

# Fair Observer

Monthly



DECEMBER 2022

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Independence, Diversity, Debate

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# Fair Observer Monthly



December 2022

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## ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a nonprofit media organization that engages in citizen journalism and civic education.

Our digital media platform has more than 2,500 contributors from 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

Our education arm runs training programs on subjects such as digital media, writing and more. In particular, we inspire young people around the world to be more engaged citizens and to participate in a global discourse.

As a nonprofit, we are free from owners and advertisers. When there are six jobs in public relations for every job in journalism, we rely on your donations to achieve our mission.

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## Brazil's New President and Hope for a Democratic Revival

Helder Ferreira do Vale

December 04, 2022

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**The return of Brazil's two-time left wing president known familiarly as Lula marks a turning point after four years of rightwing rule, but the task will be complicated by his lack of a majority in Congress. Bolsonaro is gone, but Bolsonarism is still lurking.**

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In Brazil's presidential election last month, 156 million Brazilians went to the polls to vote for the one of the two candidates who emerged from the first round of elections: former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (The Workers' Party) and the incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro (The Liberal Party). Lula won the election with 60 million votes. He returns to the Brazilian presidency for a third term. His narrow victory — 50.8% of the votes to Bolsonaro's 49.1% — represents the triumph of a democratic agenda against the extreme right agenda. Nevertheless, the governability of Brazil under Lula's government will be challengingly complex in a politically divided country.

Lula owes his triumph to the formation of a broad political front built during the election campaign to reverse the unpopular policies of Bolsonaro's far-right government. The 60 million Brazilians that elected Lula hope that Brazil will be politically rejuvenated, marking the end of Bolsonaro's effort to erode Brazilian democracy.

## Lula's comeback

Lula began his long political career as a trade union leader in the early 1980s. In 2003 he was the first leftist leader to be elected president in Brazil. After two terms in power, his government ended in 2011 with the highest popularity rating of any democratic government in Brazil's history.

Lula cannot however dissociate himself from the scandal known as Operation Car Wash, a corruption probe that uncovered a web of money laundering schemes involving the Brazilian state's oil company. The unraveling of the judicial procedures that followed led to the jailing of the president in 2011. However, the Brazilian Supreme Court ultimately annulled all criminal convictions against Lula on the grounds of a series of judicial procedural errors by the prosecution.

In the extremely polarized country that Brazil has become, Many Brazilians view Lula as the leader who led Brazil to a brief period of prosperity. Lula's administrations may boast of a number of achievements, in particular, a considerable reduction of poverty and hunger in Brazil, an increase of Brazilians' real income, the expansion of social programs and policies, sustainable economic growth, creation of a domestic regime for environmental preservation, and the strengthening of Brazil's multilateral vision in global debates.

Despite Lula's many accomplishments as president, the corruption crisis involving Lula and his party provided the pretext for the rise of Bolsonaro to power as a far-right leader. In effect, Lula's disapproval rating among the electorate still stands at approximately 46% (according to two opinion polls, Datafolha and Ipec). What saved



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him in the election is the fact that Bolsonaro's disapproval rating was even higher.

For an important percentage of citizens Lula's return to power has sparked great optimism for the future. 44% of Brazilians believe their lives will change for the better with Lula in the presidency, compared to 21% who believe their lives will improve if Bolsonaro were to continue as president (Datafolha).

### **Brazil and the Latin American "pink tide"**

Lula's government will be confronted with strong opposition in the national congress. He will have to govern with a National Congress dominated by a majority of far-right senators and deputies, who will do everything in their power to block his political agenda.

The parties forming the pro-Lula alliance in the senate and the lower house do not have the numbers that will permit them to pass laws. Lula will have to negotiate with the pragmatic parties representing the center of the ideological political spectrum who are in the habit of trading their congressional support in exchange for political benefits (for example, political appointments in ministries).

Unlike other Latin American countries that have turned to the left in what analysts have called a "pink tide" in the region, there are doubts whether Lula has enough political strength to implement progressive policies. Lula won the elections with a narrow margin of 2 million votes, revealing a deeply divided country. In his victory speech, Lula focused on the urgent need to reconcile the country: "There aren't two "Brazils, he proclaimed. "It's time to lay down our arms".

### **Brazil's deep social divisions**

The majority of Lula's votes +came from women, the poor, and Catholics. The poorest voters, those who earn up to two minimum wages (45% of the Brazilian electorate), supported Lula, who received 61% of their vote intention, compared to 33% support for Bolsonaro. Also, Lula showed a great capacity for attracting female voters (53% of the electorate). In pre-election polls, around 52% of women declared they would vote for Lula. Only 41% expressed the intention to vote for Bolsonaro.

In recent years, there has been a marked politicization of Pentecostal churches in Brazil, the country that hosts the largest Catholic population in the world. Aligned behind Bolsonaro, 62% of Evangelicals (27% of the electorate) declared their intention to vote for him, while only 32% intended to support Lula. In contrast, 55% of Catholics (52% of the electorate) showed a preference for Lula, whereas 39% declared their intention to vote for Bolsonaro.

### **Policy changes under Lula**

The fight against hunger is urgent in a country that has experienced an increase in child malnutrition. 33 million Brazilians suffer from food insecurity. Lula's popularity among poor Brazilians derives from his policies aimed at combating poverty and hunger, such as the creation of the cash-transfer program, Bolsa Família, which lifted over 40 million Brazilians out of poverty. Many Brazilians expect that Lula will once again innovate in his social policies, in contrast with Bolsonaro's failure to promote policies aimed at alleviating hunger.

Lula has a strong commitment to environmental preservation. One of his campaign promises

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concerned the creation of a ministry to deal with the interests of indigenous peoples. Lula also guaranteed the reactivation of existing institutions and legislation to combat environmental destruction. Currently, Brazil has one of its highest deforestation rates in decades and a significant increase in land conflicts culminating in record killings of environmentalists and indigenous people.

Brazil's foreign policy will undergo a radical change as Lula will vigorously participate in global debates. Furthermore, Lula will bring Brazil closer to its Latin American neighbors, increase the weight of Brazil in the reform of international organizations, actively participate in the BRICS' initiatives, and create cooperation mechanisms between Brazil and developing countries.

### **Challenges ahead**

Since becoming president in 2018, Bolsonaro immersed Brazil in a permanent democratic crisis. In this year's elections, Bolsonaro used the tools of the state for political purposes to influence the electoral process. In recent months, the ministry of economy increased social benefits, granted special credit for the beneficiaries of social assistance, and decreased taxes to reduce the price of gasoline and electricity. In addition to electoral abuses, Bolsonaro attacked democratic institutions in an attempt to generate public mistrust in the election results in the case of his defeat. Bolsonaro until now has not explicitly conceded the election.

After four years of democratic setbacks, politics must now seek solutions to the real-life problems that afflict most Brazilians. Lula has committed to transforming Brazil's harsh social reality while at the same time seeking a way of appeasing the

followers of Bolsonaro's ultra-right movement. This task seems particularly difficult so long as Bolsonaro's anti-democratic extreme right movement remains present and active in the political landscape.

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## **Journey to the World Cup: 6,500 Deaths and \$220 Billion**

Cristian Rosu  
December 08, 2022

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**Sports often stand at the crux of many historical periods and political events. The 2022 Qatar World Cup is at such a pivotal point and will be remembered for all the wrong reasons.**

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**S**ince the start of the 20th century, sports have played a significant role in developing the nation state. Lending a hand through both public diplomacy and soft power, sports have often fostered national identity. Through the "us versus them" mindset, sports provide the perfect

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opportunity to display visible and powerful symbols of nationalism.

The original intentions of Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, were to promote internationalism and humanity. However, sports have continuously been used as a platform to promote nationalism. For instance, who can forget how the USSR and USA turned the 1980s Olympics into a Cold War battleground? If war is an extension of politics, then organized sports can be seen as a substitute for war and a bloodless theater for national competition.

This year, the FIFA World Cup has announced Qatar's arrival on the international stage. It has become the first Arab and Muslim country to organize an event of such magnitude, This has added to its prestige and soft power globally and, especially, in the Islamic world.

### **Money Rules the World**

The 2022 World Cup in Qatar comes after the 2018 World Cup held in Russia. Though both host nations are light years away from democracy, this did not matter for FIFA. Almost immediately after the nomination of the organizers, there were multiple allegations of corruption. There was suspicion that the Qatari government bribed FIFA so their country could be hosts.

According to The Guardian, 16 of the 22 voting members of the FIFA Executive Committee that chose Russia and Qatar are now under investigation for some form of corruption or wrongdoing. Allegations emerged that FIFA benefited from a \$400 million TV rights deal with Al Jazeera, Qatar's state broadcaster. Apparently,

this deal came just 21 days before the decision to award the World Cup to Qatar.

### **The French Connection**

In recent years, particularly under French president Nicolas Sarkozy's, ties between France and Qatar grew closer. In November 2010, Sarkozy, Michel Platini, the former head of the European football association (UEFA), and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, had a now infamous meeting. This led to Platini changing his mind and voting in favor of Qatar hosting the World Cup. FIFA's president at the time Sepp Blatter has since admitted this was a mistake. FIFA should not have awarded Qatar the World Cup.

The Qatari government would later buy Paris Saint-Germain, France's most famous football team. Flush with money, the club has bought players like Kylian Mbappe, Neymar and Lionel Messi. The Qatari government has also increased its stake in a French media group, and bought the television rights for Ligue 1, France's top league. France has also developed closer trade relations with Qatar.

The Franco-Qatari collaboration continues. According to Le Monde, the National Assembly ratified an agreement between Qatar and France. It turns out 220 French police officers will work with local officers in Qatar during the World Cup. The French Interior Ministry declared, "France's ambition is not to deploy a large number of units, but to provide high-level expertise and specialized operational support." It seems likely that France has profited from this arrangement.

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## Human Rights Abuses, Boycott and More

After Qatar won the 2022 FIFA World Cup bid, the government began constructing the necessary infrastructure to host the tournament. Workers from poorer Asian countries often worked in unimaginable conditions. As far back as 2013, several European newspapers, including The Guardian, Norwegian magazine Josimar and Danish daily Ekstra Bladet repeatedly reported on abuses against migrant workers. They even uncovered cases of forced labor. In February 2021, The Guardian also reported that more than 6,500 workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka had died in the last 11 years. Many of them had died on World Cup construction sites.

All these revelations have cast a dark shadow over this tournament and FIFA. Tragically, Football's apex body has embraced Qatar wholeheartedly and ignored all human rights violations.

In recent years global brands have focused their communications on socio-political causes. Advertisements are no longer just about the products, they are also about important brand values. When it came down to the World Cup, many companies faced a difficult choice: do they associate with Qatar?

According to The New York Times, several companies have already announced they are boycotting the event. The ING Group, a major financial and banking services group that sponsors the teams of the Netherlands and Belgium, has decided it will neither accept any tickets nor be involved in any related promotion of the World Cup. Another company that is a baggage service provider, GLS, sponsors the Belgium team. It said, "we believe that a commercial use of the 2022

World Cup in the context of the human rights situation would be better not to take place." The company is also not using ticket allocations for customer promotions and not engaging in any advertising campaigns in Qatar.

Brands like the national lottery Danske Spil and the bank Arbejdernes Landsbank, sponsors of the Danish Football Association, agreed to forgo their paid placement on the team's training gear for human rights messages during the World Cup.

The companies involved with the Qatar World Cup are facing a backlash. Football fans have kicked off a visual campaign criticizing the brands participating in the event. Today, such action may seem relatively ineffective. In the long run, brands that have taken a strong stance against Qatar might have much to gain, especially if unpleasant events occur during the tournament.

Nevertheless, at the end of this year, we will witness probably the most expensive sports event in history. Qatar' would have spent about \$220 billion on infrastructure and communication apart from bribes funded by its ample oil and gas reserves. The 6,500 who died will not be forgotten though and the FIFA Qatar World Cup will always remain tainted.

[[Tasheanna Williams](#) edited this piece.]

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Europe, NE Global etc.), on issues in the fields on Politics and International Relations.

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## Is There Really Anything Taylor Swift Can't Do?

Ellis Cashmore  
December 10, 2022

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**The BBC recently published its yearly 100 Women list and, this year, it included producer Priyanka Chopra Jonas, disability activist Selma Blair, actor Rita Moreno and singer Billie Eilish. But not Taylor Swift. This is a serious omission. Here's why.**

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**T**aylor Swift is the greatest entertainer of the millennium. So far, anyway. But, with only 977 years to go, it will take someone special to displace her. She dominates the digital era more consummately than Elvis bossed the 1950s, or the Beatles commanded the 1960s. Madonna and Michael Jackson towered over the 1980s and 1990s but neither seemed to hold their audiences as spellbound as Swift seems to. No one has quite mastered the art of transforming doting fans into obedient acolytes. And no one in history has ever appealed to such a bewilderingly wide demographic. A recent Wall Street Journal poll found that 44 percent of the adult US population considered themselves Swift fans. It's impossible to find other artists whose appeal spanned the generations like this.

## Whisked Away By The Zeitgeist

The fascination with Swift is probably unparalleled: worldwide and seemingly inexhaustible. Fifteen years ago, she was a sweet, skillful and promising country singer. Today, she is the seventh wonder of the world. Last November, tickets for her forthcoming Era tour were released to "verified" fans: the demand was so unprecedented that the Ticketmaster site crashed under the weight of "extraordinarily high demands" and "insufficient" tickets. About 2.4 million fans applied. Within days, it was reported that prices for single Era tour tickets were listed on resale sites as high as \$17,860 -- a price beyond all but affluent adults (passionately devoted affluent adults too) or child stars.

The tour -- which starts March 17 -- is intended to support Swift's tenth album *Midnights*. Even at a time when physical sales of recordings are a relic of the previous century, Swift's album sold 1.5 million units in its first week of release in October, 2022 -- the first time a musician had sold over a million in an opening week since Swift herself did so with *Reputation* in 2017. Streaming of *Midnights* exceeded a billion in days. In 2022, Forbes estimated her personal wealth to be \$570m.

Some artists are just meant to be: Elvis and the others mentioned earlier were pop gods in waiting: so close to the zeitgeist they were, like Dorothy and Toto, bound to be whisked away and carried to greatness, their music, demeanor, look, antics perfectly in harmony with the times. Others are harder to figure out: Swift is one of them. It's easy to mistake her music for good rather than brilliant. She looks interesting, but not in the same flamboyant way as, say, Rihanna or Lady Gaga. There have been no outrageous stunts or splashy

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displays of wealth that typically guarantee the kind of coverage Kim Kardashian and her siblings have exploited so expertly. Swift has either steered or been swept clear of caricatured performances.

Her only moment that came close to explosive was at the 2009 MTV Video Awards ceremony when the artist formerly known as Kanye West interrupted her acceptance speech and sparked a long feud. West aka Ye later claimed he was motivated by god to make his intervention. If so, god might legitimately be considered to have delivered Swift to her eminence. Because the years-long dispute with Ye probably boosted her reputation.

Yet, she is unmistakably great — and I use the word as an attribution rather than a property: if enough people acknowledge her greatness, she actually is great. So, why is she considered so illustriously above the average?

### **Authenticity by Kismet or Design?**

The greatest entertainers are those who understand how much of themselves to reveal to audiences. For most of the twentieth century, a little went a long way and performers allowed only glimpses of what used to pass as private lives. All that changed with the onset of celebrity culture and, today, anyone with ambitions in the entertainment industry is obliged to sign a Mephistophelean contract: success is conditional on the surrender of private lives. Swift was only fifteen when she signed for Big Machine, a Nashville label, in 2005. For the next 10 years, she was a meticulous chronicler of her own developing status: her records were mostly autobiographical reflections on “my-life-as-a-popstar.”

Media studies scholar Maryn Wilkinson thinks this “authenticity” was crucial to Swift’s early success and it made her relationship with fans almost intimate. Los Angeles Times’ Mikael Wood reckons the intimacy “wasn’t a product of kismet but of design” but her music was so shimmering that “eventually you stop caring what’s drawn directly from Swift’s real life and what’s not.”

It’s worth pondering this point because the sense of intimacy Swift created endured. No artist has used social media more artfully than Swift. The Guardian writer Alim Kheraj calls her “a ringmaster of fan service,” the reference to the ringmaster suggesting how she conducts and directs her fans. And remember, her fan base spans the age spectrum, so her ability to coordinate is quite a feat.

Were Swift’s progress uneventful, her personal history might not have captivated her fans. But it was anything but: she had a major fall-out with Big Machine’s owner Scott Borchetta when in 2019 he sold the label to Ithaca Holdings, owned by Scooter Braun, whom Swift disliked. While Swift had negotiated a deal with Borchetta that allowed her to own the masters of later albums, the ownership -- and thus ability to earn from -- her first six albums transferred to Braun. This meant that he could earn money from the use of Swift’s early music in, for example, advertising, tv programs, films and so on. She would have no control over where and how her music would be used. Characteristically, Swift made her annoyance well known on Instagram, Tumblr and other social media.

An acrimonious and serpentine dispute ensued and fans were offered ringside seats as both Swift and Braun vented on social media. Feuds like this are

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reliable ways of galvanizing interest. Swift resolved to re-record her early music, announcing this on social media, of course. She did exactly that and, with typical ringmaster's flair, urged her fans to buy the new recordings, even if they already owned the originals. Sales suggested they were mostly compliant.

### **What Next?**

This wasn't the only splenetic dispute that kept Swift occupied. The earlier-mentioned incident with Ye in 2009 started a squabble that dragged on for several years. Celebrity feuds are usually popular with audiences and serve to keep the disputants in the news. Ye was presumably aware of this when he rapped, "I made that bitch famous" on his 2016 track "Famous." The altercation broadened when Ye's then wife Kim Kardashian got involved. Her involvement at any level guaranteed a global audience, not just of observers, either: the heated exchanges were conducted largely on social media, allowing interested fans to feel they were participating.

The disputes lend a nimbus of complexity to Swift: she may bewitch fans with her music, but she makes a no-holds-barred enemy if you cross her. Her fights are spectator sports but ones in which her fans are allowed to brawl too. And not just on social media: they buy her albums, if only to ensure she wins the day. When someone, especially a god-fearing American, wields the kind of influence over human life, thought and action Swift evidently does, the imagination starts to wander and the mind starts to wonder: What might she do next?

She could break Spotify's single-day streaming numbers again. Or sell-out a record number of

concerts at record high ticket prices. And she could carry on winning every conceivable music award. Or she could try something new.

### **Unsurpassed Influence**

In 2018, Swift celebrated her win at the American Music Awards by urging her followers to vote in the midterm elections. For years, her blue eyes and blonde hair endeared her to the US's alt-right, the rightwing movement that rejects mainstream politics and uses online sources to disseminate its supremacist ideology. But her injunction put paid to the alt-right rumors and appeared to align her with the Democrats, a party for which she could become valuable. Influence comes in many shapes and forms. When a popstar, then not even 30, tells voters to exercise their right, it might not make much difference. There again, maybe it will.

In September 2021, in Fair Observer, I asked the question: Is Oprah the Most Influential Person Ever? I thought she was. Now, I think Swift surpasses her. Think of her demographic: not just teenagers or starry-eyed twentysomethings, but heads of family, perhaps even grandparents. I repeat the figure 44 percent of all Americans. I doubt if any pop singer in history ever had such wide and deep appeal. Within that dense fan base is a dutiful alliance committed to maintaining her dominion. Swift's onetime adversary Ye plans to run for president in 2024 and, while Swift herself has given no indication that she has no comparable ambitions, there's a temptation to ponder what theoretically she could achieve in 2028. She will be 39, four years younger than John F. Kennedy was when he was inaugurated as President.

[Ellis Cashmore's latest book is [The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson.](#)]



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\***Ellis Cashmore** is the author of "Elizabeth Taylor," "Beyond Black" and "Celebrity Culture." He is an honorary professor of sociology at Aston University and has previously worked at the universities of Hong Kong and Tampa.

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## **Experiencing the World as Miss Universe Morocco**

Kawtar Benhalima  
December 10, 2022

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**Morocco's candidate for Miss Universe 2021 tells the tale of her cross-cultural and cross-generational adventure as, to her own surprise, she ended up representing her country at the final competition in Israel, a land that left her with a few surprises, including having a better understanding of her national and cultural identity.**

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**O**n my way home, the taxi driver told me about the football (soccer if you are American) game he had been watching. The team he was rooting for had lost. I, in turn, told him about the event I had just attended, explaining that after 43 years of absence, Miss Morocco was now back on the map of the Miss Universe competition.

When I shared with him the fact that I came in second place, he informed me, strangely enough,

that in case of an injury to the first place winner, I might be called upon to represent Morocco. I immediately dismissed the idea as I had no wish that such a thing might befall on Fatima Zahra, our newly crowned Miss Morocco. She carried the title beautifully, and we were all so proud of her. I arrived home and spent that evening telling my aunt and mother about the emotionally-charged experience the pageant had been for me. I felt the presence of my grandmother hovering above me the entire time.

Call it a premonition or fate. The taxi driver's words later became a reality, which meant I would be going to Israel to represent Morocco during the Miss Universe 2021 competition. Life's events are not as arbitrary as they seem, after all. Although Fatima Zahra's injury was unfortunate, I think it served to teach us different lessons. She kindly expressed her trust in my abilities, her benevolent candor reflecting her inner radiance. Today, she continues to personally and professionally blossom, and it has been a true pleasure witnessing that evolution from afar.

Not everyone was supportive. The political climate around Israel and Palestine has always been delicate, and the topic is still as sensitive as ever. When the location of the Miss Universe event was initially announced, people immediately began to express their discontent on social media. At the same time, the political relationship between Algeria and Morocco had also become a sensitive topic. My grandmother's Algerian roots created an additional issue for some people. As soon as I was announced as the newly crowned Miss Morocco, someone unearthed a video depicting me sharing my grandmother's life story meant to demonstrate the power of choice. This provoked a public debate

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about my legitimacy as an ambassador of Morocco.

I instantly became a name in the news, as some journalists evidently sought to exploit the story. Others working in the media described the phenomenon as a strategic maneuver designed to generate more “buzz”, in other words, a publicity stunt. In my own thoughts I continued to ponder the notion of identity.

### **Discovering familiarity in a foreign land**

Jerusalem is described as the city of peace, yet it contains the pain and passions of diverse peoples. We walked along its storied streets marked with the remnants of a diverse religious patrimony, a pattern of temples, churches, mounts, and mosques spread across its surface, mapping out something like a constellation. This route of sacred sites held more than nominal significance for me. As my ears rang to the greetings of “shalom” and “salam,” I wished for just that: peace.

With approximately 700,000 in Israel with Moroccan Jewish ancestry, I was frequently approached by individuals who proudly expressed their families’ Moroccan origins. They generously offered me tokens of appreciation, even my evening gown. They shared various types of food with me as well as smiles, hugs, songs, dances, and cheers. It produced the effect of a deeply rooted sense of amity. With a declining Moroccan Jewish population, these stories felt like echoes from a distant past. I had educated myself on this aspect of my country’s history, but the experience of being exposed to the number of people who came to me and made clear how widespread remembrance of the Moroccan Jewish past

remains. I found the fact that it is still celebrated eye-opening and, quite simply, wonderful.

One evening, Miss Universe 2020, Miss USA, Miss Israel, and I had the pleasure of dining together at the home of Eli Lankri, mayor of Eilat. His wife, whose joie de vivre was contagious, had prepared an array of familiar dishes—couscous and shebakiya among them. The melodies of an oud accompanied us as we spoke of the memories the hosts had formed during their childhood in Morocco.

Stories that came into being long before my existence were thus transmitted created an intergenerational as well as intercultural link. What had previously felt to me like random echoes of the past instead took the form of artfully composed symphonies. During my stay in Israel, I became fascinated by the land, by its capacity to juxtapose faiths, and the fact that the Dead Sea happens to be the lowest point on Earth. I contemplated that maybe, just maybe, this mix of the high and low has created a unique midpoint, one that celebrates difference, coexistence, and understanding.

Growing up, I attended an American school in the morning and returned home to speak Darija and French. I then extended my academic journey in France while pursuing an anglophone program. Exploration was my native language, and the cultural dichotomy I grew up in was where I felt most comfortable. The people I met during my stay, though they had not been to Morocco in years, considered themselves to be as Moroccan as any other Moroccan citizen. So, how does one measure Moroccanness?

I mean that, to me, being Moroccan means creating space for both yourself and the other. It means

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respecting your beliefs as much as any other individual's beliefs, demonstrating tolerance and coexistence. It means equally valuing two seemingly opposing thoughts, making the desire to understand the underlying force behind our eclectic relationships.

Being Moroccan means having freedom inculcated into our biological blueprint. Adorned with colorful intricacies, our tables, tapestries, ceilings, floors, and living rooms continue to celebrate our innate vibrance. The Moroccan man walks to the end of his sentences with hope and gratitude. The Moroccan woman wears courage on her sleeve as she gracefully embodies liberty. Morocco is where despair surrenders to faith and where cynicism is replaced by a wise smile or a warm piece of homemade bread. It is a place where empathy is the local currency, giving value to everything.

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**\*Kawtar Benhalima** was the Miss Universe Morocco 2021 runner-up. She is an avid philanthropist, artist, and entrepreneur who has co-created a jewelry line with her sister. Benhalima earned a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration from ESSEC Business School in Paris. She has been involved in the world of expression and celebration of identity since the age of seven. Benhalima has worked with various Moroccan associations doing educational and charitable work. Today, she works with a French marketing agency and looks forward to pursuing a graduate degree in communication.

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## Is the Reckless Swiss National Bank Endangering Its Independence?

Alex Gloy

December 11, 2022

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**To combat the persistent strength of its currency, the Swiss National Bank (SNB) expanded its balance sheet to more than \$1.1 trillion (CHF 1.05 trillion; 1 US dollar = 0.94 CHF), earning the nickname “the world’s largest hedge fund.” Its attempt to influence exchange rates failed, and initial gains on its foreign investments have turned into massive losses, leaving the SNB’s credibility and reputation badly damaged.**

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**O**n October 11, Thomas Jordan, Chairman of the Governing Board of the SNB, gave a speech in Washington DC titled “Current Challenges to Central Bank Independence”. Three weeks later, the SNB released its third quarter results, revealing a record loss of \$151 billion (CHF 142.4 billion). This is a staggering amount. To put this loss in context, the Swiss gross domestic product (GDP) is \$813 billion (CHF 765 billion). Simply put, the SNB had squandered 18.57% of the GDP in a policy at odds with the Swiss reputation for prudence.

### **How to lose 1/6th of GDP**

The loss is almost entirely due to foreign investments. Around half of the losses of \$74 billion (CHF 70 billion) came from fixed income

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securities. As global bond prices fell, so did the value of these securities. Another \$57 billion (CHF 54 billion) came from losses in equities, among them many US technology stocks. The loss wiped out almost three quarters of the bank's equity. How did we get here?

In March 2009, the SNB began to purchase euros to stop the rise of the Swiss franc. The mission failed, as the euro continued to fall against the Swiss franc (from 1.46 to 1.26). Within two years, investments in foreign currency mushroomed from \$50 billion (CHF 47 billion) to \$216 billion (CHF 204 billion) by the end of 2010. That year, the SNB lost \$27 billion (CHF 26 billion) on foreign investments. Early that year, newspapers such as *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* warned of “concentrated risks” and “harsh losses” due to outsized positions in foreign currency.

### **Doubling down**

On September 6, 2011, the SNB announced that it would “set minimum exchange rate at CHF 1.20 per euro” as “the current massive overvaluation of the Swiss franc poses an acute threat to the Swiss economy and carries the risk of a deflationary development”. It announced, “With immediate effect, it will no longer tolerate a EUR/CHF exchange rate below the minimum rate of CHF 1.20. The SNB will enforce this minimum rate with the utmost determination and is prepared to buy foreign currency in unlimited quantities”.

Foreign exchange markets are characterized by enormous trading volumes. An average of \$7.5 trillion are traded per day. This number is ten times larger than the annual Swiss GDP. Central banks have attempted many times to influence exchange rates. Most attempts have failed. To be fair, some

succeeded such as the 1985 Plaza Accord to weaken the dollar and the 1987 Louvre Accord to stop its decline. Note that successful attempts always involved multiple central banks.

Unfortunately, the SNB took its decision unilaterally, without help from the European Central Bank (ECB). The ECB released a statement it had “taken note of this decision, which has been taken by the Swiss National Bank under its responsibility”. This is central banker speak for “good luck – you are on your own”.

The Swiss franc's share of world currency reserves is less than 3%. It was pure hubris to think the SNB could manipulate the exchange rate of the Swiss franc given how much larger the euro (20%) and US dollar (60%) happen to be.

### **Did SNB contribute to negative German yields?**

For the SNB, a dilemma presented itself: what to do with all the euros purchased? Remember, this was in the middle of the euro crisis. Greek government bonds were yielding over 20% but they were risky. Losing money on such bonds would have looked terrible. Therefore, German government bonds were the go-to solution. This helped drive German government bond yields even lower, increasing the spread to “peripheral” sovereign issuers — the so-called PIIGS; Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain.

Understandably, the ECB was not particularly happy about Swiss purchases of German government bonds. And it led to another problem: acquiring German government bonds at negative yields would effectively be a transfer of wealth from the Swiss to the German taxpayer.

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This forced the SNB to venture into other currencies still offering positive yields, like the US dollar, and, by extension, US stocks. At the end of 2021, its holdings exceeded \$11 billion in Apple, \$9 billion in Microsoft, \$5 billion in Amazon and \$3 billion each in Tesla, Alphabet A (formerly Google), Alphabet B and Meta (formerly Facebook). In total, the SNB owned 2,719 different US stocks worth \$166 billion, a sum of \$19,000 per Swiss inhabitant. Among earlier holdings were also 1.8 million shares of Valeant, a healthcare company that turned out to be an accounting fraud, which subsequently saw its stock price fall from over \$260 to below \$10.

### **Should a central bank invest in foreign assets?**

A central bank generates seigniorage gains by pushing zero-yielding currency into circulation while investing the proceeds in assets, usually bonds, carrying a positive return. If your counterparty is domestic, the transfer of assets stays “within the country.” Some income is being transferred from those domestic counterparts to the central bank. The central bank makes a profit, pays salaries, and transfers the rest to the government. It's a kind of tax.

But if you do the same with non-domestic counterparties you are “taxing” other countries' citizens. US shares purchased by the SNB are not available to other investors or, if they are, then only at a higher price. Perhaps the SNB even contributed to the bubble in technology stocks. Because the SNB was forced to invest its euros and dollars it became what is called a price-insensitive buyer. It had to buy something with the money printed. Price-insensitive participants distort market prices. When an individual distorts

markets, he will go to jail. Central bankers face no such consequences.

Negative effects on large-scale purchases of foreign currency are not limited to the asset side of the balance sheet. For every euro, dollar or yen purchased, the SNB sold a corresponding amount of Swiss franc, thereby increasing the amount in circulation dramatically. Such a move, if left unsterilized, can provide the kindling for inflation driven by monetary expansion.

### **SNB meets Waterloo, causing chaos in markets and billions of losses**

Despite massive interventions the SNB was unable to prevent the Swiss franc from strengthening against the euro. By the end of 2014, its foreign currency investments had mushroomed to \$540 billion (510 billion CHF), or 76% of GDP. On January 15, 2015, the SNB had to give up its 1.20 CHF/EUR exchange rate barrier it had vowed to defend with “utmost determination”.

The announcement occurred during European trading hours (10:30am CET) on a Thursday. The Swiss currency briefly shot up by a staggering 40% against the euro. Postfinance (Swiss postal bank) had to suspend foreign currency trading for its customers. Swiss stocks fell the most in 25 years. Shares of Julius Baer lost 23% on rumors of currency losses. FXCM, the largest US retail FX broker, needed a \$300 million cash infusion after customers were unable to repay losses incurred. Citigroup, Deutsche Bank and Barclays lost a combined \$400 million. Everest Capital, a hedge fund, lost virtually all its \$830 million as it had bet on the Swiss franc to weaken. Homeowners in Austria, Poland and Hungary were thrown into financial trouble as they had taken out mortgages

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in Swiss francs to benefit from low interest rates. Swiss franc-denominated loans accounted for 15% to 35% of total mortgages in those countries.

### **Could not wait for the weekend**

Market-moving decisions are usually released on weekends, when all financial markets are closed, allowing investors enough time to analyze the news. Publishing a dramatic decision in the middle of a trading day is highly unusual and unprofessional. What could have convinced the SNB to do so, nevertheless? The weekend was only one day away. Why couldn't the release wait, given the mayhem it was bound to cause?

The most likely explanation is that the imminent publication had leaked. Swiss franc futures contracts traded in Chicago show a suspicious burst of activity 39 minutes before the announcement. On the following Monday, Christine Lagarde, then the managing director of the International Monetary Fund, mentioned that "very few people were informed of the move ahead of time. My understanding is that very, very, very few people were informed ahead of anything." It seems that some of those people used inside information for personal gain. Once a leak occurred, rumors would have started flying, and the SNB would have been asked to comment. This would have forced their hand to immediately release the fateful statement.

"Poor advertisement for Swiss reliability" titled a story in The Financial Times. The entire episode does not shine a good light on the SNB. In addition, no lessons seem to have been learned, as the balance sheet continued to grow after this debacle. At the end of 2021, the SNB's balance sheet exceeded \$1.1 trillion (CHF 1.05 trillion),

equal to 144% of GDP. Foreign currency investments of around 130% of GDP, and 30% in foreign stocks, can hardly be described as prudent. In terms of balance sheet size relative to GDP the SNB exceeds the Bank of Japan (129%), the European Central Bank (67%), the US Federal Reserve (34%) and the People's Bank of China (32%). A large balance sheet relative to the GDP limits potential future moves in case of economic or monetary turmoil. It also amplifies losses. The SNB's mandate is to "act in accordance with the interests of the country as a whole. Its primary goal is to ensure price stability." Engaging in failed currency and balance sheet adventures on a massive scale seems contradictory to its mandate. The supervisory board of the SNB should put an end to this casino mentality, or risk losing the independence of the Swiss central bank.

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# Tawang Is the India-China Battleground for Tibetan Buddhism

Atul Singh, Manu Sharma  
December 16, 2022

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**Tibetans prefer democracy to autocracy, Buddhism to communism and the Dalai Lama to Emperor Xi. That is why China seeks to take over Tawang, home to Asia's oldest monastery and a place where, as per the Tibetan tradition, the next Dalai Lama could be reborn.**

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Indian and Chinese troops have clashed again. CNN-News18 reported that 300 Chinese soldiers crossed over into Indian territory at 3.00 am on December 9. Within minutes, 100-150 Indian troops rushed over and repelled them. Thanks to an agreement not to use firearms, the fighting involved clubs, sticks and machetes. Six Indians were grievously injured. The numbers are much higher for the Chinese. Unlike the clash in June 2020, no one has died. Like the 2020 clash, Indian troops have given Chinese soldiers a beating.

Chinese newspaper Global Times claims that rising Indian nationalism and closer US-India cooperation are responsible for border tensions. A joint US-India military exercise in the border state of Uttarakhand has ruffled Chinese feathers. So has the building of roads and strengthening of Indian positions in border areas. Furthermore, Beijing sees New Delhi increasingly aligning with Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. It views the

Quad, comprising India, Japan, Australia and the US, as an anti-China alliance.

Retired CIA officer Glenn Carle, one of Fair Observer's regular authors and commentators, takes the view that Chinese transgressions are a part of a long term policy. Beijing pushes on all international issues where they have differences until they meet opposition. On Deutsche Welle, an Indian professor opined that Chinese transgression aims to keep India distracted and gain leverage in negotiations. Like many, he thinks that Beijing is signaling to New Delhi that Washington is far away. India should make peace with its more powerful northern neighbor, which is the top dog in Asia.

All these explanations are true but there is something more going on.

## Chinese Communism v Tibetan Buddhism

It is important to note that the Chinese carried out this operation in the wee hours of a chilly winter morning at high altitude. This required detailed planning and effective execution, and was clearly not an accidental cross-border patrol, as some analysts have speculated. The aim was to occupy strategic heights near Tawang, one of the most sacred places in Tibetan Buddhism in India's northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Nestled between China-occupied Tibet and Bhutan, Tawang is a district of about 2000 square kilometers (800 square miles) that is also home to the oldest and second biggest monastery in Asia. Tawang is one of the very few areas where there are thousands of Tibetan families in their traditional homeland outside China. The Sixth



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Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, was born in this area in March 1683.

The current Dalai Lama is now 87 and the question of succession looms. Already, the Tibetans and the CCP are clashing over this question. Note though that no Dalai Lama has emerged outside the traditional Tibetan homeland. Tawang is the only important center of this homeland outside Chinese control. For many Tibetans, it is desirable that this tradition continues. As many lamas have mentioned to the authors, the next Dalai Lama could well emerge from the Tawang area. Beijing wants to avoid such a possibility. Control over Tawang would help. Hence, China claims this area along with other bits of Arunachal Pradesh as a part of South Tibet.

In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) finally triumphed in its civil war and took over Mainland China. Within a year, the CCP sent the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. This imperial army of occupation posed as an army of liberation and has still not left.

In the early days, Beijing sought to avoid Tibetan unrest. Therefore, China signed a Seventeen Point Agreement with Tibet. It promised not to "alter the existing political system in Tibet" and "the established status, functions and powers of the Dalai Lama." China did not make these promises in good faith. Under Chairman Mao Zedong, the CCP began shaping a deeply spiritual and Buddhist Tibet into its vision of an atheistic communist utopia. For most Tibetans, this utopia was a nightmare. In 1959, they rose up in revolt. The PLA brutally crushed the revolt and the Dalai Lama fled to India.

Just as the Pope is the spiritual leader of the Catholics, the Dalai Lama is a similar figure for the Tibetans. His presence in India angers China and, as long as the Dalai Lama lives, he remains a focal point of Tibetan resistance to Chinese colonization. Once the Dalai Lama dies, Beijing aims to pick his successor. Control over the historic Tawang monastery would snuff out a key center of future resistance.

China has been following this playbook for a while. In 1995, Beijing rejected the Panchen Lama chosen by the Dalai Lama. Instead, the CCP appointed a Manchurian candidate in his place. Today, a puppet Panchen Lama signs from Beijing's hymn sheet, warning Tibetans to stay away from separatist forces. This Beijing-appointed leader argues that Tibetan Buddhism must adapt to "socialism and Chinese conditions." No wonder, the CCP's wet dream is to install a puppet Dalai Lama who pledges fealty to Beijing.

### **Why Tawang Matters**

Many Chinese nationalists regret the loss of Tawang. This area could very well have been a part of China. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister was wedded to the idea of India-China unity. He wanted the two Asian giants to stand up to Western imperialism. Against the wishes of his statesmanly home minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Nehru acquiesced to the 1950 Chinese takeover of Tibet.

As explained in a magnum opus on Fair Observer about India-China tensions, Nehru later realized that he had been duped by Mao. He kicked off the so-called "forward policy" as per which Indian troops took positions in territory that both India and China claimed as their own. In 1962, the PLA

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dealt India a devastating defeat. Chinese troops took over Tawang and advanced as far south as Bomdila. Although they later withdrew, India lost valuable territory and invaluable prestige.

The fact that Tawang was in Indian hands is a historical accident. Nehru was a socialist and so were his top officials. They valued an anti-Western alliance with China. Major Ralengnao “Bob” Khathing did not have such Nehruvian delusions. He took matters in his own hands and marched to Tawang with merely two platoons. In 1951, this area, formerly under the control of the independent Tibetan government, was now in Indian hands. Except for a brief interlude in 1962, it has remained Indian territory since. The Chinese still lay claim to Tawang though.

The recent Chinese operation would have captured heights from where both the town and monastery in Tawang are clearly visible. They would have secured area domination and made a future move to capture Tawang easier. Artillery from the captured heights could have pummeled the monastery and the town. Also, once snow would have set in and weather turned inclement, Chinese troops would have dug into their new positions. Indian generals would have found it hard to move large numbers of troops to recapture these positions.

Note that the Chinese have tried to capture these heights before. They attempted in 2016 and, more recently, in October 2021. The Chinese have settled veterans in xiaokang (well-off) border defense villages. One such village is in the vicinity of the point of the latest clash. Intelligence officials tell officials that 600-700 such xiaokang encampments now exist along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto India-China border.

They form part of the aggressive defense policy that President Xi Jinping has unleashed on nearly all of China’s neighbors.

If the PLA got hold of Tawang, the CCP would control a historic Tibetan monastery. Its choice of the Dalai Lama would be rubber stamped by this venerable institution.

### **Buddhist Dalai Lama v Communist Emperor Xi**

Tibet is run per Mao’s dictum: “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” Neighboring Arunachal Pradesh, which the CCP claims as South Tibet, is a rambunctious multiparty democracy. The state’s chief minister won 41 out of 60 seats in the 2019 elections. On December 16, he blamed Nehru for appeasing China and thanked Patel for taking over Tawang. Such a statement about recent history is impossible across the border. Unsurprisingly, Arunachal Pradesh has emerged as an imperfect but viable democratic model for China-occupied Tibet. This makes the CCP nervous.

This nervousness has worsened because of recent protests. Only in October, the 20th Central Committee of the CCP crowned Xi as de facto emperor. Despite his disastrous zero-COVID policy, Xi’s vice-like grip on power looked more secure than ever. The last few weeks have turned out to be a rather long time in Chinese politics. Xi’s zero-COVID policy has fallen apart and he has quietly made a U-turn. As per Nature, scientists worry Xi’s abrupt reversal could lead to a rise in infections and overwhelm hospitals.

Winter is peak influenza season. Also, many people will be traveling across China for the Lunar

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New Year and spring festival, further increasing viral spread. Now that Xi is omnipotent, all blame would fall on him. The CCP is anxious that protests could even spread to Tibet, making the party and Xi lose face.

The CCP is also worried about recent developments in India. Earlier this year, the Indian prime minister called the Dalai Lama to wish him a happy birthday. Chinese irritation further increased when New Delhi released photos of the Dalai Lama visiting “a remote Himalayan village in the disputed border region of eastern Ladakh.” The fact that he had been flown there by a military helicopter particularly aggravated Beijing.

The Chinese have not forgotten that the previous Dalai Lama fled to Darjeeling when Qing troops marched into Lhasa. The 1911 revolution gave the 13th Dalai Lama the opportunity to return from exile, and expel Chinese troops and officials from Lhasa in 1912. He declared complete self-rule and Tibet achieved de facto independence that lasted nearly four decades. The CCP is terrified of Tibetans achieving independence again. As long as the Dalai Lama lives in India, they fear that what happened in 1912 could recur.

For the CCP, Tibet is a tributary of China and the Dalai Lama should kowtow to Emperor Xi. For Indians, Tibet is home to Kailash and Mansarovar, the abode of Lord Shiva. They respect Tibetans for preserving Buddhism and many of India’s most revered tantric traditions. For Tibetans themselves, India is the land of the Buddha and now home to the Dalai Lama. They prefer democracy to autocracy, Buddhism to communism and the Dalai Lama to Emperor Xi.

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## Two Remarkable Things About Jesus (From a Jew)

Sarah Stein Lubrano  
December 25, 2022

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**Jesus was no fan of money and suggested a transcendence of the family. He emphasized action over belief. His views are remarkable in a world where too little good is actively done by believers and non-believers alike.**

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[This text is lightly adapted from a short talk given at St. Ethelburgas's Church in London on December 15 for *Perspectiva*. It was a response to a request for a non-Christian reflection on Christmastime.

*Perspectiva* is a community of expert generalists working on an urgent 100-year project to improve the relationships between systems, souls and society in theory and practice.]

This piece is about two things I find remarkable about Jesus, as a Jew - plus one thing I find less remarkable.

If you are a Christian and offended, I am sorry. But remember (I sometimes want to say to believing, and semi believing, and even non-believing Christians!) that I live in your world, and not the other way around. I have sung in Christian choirs and listened to Christian sermons and sworn in on Christian bibles and been graduated from every institution I have ever attended with Christian prayer. Your religion is inscribed in the laws of the

state. Your days off are not my days off, but I have lived by your days in every job I have ever had.

I say this all both seriously and lightly. (This is the gentle humor with which I and other Jews in America speak of going to eat Chinese food on Christmas eve. This is the nod between the worker at the Chinese or Indian restaurant and the Jew on the same night.)

It is not just my life but my mind that has adapted to fit the Christian world. Just to get around in this Christian and post-Christian world (one in which half of my relatives are also Christians, Catholics specifically) I have read many, many books about Christianity, and I find I have come to understand the religion's theological details — not all of it of course, but some. The reverse is sadly rarely true. I understand, for example, that it is really Easter that should be the most holy and most celebrated day, but I forgive the focus on Christmas because winter is miserable and pine trees and extra lights and sugar at the darkest time of year are nice for everyone. Plus, I will never turn down an excuse for marzipan.

Despite my interest in their religion, even the nice Christians I know tend to by necessity see my religion as the proto-, undeveloped version of theirs. This is historical, institutional, unavoidable maybe. When I sang in the King's College Chapel in Cambridge, the windows of the building were designed to show that the most sacred texts of my religion were merely a predecessor for the true, developed view, the Christian faith.

This cannot help but sting deeply and bitterly, and seem preposterous to me, at the same time. For meanwhile Judaism of course carries on, ever complexifying and deepening over the last 2,000

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years, like the living breathing surviving thinking moving human civilization that it is. To imagine Judaism as merely a predecessor is not just hurtful, but it is to neglect the insights (available even to those of other faiths) of the Talmudic, hypertextual discussion across time about the nature of the good life and the reverence and awe owed to the world.

In recent years, we have wrung our hands about decolonizing statues and syllabi; I wonder what it would be like to decolonize this, the Christian faith itself, so it might sit with greater humility (a Christian virtue!) in its place among the ‘family of man’.

That is the first, most sad and bitter part of what I have to say. (Try to see it my way - in my religion, we think forgiveness is nice, but not the chief virtue. The chief virtue, arguably, is justice!)

### **Now to my second point.**

Jews think that Jesus’s birth, in particular, is the least remarkable thing about him. (But again, marzipan is wonderful.) Jews think Jesus’s birth is unremarkable, but there are two things that I find remarkable about Jesus and one thing that I do not, but wish more Christians did.

#### **1. Jesus is no fan of money**

Jesus is remarkable to me because his gospel is generally too radical for his followers. Very few Christians I meet are interested in giving up their earthly possessions to serve the poor (though I am always delighted when I meet one who is). Yet Jesus says, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”

Jesus repeatedly tells his followers that money will not save them, that it will in fact imperil their souls. It has always been rather facile and ahistorical to suggest that Jesus is straightforwardly a “socialist”, but Jesus rejects, more or less entirely, even the wise getting and spending of money as a central aspect of virtue. This is remarkable given its contrast with, for example, what Aristotle termed the “executive virtue” of knowing how to make and give money well, what Jews emphasize in household ethics, and of course what our current society values today.

To show you what I see here, as an outsider to Christianity: I see Jesus as a virtuous Jew in ancient Palestine, which means I understand him to be a member of a householder religion. Judaism was then, and is as yet still, from a sociological perspective, a householder religion - we tend to base our idea of the good life on the premise that you should keep a household, including at least some material goods, that basically you should marry and have children if you can, and that the good life and the ethical life is played out in these grounded familial responsibilities. Jesus diverges from this - and I think this is profound.

It is profound in part because of another thing about Jesus’s beliefs which also diverge from householder religions — my second point:

#### **2. Jesus suggests a transcendence, an abolition even, of the family**

Jesus repeatedly reminds us that in heaven there is no marriage. He tells his followers that they should be prepared even to “hate” and “forsake” their biological families to follow him, and asserts that it is those in his circle who are his true “mothers

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and brothers”. It is from statements like these that Paul derives the assertion that we are all related through Christ as much as through blood, that the most important union for humans to be concerned with is that of the body of Christ as a whole. While it would be cheeky to suggest that Jesus is straightforwardly “socialist”, it is not entirely preposterous to suggest that Jesus himself, and even many of the Christians who followed him, are somewhat interested in that most radical and least loved idea in left-wing political theory, the abolition of the family.

Should you be appalled by the mere phrase abolishing the family, the term abolish, when used in political theory (my field) means to transcend something by making it no longer needed, while at the same time incorporating what is good about the previous form into the new era. (The Hegelian word famously is *Aufhebung*).

Let me be clear — I say this with admiration. I think this remarkable view of Jesus’ is an improvement (not unconditionally, but in many ways) on the ethos of the family-oriented householder religion. I even dare to say I think it is the way of the future: both the movement away from money and the abolition, the transcendence, of the family unit. I admire this. I hope that one day we will accomplish this together, across faiths.

The powerful kernel in the story of a bastard child born in a barn, raised by an adoptive father, soon to be on the run from the cops, is, at least in part, that Jesus’s expression and conception of what family is and should be is so much wider than our conventional idea, and indeed transcends the concept of “the family” itself. There is something bigger and better to build together.

### **3. Finally, the unremarkable thing: Jesus emphasizes action**

One thing though that is not remarkable to me, as a Jew, about Jesus’s life and thought, is that Jesus is mostly concerned with what you do, and not what you believe, at least in a great many of his sermons.

I follow a small group of radical Mennonites on Facebook - they are called the Marginal Mennonite society, I recommend their page! - and recently they posted this quote, which I think puts things nicely:

I am aware that Jesus does talk about faith and belief and heaven (faith and heaven are in contrast things the Jews I grew up with rarely spoke of, or even believed in). But his emphasis on action is simultaneously remarkable for its difference to the way institutions have since focused their energy and their persecution of others, and simultaneously unremarkable to me, in that action remains the focus of Judaism 2,000 years later. For Jews, as I have experienced Judaism anyway, morality is generally its own reward, at most further rewarded by the experience of the divine in that moral act. That Jesus expresses an emphasis on doing is unremarkable to me, but perhaps it should be more remarked on generally, in a world where too little good is actively done by believers and non-believers alike.

There you have it in a very brief form: this is what these particular starry nights look like to me. Let us have a very merry Christmas and go do the sorts of radical and remarkable things of which Jesus would approve.

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## India's IAS Officers Are Now Rapacious Thieves

Vikram Zutshi  
December 25, 2022

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**In recent years, India's economy has been remarkably dynamic and the country is emerging as a global power. Unfortunately, a corrupt and inefficient colonial-era bureaucracy could put a brake on India's breakthrough.**

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**A** 2012 report by Hong Kong based "Political and Economic Risk Consultancy" classified India's bureaucracy as "the worst in Asia with a 9.21 rating out of 10." Vietnam scored 8.54, Indonesia 8.37, The Philippines 7.57 and China 7.11. On August 31, 2016, John Kerry, the then US secretary of state, told a group of students at the

Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi that, "India's economy will only be able to maintain its impressive growth if its bureaucracy ceases to be an expert in setting up roadblocks."

For those who chafe at outsiders meddling in India's internal affairs, Indian leaders from vastly different political backgrounds have echoed similar concerns. Decades ago, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, regretted his inability to reform the bureaucracy. In 1964, he admitted: "I could not change the administration, it is still a colonial administration."

In a speech on February 1, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Hindu nationalist BJP, referred to Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers as "babus" that some deem an offensive colloquialism. Continuing in Hindi, he said "Babus will do everything. By dint of becoming IAS officers, they'll operate fertilizer warehouses and also chemical warehouses, even fly airplanes. What is this big power we have created? What are we going to achieve by handing the reins of the nation to babus? Our babus are also citizens, and so are the youth of India."

It is common knowledge that Indian bureaucrats are rewarded for bending the rules for their political masters. On the other hand, if they refuse to carry out the will of their masters, their careers shrivel. Furthermore, favorites of one party are often punished when another party comes to power. This brings up a crucial point: is it even possible for IAS officers to be impartial and politically neutral?



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## A well-documented problem

It is an open secret that the IAS fails to deliver. Even under Modi, IAS officers hold the commanding heights of the Indian state. The revenue secretary of India is an IAS officer, not an officer of the Indian Revenue Service (IRS). The home secretary of India is an IAS officer, not an officer of the Indian Police Service (IPS). The secretary of school education and literacy is an IAS officer, not an educator.

Institutions like the Central Board of Secondary Education, the Archeological Survey of India and the National Archives of India are all headed by IAS officers. State-owned enterprises are run by IAS officers as well and so are cooperatives. Amul is a rare exception where professional management runs one of the world's most successful cooperatives. In neighboring Rajasthan, IAS officers still run Saras Dairy, which has failed to achieve success like Amul.

Former bureaucrats themselves have written many books on the failure of the IAS to deliver for the Indian taxpayer. Naresh Saxena published *What Ails the IAS and Why it Fails to Deliver: An Insider's View*, V. Balasubramaniam authored *Fall From Grace: Memoir of a Rebel IAS Officer*, and Deepak Gupta has written *The Steel Frame: A History of the IAS*. These books recount the extraordinary tale of how employees of a trading company in a foreign land — the famed East India Company — evolved into the most powerful civil service in the world.

Then the IAS was known as the Indian Civil Service (ICS). This ICS formed the backbone of the sprawling British Raj. It came to be known as the “steel frame” of the country. The ICS morphed

into the IAS after independence. Nehru's socialism gave them even greater powers than before independence. Now, the IAS ran the license-permit-quota raj that throttled the Indian economy for decades before reforms in 1991 unleashed higher growth.

The control of the IAS over the economy might have decreased but it is still extraordinarily powerful. Unlike politicians, IAS officers cannot be voted out. Since they control all top positions, they are not accountable to anyone. The adage that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely is exemplified best by the IAS.

Saxena notes that “state resources are the most valued prize for both politicians and their constituencies, which leads to a client–patron relationship between the holders of state power and those seeking favors.” He goes on to observe: “Patronage is controlled by individuals, not established institutions bound to follow set procedures. Where power is highly personalized and weakly institutionalized, the decision-making process is replaced by arbitrary and behind-the-scenes transactions. In such an environment, exercise of power for its clients demands fudging of rules, dependence upon corrupt civil servants, plundering of the public treasury and decay of governance. When the fence starts eating the field, there is little chance of development reaching the poor.”

Corruption is the elephant in the room that few people are willing to point out. The IAS is the most organized mafia in India. Taking it on can mean the end of a career or the bankruptcy of a business. Yet things have come to such a pass that India's law-enforcement agencies are finally taking on a few IAS officers. The Enforcement

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Directorate found Pooja Singhal, an IAS officer, with over \$3 million in cash (250 million or 25 crore rupees) and nearly \$10 million worth of property (827 million or 82.7 crore rupees). She is accused of stealing money from a scheme meant for the poorest of the poor. Singhal's husband was using this money to start an upscale private hospital.

Singhal joins a long list of tainted civil servants including Nitesh Thakur, Babulal Agarwal, Rakesh Bahadur and Neera Yadav. Thakur fled to Dubai after amassing over \$33 million but Agarwal, Bahadur and Yadav were reinstated as IAS officers despite being convicted of graft under the earlier dispensation.

### **A truly egregious example**

The mother of all scams is probably the New Okhla Industrial Development Authority (NOIDA) land acquisition and allotment scam. NOIDA is a satellite city of New Delhi, with an estimated population of 738,343 in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). NOIDA is a part of the National Capital Region (NCR) of India. A performance audit report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), India's supreme audit institution, tabled in December 2021, found financial irregularities to the tune of \$6.6 billion (550 billion or 55,000 crore rupees). It turns out that senior politicians and IAS officers stole massively from the taxpayer while developing the town and allocating properties. While the UP government has suspended minor officials, not one IAS officer has been prosecuted.

The audit covered the period from 2005-06 to 2017-18. Four chief ministers — Mulayam Singh Yadav (2005-2007), Mayawati (2007-2012),

Akhilesh Yadav (2012-2017) and Yogi Adityanath (2017-2018) — held power during this period. This clearly demonstrates that the real estate cabal could operate with impunity regardless of the party or leader in power. To be fair, Yogi Adityanath, the current Bharatiya Janata Party BJP chief minister, gave the green light to the audit and tabled it in front of the state assembly.

The CAG report highlighted corruption on an unprecedented scale. Favoritism to a handful of private firms, a blatantly rigged bidding process and massive collusion between builders and IAS officers in the allotment and pricing of plots led to fortunes in the billions. This report authored by one of India's most honest officers observed: "Absence of any internal audit led to unchecked violation of rules/orders and procedures as brought out in this Report. All of these translated into failure to achieve the objectives of NOIDA, distress for end-use stakeholders like home buyers who invested their life savings in schemes of NOIDA and losses to NOIDA and the Government involving thousands of crores of rupees."

The IAS officers in Lucknow managed to block any further scrutiny. The BJP is in power in both New Delhi and Lucknow. A senior officer told this author that the political leadership must order an investigation by a special investigation team that comprises senior officials from the CAG, the income tax department and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). This team must investigate, press charges and secure prison sentences in court. For such a colossal robbery of the taxpayer, some IAS officers must go to jail.

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## High time for reforms

“Corruption is like a pandemic, more dreaded than the coronavirus,” says journalist Ashwini Shrivastava, the author of *Decoding Indian Babudom*. This is a first-of-its-kind book, covering the ailments of India’s administrative system from a common man's point of view. “I have explained in detail about the ill-effects and probable causes of graft in my book through a chapter titled ‘Yeh dil maange more [the heart wants more] ... Corruption — need, greed or accepted norm?’”

Shrivastava joins a chorus of voices calling for the complete digitization of government works. They claim that this, along with swift punishment for repeat offenders, would be the real game-changer in the fight against corruption. Shrivastava says, “Governance is still largely inaccessible for people living below the poverty line or those in rural areas of the country.” He goes on to add: “The common man faces the menace of corruption in places of public dealing like [road transport officers] RTOs, property registry offices and civic authorities, among others. There would be zero scope for corruption if public work is done online and people are not required to visit government offices for their work. When I say digitization, I mean complete digitization and not ‘Indianisation of digitization’, something I tried to explain in my book.”

Shrivastava’s book is subtitled ‘15 Sutras For Effective Governance’, some of which the government is currently implementing. They include programs like Clean India mission (that is aimed at cleaning of office spaces, etc.), E-Office (digitization), Mission Karma Yogi for capacity building of government employees, the Common Eligibility Test (an online recruitment mode for

government jobs) and, above all, lateral recruitment (appointment of private sector specialists in government departments).

Replacing generalists, who may not possess the necessary domain knowledge to oversee major policy transitions at higher levels, with specialists has the potential to greatly reduce the scope for graft. Similarly, streamlining procedures and ensuring speedier implementation would help. This is exactly what Modi was referring to in his speech in parliament that this article referred to earlier.

Why should IAS officers run school boards and education departments when they have no idea or interest in the field? Note that they send their own children to private schools and, almost invariably, universities abroad. There is a running joke that even honest IAS officers are willing to sell out their country if the CIA can get members of their lucky sperm club admitted to Harvard. Similarly, why should an IAS officer who cannot stand the smell of cows and buffaloes run Saras Dairy? One could go on but the point is simple: somebody with domain expertise should run the department, not an IAS officer who bounces around as the big boss with no knowledge of the department she or he is running.

The Modi government has inaugurated the lateral entry program. This is a good start. Amber Dubey in civil aviation, Arun Goel in commerce, Rajeev Saksena in economic affairs, Sujit Kumar Bajpayee in environment, forest and climate change, Saurabh Mishra in financial services and Dinesh Dayanand Jagdale in new and renewable energy are welcome additions but much more needs to be done. Separate examinations for separate services, instead of a combined rote-based

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civil services examination, would be in the national interest.

Currently IAS officers enjoy an edge in comparison to those from the other services who come through the same exam. As pointed out earlier, the revenue secretary is an IAS, not an IRS officer. The IAS delays “empanelment” for other services, locks up all plum positions in government and occupies key positions in the prime minister’s office as well as the chief minister’s offices. Powerful IAS officers are far more important in India than even cabinet ministers. The simple solution to make the IAS less corrupt is to make it less powerful. That would redeem Nehru’s biggest regret and become Modi’s most historic legacy.

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\***Vikram Zutshi** is a cultural critic, author and filmmaker who divides his time between the US, Latin America and Asia. For a decade, Vikram worked in indie film and network television, as a consultant to tech start-ups, as a real estate developer, and in media sales and acquisitions. Then, he produced feature films before transitioning into directing. His documentary, *Max Kennedy and the American Dream*, premiered at international film festivals to rave reviews, and is currently streaming on Apple TV and Amazon Prime.

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## Dear Mr. Netanyahu, Do You Want Power at Any Cost?

Emma Davies

December 29, 2022

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**Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu is back as Israeli prime minister yet again. Politics makes strange bedfellows and he has some unsavory characters in his government. This bodes ill for Israel, Palestine and the region.**

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**D**ear Mr Netanyahu, As a secular Jew and an ambivalent Zionist, it is distressing to think about what is happening in Israel today and its links to our history. To write publicly about it feels difficult. But if most of the Jewish diaspora remain silent, there is even less chance that Israel can change course. So here goes.

While you were forming your new government in Israel, Judge Gross in Germany was completing “one of the last worldwide criminal trials related to crimes of the Nazi era.” Survivors of Stutthof Concentration Camp courageously shared their harrowing experiences of brutality. Irmgard Furchner, a 97-year-old secretary to the Commandant, was found guilty of complicity in 10,500 murders. She administered orders for mass murder from her desk with a view from her window onto the death camp. She was 19 years old. According to her lawyer, while she didn’t deny that these crimes took place at Stutthof, she took no responsibility for them herself.

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I have never heard anyone who helped with mass murder in the gas chambers talk about their experiences. Perhaps it is too hard to overcome their shame. Perhaps they came to believe that those murdered were merely collateral damage in their pursuit of the Aryan dream. Their masses of victims were not human. They were other than themselves.

Most historians agree that the humiliation and economic recession caused by reparations after World War I laid the foundations for the election of the Nazi Party. German people willingly absorbed the false pride and saving face of ultranationalism, fuelled by propaganda spewing hatred and scapegoating of Jews.

Today, the rise of the far-right in America and Europe is frightening. Marine Le Pen secured 41% of the vote in France's presidential run-off. The Brothers of Italy, with roots back to Mussolini, won the last election. Just two years ago, 74 million people voted for Donald Trump's brand of hatred. Even Sweden has elected a hard-right populist government. Ultranationalist and culturally intolerant parties are winning people's votes.

Scapegoats are useful, particularly when economic times get tough. It is much easier to fear, hate and murder the other - those we choose to not know or understand. To protect ourselves and our group, people in other groups can even appear subhuman. You are with us, or you are against us. It is that potent combination of fear, with the security and power of believing that our group is righteous. But these toxic behaviors are not inevitable, they are choices people make.

For your part, you have chosen the convicted racist, Itamar Ben-Gvir, to be a Coalition partner to govern Israel. As leader of the Jewish Power party, he is a charismatic propagator of the false pride of Israel's version of ultranationalism. He is a disciple of Meir Kahane who used to advocate for the expulsion of Palestinians from Israel and was outlawed as a terrorist in the USA and Israel alike. At the recent memorial to Kahane's death, Ben-Gvir praised his mentor: "I think Rabbi Kahane's main characteristic was love," he said. "Love of Israel without compromises or any other considerations." Ben-Gvir appears prepared to sacrifice Israeli Arabs and the potential for peace in pursuit of his Zionist dream.

Under your watch, Ben-Gvir will be Israel's national security minister with increased power over the police, despite being banned from the military for his extremist views. Bezalel Smotrich, leader of the far-right Religious Zionism party, will have control over settlements in the occupied West Bank. He has previously argued for a shoot to kill policy for Palestinians throwing stones. His Ukrainian ancestors in a different time were persecuted under similar policies.

If these men get what they want, creeping annexation will become full scale annexation. Palestinian aspirations for their homeland, however, won't disappear. Feelings of humiliation won't evaporate. This conflict over land will ultimately need a dignified compromise between reasonable parties to reach a peaceful resolution. And yet, many young Israelis voted for the extremist, Ben-Gvir. What has gone wrong on your watch that Israel is sanctioning elements of fascism? What is your responsibility?

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Our history of persecution is longstanding. It was a powerful spark for Israel's creation. I fear that how we choose to process the Holocaust, intellectually and emotionally, may be a catalyst for its destruction. In the translated words of Theodore Herzl, the founder of Zionism, "Every man will be as free and undisturbed in his faith or his disbelief as he is in his nationality. And if it should occur that men of other creeds and different nationalities come to live amongst us, we should accord them honorable protection and equality before the law. We have learnt toleration in Europe. This is not sarcastically said. The anti-Semitism of today could only in a very few places be taken for old religious intolerance. It is for the most part a movement among civilized nations by which they try to chase away the specters of their own past." I hope I live to see Israel confront its demons.

It's at least time to increase funding of trauma-informed educational programs on conflict resolution, prejudice, and discrimination. Apparently not. Instead, you've enabled Avi Maoz, son of a Holocaust survivor, to increase prejudice in schools. More than 200 Israeli headteachers recently signed a petition, warning that Maoz's "racist, homophobic, regressive, and extremist opinions are divisive and offensive to entire communities and harmful to wide identities within Israeli society." We must not forget that inverted pink triangles sat alongside the Star of David in the Holocaust.

This chilling new era of Israeli politics is creating seismic shifts within the legal bounds of the State. Your coalition partners want increased segregation of women, constricted definitions of family and religiosity, and laws sanctioning businesses to

determine who they serve based on gender, religion, creed, or race. Religious bigotry is being mainstreamed.

I find it hard to believe that you want your legacy to be the cementing of a theocratic state. Yet you appear to have given Smotrich control of Immigration and Settlements under a new National Missions Ministry which can redefine what it means to be Jewish. A couple of years ago, he stated that he wanted "to restore the Torah justice system." They want to take the country back to biblical times, and they don't want the Supreme Court to stop them.

Constitutional lawyers are sounding the alarm at proposals to reduce the power of the Supreme Court. It's widely reported that this would also help you to avoid taking responsibility for the bribery and fraud for which you've been charged. But surely after 15 years as prime minister, you also care about the future of the democratic state. You know that these institutions underpin Israel's credibility in the West and reassure international investors. This isn't just an argument between left and right.

Ironically perhaps, this lurch to the political extremes of religious bigotry could fuel more effective community and political collaboration for the soul of the Israeli state. It could spark more activism within Israeli religious communities towards peace. It might nudge the international community to put real pressure on Israel to stop illegal occupation. The increased risks to Palestinians, many of whom identify as Suni Muslims, might give the Gulf States pause for thought on economic cooperation. Perhaps in the coming months, your partners will cross a red line that you won't be able to ignore in the middle of

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the night. You might even choose to resign for the sake of your beliefs, not to mention your legacy. But I doubt it.

I share the despair and shame of millions in Israel and in the Jewish Diaspora today. I hope that all those who want a democratic state can create a unified vision for the future. Through my eyes, the plan to get there must include incremental withdrawal from occupied land and investment in Palestinian youth. However difficult this will be for all, more bloodshed in an endless cycle of persecuted to persecutor and back again, renders the more likely alternative much worse.

At the end of World War II, no one would believe that a Jewish state would embrace openly fascist ideology 77 years later. You, Mr. Netanyahu, idealize leaders who have been able to prevent catastrophic persecution of the Jewish people. How will history judge you?

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**\*Dr. Emma Davies** is a senior lecturer in forensic psychology at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and a senior fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She has published many academic articles, reports for NGOs and government agencies, and opinion pieces on children's rights, childhood adversity, sexual abuse and domestic violence. Trained as a mediator and coach, she also leads work at the University of East London on trauma-informed policy and practice. Davies is interested in the place of intergenerational trauma in perpetuating violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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## The New Weight Loss Drug Taking Hollywood by Storm is Here to Stay

Jennifer Wider

December 31, 2022

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**Dramatic weight loss can result from semaglutide injectables and the news is spreading like wildfire. The medication has merit and is likely a game-changer for people who are overweight or obese. But there are still things to consider.**

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**S**emaglutide sold under the brand names Ozempic and Wegovy is the first FDA-approved injectable drug for weight management and it arrived on the scene with a thunderous roar. These drugs aren't exactly new, oral semaglutide received FDA approval back in September 2019 for use as an adjunct therapy for adults with Type 2 Diabetes to improve glycemic (blood glucose) control. One noticeable side effect was dramatic weight loss, and the rest is history.

“The drug class, GLP-1 (glucagon-like peptide) receptor agonists have been on the market for diabetes treatment for more than 15 years,” says Donna H. Ryan, MD Professor Emerita at Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. “A similar compound, liraglutides was approved for obesity in 2012, but the semaglutides plus lifestyle changes are producing a 15-17% weight loss (or reductive change in body weight) on average.”

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As a result of the dramatic weight loss, Ozempic and its cousins have taken Hollywood by storm. Suspected but not confirmed, Ozempic was the likely reason Kim Kardashian was able to fit into Marilyn Monroe's dress for the 2022 Met Gala, after losing more than 15 pounds in three weeks. Other celebrities got the memo, and so did anyone who wanted to lose weight and who could afford it. The drugs are injectables and cost between \$1200 and \$1500 per month out of pocket.

Despite the fact that many celebrities jumped on the bandwagon, the medication has merit and may be a game-changer for people who are overweight or obese struggling to lose weight. "People who are overweight, obese, diabetic or prediabetic have the same metabolic issues although the former are not called "diseases," explains Nina Karol, MD an internal medicine specialist who trained at The Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York and currently practices at Concierge Physicians of Westport in Connecticut. "They are just at different points on a trajectory of progression where the body may no longer be able to compensate as well and require drugs (prediabetes vs. diabetes)."

Without treating people who are overweight or obese, they can turn into prediabetics. And of course, many prediabetics will turn into diabetics. Semaglutides have the potential to stop this progression in its tracks and save people from going on and developing diabetes, lowering the risk of high blood pressure, nerve damage, cardiovascular disease and stroke.

According to Dr. Ryan, if you go off of the drug, there is a good chance the weight could come back, "Just like with high blood pressure, if you stop the drug, the blood pressure goes up. If you

stop semaglutide, weight will be regained." Short term use of the drug has not been demonstrated in a clinical trial, so it is likely semaglutide will be a long-term commitment.

And they are not without side effects. Like any medication, side effects are a reality: semaglutides can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, kidney issues and potentially a thyroid tumor in susceptible people. But the demand is still there and for many, the pro's strongly outweigh the con's. "The company was unprepared for the demand," says Dr. Ryan. And as a result, some Type 2 diabetics who have been on Ozempic are having a hard time getting them. "We can switch them to another GLP-1 Receptor agonist – dulaglutide, liraglutide, or exenatide – as a temporary measure."

This drug class is definitely here to stay and when used as intended it has the potential to lessen and prevent serious morbidities and mortality among so many people who have struggled with being overweight, obese and prediabetic. "Doctors are allowed to prescribe off label," says Dr. Karol, "but ethically this should be done for a good medical reason, not to help someone lose a few pounds to look good."

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**\*Jennifer Wider, MD**, is a nationally renowned women's health expert, author and radio host. She has appeared on The Today Show, CBS News, ABC News Nightline, Fox News, Good Day NY and HuffPost Live. She sits on the advisory boards of Cosmopolitan and Health magazines. Wider is the resident doctor on Just Jenny SiriusXM Stars and LOVELINE.