil of addiction, exposes millions to violence and chronic insecurity. Failing or refusing to accept tragedy, politics has become a theatre of the absurd.

In denying us the comfort of redemption, The Wire re-connects us with reality. When it shows human lives ending in a lack of meaning, the series confronts us with the absurd in its most pitiful form. When it shows human beings joking, cursing and carrying on despite this absurdity, it achieves something like the liberating catharsis that Nietzsche imagined being produced by ancient Greek drama. The struggles we share with the protagonists are not deviations from some ideal version of humanity that will someday come into being. Intractable conflict goes with being human. In one way or another, practically everything in current media culture is escapist in intention or effect. In astonishing contrast, The Wire returns us to ourselves.
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The descent of Edward Wilson

A new book on evolution by a great biologist makes a slew of mistakes, says Richard Dawkins

The Social Conquest of Earth
By Edward O Wilson
(WW Norton, £18.99, May)

When he received the manuscript of The Origin of Species, John Murray, the publisher, sent it to a referee who suggested that Darwin should jettison all that evolution stuff and concentrate on pigeons. It’s funny in the same way as the spoof review of Lady Chatterley’s Lover, which praised its interesting “passages on pheasant raising, the apprehending of poachers, ways of controlling vermin, and other chores and duties of the professional gamekeeper” but added:

“Unfortunately one is obliged to wade through many pages of extraneous material in order to discover and savour these sidelights on the management of a Midland shooting estate, and in this reviewer’s opinion this book can not take the place of JR Miller’s Practical Gamekeeping.”

I am not being funny when I say of Edward Wilson’s latest book that there are interesting and informative chapters on human evolution, and on the ways of social insects (which he knows better than any man alive), and it was a good idea to write a book comparing these two pinnacles of social evolution, but unfortunately one is obliged to wade through many pages of erroneous and downright perverse misunderstandings of evolutionary theory. In particular, Wilson now rejects “kin selection” (I shall explain this below) and replaces it with a revival of “group selection”—the poorly defined and incoherent view that the essential point to grasp is that the survival of the fittest refers only to groups or species or ecosystems. It is on its own as a “replicator,” with its own authoritative name of Edward O Wilson. If it was authority that got the paper published, there is poetic justice in deploying authority in reply.

I’m reminded of the old Punch cartoon where a mother beams down on a military parade and proudly exclaims, “There’s my boy, he’s the only one in step.” Is Wilson the only evolutionary biologist in step? Scientists dislike arguing from authority, so perhaps I shouldn’t have mentioned the 140 dissenting authorities. But one can make a good case that the 2010 paper would never have been published in Nature had it been submitted anonymously and subjected to ordinary peer-review, bereft of the massively authoritative name of Edward O Wilson. If it was authority that got the paper published, then there is poetic justice in deploying authority in reply.

Then there’s the patrician hauteur with which Wilson ignores the very serious drubbing his Nature paper received. He doesn’t even mention those many critics: not a single, solitary sentence. Does he think his authority justifies going over the heads of experts and appealing directly to a popular audience, as if the professional controversy didn’t exist—as if acceptance of his (tiny) minority view were a done deal? “The beautiful theory [kin selection, see below] never worked well anyway, and now it has collapsed.” Yes it did and does work, and no it hasn’t collapsed. For Wilson not to acknowledge that he speaks for himself against the great majority of his professional colleagues is—it pains me to say this of a lifelong hero—an act of wanton arrogance.

The argument from authority, then, cuts both ways, so let me now set it aside and talk about evolution itself. At stake is the level at which Darwinian selection acts: “survival of the fittest” but, to quote Wilson’s fellow entomologist-turned-anthropologist RD Alexander, the fittest what? The fittest gene, individual, group, species, ecosystem? Just as a child may enjoy addressing an envelope: Oxford, England, Europe, Earth, Solar System, Milky Way Galaxy, Local Group, Universe, so biologists with non-analytical minds warm to multi-level selection: a bland, unfocussed ecumenicalism of the sort promoted by (the association may not delight Wilson) the late Stephen Jay Gould. Let a thousand flowers bloom and let Darwinian selection choose among all levels in the hierarchy of life. But it doesn’t stand up to serious scrutiny. Darwinian selection is a very particular process, which demands rigorous understanding.

The essential point to grasp is that the gene doesn’t belong in the hierarchy I listed. It is on its own as a “replicator,” with its own unique status as a unit of Darwinian selection. Genes, but no other units in life’s hierarchy, make exact copies of themselves in a pool of such copies. It therefore makes a long-term difference which genes are good at surviving and which ones bad. You cannot say the same of individual organisms (they die after passing on their genes and never make copies of themselves). Nor does it apply to groups or species or ecosystems.
None make copies of themselves. None are replicators. Genes have that unique status.

Evolution, then, results from the differential survival of genes in gene pools. “Good” genes become numerous at the expense of “bad.” But what is a gene “good” at? Here’s where the organism enters the stage. Genes flourish or fail in gene pools, but they don’t float freely in the pool like molecules of water. They are locked up in the bodies of individual organisms. The pool is stirred by the process of sexual reproduction, which changes a gene’s partners in every generation. A gene’s success depends on the survival and reproduction of the bodies in which it sits, and which it influences via “phenotypic” effects. This is why I have called the organism a “survival machine” or “vehicle” for the genes that ride inside it. Genes that happen to cause slight improvements in squirrel eyes or tails or behavior patterns are passed on because individual squirrels bearing those improving genes survive at the expense of individuals lacking them. To say that genes improve the survival of groups of squirrels is a mighty stretch.

With the exception of one anomalous passage in *The Descent of Man*, Darwin consistently saw natural selection as choosing between individual organisms. When he adopted Herbert Spencer’s phrase “survival of the fittest” at the urging of AR Wallace, “fittest” meant something close to its everyday meaning, and Darwin applied it strictly to organisms: the strongest, swiftest, sharpest of tooth and claw, keenest of ear and eye. Darwin well understood that survival was only a means to the end of reproduction, so the “fittest” should include the most sexually attractive, and the most diligent and devoted parents.

Later, when 20th-century leaders of what Julian Huxley called the “Modern Synthesis” deployed mathematics to unite Darwinism with Mendelian genetics, they co-opted “fitness” to serve as a variable in their equations. “Fitness” became “that which is maximised in natural selection.” “Survival of the fittest” thus became a tautology, but it didn’t matter for the equations. The “fitness” of an individual lion, say, or cassowary, became a mathematical expression of its capacity to leave surviving children, or grandchildren, or descendants into the indefinite future. Parental care and grandparental care contribute to individual fitness because an individual’s descendants are vehicles in which ride copies of the genes that engineer the caring.

But lineal descendants are not the only such vehicles. In the early 1960s, WD Hamilton, arguably the most distinguished Darwinian since RA Fisher, formalised an idea that had been knocking around since Fisher and Haldane. If a gene happens to arise which works for the benefit of a sibling, say, or a niece, that gene can survive in the same kind of way as a gene that works for the benefit of offspring or grandchildren. A gene for sibling care, under the right conditions, has the same chance of surviving in the gene pool as a gene for parental care. A copy is a copy is a copy, whether it sits in a lineal or a collateral relative.

But the conditions have to be right, and in practice they often aren’t. Full siblings are usually harder to identify than offspring, and usually less obviously dependent. For practical reasons, therefore, sibling care is rarer in nature than parental care. But as far as
The Darwinian principle is concerned, sibling care and parental care are favoured for the same reason: the cared-for individual contains copies of the genes that programme the caring behaviour. Half siblings, nephews, nieces and grandchildren are half as likely as full siblings or offspring to share a caring gene. First cousins are half as likely again, and are harder to identify. Hamilton summarised all this in the form of a simple equation, which has become known as Hamilton’s Rule. A gene for altruistic care will spread through the population if

\[
{r_B} > {r_C} > 0.25
\]

where \(r_B\) is the benefit to the recipient, \(r_C\) is the cost to the care-giver, and 0.25 is the relatedness of full siblings or offspring to parents and offspring. First cousins are half as likely to be related as full siblings or offspring, so the cost to the care-giver is twice as high. Full siblings, half siblings, nephews, nieces and grandchildren are an order of magnitude less likely to be related, and so on. A gene for altruistic care will spread through the population if \(r_B > r_C > 0.25\).

Hamilton replaced “classical fitness” (which took account only of lineal descendants) by “inclusive fitness,” which is a carefully calculated sum embracing collateral as well as lineal kin. I have informally (and with a touch facetiously but with Hamilton’s blessing) defined inclusive fitness as “that quantity which an individual will appear to maximise, when what is really being maximised is gene survival.” In his previous books, Wilson was a supporter of Hamilton’s ideas, but he has now turned against them in a way that suggests to me that he never really understood them in the first place.

“Inclusive fitness” was coined as a mathematical device to allow us to keep treating the individual organism (“vehicle”) as the level of agency, when we could equivalently have switched to the gene (“replicator”). You can say that natural selection maximises individual inclusive fitness, or that it maximises gene survival. The two are equivalent, by definition. On the face of it, gene survival is simpler to deal with, so why bother with individual inclusive fitness? Because the organism has the appearance of a purpose-driven agent in a way that the gene does not. Genes lack legs to pursue goals, sense organs to perceive the world, hands to manipulate it. Gene survival is what ultimately counts in natural selection, and the world becomes full of genes that are good at surviving. But they do it vicariously, by embryologically programming “phenotypes”: programming the development of individual bodies, their brains, limbs and sense organs, in such a way as to maximise their own survival. Genes programme the embryonic development of their vehicles, then ride inside them to share their fate and, if successful, get passed on to future generations.

So, “replicators” and “vehicles” constitute two meanings of “unit of natural selection.” Replicators are the units that survive (or fail to survive) through the generations. Vehicles are the agents that replicators programme as devices to help them survive. Genes are the primary replicators, organisms the obvious vehicles. But what about groups? As with organisms, they are certainly not replicators, but are they vehicles? If so, might we make a plausible case for “group selection”?

It is important not to confuse this question—as Wilson regretfully does—with the question of whether individuals benefit from living in groups. Of course they do. Penguins huddle for warmth. That’s not group selection: every individual benefits. Lionesses hunting in groups catch more and larger prey than a lone hunter could: enough to make it worthwhile for everyone. Again, every individual benefits: group welfare is strictly incidental. Birds in flocks and fish in schools achieve safety in numbers, and may also conserve energy by riding each other’s slipstreams—the same effect as racing cyclists sometimes exploit.

Such individual advantages in group living are important but they have nothing to do with group selection. Group selection would imply that a group does something equivalent to surviving or dying, something equivalent to reproducing itself, and that it has something you could call a group phenotype, such that genes might influence its development, and hence their own survival.
ies programme them to work for copies of the same genes in fertile bodies—either the old queen (their mother), or young queens (their sisters) or young males. The result is that queens evolve to become more efficient, full-time specialist egg-layers, with all their needs taken care of by their sterile daughters or sisters.

Because of how the B, C and r values in Hamilton’s Rule turn out for bees, genes for sterility are favoured under some conditions, hyper-fertility under others. The same is true for ants and wasps; and termites but with differences of detail (for example termites have male as well as female workers—alas I have no space to expound Hamilton’s elegant explanation of this difference and many other intriguing facts). With more differences of detail, the same is true for some non-insect species such as naked mole rats and a few crustaceans.

It truly is a beautiful theory. Everything fits, exactly as it should. Darwin himself, with characteristic prescience but using the pre-genetic language of his time, got the point. As so often, he drew inspiration from domestication:

“Thus, a well-flavoured vegetable is cooked, and the individual is destroyed; but the horticulturist sows seeds of the same stock, and confidently expects to get nearly the same variety; breeders of cattle wish the flesh and fat to be well marbled together; the animal has been slaughtered, but the breeder goes with confidence to the same family. I have such faith in the powers of selection, that I do not doubt that a breed of cattle, always yielding [sterile] oxen with extraordinarily long horns, could be slowly formed by carefully watching which individual bulls and cows, when matched, produced oxen with the longest horns; and yet no one ox could ever have propagated its kind.”

In modern, Hamiltonian terms we would interpret Darwin’s “seeds of the same stock” as sharing genes with the vegetable that has been cooked. The sterile ox with the long horns shares genes with the same stock from which we breed. Darwin, lacking the concept of the discrete, Mendelian gene, spoke of going with confidence to the “same family” rather than the same genes. Wilson now interprets this as a form of “group selection,” the “group” in this case being the family. But what a staggeringly unenlightening—even perverse—use of language. Kin share genes, that is the point, and Darwin would have loved it. The fact that a family can also be seen as a “group” is entirely beside the point and an unhelpful distraction from it.

When Hamilton’s twin papers on inclusive fitness were first published in 1964, John Maynard Smith, who was the referee chiefly responsible for recommending them, published a short paper in Nature in which he called attention to Hamilton’s brilliant innovation. Maynard Smith coined the phrase “kin selection” specifically in order to distinguish it from group selection, then in the process of being discredited by him and others such as the ecologist David Lack. Soon after this, Wilson, in The Insect Societies (1971), enthusiastically adopted Hamilton’s ideas. He continued to press them in Sociobiology (1975), but in an oddly misleading way which indicates that he was already flirting with a watered down version of his current folly. He treated kin selection as a special case of group selection, an error which I was later to highlight in my paper on “Twelve Misunderstandings of Kin Selection” as Misunderstanding Number Two. Kin may or may not cling together in a group. Kin selection works whether they do or not.

Misunderstanding Number One, which is also perpetrated by Wilson, is the fallacy that “Kin selection is a special, complex kind of natural selection, to be invoked only when the allegedly more parsimonious ‘standard Darwinian theory’ proves inadequate.” I hope I have made it clear that kin selection is logically entailed by standard Darwinian theory, even if the B and C terms work out in such a way that collateral kin are not cared for in practice. Natural selection without kin selection would be like Euclid without Pythagoras. Wilson is, in effect, striding around with a ruler, measuring triangles to see whether Pythagoras got it right. Kin selection was always logically implied by the neo-Darwinian synthesis. It just needed somebody to point it out—Hamilton did it.

Edward Wilson has made important discoveries of his own. His place in history is assured, and so is Hamilton’s. Please do read Wilson’s earlier books, including the monumental The Ants, written jointly with Bert Hölldobler (yet another world expert who will have no truck with group selection). As for the book under review, the theoretical errors I have explained are important, pervasive, and integral to its thesis in a way that renders it impossible to recommend. To borrow from Dorothy Parker, this is not a book to be tossed lightly aside. It should be thrown with great force. And sincere regret.

Richard Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist and author of “The Ancestor’s Tale”

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The month ahead

ANJANA AHUJA

Hang on a second. That’s what the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)—the official keeper of the Earth’s time—will be doing when it adds a leap second on 30th June, reigniting the debate about whether this horological interpoler has outstayed its welcome. The leap second was invented in 1972 to bring two chronological systems—time as measured by the Earth’s rotation, and time as measured by more precise atomic clocks—back into alignment (our planet wobbles as it spins, meaning that the exact length of a day can vary by a few milliseconds). But lobbing in a corrective second is disruptive for technology such as sat-nav; that’s why America, Japan and France, unlike the UK, want leap seconds abolished. The reprieve lasts until 2015, when the ITU revisits the controversy.

Why are identical twins sometimes so different? What is the perfect population for the Earth? These and other questions will be tackled at the Cheltenham Science Festival, running from 12th to 17th June. Highlights include the ever-popular Famelab, a kind of X Factor for scientists, and comedian Marcus Brigstocke, who will be showing environmentalists how to up their pr game by Marketing the Apocalypse (“it shouldn’t be any more difficult than selling drinking water to a person who has a tap”).

Leading scientists and politicians gather in Washington this month for a symposium on where synthetic biology is headed. Synthetic Biology for the Next Generation, on 12th and 13th June, will hear from companies like Shell and Agilent on how they want to use synthetic biology, and from MPs like David Willetts on how it could be regulated. It follows previous symposiums in London and Shanghai last year, jointly organised by six scientific bodies including the UK’s Royal Society, the US National Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Engineering.
Long before he founded the Salvation Army, William Booth preached the gospel outside the Vine, a public house on the corner of Whitechapel Road, in east London. He also spoke in front of the Blind Beggar, another pub on what was then called the Mile End Waste. One day—when the passers-by were even more aloof than usual—he decided to go inside the Vine to take his message to its customers. He did not record the extent of his success, but for the rest of his life he remembered his first impression of Victorian London’s taprooms. They were, he explained, the only places in which the slum dwellers of the east end could find light, heat and comfort. For many people, therefore, the attraction of the 19th century urban public house was the simple fact that it was more congenial than home.

Increased prosperity, combined with competition from new forms of entertainment, has certainly contributed to the fall in the number of public houses. According to the British Beer & Pub Association (BBPA), in 1980 there were 69,000 pubs in Britain. By 2000, the number had declined to 60,800 and by 2010, 51,178. But the reduction cannot be attributed solely to a change in tastes and higher levels of disposable income. The BBPA blames the beer tax. It has increased by 42 per cent in four years and is now 12 times as high as the duty paid in Germany.

Yet, over the same period, the rate of decline has decelerated. In 2009, pubs closed down at the rate of 52 a week. Now the weekly closure rate is a mere 12. One conclusion to draw from this is that in the early 2000s, the pubs that went out of business were already on the margin of viability. An alternative conclusion is that the more flexible parts of the industry have adjusted to the new world of complicated consumer choice.

Describing what is happening to the British pub is complicated by the difficulty of defining what it is. The BBPA does not even try; despite containing the word “pub” in its name, the association welcomes wine bars and bistros into its membership, meaning that the pub has never had a single or certain description. Country inns and the town pubs always differed in ambience, and often in amenities. Their clienteles were different and pubs tend to take on the character of their customers. Although prosperity, television, the internet and cheap air travel have smoothed out most fundamental differences between Britons, now a more discriminating nation wants to indulge its individuality in little ways. Drinkers have strong views about the character of their local, meaning that, to succeed, a pub has to fit into a niche.

There is a romantic illusion that “pubs”—never “public houses”—represent, or once represented, the spirit of Olde England. GK Chesterton did a great deal to perpetuate the myth with the claim that the Frenchman talks about liberty while the Englishman talks about beer. There was a time when men went to their “local” for companionship as well as alcohol. Perhaps some still do. But it is important not to be oversentimental about the changes in our national habits. In the glory days of the British pub, women stayed at home to cook the supper and made sure it was “on the table” when their husbands got home. For every country tavern with polished horse brasses and talk of harvest home there was a city “boozers” with neglected children waiting outside for their drunken father. The old order—especially the habit of drinking without eating at the same time—has changed for the better.

The Crispin, in the Peak District village that I call home, illustrates how this change can be managed. Like most landlords, Paul Rowlinson could not make a living by simply selling alcohol. He describes his turnover as “50 per cent wet; 50 per cent dry.” The dry half is set out in the pub’s menu and at lunchtime on weekdays, food attracts most of his customers. On a typical Thursday when I visited, the tables were all occupied. There was one lonely drinker at the bar. But it is not only food that makes the Crispin a success. Rowlinson is succeeding because he has made his pub part of the community. He gives over one of his rooms, free of charge, to all local events. His recent guests have included the mourners at a woodland burial, voluntary workers in a retirement home, and a protest group which has come together to protect country footpaths from motorcycle and 4x4 “off-roads.”

Rowlinson knows what his customers want—and also what they do not. The Crispin has no television, no juke box and no slot machines. Its one concession to technology is wifi. (The discovery that one local inn had replaced its wooden chairs with sofas was greeted with horrified disbelief.) When the smoking ban was introduced Rowlinson erected a cross between a tent and an awning outside his front door, but after a few weeks he decided that “it looked shocking.” So, at his own expense he built a beer garden, complete with gazebo, at the side of
In 1980 there were 69,000 pubs in Britain; by 2010, just 51,178

Adaptation is the secret of survival, yet this is a solution to the industry’s contraction which, by their nature, the big chain pubs find difficult to embrace. For them, it is easier to promote fruitless petitions calling for a reduction in tax and to remind the country of the contribution that brewing and the sale of alcohol make to the economy. That is as pointless an occupation as hoping for a return of the kind of snug in which Ena Sharples and Minnie Caldwell, characters from Coronation Street, used to drink their glasses of stout. Licensed tranquillity is possible. But it has to be organised.

John Smith’s, the Tadcaster brewery, has also been successful in adapting its pubs. The Windsor Castle—a quarter of a mile from London’s Victoria station—was making a reasonable profit during the 70 years in which, due to its location in the shadow of Westminster Cathedral, it was called the Cardinal. But the brewery decided that the pub could perform better and decided that it should be “refurbished” and its original name, the Windsor Castle, reinstated. The return to the old name was consistent with a renovation which restored the glories of Victorian pub design in an explosion of plate glass and brass. According to the rumours at the bar, the work cost close to £6m.

Victorian chic has proved an irresistible attraction and together with Joanne Stephenson, its energetic landlady, it has enabled the pub to succeed. The Windsor Castle’s income from the sale of alcohol far outstrips its takings from the pies and sausages that are offered on the menu. Many of its customers are transient (on their way home) and they are generally the sort of people who smoke. There is no space for an “outdoor” smoking area and the bylaws prohibit the bar room spilling on to the pavement. Yet the Windsor Castle is full night after night because of its decor. The success of a pub is almost as much dependent on its furniture as on its beer.

The Kelham Island Inn in industrial Sheffield has a different appeal. It caters for serious beer drinkers. The Campaign for Real Ale voted it pub of the year twice in succession and the seriousness with which Trevor Wright, the owner and landlord, takes the genuine brew is illustrated by the open contempt in which he holds lager, a drink that he says “used to be drunk”.

the pub. The Crispin is a success because it meets the needs of its market.

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In 1980 there were 69,000 pubs in Britain; by 2010, just 51,178
by ladies—with *lime.* Lager makes up 75 per cent of all bar sales, but Wright, who spent 20 years as an engineer, offers only one, German, brand. The Kelham Island Inn is a free house, meaning that it is not owned by a parent company or brewery. So the big breweries would charge Wright anything up to a £100 a barrel less than they charge their own appropriately named “tied houses.” Despite this, Kelham prefers to buy from the specialists whose beers have romantic names: Brewers Gold, Barnsley Bitter and Bradfield Farmers Blonde. The secret of his success is catering for the beer connoisseur.

Dan Powell is landlord of the George Inn at Abbots Leigh in Bristol, and is also the head chef. That would, in itself, be unusual though by no means unique for a public house—if the George can be accurately described as a pub. Powell thinks of it as a restaurant with “public house aspects” and emphasises his determination to meet local needs and demands. There are, he says, 30 or 40 of his neighbours in the bar each night. But most of the diners are carriage trade. In the afternoon on which we spoke, he was cooking a “gourmet dinner” which consisted of eight courses including quail Scotch eggs, curried scallops and veal sweetbread, rack of lamb, and sheep’s cheese. There were two wines with each course. When Powell took over 18 months ago, he “completely redecorated the rather dilapidated building.” In the licensed trade, even at the top of the market, appearance matters.

But for real success, it has to be explicitly designed to meet the taste of the chosen, or available, clientele. There exist property companies that rent out licensed premises in the detached way that office and apartment blocks are leased, and companies like this can make money from pubs that take the scatter-gun approach to their customers. Their franchises may not provide what their casual callers would choose, but the organisation is big and prosperous enough to ride out the disappointment. They can also transcend the social and economic burdens that are heaped on public houses, such as: the growing expectations about service; the increased resentment at rising prices; the alternative ways of spending a comparatively inexpensive night out; and young drinkers who “load up” before they arrive with cheap wine or cut-price canned lager bought at the supermarket.

For more independent pubs to succeed, to survive even, they have to specialise. As long as they meet the needs of a clearly identified clientele, they will not join the ranks of the 12 weekly casualties. They will also provide a service that is infinitely superior to anything that the pub chains can offer.

In a way, my habits illustrate the need for pubs to tailor-make their product. Beer was never my favourite drink. But I enjoy a pint in the right circumstances. I cannot remember when I was last in a city pub. But I occasionally walk across the village green to the Crispin. I go there for haddock and chips. But it is always local bitter that washes it down. Out walking—if it’s a summer’s day and my dog and I can drink outside—I call in pubs that we pass when I am thirsty. But I feel no social or psychological compulsion to hold a tankard in my hand.

Roy Hattersley was deputy leader of the Labour Party from 1983 to 1992

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**Ginformation**

**Alice Lascelles**

**From small distilleries to large, gin production is thriving**

There has never been a more exciting time to be a gin lover. From crisp, classic London Drys and artisan gins boasting exotic botanicals, to fruity, floral newcomers and full-bodied 18th-century-type blenders, the spectrum of styles on the market is now greater than it’s ever been.

And much of the credit for this reversal in Lady Genever’s fortunes must go to new micro-distillers such as Sipsmith, one of a number of garagiste-style outfits that have lately been helping to revive London’s long tradition of gin distilling. Aided by “Prudence,” a copper pot still not much bigger than a family car, Sipsmith produce a delightfully dry gin with biscuity, marmalade notes which also serve as the backbone of their excellent new Summer Cup (imagine a more grown-up version of Pimm’s).

Up north in London, ex-Lehman Brothers headhunter Ian Hart has sacrificed his drawing room to the production of Sacred, a sophisticated, fragrant Martin gin featuring cardamom, nutmeg and frankincense among its botanicals. Hart also uses his high-tech vacuum still to produce individual distillates such as juniper, star anise and plum stone, which can be bought as part of a DIY gin-blending kit, or enjoyed in Sacred’s aromatic vermouth—a winner in a Negroni cocktail.

A growing number of bars are now also producing their own-label spirits. The gorgeously packaged Portobello Gin is distilled above the Portobello Star Bar in Ladbroke Grove, where you can peruse the exhibits in the Ginstitute, a miniature museum of gin history.

If I were only to have one London gin, however, it would have to be Beefeater. Founded on the banks of the Thames in 1820, and now distilled just a stone’s throw from the Oval cricket ground, Beefeater was one of the pioneers of the clean, crisp style of gin known as London Dry. Big on piney juniper and lemon zest botanicals, it’s a great all-rounder and, in my book, the best value gin you can buy.

Rather confusingly, London Dry Gins do not have to be made in London, and there are in fact only two gins with an *Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée* in the world, one of them being Plymouth. Soft and delicate, with sparkling top notes of sweet orange, this 200-year-old gin makes a sublime martini. A pilgrimage to Plymouth’s waterside distillery, where one can even have a bash at making one’s own gin recipe, is an essential (if somewhat humbling) experience for any juniper lover.

The trend for classic cocktails has also prompted a big revival in lost styles of gin such as Old Tom, a fuller-bodied, slightly sweeter precursor to London Dry that was popular in the 18th century (it was originally sweetened to mask the spirit’s imperfections). Hayman’s is a good introduction to the style—drink it in a Martinez cocktail (a sort of Martini/Manhattan hybrid from the 1800s) or with a couple of cubes of ice.

There are now also some really classy gins coming out of America, which has a thriving micro-distilling scene of its own. My latest discovery is Cold River Gin from Maine, a palate-sharpening marriage of woody spice and citrus that’s sure to bring fresh inspiration to any cocktail hour.

Alice Lascelles is Bars & Spirits Editor of *Imbibe*, the award-winning drinks trade magazine which she co-founded in 2007.
Save your pint the facts

- Brits pay the second highest rate of beer tax in the EU.
- Beer tax has been hiked by 42% since 2008 and is set to increase yearly by 2% above inflation.
- Beer and pubs support 1 million jobs.
- Over 4,500 UK pubs have closed since 2008.

Sign the e-petition
Camra.org.uk/saveyourpint

George Osborne is taking a 3rd of your pint in tax!

Duty and VAT on a 5% pint sold at £3 accounts for over a third of the price of a pint.
Unravelling from a double-jointed plane journey and a taxi jolting over the cobblestones, we were in Naples, walking through the black volcanic paved alleys, ravenous in search of lunch. A cluster of white linen table cloths under an arch in an alley full of secondhand booksellers. We stopped, gratefully slumped. A carafe of vino bianco, fresh, green and slightly effervescent, a plate of plump and melting marinated anchovies, frizzed with rocket leaves; slices of prosciutto, salt against the soft milky tang of a ball of mozzarella di bufala and then the twin pillars of Neapolitan cuisine: spaghetti al pomodoro fresco and a pizza margherita. The spaghetti was perfectly al dente, the tomatoes coddled between cooked and crudo, pulpy and concentrated. The pizza was crusty and chewy, with a slurry lava lake of creamy white mozzarella streaked with sweet and acid tomato. We fell silent with gorging happiness. Afterwards, the pizzaiolo, the pizza man, came out for a cigarette. He was white haired and lean, his arms hung like heavy chains and he had enormous hands. Each finger was muscled and roped as if his whole body’s strength and force and life had gone into those hands, which worked the dough and thumped and pulled.

We stayed in the Old City, in the Palazzo Spinelli di Laurino, through a courtyard overlooked by crumbling terracotta statues, up a grand double ducal staircase, to a guest house. The proprietress, Nathalie de Saint-Phalle, French, thin, acerbic, full of stories, came to Naples 20 years ago, got stuck, love-hate, with the city that feeds every sensual pleasure and frustrates northern European rationalism with its dark alleys, code and Camorra. So many people wanted to come and stay in her spare room that she rented an apartment in the Palazzo Spinelli di Laurino in the grimy artisan Old City, turned it into a guest-house gallery, and invented an owner, a perpetually out-of-town collector called Robert Kaplan (not to be confused with Robert D Kaplan or Robert S Kaplan, the distinguished American writers). Over the years Robert Kaplan has taken on a life of his own; she recently published a book with the fictional reminiscences of writers and artists who have come to stay over the years: 222 Autobiographies of Robert Kaplan.

The guest rooms open onto a grand salon: an eight-metre high ceiling, walls covered with modern art and photographs, a patchwork of multicoloured carpets, divans of harlequin velvet, chairs made from hospital crutches and lamps from crushed coke cans.

One night we sat in the atelier apartment of an artist friend of Nathalie’s, Giuseppe Zevola, gentle, rotund and bearded, a generous host who, as Nathalie described, “eats the world.” Large ornate mirrors floated on end tables several feet above the floor, a harpist played the exposed strings of a piano suspended from the rafters, and I perused a book Giuseppe had spent a decade putting together, of 17th and 18th-century doodles drawn by bored clerks in the archives of the Banco di Napoli. “Where’s the best place to eat in Naples?” I asked him.

“Ah, you must go to Enzo’s,” he said, and drew a map of an alley from the Piazza Car-
"Up here and at the end, there is no sign. Well he is very impolite and does nothing."

Enzo is the son, the mother cooks, the father, energetic, unrolled a paper table with two or three flickery fluorescent tubes. Dowless room, lined in beige tiling and jumble of crates of fizzy water, to a win-and we pushed through an unprepossessing door. Enzo’s was indeed as described. The next table, a rowdy group shouted good-naturedly at Enzo to hurry up with the octopus, where was the cod with olives? Braggadocio and diamante earrings, tough local guys with tattoos around their biceps, dunking their bread in their wine, spitting out clamshells on their napkins and swiping their glasses to the octopus, where was the cod with olives? We pushed through thin walls, sparse with sun. We ate grilled fish which grandmothers could be seen shuffling between stove and table. We ate grilled fish and pizza dough parcels stuffed with broccoli leaves and pancetta. One of Nathalie’s friends made little butter cookies to go with our evening coffee. With them he served a compote marmalade, bright orange, that tasted like sunshine.

One lunchtime Nathalie took us along the coast to a grand suburb where we sat next to a Roman wall and sucked languou-tines from their shells, barely cooked, soft and briny and gelatinous. There were fried baby octopi and zucchini too, mussels and clams sautéed in olive oil and garlic and tomato and sopped with cubes of toasted bread and shrimp wrapped in a coiled carapace of fried spaghetti. We talked about the eternality of Naples, a city that has consumed every invader but has never been destroyed, where the alleys were still aligned like stable doors, in cubby-room ground floor interiors, windows half open to the street like stable doors, in which grandmothers could be seen shuffling between stove and table. We ate grilled fish and pizza dough parcels stuffed with broccoli leaves and pancetta. One of Nathalie’s friends made little butter cookies to go with our evening coffee. With them he served a compote marmalade, bright orange, that tasted like sunshine.

We nodded. Came a carafe of wine, deep-fried balls of mushy rice, arancini, delicious and crispy, a clatter of cutlery, a plate of spaghetti alla vongole, tiny clams strewn across the buttery pasta like delicate purple butterflies, more spaghetti al pomodoro fresco, swirly yum, a plate of lightly fried fish; little anchovies, too-small red mullet, something flat the size of my hand, something long and thin with spiked teeth. Scattered over the fish were translucent neon green squares of deep fried seaweed. They tasted extraordinary, iodine umami with a truffle afterglow. At the next table, a rowdy group shouted good-naturedly at Enzo to hurry up with the octopus, where was the cod with olives? Braggadocio and diamante earrings, tough local guys with tattoos around their biceps, dunking their bread in their wine, spitting out clamshells on their napkins and swiping bottles of water from the next-door table.

The next table, a rowdy group shouted good-naturedly at Enzo to hurry up with the octopus, where was the cod with olives? Braggadocio and diamante earrings, tough local guys with tattoos around their biceps, dunking their bread in their wine, spitting out clamshells on their napkins and swiping bottles of water from the next-door table. Over the days we ate platefuls of vongole and many rounds of pizza margherita. Between lunch and dinner was Naples, rimed in graffiti, scrubbed with garbage, garlanded with laundry hanging out to dry. Vignettes: a floating waft of marijuana across the nose of a carabinieri in the crowd outside the Duomo, waiting for the miracle of liquefaction of the blood of San Gennaro; the man at the next table with a pistol stuck in the back waistband of his jeans; the cubby-room ground floor interiors, windows half open to the street like stable doors, in which grandmothers could be seen shuffling between stove and table. We ate grilled fish and pizza dough parcels stuffed with broccoli leaves and pancetta. One of Nathalie’s friends made little butter cookies to go with our evening coffee. With them he served a compote marmalade, bright orange, that tasted like sunshine.

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Wedding fever

Two months ago, I had no idea what a pea-light canopy was. And if you’d explained to me what one is—a decorative overhead spider-web-style arrangement of wee glowing lights—I’d have felt confident in consigning it to the vast category of things that the human race is free to find distinctly optional, along with wasps, peanut butter, dental floss and football.

Now, I’m spending great chunks of my life wondering whether I can do without one. I lie in bed long after I should be asleep, eyes saucing into the dark, worrying about it. Pea-light canopies, in other words, have quietly nudged into the late-night heebie-jeebie slot usually reserved for the terrified contemplation of my own mortality.

That, my friends, is what planning a wedding will do to you. You start with the intention of affirming a private, intimate relationship between two human beings and you end up worrying yourself sick about pea-light canopies. That worry is, in a way, a cousin of the death fear. An inexorable but completely unforeseeable chain of logic links romantic love and pea-light canopies. You try to work back—like the guy in the old joke, reading the Bible in search of pea-light canopies, in other words, have quietly nudged into the late-night heebie-jeebie slot usually reserved for the terrified contemplation of my own mortality.

When you start out organizing a wedding, you may very well think, as we did: we’re going to do this our way. What matters is the people, you tell yourself, not the paraphernalia. You won’t bother with tons of flowers, fancy table settings, staff, snazzy caterers and one of those wedding-mill venues through which happy couples tramp through three times a week or more each summer. We won’t bother with fancy outfits. We won’t knock around with a wedding photographer. We won’t draw up a wedding list—we already live together and have most of what we need: why ask people to shell out for more "stuff"?

So you start from the ground up. You ▶
start from the people. You have a lot of relatives, and not a few friends. So suddenly, you’re throwing a party for upwards of 100 people. Fine. So you need a venue that can accommodate them. And they’ll need feeding. And drink. And dancing, obviously. So you cast about for venues that have the facilities to make this possible. And—bang!—suddenly you’ve booked, well, a wedding venue.

And you realise that many of these people, even if you ask them not to, will feel that they either want or ought to buy you a wedding present. So unless you want to end up with 142 toasters and a cruet set it’s no more than a kindness to give them some suggestions. Suddenly you’ve got a wedding list.

And then you’ve got to wear something, of course. People will dress up. How will it look if you’re in your baggy-kneed old suit? And would your guests really feel special dancing to an iPod in a bare community hall lit only by fluorescent strips, in the manner of a WeightWatchers class? Would you not feel that you were selling the celebration of your one and only lifelong union short? Wouldn’t it look like you were hedging your bets, doing it on the cheap? So, maybe just a flower or two. And some candles. And some disco lights. And you’ll need some photos, won’t you? To remember it?

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang—frocks, suits, snappers, flower arrangements and—God bloody help me—pea-light canopies. And thus, whanging down rails with the speed of one of those roller coasters that feels like it will whip your neck off when it corners, your unique and unconventional celebration of your love is... well, exactly like the conventional wedding you were sure it wouldn’t be. You have submitted to an iron double-whammy of pragmatics and, as you feel like it will whip your neck off when it corners, your unique and unconventional celebration of your love is... well, exactly like the conventional wedding you were sure it wouldn’t be. You have submitted to an iron double-whammy of pragmatics and, as you quietly reproach yourself, social expectation.

At first this pains you: it goes against all of your liberal, ritual-rejecting, post-romantic individualist ways of thinking. But then you realise that fulfilling social expectation is exactly what you have signed up for. In a post-religious age, the whole point of wanting to get married is about solemnising your relationship in public. It’s all about the expectations of others. It’s all about making something private public, and aligning something necessarily individual with a barnacle-encrusted tradition of pre-Abrahamic vintage. It is to put your partnership in a timeline; you are doing what your forebears did, and asserting that continuity.

This, though it shouldn’t, surprises you. Some light may be shed by Jonathan Haidt’s recent book *The Righteous Mind*. It argues that liberal and conservative ideologies may be the result of differences in the way our brains are wired: if you’re predisposed to be more risk-averse, and to see established structures and rules as a bulwark against chaos, you’re likely to be a conservative; if your brain is set up to delight in novelty and diversity, you’ll bend to liberal politics.

So what happens when liberals get married? Marriage embodies all those things—ritual, conformity, the desire to be involved in something larger than oneself and an institution which preceded and will outlive you—that are catnip to the conservative mind. One part of my brain has hijacked the other.

And so that pea-light canopy, evidently, isn’t just an exorbitantly costly piece of electric nonsense: it’s biological destiny.

Sam Leith is author of “Are You Talkin’ To Me? Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama” (Profile)

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**Investment**

**Andy Davis**

**Investing in your bosses**

For a large group of private investors in Britain, the 2012–13 tax year will involve some delicate decision-making: are they confident enough in their own employer to invest in its shares? Or is it time to sell?

In 2009–10, 760,000 people in Britain were awarded options to buy shares in the company they work for under Save As You Earn (SAYE) share schemes. These allow companies to offer their workers options over a fixed number of shares at up to 20 per cent below the market price on a set date. Staff then put aside a monthly amount from their salary and at the end of the term (either three years or five) they can use the money to buy shares at the option price. Ideally the share price will have gone up, making the discounted option more attractive. But this didn’t happen in the years following the dotcom bust. As share prices have struggled, growing numbers of employees have taken back the cash they have saved at the end of the term and let their options expire.

That’s why this year is so interesting. In April 2009, equity markets were at dire lows and the first round of quantitative easing was beginning, in which the Bank of England injected new money into the economy. Despite the crisis, a lot of people decided to take part in SAYE option schemes. The 760,000 who signed up represented a jump of 19 per cent over 2008–09, when markets were still falling heavily. The 2009–10 cohort were awarded options worth £3bn.

Most participants save for three years rather than five, so this year many of those 760,000 employees are likely to exercise their options. If their option price was set towards the beginning of 2009–10, its value is likely to have increased. The question is whether to hold the shares they are entitled to buy, or sell now and take the profit?

SAYE schemes are low risk. Investors who don’t like the share price don’t have to buy and can instead take their money back. They also allow individuals to invest in a company that they understand—the one for which they work—and this may encourage staff to feel more involved in the long-term development of the business.

What’s not to like? A low-risk way to profit from a recovery in your employer’s share price is a valuable benefit. But the years that have brought the latest crop of option gains have been sobering for most private investors, punctuated by seemingly endless volatility and periodic crashes. Not surprisingly, a lot of retail money has flowed out of equities, particularly last autumn.

Exercising options will unlock a potential profit, but will also bring a significant risk exposure to a single company’s shares. Shares bought using SAYE options can easily become the largest part of an investment portfolio, and as staff at high street banks have found, this leaves the investor exposed to market swings.

There are two ways to mitigate this risk. First, investors can sell their own company’s shares and buy shares in an unfamiliar company. Theory says this is the right thing to do, however difficult it feels. Second, investors could take the approach favoured by hands-on investors like Warren Buffett, which is to put your eggs in a few baskets and then pay close attention.

Neither is easy. With markets again looking dangerous, I suspect many will decide now is a sensible moment to bank a gain and perhaps even join in the deleveraging party by repaying some of their mortgage.

Andy Davis is an associate editor of Prospect and former editor of FT Weekend. You can email him at clapton.calling@gmail.com
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Creating the modern eye

Two new exhibitions show how a Renaissance visionary and a misunderstood Norwegian eccentric changed the course of painting, says James Woodall

El Greco and Modernism
Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf, Germany. Until 12th August

Edvard Munch: The Modern Eye
Tate Modern, 28th June–14th October

This summer, a rare sequence of art events is bringing into focus the origins of European modernist painting. One of them, “the Modern Eye,” an exhibition of works by Edvard Munch opening in late June at Tate Modern, fits into the traditional narrative: the Norwegian is incontrovertibly a harbinger of 20th-century art. Another Munch-connected event has been a high-profile auction of his famous work The Scream in New York. A third event is more unexpected. In Düsseldorf’s Kunstpalast, situated in an art-deco complex on the east bank of the Rhine, the exhibition “El Greco and Modernism” is an exuberant, densely intelligent attempt by curator Beat Wismer to show how deep the influence of the 16th century master was on a raft of artists in Germany before the First World War—most of whom had already been impressed by Munch’s troubling subject matter and brazen brushwork.

“After German painters had copied works by El Greco for the first time in 1907 and 1908,” Beat Wismer says, “young expressionists engaged intensively with him, both with his form and with the ecstatic and visionary impulses of his painting.” Modernism across Europe was lifting off, shattering the centuries-old dominance of realism. In German painting, expressionism, as it came to be known, was a particular manifestation of a desire to redraw the rules of space, structure and colour. The Düsseldorf exhibition presents El Greco alongside works by key Germano-Austrian modernist painters, including Franz Marc, August Macke, Max Beckmann and Oskar Kokoschka. Its aim is to show that the late discovery of El Greco helped them define their entire approach to how paint can be arranged on canvas.

It might seem odd that a Christian artist born some 360 years before this modernist aesthetic ferment—somewhat godless in spirit—should be so important to it. El Greco seemed in his canvases to have had intensely private relations with biblical figures whose literal existence he believed in fervently. The connection to the 20th century, then, is a stylistic one. The challenging of conventional form, the primacy of colour, the articulation of private feeling: expressionism was about all these. El Greco, too, was an anarchist in form and a miraculous colourist.

Formally, El Greco had been way too weird for his own time. Modernism was perhaps waiting for him: art radicals from Paris to Berlin were amazed to find that an old master had broken so many rules. But he did so to no acclaim in his own era. El Greco’s adoptive 17th-century visual culture was, moreover, quickly dominated by Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), the defining master of post-Renaissance realism. El Greco was forgotten.

It is a matter of some serendipity then that in 2012, art lovers can see for themselves, in two immense riverside venues and in the hands of two distinct geniuses, how those rules were broken a century ago—or, more precisely, how they began to be, out of sight, in a small Castilian town 400 years ago.

Born in Crete in 1541, and cutting his teeth in Venice and Rome in the 1560s and 1570s, Doménikos Theotokópoulos moved to imperial Spain in 1577. Philip II was not an admirer of his work. El Greco, simply “the Greek,” thus lived and worked, unfêted, until his death in 1614 in Toledo. There, he painted the fierce, hallucinatory canvases which have made him now, at least in terms of subject matter, as identifiable as Raphael and Michelangelo.

After classical beginnings, El Greco adopted—there is no clear reason why—his unique, fluid style, with its frequent abandonment of conventional perspective. But El Greco was no primitivist; he was a supreme artist of the most demanding kind.
El Greco, *The Opening of the Fifth Seal* (1608-14): the bodies are vibrant, with exaggerated curves defining arms, thighs and calves; they are also elastically true, as the stunning canvases in Düsseldorf demonstrate. In particular, *The Opening of the Fifth Seal* (which illustrates a moment from the Book of Revelation) has a dramatically robed Saint John the Baptist imploring, perhaps blessing, the sky. To his right seven naked figures disport themselves with the kind of pagan abandon Paul Cézanne caught so dazzlingly around 270 years later in his...
pictures of bathers. In *Laocoön*, El Greco’s last, unfinished canvas, contorted figures trapped in the mythical story of Troy’s destruction strain and suffer in a dynamic, apocalyptic loop. Many of the expressionist works in the same room clearly emulate its movement and terror.

What the show cannot square is the contrast between 20th-century profanity and El Greco’s piety. Episodes in the life of Christ, as well as profoundly imagined, human portraits of the saints (in Düsseldorf there are three entitled *Saint Francis in Prayer*, painted in three different decades; two of Saint James the Elder; and one of the Younger), recur in every stage of El Greco’s career. He was—and this is possibly what still makes him quite hard to grasp—both a fearless visionary and a canny realist. He understood suffering and knew, at the same time, what it was to live in the moment. On his excavation of subjective experience was an inspiration for the first German expressionists’ fight with traditional form and content. Munch created benchmark works, including the renowned *Dance of Life* (1899-1900)—a dozen figures dancing on the fjord shore against a ghostly moon. The cottage he had bought there in 1897 and which he occupied for a decade evokes, perfectly preserved today, the modest, almost spartan work ethic that drove him. Like Picasso, he was unable to stop painting. Munch ploughed his own furrow and joined no artistic school. He knew Paris and southern France but his milieu was the chillier, repressed north of Europe. There, his excavation of subjective experience was an inspiration for the first German expressionists’ fight with traditional form and content. Munch had lived in Berlin in the 1890s. He was greatly admired there and in other German centres of art. The artists of the “Brücke” group, and of Kandinsky’s “Blue Rider” movement (this also included Franz Marc and August Macke), flourishing in Dresden and Munich between 1905 and 1914, would never have felt so free without him. Munch was, in a sense, the first expressionist painter. He was sometimes included in

Just 14 years before Picasso unveiled his revolutionary painting, Edvard Munch began to produce four versions of an equally notorious picture. *The Scream* is, today, bolted into the western imagination as the abiding image of psychic distress and social alienation. An amorphous, cartoon-like skull, clutched between its owner’s desperate paws, shrieks in front of a blue-black fjord, topped by a horizontally striated, fiery sky. Behind the central figure, who, as Munch put it, hears “a huge extraordinary scream pass through nature,” two ghostly “friends” (also his word) hover on a bridge, unable or unwilling to help, thereby pushing into more hellish perspective a new kind of loneliness: the kind Sigmund Freud was to worry away at in his treatises and Franz Kafka embody in his novels.

Like Vincent van Gogh’s four canvases of apparently exploding olive trees of 1889, or Paul Gauguin’s first libidinous images of Tahitian women of 1891-2, this was defiant, new painting, and, in this case—because it was quite ugly—shocking. Munch, acutely aware of impressionism and post-impressionism, was more autobiographical than any painter of either movement. *The Scream* offers a glimpse inside an artist’s head. After the period when he painted it, Munch claimed, he “gave up hope of ever being able to love again.” Whether the statement was true or merely melodramatic, European painting had now properly entered ungentele terrain.

The conventional Munch biography is of a man crippled inside by childhood experiences illness and death, obsessed by the pathology of sex; wandering, Nordic and drunk, into the 20th century as more disciplined post-first world war figures—Picasso, Kandinsky and Mondrian—forged spiky, taboo-busting European abstraction. Though he remained, deliberately, at a remove from fashion, he was as industrious as any of these three. In the fishing village of Asgårstrand, on the Oslofjord south of the capital, Munch created benchmark works, including the renowned *Dance of Life* (1899-1900)—a dozen figures dancing on the fjord shore against a ghostly moon. The cottage he had bought there in 1897 and which he occupied for a decade evokes, perfectly preserved today, the modest, almost Spartan work ethic that drove him. Like Picasso, he was unable to stop painting.

Munch ploughed his own furrow and joined no artistic school. He knew Paris and southern France but his milieu was the chillier, repressed north of Europe. There, his excavation of subjective experience was an inspiration for the first German expressionists’ fight with traditional form and content. Munch had lived in Berlin in the 1890s. He was greatly admired there and in other German centres of art. The artists of the “Brücke” group, and of Kandinsky’s “Blue Rider” movement (this also included Franz Marc and August Macke), flourishing in Dresden and Munich between 1905 and 1914, would never have felt so free without him.

“A hand slashing paint on the canvas as [Munch] does could sooner be imagined as wielding a knife or throwing a bomb,” Brücke painter Emil Nolde wrote in 1906. He might have been describing Jackson Pollock on Long Island in the 1940s. Munch was, in a sense, the first expressionist painter. He was sometimes included in
but rarely attended the movement’s exhibitions that began to proliferate in early-1900s Vienna and Berlin. But these shows announced aggressively once and for all, in this part of Europe at least, an end to the long reign of realism (with the exception of the efforts of a reclusive Greek in Toledo). Munch had mounted his own assault on it at least a decade before.

Now, Munch has joined the ranks of modern-art cash-cows, up there with Picasso. On 2nd May at Sotheby’s in New York a copy of The Scream was sold for nearly $120m to an anonymous phone-bidder—two publicity-accessible painted versions and another pastel of it remain in Oslo (now under special security conditions since thefts in 1994 and 2004). The work has, over a century on, rendered angst an iconic part of—almost a cliché-in—their collective interior landscape. The Scream has become a symbol of all our fears.

Publicity generated by the New York sale will please Tate Modern, though The Scream will not be displayed in its exhibition. Great paintings such as Ashes (1894), Puberty (1914-16) and Red Virginia Creeper (1898-1900) will be. Already seen in Paris and Frankurt, the show argues that the painter was much more than the moody, introverted symbolist he is often depicted as. It asserts that Munch in fact responded keenly to contemporary affairs, and was especially fascinated by new, vivid, gadget-heavy means, through the camera, of representing reality.

In his final three and a half decades, lesser-known anecdote has Munch filming pedestrians and the passing of a cart or tram, and observing a woman on a street corner, then following and filming her—hardly surprising: he loved several (and probably slept with dozens of) women, well into old age, though he never married. He also filmed his aunt and sister (always vitally important to him) without their knowing. He took hundreds of photographs. Whether with camera or brush, he remained a solitary questor, looking for visual answers, in colour, form and composition, to the existential questions his pressured, inquisitive, rather odd brain posed through the 80 years of his existence.

It is, as Tate Modern is about to do, legitimate to present a well-known painter’s unexplored interests in order to highlight something less obvious than the greatest hits. But does Munch need to be redefined by a narrowing curatorial category? I’m not sure. Peripatetic and broke until the age of 45, he nonetheless left on his death in 1944 his entire oeuvre—that which did not end up in particular collections or private hands, or which had not disappeared or been destroyed—to the city of Oslo.

The Munch Museum there houses over 1,000 paintings, marvellously kept, when not hung, in a basement on 100 sliding slats. He also made tens of thousands of prints and drawings. The museum is lending a total of 130 items for “The Modern Eye.” Compelling as the smaller works are it is a safe bet that most punters in London will want to stop at and really take in the brooding post-coital drama of Ashes, or the menacing rash of blood red engulfing the house in Red Virginia Creeper, with Munch’s haunted Polish friend Staczu Przybyszewski staring from the foreground like a criminal: another screamer, almost. These works tell their own tales and need little context.

In Düsseldorf’s Kunsthistorisches Museum, we are asked to believe that context is all, that the modernists and El Greco make perfect sense together. Again, I’m not sure, all of the time: the El Grecos tower in awe and wonder above almost everything else there, though the case for connections in design between certain pictures is often well made. As for the connection between El Greco and Munch, there is, happily, a concrete one. Julius Meier-Graefe, who wrote ecstatically about El Greco in his 1910 book Spanish Journey and so ignited crucial German interest in him, was an early energetic champion of Munch. By linking them up but without knowing it, Meier-Graefe was anticipating a truth that, a century later, cannot be ducked: during a short era of cultural transition, these two strange, toiling, isolated outsiders, born 322 years apart, altered for good the way people painted, and therefore the way in which the world can be seen and understood.

The heart of the crime

For psychological and linguistic brilliance, Richard Ford remains hard to beat, says Francine Prose

Canada
By Richard Ford (Bloomsbury, £18.99)

More than 30 years after I first saw Terrence Malick’s film Badlands, I can still hear the childish sing-song of Sissy Spacek as the charismatic serial killer’s worshipful girlfriend. How wrenching her lilting rhythms became as she described their modus operandi—the differences between the youths themselves than about the specifically American character of the felonies they observe—their own tales and need little context. One such crime—and its hapless young witnesses—is at the heart of Richard Ford’s new novel, Canada. Ford, who won the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 1996, is best known and most frequently acclaimed for mining the darkly faceted anthracite of the adult male psyche. In his “Frank Bascombe trilogy”—Independence Day (1985), The Sportswriter (1986) and, The Lay of the Land (2006)—and in his most recent story collections, Women with Men (1998) and A Multitude of Sins (2002), Ford writes with unsparing and sometimes lacerating accuracy about the private griefs and public bad behaviour of men whose lives have not turned out in any of the ways they might have hoped or imagined. They are hopelessly confused about what women want—and about what they want. Befuddled, disconnected, they drift through their daily routines, seeking consolation in unhappy love affairs and unsatisfying jobs, trying to understand where and how exactly things took such a disheartening turn for the worse.

Early in his career, Ford (whose first novel, A Piece of My Heart, appeared in 1976) was often associated—in the minds of readers and reviewers—with a group of American writers then known as “dirty realists.” Perhaps the best known of these authors was Raymond Carver, a close friend and colleague of Ford’s, who, like Ford, frequently chose his protagonists from the working and lower-middle classes. But though Ford’s characters have, one might say, come up in the world over the course of the last decades, echoes of...
of Carver still resonate in his work—most notably in the melancholy that pervades the sensibilities of so many of his heroes, and especially in their wrenching efforts to figure out what they did wrong, or where they went wrong, why their wives left them and how their destinies wound up falling so far short of the happiness, however limited, that the future once seemed to promise.

What’s perhaps less obvious about Ford’s similarity to Carver is actually the most important aspect that their work shares in common: their close and exacting attention to word choice, to diction and language. In a *Paris Review* interview, Ford has said, “I’m always interested in words, and no matter what I’m doing—describing a character or a landscape or writing a line of dialogue—I’m moved, though not utterly commanded by an interest in the sound and rhythm of the words.”

In the past, I’ve found myself most strongly drawn to the books in which Ford focuses his calm, intelligent sympathies on the inner lives of boys and young men. So far my favourite has been his story collection, *Rock Springs*, and in particular the much-anthologised “Communist,” in which a 16-year-old boy named Les studies his mother’s trade union organiser boyfriend for clues to the mysteries of manhood.

Dell Parsons, the narrator of *Canada*, my new favourite Ford book, could be Les’s brother: introspective, observant, decent, coming of age in the American west during the same era. Dell is 15. It’s 1960. He likes school. His main interests—beekeeping and chess—suggest the presence of (or the desire for) an orderly, inquisitive mind. He loves his parents and his twin sister Berner but is so dwarfed by their oversized, forceful personalities that it’s hard for him to see beyond the edges of the shadows they cast on the visible landscape. And the fact that the family has moved around so much before coming to a full stop in Great Falls, Montana has left Dell with little talent for, or belief in, forging lasting connections with the world outside his front door.

The first hundred or so pages of the novel read like the verbal equivalent of a family portrait that the painter keeps returning to, adding new brushstrokes, rubbing out, trying to get an accurate or at least a recognisable likeness. Dell’s father, Bev, is what we have come to think of as a 1950s guy: handsome, self-confident, charming, a veteran who has failed to navigate the transition from the Air Force into civilian life. Neeva, Dell’s mother, could hardly be more different. Sceptical, cerebral, introverted, she “had worked in a bookstore, featured herself possibly as a bohemian and a poet, and had hoped someday to land a job as a studious, small-college instructor.” For Dell, the mystery of who his parents are is compounded by the even more confounding question of how they wound up together.

In my view, it’s not a “spoiler” to reveal a plot point that the author himself discloses in the opening paragraph. So here’s how Ford begins the novel, and we can take it from there:

“First, I’ll tell you about the robbery our parents committed. Then about the murders, which happened later. The robbery is the most important part, since it served to set my and my sister’s lives on the courses they eventually followed. Nothing would make complete sense without that being told first.

“First, I’ll tell you about the robbery our parents committed. Then about the murders, which happened later. The robbery is the most important part, since it served to set my and my sister’s lives on the courses they eventually followed. Nothing would make complete sense without that being told first.

“Our parents were the least likely two people in the world to rob a bank. They weren’t strange people, not obviously criminals. No one would’ve thought they were destined to end up that way. They were just regular—although, of course, that kind of thinking became null and void the moment they did rob a bank.”

Dell spends a large part of the novel trying to understand how his “regular” parents could have become bank robbers. There are extenuating circumstances, including a debt incurred in a scheme.
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to resell beef stolen by a group of local Indians—a rather low-level criminal activity gone seriously wrong. But Dell knows that the larger crime his parents commit doesn’t make sense; Ford seems to know it too, and his efforts to persuade his characters and himself and his readers that these two people could have committed this act range from the incise to the excessive.

“For some reason she was committed to robbing a bank—the only truly reliable explanation for which is the simplest one: people do rob banks. If this seems illogical, then you are still judging events from the point of view of someone who’s not robbing a bank and never would because he knows it’s crazy.”

Just as it begins to seem wearing, or like a flaw in the novel, just as we find ourselves longing to tell Dell, and Ford, “Enough! We believe you! People do strange things!” our doubts are blown away by a series of scenes so powerful that our misgivings seem beside the point. Because almost without our being aware, Ford has managed to make us honorary or vicarious members of the Parsons family, to implicate and involve us so deeply in their missteps and misfortunes that the scene of Neeva and Bev’s arrest is almost unbearably painful. It’s as if we truly are watching it through the eyes of the child who is seeing something terrible and irreversible happen to the parents he loves.

“...I have two children here,” our mother said to the policeman, who’d begun moving her awkwardly around the dining room table, her hands behind her. Because she was small, her arms didn’t reach easily around her back. It is not simple to describe what I saw. The big policeman’s cigar odour was all inside the room, as if he’d been smoking. He was breathing stiffly. My mother’s feet didn’t move willingly, but she didn’t struggle or say anything other than that she had two children. Her eyes became fixed in front of her—not on me—as if what she was doing was difficult to perform.

I never imagined I’d find myself comparing Richard Ford’s work to The Man Who Loved Children, the brilliant and immensely peculiar novel of domestic mayhem by the Australian writer, Christina Stead. But when the Parsons’ bubble is finally burst and the police arrive on the scene, I kept thinking of a scene in the Stead novel. There, it’s the daughter’s teacher through whose eyes we suddenly see the wildly dysfunctional family that, in the course of reading the novel, we have come to view as normal—the way children see their families, as Dell does, as “regular.” It’s a shocking and wounding shift in perspective, and we are likewise shocked and wounded by the events that transpire after Bev and Neeva are apprehended.

The second half of Canada contains a series of plot turns that one would hate to ruin for the reader. Perhaps it’s enough to say that their unwanted new freedom provokes, in Dell and Berner, a disturbing volley of responses.

Berner runs away, and Dell is smuggled across the border to Canada: a rescue intended to save him from being made a ward of the state. In Saskatchewan, he rather rapidly discovers that rescue is a relative term; it’s unclear whether his new situation is better or worse than what would have befallen him had he been left to the mercies of the authorities in Montana. Watched over by the unsavoury and vaguely threatening Charley Quarters, one of those renegade, lipstick-wearing frontier weirdos we’re always happier to meet in fiction than in real life, he is put to work at a seedy hotel for itinerant workers and goose hunters from the States. There, he falls under the spell of the hotel owner, Arthur Remlinger, one of the inevitably dispointing father substitutes who appear with some regularity in Ford’s fiction.

In fact Arthur Remlinger is the dark mirror image of Bev Parsons: mysterious, secretive, mercurial, ultimately criminal. That is to say, male. Like Bev, Remlinger has strong political opinions, considerably to the right of Bev’s; views that—in Remlinger’s case—have turned him into a fugitive, fleeing a crime that, we suspect, will catch up with him sooner or later.

As Dell moves deeper into Remlinger’s orbit, and as we approach the two murders mentioned in the book’s opening paragraph, Dell—and Ford—provides us with a series of illuminating reflections on the relationship between fathers (biological or quasi-adoptive) and their sons: “He needed me to be his ‘special son’—though only for a moment, since he knew what bad things were coming to him. He needed me to do what sons do for their fathers: bear witness that they’re substantial, that they’re not hollow, not ringing absences. That they count for something when little else seems to.”

A final section, which features a reunion between Berner and Dell, is more confirming than surprising. It hasn’t been hard to predict which of the twin siblings would make it through, against all odds, and which would be less fortunate. But this reflective, elegiac conclusion reminds us of a theme that has repeatedly surfaced in Ford’s work, an observation that Canada has so well demonstrated, and what we have ourselves observed: that buried inside every adult is the baffled child who has struggled to solve the riddle of what it means to make one’s own way through a confusing, inhospitable, and even criminal world.

Francine Prose is a novelist and critic. Her latest book is “Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them” (Union)

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**Wear your worst jeans**

Drawing upon painful experience, Edward Docx presents an author’s survival guide to book tours

London. 2003. My first novel, The Calligrapher, has just come out in Britain. And it is about to be published in America. I’m at the launch party of a senior British novelist. I’m pretending to smoke so that I can hang out with him. He asks how it’s all going. I say that it’s going pretty well. And then add—with an effort to conceal my pride—that I’m doing a book tour.

He sucks his teeth. “How many dates?”

“About ten,” I say, doubling the true number.

He winces sympathetically. His reaction is disconcerting. To me the reality of an American book tour seems like a profound spiritual breakthrough of an order unmatched in at least 3000 years of human history. The guy is pretty famous though. So I assume ennui. I figure he must be down on the whole book tour thing—the endless airports, the needy crowds, the anonymous hotels.

I try to act cool: “Just the coasts,” I say. “Just the coasts.” He shakes his head.

“Good luck with that.”

New York. A month later. And still I don’t get it. Instead, I’m thinking: this is what it must have been like for the Beatles. OK, so the number of people here to see me is closer to 70 than 70,000. But still, for my first ever night on tour, it feels impressive. I gaze out with a much-rehearsed expression calculated to suggest that sunlit vantage where intellectual distance meets soulful intensity. Christ, if it carries on like this, by the time I get to LA, I’ll need decoy limos.
and VIP tables for the entourage.

It doesn’t carry on like that.

In Oakland, California, there are… four. Four people. This is not as big a number as it at first sounds. Two of the “audience” are staff, another is a man whom they warn me is “crazy as a cut snake” and the fourth, so I’m told with escalating animation, “comes to everything, comes to everything, everything, everything, everything.”

I’m wearing a Savile Row suit. I am feeling ridiculous even by my own stringently maintained standards. And all that I’m thinking is that maybe I can convince these people that this is how England likes to dress after six. That this is what we do. We have a monarchy. We eat marmalade. We wear morning dress in the morning. We wear evening dress in the evening. Yes: this now seems to be the main business ahead of us. The book, my career, the written word—all of it a side-show. Our focus—as a five—is to wipe the suit (and therefore the evening) from our collective mind.

San Francisco. The following night. I’m in jeans and an old t-shirt. You don’t catch a guy like me out twice. No, sir. This time, I’m ready to hunker down with the two or three bums that might have wandered in.

But—wait—what is this? The place is packed. No. How can this be? There is not a spare seat. What is happening? And why am I dressed like an irksome trustafarian? Oh, God. The organiser shoulders his way through the crowds toward me. “You’ve got a terrific review in the Chronicle,” he says. “They love you.”

Back in car, I plead with the meet-and-greet driver: “Surely there must be some way of knowing?” I ask. “I don’t mind a few people. I don’t mind lots of people. But what I cannot handle is all this uncertainty. It’s killing me. I can’t put myself through it every night. It’s like ritual torture. When there are crowds, I act weird because I’m absurdly grateful. When there aren’t, I act weird because I’m absurdly embarrassed.”

A second San Francisco date goes staggeringly well. But then: Los Angeles. Nobody. Not anybody. Sure, there are some chairs—too many chairs—and a vaguely amicable glass of water. But no actual people. This is when I get to thinking that I’d like to join them—the rest of humanity—I’d like to join them in not being here. But I can’t. I am the only person who has to be here. I am the only person who has to be here and witness nobody being here. If I were not here, if I were with everybody else (not here), then things would be better. But I’m not. I’m here. And there’s nobody here. That’s what a book tour is, I now realise: a kind of existential joke.

At a launch party some years later—a few tours down the line—I find myself able to answer another writer with the kind of practical advice I wish I had been given: “Go for the scruffiest jeans and trainers you own,” I say, “with your most elegant jacket and shirt. Stay behind the lectern when there is a big audience. Sit down with your feet up when there is not. Portland or Seattle should be good; but keep in mind that LA has never been much of a book town.”

Edward Docx is an associate editor of Prospect. His latest novel is “The Devil’s Garden” (Picador)
New old teenagers

Male oddballs, losers and underdogs have infiltrated mainstream movies, says Francine Stock

In the 2008 comedy *Step Brothers*, oversized thirtysomething kids Will Ferrell and John C Reilly burst into the marital bedroom shared by their respective parents. Squirming with anticipation, they beg to turn their own twin beds into a bunk. Reluctant approval secured, they bound away. Seconds and a sickening crash later, a distraught Reilly reappears, wailing: “Those bunk beds were a terrible idea. Why did you let us do it?”

Over the past decade, cinema screens have been overrun with such characters—adult males in various stages of arrested development, often sitting at home in bedrooms festooned with posters and action toys. *Step Brothers* may be caricature but it’s revealing: from arthouse to multiplex manchildren lead in films, from Steve Carell in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*, to pretty much any character played by Ferrell or Ben Stiller, to the bachelor-party lost boys in *The Hangover* (which took $470 million worldwide) and Paul Giamatti’s toddler tantrums in the vineyards in *Sideways*. Even the recent Muppets film played with the oddity of a fully grown man (Jason Segel) preferring to hang out with toys rather than his cute romantic interest Amy Adams.

Now there are two more films in this mould. This May, Segel was back, this time as a 30 year old slacking in the basement of his mother’s house in *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*. In cinemas from 29th June Todd Solondz’s *Dark Horse* focuses on a plump mummy’s boy who hooks up with a depressed young woman who has returned home after a failed love affair.

So where do they come from, these adult adolescents? And what are they about? *Dark Horse* is a gentler variation on Solondz’s earlier films like the breakthrough *Happiness* (1998) which impressed and disgusted audiences in equal measure. Some critics claimed *Happiness* was simply an exercise in audience discomfort, like pulling on a hangnail. It showed dysfunction—abuse and misery—beneath affluent conformity and amidst these grotesques, the masturbator anonymous caller played by Philip Seymour Hoffman emerged as the film’s most sympathetic character. Over the intervening years, milder versions of Hoffman’s character in *Happiness*—mixed with elements of Richard Linklater’s aimless student in *Slacker* and some tics of the improvised film trend known as mumblecore—have drifted into the mainstream. The best of these wallflowers (usually played by Hoffman or John C Reilly) are illuminating human studies but many of the others are plain irritating or downright creepy.

Odd guys on screen, losers and underdogs, are hardly new, but the vintage models ran on different fuel. Jack Lemmon’s character in *The Apartment* or any Woody Allen lead was frustrated when others, less talented, ran away with life’s prizes. Benjamin’s angry rejection in *The Graduate* of the smug “plastics” ethos and hypocrisy of his parents’ generation propelled him out of that diving suit and into the Alfa Romeo to the sounds of Simon & Garfunkel. Bobby Dupea, Jack Nicholson’s character in *Five Easy Pieces* may rant and rage but he’s still searching for something better.

That energy had a kind of nobility very different from the passive aggression of the new old teenagers. Typically college-educated yet devoid of ambition, they don’t even glance at the prize; it’s out of reach. And what’s more they despise it, so there. They’re sussed that life is not a Hollywood plot cliché—not for them snappy dialogue, art-directed aspirational interiors and a narrative arc that overcomes obstacles to recognition and fulfilment. The fact is that—like Jason Segel’s Jeff—this generation is metaphorically stuck in the basement while the baby-boomers live upstairs. They’re constrained by something more serious and enduring than a credit crunch; it’s a demographic and cultural squeeze.

The 50, 60 and 70-somethings who lived through the 20th century cult of youth are not going to give it up. In *The Graduate*, handsome Mrs Robinson comes to eventually seem ludicrous because her youth is behind her (although Anne Bancroft was only in her thirties when she played her). By contrast, in *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*, Susan Sarandon as Jeff’s mother is still hot in her seventh decade. Her generation are hanging onto more than the deeds of the house whilst the ageing kids struggle, as it were, to scrape together a deposit.

The man-child’s relationship to women is also affected by an in-built defeatism. In these films, a little understanding is the most you can hope for in life, most likely dispensed by a sympathetic woman. So female characters, however sexy, are forced by the infantilism of the men back into traditional nurturing roles, becoming by default patient mothers, nurses or strict schoolmistresses. Actresses are rarely allowed the range to behave badly. Charlene Theron did recently buck the trend, acting like a crazed hormonal teenager to brilliant effect in *Young Adult* (tagline: “Everyone Gets Old. Not Everyone Grows Up”)—but though the film recouped its modest budget, it was not a huge success; a beautiful woman out
SHAKE THE DUST
WITH SAUL WILLIAMS & KATE TEMPEST
THURSDAY 5 JULY, 8PM

ANDY KERSHAW & GUESTS
FRIDAY 6 JULY, 7.30PM

TONY HARRISON
SATURDAY 7 JULY, 7.30PM

ALL YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE ARAB REVOLUTIONS BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK
A DAY OF DISCUSSION AND EXCHANGE CURATED BY AHDAF SOUIEF & SALMA SAID
SUNDAY 8 JULY, NOON – 6PM

THE WORD FOR SNOW
BY DON DELILLO
TUESDAY 10 – THURSDAY 12 JULY, 7.45PM

JOHN PILGER
TUESDAY 10 JULY, 7.30PM

CLIVE STAFFORD SMITH WITH JON SNOW
WEDNESDAY 11 JULY, 8.15PM

SIRI HUSTVEDT
THURSDAY 12 JULY, 7.30PM
of control was too unsettling. Last year’s *Bridesmaids*, which took nearly $300 million, flirted amusingly with the idea of women behaving badly but the heroine ultimately bowed to old-fashioned romantic redemption. And baking cupcakes.

The bitter joke at the end of *The Graduates* is that for all his rebellion, Benjamin is destined to repeat his parents’ mistakes. Today’s screen-men may not even get that opportunity. In response, they retreat into sullen apathy. With a less than promising future, they look backwards; they are ironists and classifiers—look at those *Star Wars* collections and “best ever” lists—and they stay in their rooms and blame their parents. They need to get out more. *Prospect* 88 · June 2012

Francine Stock is a writer and broadcaster

The month in books

From Libya to an existential detective story, Rachel Aspden picks June’s highlights

What should we read on the longest, brightest days of the year? Publishers’ answers for June are counterintuitively gloomy. Before the season of more lighthearted travels, this month’s books follow quests and journeys of a downbeat kind—with the occasional glimmer of light.

Aside from his cult experimental story collection *The Age of Wire and String*, Ben Marcus is best-known for a fractious essay in *Harper’s* magazine attacking Jonathan Franzen’s bestselling novels for being just too easy and enjoyable to read. *The Flame Alphabet* (Granta, £14.99)—“an urban ironist’s reply to Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” in the words of novelist Jonathan Lethem—seems determined not to relinquish this reputation for difficulty. In the novel’s dystopian future America, first children’s speech, then all language, becomes fatally poisonous to adults. Amid the carnage that ensues, one suburban Jewish father, Samuel, embarks on a desperate search for a cure. In obedience to his fans have no need to fear his the torment language inflicts on its would-be users. His fans have no need to fear his the carnage that ensues, one suburban Jewish father, Samuel, embarks on a desperate search for a cure. In obedience to

*The Guardians* (Granta, £12.99), by the American poet and memoirist Sarah Manguso, is superbly condensed. Its 160 pages are divided into lapidary passages of as little as a paragraph or two. Set in New York against the echoes of 9/11, it follows her attempts to make sense of the suicide of her friend Harris, a musician who “eloped”—escaped—from a psychiatric ward during a psychotic episode. As the book unfolds, Harris is transformed from the “unidentified white man” of a local newspaper report to a well-loved friend, complete with filing-cabinet furniture and home-made mandonlin. Manguso’s writing gravitates towards the minute and particular—*The Guardians* recalls Joan Didion in its forensic account of the effects of loss and pain—but its brilliance is all her own.

Detail is also the strength of Alison Pargeter’s study *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi* (Yale, £20). This history of modern Libya is a vital aid to understanding its current conflicts, from the reaction against centralism by its three disparate regions—wealthy and cosmopolitan Tripolitania, conservative, tribal Cyrenaica and the impoverished desert Fezzan—to the legacy of its savage colonial history. In the recent conflict, both Gaddafi and his opponents claimed the mantle of the resistance to Italian oppression—the eastern rebels proudly calling themselves “the grandsons of al-Mukhtar,” a nationalist hero executed by the Italians in 1931. Pargeter’s insightful account of the Colonel’s bizarre schemes and their bloody unravelling ends on a sombre note, his country left “utterly unprepared for life beyond him.”

The Democratic Republic of Congo has a fearsome reputation, but Ben Rawlence’s *Radio Congo* (OneWorld, £12.99) is an unexpected broadcast of hope. Rawlence, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, travels through the rarely-visited heart of the country, documenting its people’s attempts to emerge from the shadow of conflict and repression. He meets militia men, entrepreneurs, pygmies, refugees and former child soldiers and, for light relief, gets drunk with priests from the ubiquitous Catholic missions and dances to east Africa’s irresistible guitar pop, bolongo. Rawlence is clear-eyed about DRC’s problems—rapacious mineral extraction, the uneasy truce between former oppressors and their victims, the ambiguous presence of the international aid community—but he shows ordinary Congolese tackling them with courage and generosity. After the histrionics of the Kony 2012 viral video, this is a much-needed introduction to a misunderstood country—and a welcome glimpse of sunshine.

Rachel Aspden is a Cairo-based writer.

Arts & Books
THE ARAB SPRING
The End of Postcolonialism
HAMID DABASHI

‘An enormously enlightening and original study ... rich, careful and systematic.’
Alamin Mazrui, Rutgers University

‘A refreshing, thoughtful and historical reading of the dramatic changes sweeping the Arab world.’
Marwan Bishara, senior political analyst, Al Jazeera

‘Hamid Dabashi has a deep understanding of both the region and post-colonialism. His perspective on the Arab Spring is well worth the read.’
Mahmood Mamdani, Makerere University, Kampala & Columbia University

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Once, after a conversation with a friend about the mercurial nature of art, Amalfitano told a story he'd heard in Barcelona. The story was about a sorche, a rookie, in the Spanish Blue Division, which fought in the Second World War, on the Russian Front, with the German Northern Army Group to be precise, in the vicinity of Novgorod.

The rookie was a little guy from Seville, blue-eyed and thin as a rake, and more or less by accident (he was no Dionisio Ridruejo, not even a Tomás Salvador; when he had to give the Roman salute, he did, but he wasn’t really a fascist or a Falangist at heart) he ended up in Russia. And there, for some reason, someone started calling him sorche for short: over here, sorche, or: Sorche, do this, Sorche, do that, so the word lodged itself in the guy’s head, but in the dark part of his head, and in that capacious and desolate place, with passing time and the daily panicking, it was somehow transformed into chantre, cantor. How this happened I don’t know, let’s just say that some connection dormant since childhood was reactivated, some pleasant memory that had been waiting for its chance to return.

So the Andalusian came to think of himself as being a cantor and having a cantor’s duties, although he had no conscious idea of what the word meant, and couldn’t have said that it referred to the leader of a church or cathedral choir. And yet, and this is the remarkable thing, by thinking of himself as a cantor, he somehow turned himself into one. During the terrible winter of ’41, he took charge of the choir that sang carols while the Russians were hammering the 250th Regiment. He remembered those days as full of noise (muffled, constant noises) and an underground, slightly unfocussed joy. They sang, but it was as if the voices were lagging behind or even anticipating the movements of the singers’ lips, throats and eyes, which in their own brief but peculiar journeys often slipped into a kind of silent crevice.

The Andalusian carried out his other duties with courage and resignation, although over time, he did become embittered. He soon paid his dues in blood. One afternoon he was wounded, more or less accidentally, and spent two weeks in the military hospital in Riga, under the care of robust, smiling German women, nursing for the Reich, who couldn’t believe the colour of his eyes, and some extremely ugly volunteer nurses from Spain, probably sisters or sisters-in-law or distant cousins of José Antonio.

When he was discharged, a confusion occurred that was to have grave consequences for the Andalusian: instead of giving him a ticket to the right destination, they shunted him off to the barracks of an SS battalion two hundred miles from his regiment. There, among Germans, Austrians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Danes, Norwegians and Swedes, all much taller and stronger than him, he tried to explain the confusion in his rudimentary German, but the SS officers brushed him off, and while it was being sorted out, they gave him a broom and made him sweep the barracks, then a bucket and a rag to clean the floor of the enormous rectangular wooden building in which they held, interrogated and tortured prisoners of all sorts.

Not entirely resigned to his lot, but performing his new tasks conscientiously, the Andalusian watched the time go by in his new barracks, where he ate much better than before and was not exposed to any new dangers, since the SS battalion had been stationed well behind the lines, to combat what they called “outlaws.” Then, in the dark part of his head, the word sorche became legible again. I’m a sorche, he said, a rookie, and I should accept my fate. Little by little, the word chantre disappeared, although some afternoons, under a limitless sky that filled him with nostalgia for Seville, it resonated still, somewhere, lost in the beyond. Once he heard some German soldiers singing, and he remembered the word; another time there was a boy singing.
behind a thicket, and again he remembered it, more clearly this
time, but when he went around to the other side of the bushes,
the boy was gone.

One fine day, what was bound to happen happened. The bar-
racks of the SS battalion came under attack and were captured,
some say by a Russian cavalry regiment, though others claim it
was a group of partisans. The fighting was brief and the Germans
were at a disadvantage from the start. After an hour the Rus-
sians found the Andalusian hidden in the rectangular building,
wearing the uniform of an SS auxiliary and surrounded by evi-
dence of the atrocities committed there not so long ago. Caught
red-handed, so to speak. They attached him to one of the chairs
that the SS used for interrogations, with straps on the legs and
the armrests, and to every question from the Russians he replied
in Spanish that he didn’t understand and was just a dogsbody
there. He also tried to say it in German, but he barely knew four
words of that language and his interrogators knew none at all.
After a quick session of slapping and kicking, they went to get
a guy who could speak German and was questioning prisoners
in another of the rectangular building’s cells. Before they came
back, the Andalusian heard shots, and knew they were killing
some of the SS, which put an end to any hopes he might have had
of getting out of there unharmed. And yet, when the shooting
stopped, he clung to life again with every fibre of his being. The
Russian who knew German asked him what he was doing there,
what his job was and his rank. The Andalusian tried to explain, in
German, but it was no use. Then the Russians opened his mouth,
and with a pair of pincers, which the Germans had used on other
body parts, they started pulling and squeezing his tongue. The
pain made his eyes water, and he said, or rather shouted, the
word coño, cunt. The pincers in his mouth distorted the expletive
which came out, in his howling voice, as Kunst.

The Russian who knew German looked at him in puzzlement.
The Andalusian was yelling Kunst, Kunst and crying with pain.
In German, the word Kunst means art, and that was what the
bilingual soldier was hearing, and he said, This son of a bitch
must be an artist or something. The guys who were torturing
the Andalusian removed the pincers along with a little piece
of tongue and waited, momentarily hypnotised by the revela-
tion. The word art. Art, which soothes the savage beast. And so,
like soothed beasts, the Russians took a breather and waited for
some kind of signal while the rookie bled from the mouth and
swallowed his blood liberally mixed with saliva, and choked. The
word coño transformed into the word Kunst, had saved his life.
When he came out of the rectangular building, it was dusk, but
the light stabbed at his eyes like midday sun.

They took him away along with the few remaining prison-
ers, and before long he was able to tell his story to a Russian
who knew some Spanish, and he ended up in a prison camp in
Siberia while his accidental partners in iniquity were executed.
He was in Siberia until well into the fifties. In 1957 he settled in
Barcelona. Sometimes he’d open his mouth and cheerfully tell
his tales of war. Sometimes he’d open his mouth and show who-
ever wanted a look the place where a chunk was missing from
his tongue. You could hardly see it. The Andalusian explained
that over the years it had grown back. Amalfitano didn’t know
him personally. But when he heard the story, the guy was still
living in a janitor’s apartment in Barcelona.
### Enigmas & puzzles

#### Fuel’s errand

Ian Stewart

When Stan Polo crash-landed the Perennials Sparrow in the swamps of Granolabah it was completely out of fuel. “Nice landing,” said Duke Skyhawk sarcastically, pulling weeds from his hair. Polo took it as a compliment and grinned.

“Hustle up some fuel, Stan, and get us off this dump,” ordered Princess Hava Banaka. By a stroke of good fortune, four small green aliens with pointy ears promptly appeared with a petrol tanker.

“I want one million gallons of rebel warship diesel,” said Polo. “Unleaded.”

One of the aliens held up a card, which read: WE WILL EACH MAKE ONE STATEMENT. DEDUCE WHO IS TELLING THE TRUTH AND WHO IS LYING AND WE WILL FILL UP YOUR TANK. Polo nodded agreement.

“At least one of us is lying,” said the first alien.

“At least two of us are lying,” said the second alien.

“At least three of us are lying,” said the third alien.

“At least four of us are lying,” said the fourth alien. Help Stan Polo refuel his spaceship.

**Last month’s answer**

One way to start solving the puzzle is to work out all the rows, column, and diagonal sums and see how they differ from 34. After that experiment.

14 3 13 7 10 4 13 7
11 6 16 2 15 5 12 2
8 10 4 9 8 14 3 9
1 15 5 12 1 11 6 16

### How to enter

**The generalist prize**

One winner receives nine newly designed paperbacks in the Penguin Essentials collection. Also included are Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and Jerome K Jerome’s *Three Men in a Boat*.

**Enigmas & puzzles prize**

The winner receives a copy of *The Universe in Zero Words: The Story of Mathematics As Told Through Equations*, by Dana Mackenzie, which tells the stories behind 24 equations—what they mean, who discovered them, and why they matter.

**Rules**

Send your solution to answer@prospect-magazine.co.uk or Crossword/Enigmas, Prospect, 2 Bloomsbury Place, London, WC1A 2QA. Include your email and postal address for prize administration. All entries must be received by 8th June. Winners will be announced in our July issue.

### Last month’s solutions

**Solutions across:**

1 US showman, William Frederick Cody (7,4)

7 Emona to the Romans and capital of Illyria from 1816 to 1849 (9)

12 Literary commentator (9)

13 Sailor’s knot (7,4)

14 Problem solved! (4,4,13)

15 In botany, sword-shaped (6)

16 Dancer’s or gymnast’s close-fitting one-piece garment (7)

17 Bavaria to its inhabitants (6)

20 Inventor of the gramophone and kinetoscope (6,6)

22 Claim as one’s own (8)

23 Quaries (9)

25 An expanse of open level country (9)

29 Rosaceous plant with spiky yellow flowers and broadly bar-like fruits (8)

30 One of Titania’s fairy servants (12)

32 Curved handles on scythes (6)

33 The upper-arm muscle that straightens the elbow (7)

34 Men’s Singles runner-up at Wimbledon in 1963/4/5 (6)

38 Our life span according to Psalm 90 (10,5,3,3)

39 Plain rich sponge bake (7,4)

40 Inspiring with love, in the (6)

41 Of the Lowlands (9)

42 Claim as one’s own (8)

43 Quarries (9)

45 An expanse of open level country (9)

47 Lapidarist (6)

48 Mulligrubs (6)

49 New critics (3,10)

50 One of Titania’s fairy servants (12)

51 Ossiferous (6)

52 Poori (3)

53 Quimper (9)

54 Youth hostel (4,3)

56 Zymometer (9)

58 The generalist:

David Mallen, London

**Enigmas & Puzzles prize:**

David Scale, Hampshire

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June

Wednesday 6th
From judgement to atonement: sculpture at Strasbourg, Lincoln and Naumburg
Paul Crossley, Courtauld Institute University of York, King’s Manor, York, 5.30pm, free, 01904 322622, www.york.ac.uk

Wednesday 13th
Thomas Friedman: a manifesto for rescuing America
Thomas Friedman, columnist and author
The Royal Institution, 21 Albemarle St, W1, 7pm, £25, 020 7794 2000, www.vam.ac.uk

Sunday 10th
Is democracy right for the world’s current problems?
Andrew Gamble, David Runciman and Glen Rangwala, University of Cambridge
Hay Festival, Big Tent, Hay-on-Wye, 1pm, £5.25, 01497 822629, www.hayfestival.com

Tuesday 12th
Does the sun cause climate change?
Lucie Green, solar scientist; Mark Maslin, paleoclimatologist
Cheltenham Science Festival, Town Hall, Imperial Square, Cheltenham, 12.45pm, £7, 08448 808094, www.cheltenhamfestivals.com

Abolitionist experimentation in Sierra Leone: conflicting ideas
Suzanne Schwarz, WISE
Hull History Centre, Worship St, Hull, 12.30pm, free, 01482 305176, www.hull.ac.uk

Tuesday 19th
The potential infinite
Øystein Linnebo, Birkbeck Clore Management Centre, 2 Malet St, Bloomsbury, WC1, 5pm, free, 020 7380 3109, www.bbk.ac.uk

Wednesday 20th
Poetry and faith
Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury; Fiona Sampson, poet
LSE, Old Theatre, Houghton St, WC2, 7pm, £10, 020 7945 6043, www.lse.ac.uk

Thursday 21st
Thomas Becket: warrior, priest, rebel, victim
John Guy, historian

Friday 29th
Eurasian renaissance: intellect, art and exchange
Felipe Fernández-Armesto, historian
British Library, 96 Euston Rd, NW1, 6.30pm, £7.50, 020 7412 7676, www.bl.uk

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Our pick of the best public talks and events

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John Frederick Herring Jnr. (1815-1907)
Over the fence
Oil on canvas
16 1/4 x 24 in. (41.3 x 61 cm.)

Peter Biegel (1913-1988)
The jump
Oil on canvas
20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm.)

George Sturm (German, 1855-1923)
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John Ruskin vs James McNeill Whistler, June 1877:
In his review of the Grosvenor Gallery’s opening exhibition John Ruskin observed of Whistler’s painting, Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket: “For Mr Whistler’s own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.”

The following month, Whistler brought a libel suit against Ruskin, claiming damages of £1,000 and costs. The jury found for Whistler, but awarded only one farthing in damages. The judge did not award costs.

Whistler in his account of the trial said this: “We are told that Mr Ruskin has devoted his long life to art, and as a result is ‘Slade Professor’ at Oxford. In the same sentence, we have thus his position and its worth. It suffices not, messieurs! A life passed among pictures makes not a painter—else the policeman in the National Gallery might assert himself. As well allege that he who lives in a library must needs die a poet. Let not Mr Ruskin flatter himself that more education makes the difference between himself and the policeman when both stand gazing in the Gallery.”

The Sitwells vs Noël Coward, June 1923:
The first public performance of Façade, words written and intoned by Edith Sitwell through a papier-mâché megaphone, was held at the Aeolian Hall in Bond Street. It was badly performed and not well received. Among the audience was the 23-year-old Noël Coward, an acquaintance of Osbert Sitwell, then largely unknown but engaged in preparing a theatrical revue for Gertrude Lawrence and Maisie Gay. Coward’s friend, Cole Lesley reported that, “Noël always told me that he did not walk out of Façade. ‘I wouldn’t have missed it for the world,’ were, I am afraid, the words he used.”

When his revue London Calling! opened in September 1923, one of its successes was Maisie Gay’s performance as the poetess Hernia Whittlebot, widely assumed to have been modelled on Sitwell, in a sketch entitled “The Swiss Family Whittlebot,” reciting her poems with her two brothers, Gob and Sago. One lyric ran: “Your mouth is my mouth/ And our mouth is their mouth/ And their mouth is Bournemouth.”

London Calling! became a hit and Osbert was incensed. Coward recalled: “During the first two weeks of the run I received, to my intense surprise, a cross letter from Osbert Sitwell; in fact, so angry was it, that I first imagined it to be a joke. However it was far from being a joke, and shortly afterward another letter arrived, even crosser than the first. To this day I am a little puzzled as to why that light-hearted burlesque should have aroused him, his brother and his sister to such paroxysms of fury.”

Edith never saw the show and became convinced that Maisie Gay had implied that she was a lesbian. The feud lasted decades. In 1947 Edith wrote to John Lehmann, saying she was: “Sick of being attacked by per-sons of no talent... In 1923 Mr Coward began on me in a ‘sketch’ of the utmost indecency—really filthy, I could have him up [in court]... I had to put up with having filthy verses about vice imputed to me and recited every night and three afternoons weekly for nine months.”

In 1962 the feud was resolved. Coward wrote in his diary: “Went to tea with [Sitwell] in her flat in Hampstead. I must say I found her completely charming, very amusing and rather touching. How strange that a 40-year feud should finish so gracefully and so suddenly. I am awfully glad. She gave me her new slim volume of poems. I am fairly unrepentant about her poetry. I really think that three-quarters of it is gibberish. However I must crush down these thoughts otherwise the dove of peace will shit on me.”

Albert Camus vs Jean-Paul Sartre, May 1952:
The friendship between Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre came to an abrupt end after a vitriolic review of L’Homme Révolté (The Rebel) was published by Sartre in his magazine, Les Temps Modernes. Camus’ reply was printed in the following issue: “I’m getting tired of seeing myself, and particularly seeing old militants who have known all the fights of their times, endlessly chastised by censors who have always tackled history from their armchairs.” This was a pointed reference to the liberation of Paris in 1944 when Camus had discovered Sartre, who had been tasked with occupying the Comédie-Française, fast asleep in the orchestra stalls. Sartre replied with a public letter. “My dear Camus, Our friendship was not easy, but I will miss it. You have become the victim of an excessive sullenness that masks your internal problems... Your combination of dreary conceit and vulnerability always discouraged people from telling you unvarnished truths... I would have so much preferred that our present quarrel went straight to the heart of the matter, without getting confused with the nasty smell of wounded vanity. Who would have said, much less thought, that everything would finish between us in a petty authors’ quarrel?”

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