

Make Sense

of 2022



Fair Observer^o

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Fair Observer

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Has Britain Achieved a Post-Racial Politics?

Martin Plaut
January 05, 2022

It is not inconceivable that overtly racist politics will rear its head once more in Britain, but no major party is likely to support it.

The most closely guarded secrets of the British government are currently being reviewed by Priti Patel, the home secretary, or minister of the interior, as she would be described in most countries. It is her duty to receive the reports of the secret services: MI5, MI6 and GCHQ. Patel has to take those most difficult of decisions: which threats from Britain's enemies to act on and which to ignore.

Rishi Sunak holds the economic future of the country in his hands through his control of the Treasury as chancellor of the exchequer. Kwasi Kwarteng is Sunak's deputy, as secretary of state for business, energy and industrial strategy. Sajid Javid is in charge of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

Facing them across the House of Commons sits David Lammy, Labour's shadow foreign secretary. Rosena Allin-Khan is Labour's minister of mental health, and the woman charged with getting her party from the opposition into government is Shabana Mahmood, Labour's national campaign coordinator.

Minority Representation

These men and women have little in common politically. Some are passionate capitalists, others

fervent socialists. But all are members of Britain's ethnic minorities. Some have family backgrounds in the Indian subcontinent. Others — an admittedly smaller number — can trace their roots to Africa. It is a little commented-upon fact that in Britain today, ethnic minorities are almost numerically represented in Parliament. Some 14% of the British population has an ethnic minority background, and 10% of MPs elected at the last general election in 2019 are black or Asian.

The key point is not simply the numbers, but rather that they are as likely to be found on in the governing Conservative Party as they are in the opposition Labour Party. Back in 1987, the situation was very different. Four ethnic minority MPs were elected that year: Diane Abbott, Paul Boateng, Bernie Grant and Keith Vaz. All were Labour members.

As the House of Commons Library points out, "Their number has increased at each general election since then — most notably from 2010 onwards ... But if the ethnic make-up of the House of Commons reflected that of the UK population, there would be about 93 Members from ethnic minority backgrounds ... Of the 65 ethnic minority Members, 41 (63%) are Labour and 22 are Conservatives (34%). There are two Liberal Democrat MPs from an ethnic minority background." These MPs have not languished in obscurity. They have been promoted to the highest political offices of the land, by both major political parties.

The policies they would pursue could hardly be more different. Priti Patel has been roundly criticized by Labour for her virulent hostility to unrestricted migration and her determination to crack down on smuggling refugees over the English Channel from France. Her plans for "pushbacks" using the navy to deter migrants have been described as "inhumane, unconscionable and extremely reckless."

Patel's background — her family came to Britain in the 1960s before dictator Idi Amin's mass expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972 — appears to have had little influence on her opinions or policies. Little wonder that she is a favorite of the Conservative right and a potential successor to Boris Johnson as prime minister.

Zero Tolerance

The significance of the rise of Britain's ethnic minorities through the ranks is that neither of the two main parties that dominate the country's politics can any longer tolerate the kind of overt racism that was once a regular part of British culture. Patel and Allin-Khan may be poles apart politically, but neither would accept policies of the kind that once were espoused by the likes of the Enoch Powell.

His notorious "Rivers of Blood" speech from 1968, in which he warned against the impact not just of immigration but also of a bill before Parliament designed to fight racism, was widely welcomed. The Conservative right hailed him as a champion, and Labour-supporting London dockers marched to Parliament to show their support.

Does this imply that racism in Britain is a thing of the past? Emphatically not. But given Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system, it means that only fringe parties, with little chance of winning seats in Parliament, are likely to take up the issue.

Overt racism is still nurtured by a section of British society. The Brexit referendum in 2016 brought out the worst in some communities. The attacks on Poles were particularly disgraceful, given the bravery of their pilots, over 8,000 of whom fought in the critical Battle of Britain over the skies of England during World War II. No fewer than five neo-Nazi groups are banned in the UK, with Patel condemning "evil white supremacist groups, who target vulnerable people

across the world." A third of all terror plots uncovered in Britain emanate from the far right.

None of this should be ignored. It is not inconceivable that overtly racist politics will rear its head once more in Britain, but neither the Conservative Party nor Labour is likely to support it. Only in extreme circumstances are they likely to flourish. As such, it may be that British politics can today be considered post-racial.

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Is Afghanistan Going to Break Apart?

Tabish Forugh, Atul Singh
January 10, 2022

The Pashtun-led Taliban are ripping up Afghanistan's fragile social contract by centralizing all power and creating conditions for civil war, disintegration and spillover into neighboring regions.

After the shambolic US withdrawal, Afghanistan faces an existential problem: Its very existence as a state is now in question. Most people forget that Afghanistan is a patchwork of disparate ethnic groups and remote villages. Unlike Germany or Japan, it is not and has never been a nation-state. Since the 1880s, Afghanistan has been a state based on a loose

coalition of poorly governed provinces, forgotten villages and marginalized ethnic groups.

A Chequered Past

For more than a century, different power centers in Afghanistan have had some sort of representation in the central government, even if they often got leftovers from the dominant Pashtun ruling class. This class was repressive and often bloody. Abdur Rahman Khan, the Iron Amir, conducted genocide against the Hazaras in the 1890s, erased a substantial part of the cultural heritage of Nuristanis by forcing them to convert to Islam, and confiscated fertile lands of Tajiks and Uzbeks in the north only to redistribute them to Pashtun tribes. Even a modernist king like Amanulla pursued the Iron Amir's policies. Yet, at the helm of power, there was generally a servant's seat at the table for other ethnic groups such as the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and even the Hazaras. This seat at the table along with the backing of superpowers, first the British and then the Soviets, kept the state and the political order intact.

When the Soviets invaded in 1979, the Pashtun-dominated order of Afghanistan gradually crumbled. Ideology trumped ethnicity, and groups like the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Hazaras rose in prominence. Much credit for this goes to Babrak Karmal, the president of Afghanistan from December 1979 to November 1986. When the Soviets withdrew in February 1989, this order collapsed. The battle-hardened mujahideen groups fought a brutal civil war in which Tajik leaders Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of the Jamiat Party, and Ahmad Shah Massoud, known as the "Lion of Panjshir," held the upper hand.

The Pashtuns struck back through the Taliban and took over Kabul in 1996. They exercised power over most of the country while Massoud was leading the resistance to the Taliban government from the Panjshir Valley. He

was killed in Afghanistan two days before the 9/11 attacks in 2001 by an al-Qaeda suicide squad masquerading as journalists on the pretext of filming an interview. Even after his death, the resistance to the Taliban continued and Massoud's fighters contributed heavily to the ground fighting that drove out the Taliban from much of the country, including Kabul.

In the five years of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, the Pashtuns returned as the dominant military and political group. They ran an autocratic regime, marginalizing other ethnic groups and suppressing opponents. Hence, resistance to the Taliban was persistent and ferocious in many parts of the country.

The Post 9/11 Experience

The 9/11 attacks led to the American intervention and the creation of a new democratic state. Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmens and other marginalized communities became active participants in the political process. Despite its fragility and flaws, the post-2001 political order and its democratic components offered a unique opportunity for Afghanistan to transform into a functioning polity and society.

The governing Pashtun ethnonationalist elites, their non-Pashtun partners, including conservative warlords, and the reemergence of a Pashtun-led insurgency squandered the resources and opportunities that otherwise might have consolidated a civil and democratic political order.

The Taliban's forceful return to Kabul last August ended the post-2001 American-backed constitutional order. Today, chaos prevails and a fanatical Pashtun clergy has a vice-like grip on every aspect of Afghanistan's social, political and economic life. Furthermore, the Taliban are fanatical Muslims with ethnofascist tendencies and

a profound apathy for Afghanistan's ethnic, cultural and political diversity.

In recent months, many analysts have been very charitable to the Taliban. In an interview with Fair Observer, political analyst Anas Altikriti said, "The reality is the Taliban have won and in today's world, they have the right, the absolute right to govern." If the right to govern comes from conquest, then Altikriti is right. Lest we forget, the Taliban have yet to win an election or demonstrate that they are actually capable of governing. Moreover, they are rigid, dictatorial and revanchist. An inclusive political formula that represents Afghanistan's mosaic-like diversity is impossible so long as the Taliban remain exclusively in charge.

The legitimate aspirations of non-Pashtun ethnic groups such as the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, the Hazaras, the Turkmens and others are now dissolving in the acid of Sunni fundamentalism. The Taliban have marginalized them completely. These groups have no seat at the table, no representation in the decision-making process and have to live under the barrel of the Taliban gun.

In 2022, this situation is untenable. Non-Pashtun ethnic groups are fed up and want control over their destiny. Many Pashtun technocrats, including the former president, Hamid Karzai, have switched sides and are part of the ruling dispensation. They claim the Taliban are the source of stability and have formed the only organization capable of ruling the country. However, they forget an important point. Marginalized groups in Afghanistan are chafing under Pashtun hegemony. If the Taliban-led Pashtuns cling to their unilateral rule and convert Afghanistan into a centralized state, the country will indubitably and inevitably break apart.

Federalism Is the Way Forward

To avoid a bloody partition along ethnic lines or a 1990s style civil war, Afghanistan needs a federal political system. Afghanistan is not France or the United Kingdom. It cannot be run out of a grand capital no matter how powerful the ruling class is. Like Switzerland and the United States, Afghanistan is an extremely diverse country with a history of local autonomy and a glorious tradition of bloody rebellion as the British, the Soviets and the Americans discovered at their cost.

Therefore, the balance of power in any political system that can work must lie with local, not national government. Such a system could turn Afghanistan's disparate ethnic groups into building blocks of a new federal state and avoid the looming bloodbath due to the Taliban's autocratic rule.

With China and Russia taking center stage, Afghanistan is increasingly forgotten. That is as risky as it is unfortunate. Conflict in Afghanistan could spill over into South and Central Asia, threatening global peace and security. Afghanistan needs dialogue between different groups ready to hammer out a territorial, judicial, and administrative settlement that leads to a functional union. Only then can we expect the fragile state of Afghanistan to survive.

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Former Austrian President Heinz Fischer Talks to Fair Observer

Kouros Ziabari, Heinz Fischer
January 12, 2022

In this edition of The Interview, former Austrian President Heinz Fischer talks about COVID-19, the refugee crisis and more.

Austria is known as a stable Central European country that is the capital of classical music. It is also the home of prominent figures in the world of science and philosophy, including Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In 2014, Austria had the lowest unemployment rate in the European Union. That trend declined in the years that followed, but the economy remained largely competitive. Austria is also one of the top 10 countries with the fewest number of unemployed young people among member states of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Austrians will head to the polls later this year for elections. The incumbent president, Alexander Van der Bellen, remains undecided over running again, but he is eligible for a second term in office. In the 2016 election, he defeated Norbert Hofer of the Freedom Party of Austria, thwarting his rival's attempt to become the first far-right head of state in the EU.

Recently identified as the world's fifth-most peaceful country in the 2021 Global Peace Index, Austria has seen substantial economic fallout due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government's decision to introduce mandatory vaccination and hefty penalties for those who do not comply has stirred controversy.

Heinz Fischer, the president of Austria between 2004 and 2016, is a seasoned lawyer who had a long career in politics. He took his first step toward becoming a national leader in early 1963, when he served as a legal assistant to the vice president of the Austrian parliament. He later became a member of parliament himself and then served as the minister of science, before leading the national council, the lower house of parliament, from 1990 to 2002. He is currently the co-chairman of the Ban Ki-moon Centre for Global Citizens in Vienna.

I spoke to Dr. Fischer about the COVID-19 pandemic, the refugee crisis in Europe, the Iran nuclear talks in the Austrian capital and more.

The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Kouros Ziabari: Mr. President, according to Statistics Austria and the Austrian Institute for Economic Research approximations, the total fiscal costs of the COVID-19 pandemic for Austria amount to roughly €70 billion [\$79 billion] in the 2020-22 period. As of May 2021, the government had earmarked €37 billion for relief measures. Do you think this is a liability for the Austrian economy that may result in a short- or mid-term recession, or is it a deficit that can be made up for soon? Has the government been able to handle the economic burden of the pandemic efficiently?

Heinz Fischer: When COVID-19 reached Austria and the first lockdown became mandatory, I was surprised to hear the finance minister from the

conservative party announcing that he would compensate the economic burden with “whatever it costs.” This was unusual language for a conservative minister of finance.

All in all, the government’s relief measures were crucial for reducing Austria’s economic damage of the pandemic. The Institute for Economic Research as well as our National Bank claim that Austria will be able to go back to the path of economic growth; this will reduce unemployment and keep recession lower than a traditional conservative finance policy of strict zero deficit would have done. But the performance of the government fighting against COVID-19 was less successful.

Ziabari: It was reported that the government is planning to introduce mandatory inoculation starting in early 2022 and that those holding out will face fines of up to \$4,000. Of course, vaccination is the most effective way of combating the effects of the coronavirus. But does a vaccine mandate and handing out substantial penalties not go against democratic practice in a country known for its democratic credentials? You are no longer in office, but as an observer, do you support the decision?

Fischer: This is one of the hottest or even the hottest topic of current political debates in Austria. To answer your question promptly and directly: Yes, I believe it is necessary and legitimate to introduce mandatory inoculation — with justified exemptions — for a limited period of time in order to protect our population and our country in the best possible way. Other European countries start thinking in a similar way.

It is not a one-issue question. You have, on the one hand, the obligation of the government to protect basic rights and individual freedom and, on the other hand, the obligation of the government to protect the health and life of its population. And it

is obvious that there are different, even antagonistic basic rights, namely individual freedom on the one side and health insurance and fighting a pandemic on the other. It is not an either/or but an as-well-as situation. The government must take care of two responsibilities simultaneously, meaning that the democratically-elected parliament has to seek and find the balance between two values and two responsibilities.

If I remember correctly, a similar situation existed already two generations ago, when the danger of a smallpox pandemic justified an obligatory smallpox vaccination until the World Health Organization proclaimed the global eradication of the disease in 1980.

Ziabari: Moving on from the pandemic, Austria was one of the countries hugely affected by the 2015-16 refugee crisis in Europe. When the government of former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz came to power, it took a hard line on migration and made major electoral gains as a result. Now, with the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, a new wave of westward migration appears to be in the making. Does Austria have a moral and human responsibility to protect asylum-seekers fleeing war and persecution, or should the responsibility be outsourced to other nations for certain reasons?

Fischer: My clear answer is, yes, Austria has a moral and human responsibility to protect asylum-seekers on the basis of international law and the international sharing of responsibilities.

Of course, we must discuss the numbers, the conditions, the possibilities, etc. of the respective country. But immediately saying no, we will not take women from Afghanistan, or we will not participate in burden-sharing of the European Union with the excuse that earlier governments many years ago already accepted a substantial

share of refugees, is not acceptable. One cannot outsource humanity and moral duties.

Ziabari: How is Austria coping with the effects of climate change and its human rights implications? While the average global surface temperature rise from 1880 to 2012 has been 0.85° Celsius, it has been 2° Celsius for Austria. Austria's target for 2030 is to cut greenhouse gas emissions not covered by the EU Emissions Trading System by 36%, but the International Energy Agency has forecast it may only achieve a 27% benchmark. Will Austria need external help to overcome the challenge? Are you positive it can fulfill the EU expectations?

Fischer: I do not think that Austria needs external help to fulfill its climate commitments. I do, however, think it is urgently necessary for the Austrian government to find a way forward in combating the climate crisis, a way that does not only cut greenhouse gas emissions, but which will also help to achieve societal consensus on the measures that are to be taken. This means the government must also be supporting social coherence.

Combating climate change is a multi-stakeholder effort and includes a just transition to clean energy, rapid phase-out of coal and end to international fossil fuel finance. In Austria in 2018, already 77% of electricity came from renewable energy sources and the number is constantly rising. While building a sustainable and climate-friendly future, we must, however, not forget to create green jobs, uphold human rights around the world and leave no one behind. I am positive that Austria will fulfill its EU expectations because it has to. There is only one planet, and we have to protect it with all means.

Ziabari: Let's also touch upon some foreign policy issues. The former US president, Donald Trump, was rebuked by European politicians

for alienating allies and spoiling partnerships with friendly, democratic nations and embracing repressive leaders instead. But Austria-US relations remained largely steady, and despite Trump's protectionist trade policies, the United States imported a whopping \$11.7 billion in goods and services from Austria. Do the elements that undergirded robust Austria-US connections still exist with a transition of power in the White House and a change of government in Austria?

Fischer: Yes, the relations between Austria and the United States have a long history and stable basis. Austria has not forgotten the prominent role of the US in the fight against Hitler. It has not forgotten the Marshall Plan — 75 years ago — and other ways of American support after World War II. The United States was a lighthouse of democracy in the 20th century, including the time of Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Franco, Horthy, etc. in Europe.

Of course, the Vietnam War, the political and economic pressure on countries in Latin America, the false arguments as the basis for a military invasion in Iraq and the heritage of racism have cast shadows on US policy. But having said all this, it is also true that the US has strengths in many fields of foreign policy and good relations between the US and Europe are a stabilizing factor in the world.

I would like to add that Donald Trump was and still is a great challenge for democracy in the US and a danger for the positive image of the United States in Europe and elsewhere.

Ziabari: Are you concerned about the tensions simmering between Russia and the West over Ukraine? Should it be assumed that Russia's threats of deploying intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe are serious, or are the Russians bluffing to test the West's resolve,

particularly now that one of Europe's influential leaders, Angela Merkel, has departed? Are Russia's complaints about NATO's exploitation of Ukraine to expand eastwards and the ongoing discrimination against Ukraine's Russian-speaking populace valid?

Fischer: Yes, I am concerned about the growing conflict between Russia and the West, and this conflict has a long history. World War II was not started by Russia, the Soviet Union, but brutally against them.

After World War II, there was a bipolar world developing between the East and the West, between Moscow and Washington, between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new situation emerged. Gorbachev was honestly interested in a more peaceful world. He was accepting over the reunification of Germany and accepted the former Warsaw Pact member East Germany to become a member of NATO.

But the deal was that Russia's security should not be reduced, and other parts of the former Soviet Union should not become part of NATO. And, in this respect, Ukraine is an extremely sensitive issue. It is already a while ago, but let's remember how sensitive the United States reacted to the so-called Cuban Missile Crisis — the stationing of Russian weapons near the US. NATO weapons at the border of Russia are not supportive of peace and stability.

Ziabari: German Chancellor Angela Merkel stepped down after 16 years in power. Aside from being referred to as the *de facto* leader of the EU, she was praised for her leadership during the eurozone debt crisis and her role in mustering global solidarity to fight COVID. What do you think about the legacy she has left behind? In terms of relations with Austria, do

you think her differences with the government of Sebastian Kurz on immigration, Operation Sophia and the EU budget blighted the perception that Austrians had of her?

Fischer: Angela Merkel was a great leader, crucial for Germany, crucial for Europe, crucial for human rights, crucial for peace. I admired and liked her. When former Austrian Chancellor Kurz and former German Chancellor Merkel shared different views, Merkel was, in my opinion, mostly on the right and Kurz on the wrong side. She was “Mrs. Stability and Reliability” in a positive sense.

And her legacy? She belongs with Konrad Adenauer, Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt to the four great German leaders after World War II. Under her leadership, Germany was the most stable nation in the European Union and her relationship with Austria was a mirror to her character, namely balanced, friendly and correct.

Ziabari: In the past couple of decades, Europe has been the scene of multiple terror attacks with hundreds of casualties, including the November 2020 shooting in Vienna, which European officials and media unanimously blamed on Islamist terrorism and political Islam. What are the stumbling blocks to the normalization of relations between secular Europe and its Muslim community? Is this civilizational, generational clash destined to last perennially, or are you optimistic that the two discourses can come to a co-existence?

Fischer: The melting of different nationalities, cultures and religions is always a difficult task. The Austro-Hungarian monarchy finally collapsed because of unsolved conflicts between European nationalities.

Conflicts become even more difficult when they include different religions and ethnicities. We can say that the conflict between our German-

speaking, Czech-speaking, Hungarian- or Polish-speaking grandparents is more or less overcome, but the conflict between Christians and Muslims will last longer. We can study this in the United States. But it is my personal hope that multi-religious integration is possible in the long run in a fair and democratic society.

Ziabari: Talks to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, are underway in the Austrian capital. Are you hopeful that the moribund agreement can be brought back to life? Do you see the determination to save the accord in the Iranian side and the other parties, for the benefit of international peace and security?

Fischer: I was very happy when the 2015 JCPOA was signed between Iran, the United States, China and several European countries. And I believe it was one of the very wrong and unwise decisions of Donald Trump to withdraw from that agreement. To revitalize this agreement is, as we can observe these days, very difficult.

As you asked me about my opinion, I am inclined to a more pessimistic outlook, because the present Iranian leaders are more hardliners than the last government and President Biden is under heavy pressure and has not much room for compromises. On the other hand, I recently met a member of the Iranian negotiation team in Vienna and, to my surprise, he was rather optimistic.

One of my wishes for 2022 is a reasonable and fair solution for the JCPOA negotiations and a détente between Iran and the Western world. But the chances for a positive outcome seem to be limited at the moment.

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Welcome to the Metaverse: The Peril and Potential of Governance

Benjamin Verdi
January 20, 2022

How will the metaverse shape the way we do business, the way we live our lives, the way we govern ourselves?

The final chapter of Don DeLillo's epic 1997 novel "Underworld" has proven a prescient warning of the dangers of the digitized life and culture into which we've communally plunged headfirst. Yet no sentiment, no open question posed in his 800-page opus rings as ominously, or remains as unsettling today, as this: "Is cyberspace a thing within the world or is it the other way around? Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?"

Regrettably, people's opinions on the metaverse currently depend on whether they view owning and operating a "digital self" through the lens of dystopia ("The Matrix") or harmless fun ("Fortnite"). It is additionally unfortunate that an innovative space as dynamic and potentially revolutionary as the metaverse has become, in the public's imagination, the intellectual property of one company.

But the fact that future users so readily associate the metaverse with Facebook is a temporary result

of PR and a wave of talent migration, and will be replaced by firsthand experiences gained through our exposure to the metaverse itself, and not a single firm's vision for it.

Meta Power

So, what does this all mean? How will the metaverse shape the way we do business, the way we live our lives, the way we govern ourselves? Who owns the metaverse? Why do we need it? Who will be in charge?

Taking a lead from this stellar primer, if we simply replace the word “metaverse” with the word “internet” wherever we see it, all of a sudden, its application and significance become easier to grasp. It also becomes clear that Facebook's rebranding as Meta is not as much a reference to the creation of the metaverse but more in line with the company's desire to become this new territory's most enthusiastic homesteaders. Facebook is not so much creating the metaverse as it is hoping — like every other firm and government should hope — that it won't be left behind in this new world.

As far as the metaverse's impact, its political implications might end up being its least transformative. In the United States, for instance, the digitization of political campaigning has carved a meandering path to the present that is too simplistically summed up thus: Howard Dean crawled so that Barack Obama could walk so that Donald Trump could run so that Joe Biden could drop us all off at No Malarkey Station.

Where this train goes next, both in the United States and globally, will be a function of individual candidates' goals, and the all-seeing eye of algorithm-driven voter outreach. But the bottom line is that there will be campaign advertisements in the metaverse because, well, there are campaign advertisements everywhere, all the time.

More interesting to consider is how leaders will engage the metaverse once in power. Encouragingly, from the governmental side, capabilities and opportunities abound to redefine the manner in which citizens reach their representatives and participate in their own governance. Early public sector adopters of metaversal development have but scratched the surface of these possibilities.

For starters, the tiny island nation of Barbados has staked out the first metaversal embassy. This openness to embracing technology and a renewed focus on citizen interaction evidenced in this move are laudable and demonstrate the metaverse's democratic value as a means for increased transparency in government and truly borderless global engagement. Though novel, Barbados' digital embassy is no gimmick. You can be sure that additional diplomatic missions will soon follow suit in establishing their presence in the metaverse and will perhaps wish they had thought to do so earlier.

Another happy marriage of innovation and democracy is underway in South Korea. Its capital city has taken the mission of digitizing democracy a step further by setting the ambitious goal of creating a Metaverse Seoul by 2023 for the express purpose of transforming its citizenry's access to municipal government. Things like virtual public hearings, a virtually accessible mayor's office, virtual tourism, virtual conventions, markets and events will all be on the table as one of the world's most economically and culturally rich metropolises opens its digital doors to all who wish to step inside.

Digital Twinning

Any time technology is employed in the service of empowering people and holding governments more accountable, such advancements should be celebrated. The metaverse can and must become a

vehicle for freedom. It need not provide a tired, easy analog to Don DeLillo's ominous underworld.

But then there's China. While some of its cities and state-run firms are making plans to embrace what functionality is afforded via metaversal innovation, there can be no question that the government in Beijing will have a tremendous say in what development, access and behavior is and isn't permitted in any Chinese iterations of the metaverse. It is hard to imagine, for instance, certain digital assets, products or symbols making their way past the same level of censorship beneath which China already blankets its corner of cyberspace.

Yet China's most intriguing metaverse-related trend involves the spike in interest in digital property ownership occurring while its real-world real estate market continues to sputter. Such a considerable reallocation of resources away from physical assets into digital ones mirrors the increasing popularity of cryptocurrency as a safe haven from the risk of inflation. Call it a technological inevitability or a societal symptom of COVID-fueled pessimism, but the digital world now appears (to some) to present fewer risks and more forward-looking stability than the physical.

China may be an extreme example, but the need to balance transparency, openness and prosperity with safety and control will exist for all governments in the metaverse just as it does in non-virtual reality. Real-world governmental issues will not find easy answers in the metaverse, but they might find useful twins. And as is the case in the industry, the digital twinning of democracy will give its willing practitioners the chance to experiment, to struggle, to build and rebuild, and to fail fast and often enough to eventually get some things right.

Championing commendable applications of this new technology in government and business will position the metaverse as a useful thing within the real world, something that enriches real lives, that serves real people — not the other way around.

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The Pashtun-led Taliban Could Break Apart Both Afghanistan and Pakistan

Atul Singh, Manu Sharma, Vikram Sood
January 25, 2022

Victory against the US, ethnic conflict within Afghanistan and disappointment with Islamabad could lead the Taliban to create a new Pashtun state on the ruins of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

More than a century ago, the Russians and the British played the Great Game for the control of Afghanistan. Immortalized in Rudyard Kipling's "Kim," this game defined three generations of soldiers, spies and diplomats. As the remarkable Rory Stewart records, the Great Game never ended. The Soviets and the Americans carried on where the Russians and the British left. Now, a new great game is about to begin.

As is well chronicled, Afghanistan emerged as a buffer state between the Russian and British empires. Dominated by the Pashtuns, this state

remained an inchoate entity of competing ethnic groups, feuding clans and autonomous villages. As Tabish Forugh and one of the authors noted in an earlier article on Fair Observer, this Pashtun-dominated order crumbled when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. The Taliban brought back this order in the 1990s and are establishing Pashtun primacy yet again.

New Life to Old Identities

Modernity has not been kind to Afghanistan. Until the 1970s, this country was a land where hippies showed up to smoke pot and have a good time. Older Pakistani friends reminisce about driving from Peshawar to Kabul to buy videotapes of Bollywood movies and bask in the relatively liberal milieu of Afghanistan. When the Soviets intervened in 1979, this idyllic version of the country disintegrated. For all the efforts of Soviet troops, engineers and administrators, communism failed.

By February 1989, Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan. Later that year, the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union itself imploded in 1991. The loosely allied mujahideen turned their guns on each other and a bloody civil war followed. The Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Pashtuns were at each other's throats. Eventually, the Pakistani-trained, Islamabad-backed, Pashtun-led Taliban triumphed in 1996. Their rule was cut short by the 9/11 attacks in 2001, which brought American intervention and began a 20-year experiment with democracy.

Sadly, the democratic experiment has failed too. In June 2021, Forugh and one of the authors wrote that President Ashraf Ghani occupied "his fancy palace in Kabul thanks to the barrels of American guns," and, once the Americans left, he would be toast. Americans established a presidential system based on their own model that was destined to fail in a famously

diverse and fractious society. Note that the US leaders after World War II chose parliamentary democracy for Germany and Japan, two industrial societies with a far higher degree of homogeneity. If Washington blundered at the beginning, its decisions were catastrophic at the end. Today, democracy is dead and buried, the fanatical Taliban rule the roost and ethnic identity is replacing fragile multiethnic Afghan nationalism.

The Rise of Ethnic Nationalism

As stated earlier, Afghanistan is where two expanding empires met. The British had digested modern-day Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, then British India. The Russians had taken over an odd assortment of clans and khanates in Central Asia, many of whom were descendants of Genghis Khan and Timur. Just like the boundaries drawn by the British or the French, the Russian ones were arbitrary too. As ethnic nationalism rises in Afghanistan, it will spill over into Central Asia.

As late as February 2020, the US State Department declared that "a secure and stable Afghanistan [was] a top priority for the Central Asian governments." It encouraged these governments to boost economic and trade ties with their Kabul counterparts. American hopes for "stable governance of multi-ethnic, Muslim-majority countries" now lie in tatters. Kazakhstan demonstrates that Russian realpolitik of supporting strongmen has triumphed.

Yet even the Kremlin cannot hold back the tide of ethnic nationalism that is unfolding in Afghanistan and spreading to Central Asia. The Tajiks led by Amrullah Saleh and Ahmad Massoud have the tacit, if not explicit, support of the Tajikistan government. The Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum fled to Uzbekistan when the Taliban took over. As the Pashtuns leave not even scraps at the table for others, it is only natural that minority ethnicities are looking across the border

for a better future. Just as in former Yugoslavia, ethnic nationalism is now on the rise in Central Asia.

Pakistan's Frankenstein Monster's Problem: Radical Islam

To a large degree, Pakistan has fostered, if not created, the ethnic nationalism now rising in Afghanistan and spilling over into Central Asia. It is an open secret that Pakistan's military elite created the Taliban. As Ishtiaq Ahmed explains, "the Garrison State" has always been paranoid about its lack of strategic depth. The loss of East Pakistan that won independence as Bangladesh in 1971 has scarred the Pakistani psyche and made the country's political elites double down on political Islam. In the 1980s, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq moved Pakistan along a fundamentalist arc. Jihad became the order of the day not only against the Soviets in Afghanistan but also against India, which he sought to "bleed through a thousand cuts."

Zia was not an exception to Pakistani hostility to India. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the man Zia ousted through a military coup and hung on the gallows, vowed to wage a "thousand year war against India." In 1974, Pakistani mobs massacred thousands of Ahmadis and, instead of delivering them protection or justice, Bhutto brought in a constitutional amendment declaring the Ahmadis non-Muslims. The same year, he declared Pakistan would go nuclear, claiming "We shall eat grass but have our bomb." Islamic fundamentalism and Pavlovian anti-India ethos drive Pakistani state policy regardless of whether the country is under civil or military rule.

Backed by the US and Saudi Arabia, the Pakistan-backed mujahideen brought the Soviet Union to its knees. Against India, Pakistan has followed an asymmetric strategy of championing irregulars, insurgent and terrorists from its very

inception. In the first of a three-part series analyzing the fallout of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, Rakesh Kaul points out how Pakistan supported a Pashtun jihad in Kashmir as early as 1947. The marauding tribesmen killed Kaul's great-grandfather, "tied his dead body to a horse and dragged it through the streets to terrorize the local population into submission."

Starting from the 1980s, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) unleashed terror as an instrument of state policy against India. First, the ISI backed the violent Sikh insurgency for an independent state of Khalistan, a strategy that it continues with till today. Second, the ISI supported the insurgency in Kashmir that blew up in 1989 and persists till today. Third, the ISI created and supported militant jihadist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed to overwhelm India through multiple terrorist attacks. With a crisis-ridden economy and much smaller military, Pakistan has bet on asymmetric terror tactics and nuclear deterrence to tie India down.

However, Pakistan is discovering that when you sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind. Like Victor Frankenstein, the Garrison State has created a monster: radical Islam. Since the 1980s, Pakistan has become intolerant, sectarian and violent. Minorities have faced persecution and suffered ethnic cleansing. The case of the animistic Kalash people in Chitral is a case in point. Many documentaries have recorded how they have faced persistent persecution and forced conversion. As a result, a mere 3,500 Kalash are left and they may not survive for too long.

Radical Islam was meant to be a tool the Pakistani state used against its neighbors. Now, it has spread like cancer throughout all aspects of the country's life. Instead of Pakistan's corrupt and inefficient government, madrasas now provide education for refugees and lower-class Pakistanis. Many of them are hardline and churn out jihadis

by the thousands. For instance, most of the Afghani Taliban leadership graduated from the madrasa Dur-ul-Uloom Haqqania.

Religious figures can now bring the country over a standstill in an instant. Violent protests repeatedly erupted after French President Emmanuel Macron said that Islam was in crisis. Terror attacks within Pakistan have shot up. Roohafza, a sugary syrupy drink, has replaced whiskey in officer messes. Many officers now sport flowing beards and offer prayer five times a day. In the words of Javed Jabbar, Pakistan has experienced “a steady retreat into showy religiosity and visible piety in the public domain and in most media.” A new law makes it compulsory for every child to learn Arabic.

Pakistan finds itself in a bind. It has to direct the thousands of jihadis graduating from madrasas against external enemies to avoid internecine strife. In fact, it is only a question of time before radical Islamists will infiltrate all organs of the Pakistani state. The Taliban’s victory has convinced them that Allah is on their side. The risks of a general like Zia or a cleric like Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini taking over and unleashing nuclear terror or nuclear war are getting higher by the day.

Radical Islam and Pashtun Pride Make an Explosive Cocktail

If radical Islam is dangerous, radical Islam combined with ethnic nationalism is terrifying. After 20 years, the Pashtun-led Taliban is back in power. They are surging with confidence after humbling the world’s superpower. This time, they are battle-hardened, better trained and savvier than their predecessors from the 1990s. The Taliban also have a strong sense of history and look back to the expansionist 18th-century Ahmed Shah Durrani as a model to follow.

Durrani was a historic figure who sent troops to Central Asia, defeated the Marathas in the historic 1761 Third Battle of Panipat with assistance of local Muslim rulers and created the modern nation of Afghanistan. Durrani’s young nation soon fell victim to the Great Game and lost much territory to the British. Led by Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, the British delineated the modern-day border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Till date, many Pashtuns have not accepted this border.

The Taliban are expansionists. In the north, the Tajiks and the Uzbeks will fight a guerilla war, ensuring their eventual retreat. To the west lie Turkmenistan and Iran, two ethnically distinct entities where the Taliban cannot expand. To the south and east lies Pakistan where the Taliban trained and where their Pashtun kin reside. Furthermore, the Pashtuns have a deep memory of raiding and ruling the plains of Indus and the Ganges. When Babur swept down from modern-day Uzbekistan to modern-day Pakistan and India through the Khyber Pass, he defeated a Pashtun sultan who was ruling Delhi.

When Pakistan won independence, Pashtun opinion was divided. Some like Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar wanted a homeland for Muslim Indians in the shape of Pakistan. Others like Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a friend of Mahatma Gandhi, fought for a unified India and then for an autonomous Pashtunistan. Still others wanted reunification with Afghanistan. Worryingly for Pakistan, Pashtun refugees have streamed into the country from Afghanistan since 1979. Encyclopedia Britannica tells us that there were “about 11 million Pashtun in Afghanistan and 25 million in Pakistan in the early 21st century.” Multiple estimates indicate Pashtuns to be over 15% of Pakistan’s population. In Afghanistan, they comprise about 42% of the population. Once all-out ethnic conflict erupts in Afghanistan, Pashtun identity is only likely to strengthen.

So far, the Punjabi elite running Pakistan has co-opted the Pashtun elite by giving it plum positions in the state apparatus, especially the military. The ruling elite has also used Pashtuns to fight wars and proxy wars in Kashmir since 1947 when both India and Pakistan emerged as two independent entities after the partition of British India. During the 20 years of US presence in Afghanistan, cross-border incursions into and violent incidents in Kashmir declined because Pashtuns were too busy fighting a jihad at home. Now, these jihadis will turn their attention to Kashmir.

Not all jihadis are fixated with Kashmir. Some of them are sworn enemies of the Pakistani state such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. With the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan may have achieved its long-cherished strategic depth against India, but it now has the tail of the Pashtun tiger in its hands. Pakistan's ISI has no option but to deploy Pashtun jihadis against India in Kashmir. Failure on the Kashmir front could trigger Pashtun dissatisfaction against Punjabi leadership.

A tiny wrinkle many forget is that Pashtuns see themselves as a warrior people and the natural leaders of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. They have successfully beaten back the British, the Soviets and the Americans. Pashtuns see the Punjabis as soft, loud and showy. Like the Balochs, the Sindhis, the Muhajirs and others, Pashtuns resent the Punjabi domination of Pakistan. Furthermore, many Pashtuns regard the banks of the Indus, not the Durand Line, as their natural border.

Blood Borders

Pakistan's Pashtun problem is a particular example of a more widespread phenomenon. Most of the current borders in Africa, the Middle East and Asia are colonial legacies that do not make sense. In 2006, Ralph Peters published a controversial

article in Armed Forces Journal titled "Blood Borders" where he argued for redrawing "arbitrary and distorted borders." Peters took the view that "significant 'cheated' population groups, such as the Kurds, Baluch and Arab Shia" deserved their own states. He blamed "awful-but-sacrosanct international boundaries," not Islam, for much of the violence in the Middle East and South Asia.

Since 2006, many analysts have slammed Peters. The US has resolutely upheld the stability of the borders in former British and French colonies even as it has championed the independence of nations once under the Soviet yoke. That policy might be nearing the end of its shelf life. In its moment of triumph in Afghanistan, Pakistan might have set wheels into motion that will lead to its own disintegration.

Today, Pakistan is held together by an anti-India Islamic identity. The different linguistic ethnic groups that comprise Pakistan have long been pulling in different directions. Therefore, Pakistan has fostered a siege mentality among its people and created an identity that looks to Arab, Turkish and Pashtun conquerors of India for inspiration. Pashtun identity is far more cohesive, time-tested and real. After humbling the US, Pashtuns are unlikely to play second fiddle to the Punjabis for much longer. Inevitably, they are bound to take charge of their own destiny as they have done many times in the past.

To add fuel to the fire, Pakistan's economy is in dire straits. Last year, the International Monetary Fund instituted yet another bailout and released \$6 billion to Islamabad in November. Over the last three years, the Pakistani rupee has fallen by 30.5% against the US dollar. Inflation and unemployment are running high. In such circumstances, anti-India rhetoric is useful, desirable and essential to keep the country together.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan has repeatedly condemned India's "descent into fascism" and claimed that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the BJP's parent organization, of being Nazi-inspired entities. This puts pressure on Khan's government and his military backers to act against such a toxic neighbor and evil enemy. The trouble for Khan and his delusional friends in Islamabad is that state coffers have little money to fund conflict with a far more prosperous and numerous India. Khan and co are riling up a mob that they are bound to disappoint. The last-ditch effort to keep Pakistan together would be war with India and, if Islamic radicals were to seize power in Islamabad, the risk of nuclear war would only turn too real.

Whether conflict with India is conventional or nuclear will be determined by circumstances in the future. It is clear that the Taliban have unleashed ethnic nationalism not only in Afghanistan but also in neighboring Central Asian states. Inevitably, the Pashtuns in Pakistan will be infected by that sentiment as well, especially as Islamabad leads the country to economic and military disaster. The scenario Peters conjured of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier tribes reuniting with their Afghan brethren and creating Pashtunistan would then come true. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan would no longer be the same again.

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Did Digital Media Retire the Sex Tape?

Ellis Cashmore
February 01, 2022

With a seemingly endless supply of sexualized content available online, porn has largely lost its power to thrill or disgust.

Does anything capture the cultural changes of the late 1990s as perfectly as the sex tape? Turning what was once a deeply intimate and personal experience into a public

exhibition that could be endlessly reproduced and consumed by anybody interested, the sex tape expressed two key shifts. The first was the disappearance of what used to count as privacy. Today, we think nothing of sharing our innermost thoughts and behavior with people we don't even know or, rather, we do know, but only remotely (that's no contradiction either).

The second was the legitimization of voyeurism. What was at one time regarded as an unwholesome and indecent fascination with other people's affairs is now considered conventional. In fact, the more transgressive outlook is to be nonchalant.

The new Disney+ mini series "Pam & Tommy" dramatizes an infamous leaked sex tape involving Pamela Anderson and her then-husband, Tommy Lee, who still plays drums for the band Mötley Crüe. Anderson was starring in Baywatch, a TV series that ran from 1989 until 2001. The show was about a team of lifeguards on a Los Angeles beach and became a showcase for Anderson, who featured in the series from 1992 to 1997 before moving into film.

Anderson married Lee in March 1995. It seemed a marriage made in heaven. Well, in Cancún, Mexico, to be exact. The newlyweds were sensibly undressed in beachwear, Lee's splendidly inked torso in full view of the media. By the end of the year, Anderson announced she was pregnant. But heaven had an unwanted visitor.

Private Lives Made Public

There were rumors about a videotape of Anderson and Lee in sexual congress. That such a thing existed surprised no one. The couple seemed blissfully loved-up. But what surprised many was that people were discussing it as if it were a public event. It later became known that the videotape had been stolen from the couple's California home while they were honeymooning and that the thief,

a dissatisfied contractor who had done some work at their house, was seeking to release the tape in an instance of what we'd now call revenge porn.

This was the mid-1990s, remember. Today, he would have immediately uploaded the recording and gotten millions of views within minutes.

Anderson and Lee were, it seems, genuinely upset by the prospect of having their private lives turned inside out. Neither had anything to gain. Lee's band had six successful albums, and Anderson was borderline iconic, her signature red swimsuit emblematic of the time. Had the tape gained a wider audience, NBC, the TV network, would probably have dropped her from the show amid protest from their advertisers and several indignant church organizations.

For comparison, in predigital 1988, Rob Lowe's career temporarily cratered after the media got hold of a recording of the actor in a threesome with a woman who was later revealed to be 16 and another woman in her 20s. After a 10-year absence, Lowe made a Lazarus-like recovery when he got a part in "The West Wing," a show that restored him. Of course, Lowe was a man.

Lowe's recovery is one way of imagining how Anderson's career might have gone had the tape been quickly and widely distributed. Another way is to remember Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" of 2004. She had several contracts canceled after a tumult of complaints about her appearance in the halftime Super Bowl show in which she exposed her breast. Her partner in the stunt was Justin Timberlake, whose career suffered no comparably ill effects.

Also in 2004, a similar sex tape featuring Paris Hilton and her partner Rick Salomon had the opposite effect. It propelled Hilton to global notoriety and consequent stardom. Hilton was a woman, but, unlike Anderson or Jackson, she did

not have a successful career in show business. Salomon was relatively unknown and, perhaps paradoxically, later married — and I am not making this up — Anderson (though only for a year).

A sex tape also functioned as a career propellant for Hilton's one-time friend, Kim Kardashian. Again, unlike Anderson, but a lot like Hilton, Kardashian had no known acting or singing talents and belonged to what was then the emerging class of celebrities who were well-known for being followed avariciously by the media. Kardashian existed as an internet life force and a presence in a reality TV series. Halfway through the first decade of the century, this was sufficient to guarantee her a spot high on the A-list.

There were several differences between Anderson's experience and those of Hilton and Kardashian. For a start, audiences already knew Anderson and realized she needed a sex tape circulating about as much as a funeral wreath. Hilton and Kardashian, on the other hand, were best known as socialites, people who dress well, inhabit fashionable environments and are fond of premieres. All three women acted as if they were affronted, outraged and embarrassed by the leaks, but only one of them sounded credible.

Has Porn Lost Its Appeal?

There was another big difference. When Anderson's tape appeared, the internet was still in its infancy and without YouTube, which launched in 2005, there was no obvious conduit for publishing. Consent and exploitation may sound old-fashioned today, but, in the 1990s, they were still relevant. Even by the early 21st century, the lack of online regulation had not been realized as the major problem it later became.

Kardashian herself stress-tested the internet's limits in 2016 when she posted naked selfies, her

modesty protected only by censor bars. In the same year, OnlyFans launched an online platform specializing in what was then seen as risqué material. Its majority owner Leo Radvinsky's background was in porn. It's now one of the fastest-growing websites, according to Ofcom, second only to Pornhub for streaming this type of erotica.

Tumblr appeared to buck the trend when it banned adult content in late 2018. Its traffic dropped and it was sold a year later for a modest \$3 million, having been valued at \$1.1 billion in 2013.

What about us? Did we change too? Our capacity to respond, appreciate or be repelled by aesthetic influences is not fixed. Perhaps we were more likely to be offended or shocked when the Anderson tape became available, less so by the later exposures and hardly at all by OnlyFans' output. Porn has largely lost some of its power to thrill or disgust. Our sensitivity to images of others having sex couldn't have remained unchanged with so much of it readily available online, could it?

There hasn't really been anything shocking since the original Kardashian transmission. Can you imagine if anyone tried it today? Audiences would hardly be able to contain their indifference. With the possible exception of Britain's seemingly indestructible, multi-purpose Katie Price, surely no one would attempt it, for fear of being ridiculed.

Our fascination with what other people do in their not-yet-made-public moments is what drove reality TV to its preeminent position as the century's most popular genre, and I think its form, style and subject matter justify calling it a genre. Maybe this prurient streak has always been in us, though I'm inclined to believe the captivation was animated and encouraged by TV's ingenuity; by coaxing drama from documentary, TV cameras

made privacy entertaining. Every one of us became eavesdroppers without any of the guilt typically associated with being a peeping tom. Maybe that's why watching sex tapes, or their digital equivalents, isn't so exciting anymore. Those pangs of conscience were probably part of the frisson.

Like anything else that's banned, the prohibition is part of porn's appeal. The instant you make it legit, you reduce its attraction. While #MeToo and other movements that fight the objectification and degradation of women would find this irony hard to accept, there is logic in rinsing off porn's dirt and making it a bit more respectable — and a bit less stimulating.

Anderson, now 54, would probably not accept any responsibility for the growth or sanitization of porn and almost certainly not want her legendary tape viewed again after nearly three decades. And if it were, it would register only historical interest rather than titillation. But in the 1990s, Anderson was riding the zeitgeist, however unwittingly and, perhaps, with help from her private misfortune, changing its direction.

*[Ellis Cashmore's "The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson" will be published by Bloomsbury in May.]

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Britain's Still Got It

Atul Singh, Martin Plaut
February 02, 2022

Since 1945, the UK has survived many crises to remain one of the world's top economies and has the strength to overcome its latest crisis.

Since Brexit in 2016, the United Kingdom's growth rate has been poor. Inflation is at its highest rate in 30 years. In December 2021, it had risen to 5.4%. Wages have failed to keep up and, when we factor in housing or childcare costs, the cost of living has been rising relentlessly.

COVID-19 has not been kind to the economy. Rising energy prices are putting further pressure on stretched household budgets. To stave off inflation, the Bank of England is finally raising interest rates, bringing an end to the era of cheap money. Payroll taxes are supposed to go up in April to repair public finances.

The Resolution Foundation is predicting that "spiralling energy prices will turn the UK's cost-of-living crisis into a catastrophe" by spring. The UK's 2022 budget deficit will be larger than all its G-7 peers except the US. The beleaguered Boris Johnson government finds itself in a bind. At a time of global inflation, it has to limit both public borrowing and taxes. Unsurprisingly, there is much doom and gloom in the air.

We Have Seen This Movie Before

Since the end of World War II, the UK has experienced many crises of confidence. One of the authors move to the country in 1977. Back then, the Labour Party was in power. James Callaghan was prime minister, having succeeded Harold

Wilson a year earlier. The British economy was the fifth-largest in the world but was buffeted by crises. In 1976, the government had approached the International Monetary Fund (IMF) when, in the words of Richard Roberts, “Britain went bust.”

From 1964 to 1967, the United Kingdom experienced “a continuous sterling crisis.” In fact, the UK was “the heaviest user of IMF resources” from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s. The 1973 oil crisis spiked energy costs worldwide and pushed the UK into a balance of payments crisis. Ironically, it was not the Conservatives led by Margaret Thatcher but Labour led by Callaghan that declared an end to the postwar interpretation of Keynesian economics.

In his first speech as prime minister and party leader at the Labour Party conference at Blackpool, Callaghan declared: “We used to think you could spend your way out of a recession and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting government spending. I tell you in all candour, that option no longer exists.” After this speech, the Callaghan government started imposing austerity measures.

Workers and unions protested, demanding pay rises. From November 1978 to February 1979, strikes broke out across the UK even as the country experienced its coldest winter in 16 years. This period has come to be known as the Winter of Discontent, a time “when the dead lay unburied” as per popular myth because even gravediggers went on strike.

In 1979, Thatcher won a historic election and soon instituted economic policies inspired by Friedrich von Hayek, the Austrian rival of the legendary John Maynard Keynes. Thatcher’s victory did not immediately bring a dramatic economic turnaround. One major industry after another continued to collapse. Coal mines closed despite a historic strike in 1984-85. Coal, which

gave work to nearly 1.2 million miners in 1920 employed just 1,000 a century later.

Throughout the 1970s, the UK was dubbed “the sick man of Europe.” People forget now that a key reason the UK joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 was to make the economy more competitive. Between 1939 and the early 1990s, London lost a quarter of its population. Yet London and indeed the UK recovered from a period of crisis to emerge as a dynamic economy. Some credit Thatcher but there were larger forces at play.

There Is Life in the Old Dog Yet

Last week, one of the authors met an upcoming politician of India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). A strong nationalist, he spoke about the importance of Hindi, improving India’s defense and boosting industrial production. When the conversation turned to his daughter, he said that he was sending her to London to do her A-levels at a top British school.

This BJP leader is not atypical. Thousands of students from around the world flock to the UK’s schools and universities. British universities are world-class and train their students for a wide variety of roles. Note that the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca were able to develop a COVID-19 vaccine with impressive speed. This vaccine has since been released to more than 170 countries. This is hardly surprising: Britain has four of the top 20 universities in the world — only the US has a better record.

Not only students but also capital flocks to the UK. As a stable democracy with strong rule of law, the United Kingdom is a safe haven for those seeking stability. It is not just the likes of Indian billionaires, Middle Eastern sheikhs and Russian oligarchs who put their wealth into the country. Numerous middle-class professionals choose the

UK as a place to live, work and do business in. Entrepreneurs with a good idea don't have to look far to get funding. Despite residual racism and discrimination, Britain's cities have become accustomed to and comfortable with their ethnic minorities.

Alumni from top universities and skilled immigrants have skills that allow the UK to lead in many sectors. Despite Brexit, the City of London still rivals Wall Street as a financial center. Companies in aerospace, chemical and high-end cars still make the UK their home. British theater, comedy, television, news media and, above all, football continue to attract global attention.

Napoleon Bonaparte once purportedly called the UK "a nation of shopkeepers." There is an element of truth to this stereotype. The British are a commercially savvy, entrepreneurial and business-friendly bunch. One author knows a dealer who trades exclusively in antique fans and a friend who specializes in drinks that you can have after a heavy night. The other has a friend who sells rare Scotch whisky around the world and an acquaintance who is running a multibillion insurance company in India. Many such businesses in numerous niches give the British economy a dynamism and resilience that is often underrated. Everything from video gaming (a £7-billion-a-year industry) to something as esoteric as antique fan dealing continues to thrive.

The UK also has the lingering advantage of both the Industrial Revolution and the British Empire. Infrastructure and assets from over 200 years ago limit the need for massive capital investment that countries like Vietnam or Poland need. Furthermore, the UK has built up managerial experience over multiple generations. Thanks to the empire, English is the global lingua franca and enables the University of Cambridge to make money through its International English Language Testing System. Barristers and solicitors continue

to do well thanks to the empire's export of common law. Even more significantly, British judges have a reputation for impartiality and independence: they cannot be bribed or coerced. As a result, the UK is the premier location for settling international commercial disputes.

In 1977, the UK was the world's fifth-largest economy. In 2022, 45 years later, it is still fifth, although India is projected to overtake it soon. The doom and gloom of the 1970s proved premature. The same may prove true in the 2020s. The economy faces a crisis, but it has the strength and track record to bounce back. The UK still remains a jolly good place to study, work, invest and live in.

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Since the Start of the Pandemic, Americans Are Drinking Too Much

Jennifer Wider
February 03, 2022

Over the course of the pandemic, alcohol use in the US has reached concerning levels.

Over the last two years, the United States witnessed a steep increase in alcohol use among adults. According to research from the Journal of the American Medical Association, those aged 30 and over experienced a 14% increase, with women seeing the steepest rise in heavy drinking — a whopping 41% during the pandemic. The research also highlighted the fact that overdose and relapse rates rose among those who had pre-existing addictive conditions.

There is a multitude of factors that contributed to the increase in alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, anxiety and depression rose dramatically among the general population, and alcohol consumption often increases for those who use it as a way to cope. “Stress and boredom likely were main drivers for a substantial increase in alcohol intake,” explains Dr. Jagpreet Chhatwal, associate director of the Massachusetts General Hospital’s Institute for Technology Assessment and assistant professor at Harvard Medical School.

Measures that were designed to help businesses stay afloat during the pandemic may have also affected drinking habits. According to Chhatwal, “cocktails-to-go laws that allowed customers to pick up mixed cocktails at local bars and direct-to-

consumer laws that allowed liquor stores to deliver alcohol directly to homes” point to a potential link between access and consumption.

Regardless of the reason, these numbers are going to translate to significant morbidity and mortality rates for Americans in the future. According to new a study by researchers at Harvard’s Massachusetts General Hospital published in Hepatology, due to the pandemic uptick in alcohol use, there will be close to 20,000 cases of liver failure, 1,000 cases of liver cancer and 8,000 deaths over the next two decades.

Addressing this pressing issue will be complicated in a country that has long glamorized the use of alcohol among its population. From Super Bowl advertisements to film and music references, alcohol has long been associated with celebration, letting loose and having a good time. Consuming alcohol, even excessively, is normalized to the point that it is integrated into daily life on a regular basis: after-work happy hours, relaxing at home, birthdays, weddings, sporting events, etc. Alcohol has become so fused into the fabric of American society that in 2019, the industry was already worth over \$250 billion.

Putting a positive spin on alcohol is dangerous because it creates the mirage that there are no negative consequences on a person’s physical or mental health, which is both untrue and potentially harmful. “Not everyone is aware of the safe drinking limits or realizes when to stop,” says Chhatwal. Excessive drinking can cause a myriad of health problems including high blood pressure, heart attacks, stroke, increase the risk for cancer, liver and GI problems, a weakened immune system, depression and anxiety as well as socialization issues and job loss.

In a country where more than 14 million American adults 18 years and older had a clinical alcohol use disorder, according to statistics from

National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the challenge will be raising awareness, confronting a booming business model and reevaluating new laws that made alcohol more accessible during the pandemic.

In Chhatwal’s opinion, “One of the foremost steps is to create awareness about the risk of an increase in alcohol consumption, especially high-risk drinking among women and minority populations who are more vulnerable.” He also stressed the importance of enlisting primary care providers to do more extensive screening for alcohol consumption patterns. There is also an obligation to take a hard look at new laws: “We need to evaluate the effect of cocktail-to-go and direct-to-consumer laws — if such laws contribute to increased drinking then there is a need to make policy-level changes.”

*[The Wider Lens provides commentary on trending stories in the world of health, covering a wide variety of topics in medicine and health care.]

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Truths, Not Myths, About Pakistan's Founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah

Sanjeev Chopra, Atul Singh
February 04, 2022

A magisterial biography of Pakistan’s founder by noted scholar Ishtiaq Ahmed sheds new light on the past and provides key lessons for the future.

Many scholars have spilled much ink on Pakistan’s founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. A giant has now waded into the fray and penned a masterpiece.

Ishtiaq Ahmed is a professor emeritus at Stockholm University who first made his name with a pathbreaking book, “The Pakistan Garrison State: Origins, Evolution, Consequences.” He then went on to pen the award-winning “The Punjab Bloodied Partitioned and Cleansed,” a tour de force on the partition of Punjab in 1947. Now, Ahmed has published “Jinnah: His Successes, Failures and Role in History,” a magisterial 800-page tome on Pakistan’s founder.

Ahmed is a meticulous scholar who has conducted exhaustive research on the writings and utterances of Jinnah from the moment he entered public life. Pertinently, Ahmed notes the critical moments when Jinnah “spoke” by choosing to remain quiet, using silence as a powerful form of communication. More importantly, Ahmed has changed our understanding of the history of the Indian subcontinent.

Setting the Record Straight

Until now, scholars like Stanley Wolpert, Hector Bolitho and Ayesha Jalal have painted a pretty picture of Jinnah, putting him on a pedestal and raising him to mythical status. Wolpert wrote, “Few individuals significantly alter the course of history. Fewer still modify the map of the world. Hardly anyone can be credited with creating a nation-state. Muhammad Ali Jinnah did all three.” Both Wolpert and Bolitho argued that Jinnah created Pakistan. Jalal has argued that “Jinnah did not want Partition.” She claims Jinnah became the sole spokesman of Muslims and the Congress Party forced partition upon him.

Jalal’s claim has become a powerful myth on both sides of the border. In this myth, the Congress in general and India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, in particular opted for partition instead of sharing power with the Muslim League and Jinnah. Jalal makes the case that “Punjab and Bengal would have called the shots” instead of Uttar Pradesh, making the emergence of the Nehru dynasty impossible. Her claim that “the Congress basically cut the Muslim problem down to size through Partition” has cast Jinnah into the role of a tragic hero who had no choice but to forge Indian Muslims into a qaum, a nation, and create Pakistan.

The trouble with Jalal’s compelling argument is that it is not based on facts. She fails to substantiate her argument with even one of Jinnah’s speeches, statements or messages. Ahmed’s close examination of the historical record demonstrates that Jinnah consistently demanded the partition of British India into India and Pakistan after March 22, 1940. Far from the idea of Nehru forcing partition on a reluctant Jinnah, it was an intransigent Jinnah who pushed partition upon everyone else.

Ahmed goes on to destroy Jalal’s fictitious claim that Nehru engineered the partition of both Punjab and Bengal to establish his dynasty. Punjab’s population was 33.9 million, of which 41% was Hindu and Sikh. Bengal’s population was 70.5 million, of which 48% was Hindu. The population of United Provinces (UP), modern-day Uttar Pradesh, was 102 million, of which Hindus formed an overwhelming 86%. When Bihar, Bombay Presidency, Madras Presidency, Central Provinces, Gujarat and other states are taken into account, the percentage of the Hindu population was overwhelming. In 1941, the total Muslim population of British India was only 24.9%. This means that Nehru would have become prime minister even if India had stayed undivided.

Ahmed attests another fact to buttress his argument that Nehru’s so-called dynastic ambitions had nothing to do with the partition. When Nehru died, Gulzarilal Nanda became interim prime minister before Lal Bahadur Shastri took charge. During this time in power, Nehru did not appoint Indira Gandhi as a minister. It was Kumaraswami Kamaraj, a Congress Party veteran, and other powerful regional satraps who engineered the ascent of Indira Gandhi to the throne. These Congress leaders believed that Nehru’s daughter would be weak, allowing them greater say over party affairs than their eccentric colleague Morarji Desai. Once Indira Gandhi took over, she proved to be authoritarian, ruthless and dynastic. By blaming the father for the sins of the daughter, Jalal demonstrates that she neither understands India’s complex demography nor its complicated history.

To get to “the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” about India’s partition, we have to read Ahmed. This fastidious scholar analyzes everything Jinnah wrote and said from 1906 onward, the year Pakistan’s founder entered into public life. Ahmed identifies four stages in Jinnah’s career. In the first, Jinnah began as an

Indian nationalist. In the second, he turned into a Muslim communitarian. In the third, Jinnah transformed himself into a Muslim nationalist. In the fourth and final stage, he emerged as the founder of Pakistan where he is revered as Quaid-i-Azam, the great leader, and Baba-i-Qaum, the father of the nation.

Ahmed is a political scientist by training. Hence, his analysis of each stage of Jinnah's life is informed both by historical context and political theory. Jinnah's rise in Indian politics occurred at a time when leaders like Motilal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Subhas Chandra Bose were also major players in India's political life and struggle for freedom. Jinnah's role in the tortured machinations toward dominion status and then full independence makes for fascinating reading. Ahmed also captures the many ideas that impinged on the Indian imagination in those days from Gandhi's nonviolence, Jinnah's religious nationalism and Nehru's Fabian socialism.

Jinnah's Tortured Journey

As an Indian nationalist, Jinnah argued that religion had no role in politics. His crowning achievement during these days was the 1916 Lucknow Pact. Together with Congress leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Jinnah forged a Hindu-Muslim agreement that "postulated complete self-government as India's goal." That year, Jinnah declared that India was "not to be governed by Hindus, and ... it [was] not to be governed by the Muslims either, or certainly not by the English. It must be governed by the people and the sons of this country." Jinnah advocated constitutionalism, not mass mobilization, as a way to achieve this ideal.

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed at the end of World War I, Indian Muslims launched a mass

movement to save this empire. Among them was Jinnah who sailed to England as part of the Muslim League delegation in 1919 to plead that the Ottoman Empire not be dismembered and famously described the dismemberment of the empire as an attack on Islam.

To support the caliph, Indian Muslim leaders launched the Khilafat Movement. Soon, this turned into a mass movement, which Gandhi joined with much enthusiasm. Indian leaders were blissfully unaware that their movement ran contrary to the nationalistic aspirations of Turks and Arabs themselves.

Later, Islam would emerge as the basis of a rallying cry in Indian politics. The nationalist Jinnah started singing a different tune: He argued that Muslims were a distinct community from Hindus and sought constitutional safeguards to prevent Hindu majoritarianism from dominating. In the 1928 All Parties Conference that decided upon India's future constitution, Jinnah argued that residuary powers should be vested in the provinces, not the center, in order to prevent Hindu domination of the entire country. Ahmed meticulously documents how the British used a strategy of divide and rule, ensuring that the chasm between the Congress and the Muslim League would become unbridgeable.

As India turned to mass politics under Gandhi, Jinnah retreated to England. After a few quiet years there, he returned to India in 1934 and was elected to the Central Legislative Assembly, the precursor to the parliaments of both India and Pakistan. Jinnah argued that there were four parties in India: the British, the Indian princes, the Hindus and the Muslims. He took the view that the Congress represented the Hindus while the Muslim League spoke for the Muslims.

Importantly, Jinnah now claimed that no one except the Muslim League spoke for the Muslims.

This severely undercut Muslim leaders in the Congress. Jinnah had a visceral hatred for the erudite Congress leader Azad, who was half Arab and a classically-trained Islamic scholar with an encyclopedic knowledge of the Quran, the hadith and the various schools of Islamic thought. Furthermore, Azad's mastery of the Urdu language stood unrivaled. He wrote voluminously in this pan-national Muslim lingua franca. In contrast, Jinnah was an anglicized lawyer who wrote in English and spoke poor Urdu.

Jinnah's argument that the Muslim League was the only party that could represent Muslims was not only conceptually flawed, but also empirically inaccurate. Muslims in Bengal, Punjab, Sindh and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) supported and voted for regional political parties, not the Muslim League. In fact, voters gave the Muslim League a drubbing in 1937. This hardened Jinnah's attitude, as did the mass contact program with Muslims that the Congress launched under Nehru. When the Congress broke its gentleman's agreement with the Muslim League to form a coalition government in United Provinces (UP) after winning an absolute majority, Jinnah turned incandescent.

In retrospect, the decision of the Congress to go it alone in UP was a major blunder. After taking office, the Congress started hoisting its flag instead of the Union Jack and disallowed governors from attending cabinet meetings. Many leaders of the Muslim League joined the Congress, infuriating Jinnah. He drew up a list of Congress actions that he deemed threatening to Islam. These included the Muslim mass contact campaign, the singing of Vande Mataram, Gandhi's Wardha Scheme of Basic Education and restrictions on cow slaughter. Jinnah came to the fateful decision that he could no longer truck with the Congress and the die was cast for a dark era in Indian history.

The Two-Nation Champion

In March 1940, Jinnah threw down the gauntlet to the Congress. At a speech in Lahore, he argued that India's unity was artificial, it dated "back only to the British conquest" and was "maintained by the British bayonet." He asserted that "Hindus and Muslims brought together under a democratic system forced upon the minorities can only mean Hindu Raj."

In this speech, Jinnah argued that Hindus and Muslims belonged "to two different civilisations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions." He claimed that Muslims were "a nation according to any definition of a nation, and they must have their homelands, their territory, and their state." Ahmed rightly points out that this speech was Jinnah's open declaration of his politics of polarization. From now on, Jinnah had set the stage for the division of India.

Ahmed also goes into the claims of Chaudhry Sir Muhammad Zafarullah Khan, popularly known as Sir Zafarullah, an Ahmadi leader who was Pakistan's first foreign minister. Khan and his admirers have claimed credit for the Muslim League's Lahore resolution for Pakistan, following Jinnah's historic speech. It turns out that Khan was implicitly supported by British Viceroy Lord Linlithgow who cultivated Khan and extended his tenure as a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. This indicates that Jinnah's bid for Pakistan had the support of a canny Scot who wanted Indian participation in World War II, something the Congress was opposed to without the promise of postwar independence.

While Jalal might trumpet Jinnah as the sole spokesman of the Muslims, the historical record reveals a very different picture. Within a month of Jinnah's Lahore speech, the All India Azad Muslim Conference met in Delhi. Its attendance was five times that of the Muslim League's Lahore

session. This conference opposed partition, repudiated Jinnah's two-nation theory and made a strong case for a united India.

Others argued for a united India too. Ahmed tells us that Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the towering Dalit social reformer who drafted India's constitution, reversed his position on partition and on Pakistan. After the Lahore resolution, Ambedkar wrote a 400-page piece titled "Thoughts on Pakistan" that advised Hindus to concede Pakistan to the Muslims. By 1945, Ambedkar had come to the view that "there was already a Pakistan" in the Muslim-majority states. As a Dalit, he also turned against the hierarchy in the Muslim community where the high-born Ashrafs lorded it over the low-born Ajlafs and women had very limited rights.

Jinnah took the haughty view that Muslims were not a large minority but a political nation entitled to self-determination. In 1941, he claimed that Muslims "took India and ruled for 700 years." So, they were not asking the Hindus for anything. He was making the demand to the British, the rulers of India. Jinnah might have been arrogant but he had a genius for propaganda. He constantly fed the press with stories about impending dangers to Muslims once the Congress took over, fueling insecurities, distrust and division.

While Jinnah was ratcheting up the pressure, the Congress made a series of political blunders. It vacated the political space when World War II broke out in 1939. Gandhi idealistically opposed the British while Jinnah collaborated with them, extracting valuable concessions from his colonial masters. When Field Marshal Archibald Wavell took over from Lord Linlithgow as the Viceroy, Jinnah wormed himself into Wavell's confidence. It helped that Wavell despised the anti-colonial Congress. Ahmed observes that this British general "wanted to ensure that Britain's military interest in the form of bases and manpower was secured."

Jinnah offered him that option while Gandhi did not.

Jinnah was bloody-minded and shrewd but he was also plain lucky. Many of those who could have contested his leadership simply passed away. Sir Mian Muhammad Shafi, an aristocrat from the historic city of Lahore and a founder of the Muslim League, died in 1932. Sir Mian Fazl-i-Husain, a founding member of Punjab's Unionist Party who served as counselor to the British Viceroy, died in 1936. Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan, the towering premier of Punjab, died in December 1942. Allah Baksh Soomro, the premier of Sindh, was assassinated in 1943. Sir Chhotu Ram, the co-founder of the National Unionist Party that dominated Punjab, died in 1945. With such giants of Punjab and Sindh dying, the Gujarati Jinnah gained an opportunity to dominate two Muslim-majority provinces where the Muslim League had struggled to put down roots.

Last-Ditch Efforts to Preserve the Indian Union

It was not all smooth sailing for Jinnah, though. In 1945, the Conservatives led by Winston Churchill lost the general election. Clement Attlee formed a Labour government committed to India's independence. By this time, Jinnah was in full-fledged confrontation mode. When Wavell convened the 1945 Simla Conference, Jinnah had insisted that the Congress could not appoint any Muslim representatives. As a result, the conference failed and the last chance for a united independent India went up in smoke.

Ironically, Jinnah wanted the partition of India but opposed the partition of Punjab and Bengal. In December 1945, Wavell observed that if Muslims could have their right to self-determination, then non-Muslim minorities in Muslim areas could not be compelled to remain in Pakistan against their will. Therefore, the partition of Punjab and Bengal

was inevitable. Jinnah would only get his moth-eaten version of Pakistan.

By now, the British wanted to leave. The 1946 Naval Uprising shook British rule to the core. Weary after World War II, a revolt by naval ratings, soldiers, police personnel and civilians made the British realize that the loyalty of even the armed forces could not be taken for granted. During World War II, large numbers had joined Bose's Indian National Army and fought against the British. After the 1946 uprising, the writing was on the wall. Soon, the Cabinet Mission arrived to discuss the transfer of power from the British government to Indian political leaders. It proposed provinces, groups of provinces and a federal union. The union was to deal only with foreign affairs, defense and communications, and the power to raise finances for these three areas of government activity. The remaining powers were to be vested in the provinces.

Everyone rejected the Cabinet Mission Plan. Jinnah did not get his beloved Pakistan. The Congress was unwilling to accept such a weak federal government. The Sikhs bridled at the prospect of being "subjected to a perpetual Muslim domination." Needless to say, the plan was dead on arrival.

Even as deliberations about the transfer of power were going on, members to the Constituent Assembly were elected during July-August. Of a total of 296 seats for the British provinces, the Congress won 208, the Muslim League 73 and independents 15. British India also had 584 princely states that had a quota of 93 seats in the Constituent Assembly. These states decided to stay away from the assembly until their relationship with independent India became clearer. This turned out to be a historic blunder.

By now, the British had decided to leave. On August 24, 1946, Wavell made a radio

announcement that his government was committed to Indian independence and that an interim government would be formed under the leadership of Nehru and that the Muslim League would be invited to join it. Initially, no member of the Muslim League was in the first interim government formed on September 2, but five members joined this government on October 26 that remained in power until India and Pakistan emerged as two independent states.

The Run-up to Partition

Before the two main parties joined the same coalition government, riots broke out across the country. Jinnah called for Direct Action Day on August 16, 1946. Calcutta, now known as Kolkata, experienced the worst violence. SciencesPo estimates that 5,000 to 10,000 died, and some 15,000 were wounded, between August 16 and 19.

At the time, Bengal was the only province with a Muslim League government, whose chief minister was the controversial and colorful Hussain Suhrawardy. During the "Great Calcutta Killing," his response was less than even-handed, deepening divisions between Hindus and Muslims. To add fuel to the fire, riots broke out in Noakhali, a part of the Chittagong district now in Bangladesh. In a frenzy of violence, Muslims targeted the minority Hindu community, killing thousands, conducting mass rape, and abducting women to convert them to Islam and forcibly marry them.

As riots spread across the country and British troops failed to control the violence, India stood on the brink of anarchy. On June 3, 1947, the new Viceroy Louis Mountbatten announced India would be independent on August 15, chosen symbolically as the date Imperial Japan surrendered and Japanese troops submitted to his lordship in Southeast Asia two years earlier.

Importantly, independent India was to be partitioned into India and Pakistan. While the border was yet to be demarcated, the contours fell along expected lines. Yet partition came as a bolt from the blue for the Sikhs. In the dying days of the British Empire, this community had created a short-lived empire that died only in 1849. Yet the Sikhs were a minority in Punjab and widely dispersed around the state. The British had co-opted the Sikhs by recruiting them into the army in large numbers. The colonial authorities had given retired soldiers land in colonies they had settled near irrigation canals. These canal colonies were dotted around Punjab and Mountbatten noted that “any partition of this province [would] inevitably divide them.”

Ahmed is critical of the way the British planned the partition of Punjab. They assumed that the transfer of power would be peaceful. Mountbatten trusted the Congress, the Muslim League and the Akali leadership of the Sikhs who promised to control their followers. Evan Meredith Jenkins, the British governor of Punjab, did not. He predicted that “bloodbath was inevitable in Punjab unless there were enough British troops to supervise the transfer of power.” History has proved Jenkins right.

Ahmed’s award-winning earlier work, “The Punjab: Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed” records those macabre days in grim detail. By this time, colonial troops were acting on communal sentiment. In Sheikhpura, the Muslim Baluch regiment participated in the massacre of Hindus and Sikhs. In Jullundur and Ludhiana, Hindu and Sikh soldiers killed Muslims. Even princely states were infected by this toxic communal sentiment. Ian Copland details how troops of Punjab’s princely states, including Patiala and Kapurthala, slaughtered Muslims.

In the orgy of violence that infected Punjab, all sorts of characters from criminals and fanatics to

partisan officials and demobilized soldiers got involved. The state machinery broke down. The same was true in Bengal. As a result, independence in 1947 came at a terrible cost.

Jinnah Takes Charge

Right from the outset, India and Pakistan embarked on different trajectories. Mountbatten remained as governor-general of India, an interim position instituted in 1947 and abolished in 1959 to facilitate the transition to full-fledged Indian rule. In contrast, Jinnah took over as governor-general of Pakistan. This move weakened both Parliament and the prime minister. As the all-powerful head of a Muslim state, Jinnah left no oxygen for the new parliamentary democracy of Pakistan.

Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan, an Oxford-educated aristocrat from UP, took charge as prime minister. Yet it was an open secret that Khan had little authority and Jinnah called all the shots. In India, Rajendra Prasad took charge as the president of the Constituent Assembly of India and the Dalit scholar Ambedkar became the chair of the drafting committee. In contrast, Jinnah was elected unanimously as the president of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan that failed to draft a constitution and was acrimoniously dissolved in 1954.

This assembly might not have amounted to much, but a speech by Jinnah lives on in history books and is a subject of much debate. On August 11, 1947, Jinnah declared: “If you change your past and work together in a spirit that every one of you, no matter to what community he belongs, no matter what relations he had with you in the past, no matter what is his colour, caste, or creed, is first, second, and last a citizen of this State with equal rights, privileges, and obligations, there will be no end to the progress you will make.”

Jinnah summoned his 1916 self that championed Hindu-Muslim unity and blamed the colonization of 400 million souls on internal division. His rhetoric took flight and he claimed that “in course of time all these angularities of the majority and minority communities, the Hindu community and the Muslim community — because even as regards Muslims you have Pathans, Punjabis, Shias, Sunnis and so on, and among the Hindus you have Brahmins, Vashnavas, Khattris, also Bengalees, Madrasis and so on — will vanish.”

Jinnah also made a grand promise to Pakistan’s citizens: “You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place or worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the business of the State.” Toward the end of his speech, Jinnah’s rhetoric soared. He envisioned that “in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus, and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State.”

No scholar has analyzed this speech better than Ahmed. This professor emeritus at Stockholm University points out that Jinnah neither mentions Islam nor secularism as a foundational principle of the state. Instead, Jinnah refers to the clash between Roman Catholics and Protestants in England. It seems this London-trained barrister is looking at the constitutionalism of Merry England as the way forward for Pakistan.

Ahmed makes another astute observation. Jinnah’s speech might have been addressed less to his audience in a rubber stamp assembly and more to his counterparts in the Indian government. Jinnah did not want another 30 to 40 million Muslims from Delhi and UP immigrating to Pakistan, adding even more pressure on an already financially stretched state. If these Muslims were

driven out in retaliation for what was going on to Sikhs and Hindus in West Punjab and East Pakistan (Bangladesh since 1971), then Pakistan could well have collapsed.

Ahmed’s Evaluation of Jinnah

Jinnah excites much emotion in the Indian subcontinent. For some, he is the devil incarnate. For others, he is a wise prophet. Ahmed evaluates Jinnah in the cold light of the day with reason, judgment and, above all, fairness.

Jinnah was indubitably an impressive character with wit, will and vision. He forged a disparate nation of Balochs, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Punjabis and Muhajirs, the Urdu term for refugees in the name of Islam, including those coming from India in the west and Bengalis in the east. However, Jinnah never attained a status worthy of Thomas Carlyle’s heroes. Unlike Gandhi, Jinnah did not come up with a new way to deal with the existing political situation.

Gandhi insisted on ahimsa and satyagraha, non-violence and adherence to truth. He put means before ends. He was a mass leader but was only the first among equals in the Congress Party, which had many towering leaders. Gandhi was outvoted many times and accepted such decisions, strengthening his party’s democratic tradition. On the other hand, Jinnah was determined to be the sole spokesman who put ends before means and did not hesitate to spill blood to achieve his political ambitions.

It is true that Gandhi erred in calling Jinnah a Gujarati Muslim in 1915 when Jinnah would have been preferred to be known as an Indian nationalist. Yet Gandhi genuinely believed that everyone living in India was an Indian and had equal rights as citizens. Jinnah championed the two-nation theory and argued that Muslims in India were a separate nation. For him, religious identity trumped linguistic, ethnic or national identity. Ahmed’s magnum opus might focus on

Jinnah but Gandhi emerges as a true hero in his book.

In the short run, Jinnah succeeded. Pakistan was born. Yet Jinnah also left Pakistan with many of its current problems. He centralized all power, reduced states to the level of municipalities and postponed the drafting of a constitution. Even though Jinnah himself neither spoke his native Gujarati or urbane Urdu fluently, he made Urdu the official language of Pakistan. This infuriated East Pakistan, which eventually achieved independence in 1971. As Atul Singh, Vikram Sood and Manu Sharma point out in an article on Fair Observer, the rise of ethnic nationalism threatens the further disintegration of Pakistan for which Jinnah must take some blame.

Ahmed's book also brings into the spotlight the role of facts, factlets and factoids. His facts are based on sources that are empirically verifiable. Factlets are interesting asides, which have value in themselves but may or may not have a bearing on the meta narrative. Factoids are just plain lies that are repeated so many times that many people start believing in them. The biggest factoid in the Indian subcontinent about the partition is the assertion that a majority of Muslims in British India wanted Pakistan. Another factoid is the belief that the Congress Party was as keen on Partition as the Muslim League. Ahmed's book is strong on facts, keeps the readers interested by providing riveting factlets and demolishes several factoids.

Three Takeaways for Today

Ahmed's masterpiece offers us three important lessons.

First and foremost, facts matter. For a while, myth may obscure facts, narratives might cloud truth, but eventually a scrupulous scholar will ferret out facts. As the English adage goes, "the truth will out sooner or later."

Second, religion and politics may make a heady cocktail but leave a terrible hangover. At some point, things spin out of control, riots break out on the streets, fanaticism takes over, jihadists go berserk and a garrison state emerges with a logic of its own. Such a state can be deep, oppressive and even somewhat effective but is largely disconnected from the needs and aspirations of civil society. Such a state is also unable to create a dynamic economy and most people remain trapped in poverty.

Last but not the least, the zeal of new converts becomes doubly dangerous when religion and politics mix. These new converts can turn into fanatics who outdo their co-religionists. As the adage goes, they seek to be more Catholic than the pope. The noted Punjabi Hindu leader Lala Lajpat Rai's father returned to Hinduism after converting to Islam. Master Tara Singh, the champion of an independent Sikh nation, was born a Hindu but converted to Sikhism in his youth.

Jinnah's grandfather, Premjibhai Meghji Thakkar, was a Bhatia Rajput who converted to Islam after orthodox Hindus excommunicated Thakkar for entering the fishing business. Similarly, Pakistan's national poet Muhammad Iqbal, who studied at Trinity College, Cambridge and the University of Munich, came from a Kashmiri Brahmin family. Iqbal's father, Rattan Lal, was a Sapru who reportedly embraced Islam to save his life and was consequently disowned by his family. Pakistan was not created by a Pashtun like Abdul Ghaffar Khan or a half-Arab, blue-blooded sayyid like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad but by a Rajput and a Brahmin who were recent converts. Ironically, this nation now names its ballistic missiles after Turkish invaders, makes it compulsory for its children to learn Arabic and pretends its roots lie in the Middle East instead of the Indian subcontinent.

*[Ishtiaq Ahmed's book, "Jinnah: His Successes, Failures and Role in History" is published by Penguin Random House and available here. The same book is published in Pakistan by Vanguard Books and is available here.]

[This article incorrectly mentioned that the position of the governor general was created in 1950. At 3.30 pm GMT on February 6, 2022, this mistake was corrected.]

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A Personal Boycott of the Beijing Olympic Games

Gary Grappo
February 08, 2022

Based on its charter, the IOC should have denied China's petition to host the 2022 Winter Games, says Gary Grappo.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the world's largest corporations are allowing the government of China to use the Winter Olympic Games to promote and advance its notion of the superiority of one-party, one-man authoritarian rule, much as was done at the 1936 Nazi-hosted Olympic Games in Berlin.

I'm boycotting these games in Beijing. Doing so does not come easy for me. As a life-long sports enthusiast, I have always looked forward to the Olympics. Watching the world's preeminent athletes compete on the world stage and rooting for my own national team and others who seem to defy the oddsmakers never failed to excite me. As a kid, I even once dreamed of becoming an Olympic competitor myself. (Alas, my 1.7-meter frame was simply not up to the task of throwing the shot put or discus on the world, or any other, stage!)

Here in the United States, NBC television is broadcasting the Winter Olympics, devoting at least six hours per day of coverage. Traditionally, its broadcasts dominate the ratings as Americans gather in front of their TV sets and computer and phone screens to watch and cheer on US athletes. I will be cheering on our athletes, too. But I won't be watching.

The IOC's Charter

I will not watch these games because they betray the very values enshrined in the IOC's charter and its definition of "Olympism." That is, it "seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles." It further states its goal "to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a

view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.”

Based on its charter, the IOC should have flatly denied China’s petition to host the 2022 Winter Games. How could the IOC have been so blind to its values in awarding the games to Beijing? How was it possible to allow China to host the Olympic Games when the government of the People’s Republic of China has systematically persecuted, incarcerated, shackled and tortured up to 2 million Uyghurs, sterilized their women and sought to snuff out their Muslim faith? Uyghurs, a Muslim-majority, Turkic-speaking people, have inhabited China’s western Xinjiang province for at least 1,000 years.

But the suffering of the Uyghurs at the hands of an overbearing, intolerant Beijing isn’t a one-off. The Chinese have been doing largely the same thing for decades to the people of Tibet, effectively carrying out a campaign of cultural genocide.

Several years ago, the world again witnessed China’s notion of “respect for universal fundamental ethical principles” and “promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.” Beijing-directed henchmen attacked the people and institutions of Hong Kong, decimating the last vestiges of democracy in the enclave. The government has been arresting and trying any and all opponents, dissidents, journalists and human rights advocates unwilling to buckle under Beijing’s iron-fisted, authoritarian order.

More recently, the world has observed Beijing turn its aggression to the island of Taiwan, the lone democratic outpost today within China’s one-party, one-man “Asian Reich.” Taiwan presents an unquestionably complex and difficult issue. But the inhabitants of Taiwan have embraced democracy and the freedoms that come with it. Resolving Beijing’s differences with the island and its people with menacing and aggressive behavior

— dozens of mass warplane incursions, repeated threats and belligerent bombast — cannot possibly lead to a solution. Rather, a threatened invasion of the island would not only likely crush its democracy, but also inject enormous instability in Asia and torpedo the global economy in a manner unseen since World War II.

To the IOC, however, none of this mattered. Its president, Thomas Bach, and even UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres traveled to Beijing for the opening ceremony of the games with nary a word about China’s abysmal human rights policies in Xinjiang, Hong Kong or Tibet. Instead, the IOC wants to see another “successful” games, which typically means an Olympics that makes money. Lots of it.

The IOC, NBC and Sponsors

Enter the American media giant, NBC. For exclusive broadcast rights to the Olympics through 2023, the network has paid the IOC \$7.75 billion. That comes out to roughly \$1.8 billion for the Beijing Games alone, or about 20% of the cost of the games. Tragically, revenues trump rights for China and for the IOC.

One would think that with that kind of leverage, NBC and the IOC’s numerous sponsors and advertisers — globally recognized names like Allianz, Toyota, Bridgestone, Panasonic, Coca-Cola, Airbnb, Intel, Proctor & Gamble, Visa, Samsung and others — would have stood up to the IOC, explaining the harm to their brands of awarding the games to Beijing.

And what about NBC itself? The Chinese government has imposed restrictions on journalists covering the games. The sort of 360-type coverage that is traditionally featured in its coverage of the Olympics — not just the events themselves but also the athletes, their lives and backgrounds, the host country and its people — is being

severely restricted. One Dutch journalist has already experienced China's intolerance, having been dragged away while reporting live on camera.

Are the dollar earnings so great that NBC will sacrifice its journalistic ethics and responsibilities, all while other members of the profession suffer under Beijing's crackdown on truth and free journalism?

China is not Nazi Germany. But Germany in 1936 was not yet the depraved hell of human suffering — the tens of millions of destroyed lives of Jews, Slavs, Roma and so many others — that it would become under Nazi rule. But we might have seen it, given the way the Nazis and Adolf Hitler engaged in over-the-top self-promotion and outward, sensational displays of Aryan superiority and Nazi rule.

The IOC, NBC and their many sponsors and advertisers have given China center stage to arrogantly parade and shamelessly hawk its own brand of unyielding, intolerant authoritarian rule. In China, the power of the state, its ruling Communist Party and great leader, XI Jinping, vitiate Olympism's concepts of "social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles" and "basic human dignity."

If they won't recognize this contemptible undertaking for what it is, I will. I will miss the world's best athletes and the great ritual of the world coming together for 17 days to celebrate individual struggle and achievement. I won't be watching these Winter Olympic Games.

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Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Is a Wake-Up Call for Germany

Hans-Georg Betz
February 28, 2022

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, dreams and illusions give way to a new realism in Germany.

Anyone who has ever studied international relations in the United States has been exposed to the so-called Melian dialogue. The Melian dialogue refers to an episode in the Peloponnesian War, pitting the representative of Melos, a small island, against the representatives of Athens. The Athenians, engaged in a war with Sparta, demanded that the Melians submit to their power, join their side and, in the process, get absorbed into the Athenian empire.

In case the Melians refused, the Athenians threatened with complete destruction. The Melians did refuse, pointing out that justice was on their side. In response, the Athenians laid siege on the island, took its main city and, after its surrender, killed every surviving male and sold the women and children into slavery.

Exigencies of Defense

One of the central points of the Melian dialogue is the notion that might makes right, or, as the Athenians put it, "you know as well as we do that

right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” It is a prime example of what in international relations theory is known as realism. Over the past few decades, realism has gone out of fashion, especially in Western Europe — and for good reason. Nobody is eager to live in a Hobbesian world where life is “nasty, brutish and short” — in Western Europe, nobody more so than the Germans.

This, of course, has had a lot to do with Berlin’s position during the Cold War, when Germany was, as the prominent German-American political scientist Peter Katzenstein put it, a semi-sovereign state. During the Cold War period, the Federal Republic of Germany pursued a number of strategies that marked a fundamental break with realism: toward its neighbors to the west, a process of economic integration; toward its neighbors to the east (particularly Poland) a policy of *détente* and reconciliation, which came to be known as *Ostpolitik*.

The idea behind *Ostpolitik* was that rapprochement would ultimately lead to change — *Wandel durch Annäherung*. When, in 1989, the Berlin Wall came down, it appeared that the policy had worked.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was soon followed by the crumbling of the Soviet Union and German unification, which meant that Germany had finally regained its sovereignty — somewhat of a troubling reality, and not only among Germany’s neighbors. In Germany, too, not a few people were worried. They shouldn’t have been. Germany was perfectly adapted to the new times where the “overwhelming exigencies of defence” appeared to have disappeared and where, as the then German minister of defense would put it in 1999, Germany, for the first time in its history, was “only surrounded by friends.”

The end of the Cold War appeared to have ushered in a fundamentally new global reality, informed by interdependence, globalization and the end of history. Here, Germany was poised to play a prominent role as the epitome of a “trading state” and a “civilian power.”

Civilian powers such as Germany rely on what the American international relations theorist Joseph Nye famously called soft power. Soft power comes from the appeal of consumer products (all those sleek BMWs and Mercedes Benzes) and popular culture (TV series like “*Derrick*” and Bundesliga clubs Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund with their millions of fans all over the world), rather than from the barrel of the gun.

Civilian powers scale down their military. After all, a country surrounded by friends has little use for a military that is up to the task of defending the country. Instead, they are tempted to follow the lead of the Danish Progress party whose late leader proposed in the early 1970s to replace the country’s ministry of defense with an answering machine with the recorded message of “We surrender” in Russian.

Mugged by Reality

On February 24, Germany got mugged by reality and was caught flat-footed. In the face of a Melian scenario, Germany is like the emperor with his new clothes. Over the recent days, a growing number of articles have appeared exposing the sorry state of the German military and lamenting its lack of preparedness. Some of the stories would make for great slapstick comedy were they not describing a pathetic reality.

The German soldiers stationed in Lithuania, for instance, not only lack warm jackets but even underwear, or so Germany’s defense ombudsperson has charged. At the same time, the

commander of Germany's army went public, stating that the military "stands more or less naked." His remarks led France's center-left daily Liberation to claim that "the generals of the Bundeswehr were ready to lay down the arms at the first Russian attack." Another French newspaper charged that the German military, because of "deficient gear and the lack of flexibility of its soldiers," was not in a position to efficiently support its allies in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

None of this is new. It has all been known for years. In late 2018, for instance, Germany's weekly Die Zeit raised alarm noting that only a third of the new tanks, fighter jets and helicopters the military had received were ready to use. Four years later, one of Germany's major dailies, the Süddeutsche Zeitung, reported that the military continued to suffer from massive problems. The German navy, for instance, could count on less than 30% of its ships to be completely ready for action.

A few days before the Russian invasion on February 24, the Ukrainian government asked the Germans for anti-tank missile systems. Berlin declined. The reason is simple: Even if it had wanted to, Germany would not be in a position to supply the weapons — they were not available.

No matter the outcome of the war in Ukraine, Germany will be collateral damage. For too long, the Germans have believed that interdependence and constructive engagement would fundamentally change international relations. This view, however, is based on theoretical constructs that ignore some of the fundamentals informing international relations: the legacy of history and, closely linked to it, emotions. Europe's history abounds with grievances and resentment, more often than not triggering intense passions. The Balkan wars of the 1990s should have served as a reminder. Instead, they were dismissed as a remnant of a bygone era.

There is another lesson to be drawn from this disaster. A few years ago, two American political scientists coined the phrase "weaponizing interdependence." The authors used network theory to explain how "coercing actors could exploit interdependence and why targeted actors would find it difficult to evade coercion attempts." Germany is a textbook case. For decades now, it has increased its dependence on Russian inputs, particularly natural gas and oil.

The controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline is only the latest example of this. Dependence on Russian commodities was once again informed by the same belief in the power of interdependence to engage the other side in a way beneficial to both. But, once again, the whole thing is in shambles, and Germany is caught in the trap largely of its own making.

Time for a Change

But the times there are changing, and rapidly so. Over the weekend, Germany agreed to cut Russian banks off from the SWIFT payment system, announced it would deliver anti-tank missiles to Ukraine (leaving some observers wondering how they suddenly materialized) and sent a military contingent to be stationed in Slovakia.

What is much more significant, however, is the fundamental change in tone with regard to Russia, its assault on Ukraine and Germany's response. The two parties that in the past have been most indulgent toward Vladimir Putin's regime, the Social Democrats and the Left, have made a complete volte-face, condemning Moscow's aggression.

At the same time, there has been growing recognition on the side of Germany's left-wing intellectuals that the "times of illusion" are over, that the notion of "wehrhafte Demokratie" — a democracy that can defend itself — only has

meaning if it is backed by real forces, and that this will require not only resources but a fundamental change of mindset. The reality is that Germany's allies will no longer allow Germans to evoke the horrors of the Nazi regime as an explanation for their neglecting its defensive capabilities.

Given the new geostrategic realities, what Western Europe needs, and desperately so, is a strong German military. It must be relieved that on Sunday, Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced an allocation of €100 billion (\$112 billion) toward the 2022 military budget, aiming to raise defense spending to over 2% of GDP set out in NATO guidelines going forward; last year, it stood at 1.53%.

Finally, it seems to dawn in Germany that Putin's aggression is driven as much by historical revisionism and revanchism as by the boundless drive to snuff out and eradicate Ukraine's civil society and democratic spirit, turning it into a second Belarus, a Russia en miniature. It is hardly a coincidence that the invasion of Ukraine started almost to the day of the anniversary of the end of Viktor Yanukovich's pro-Moscow regime in February 2014.

The only one who has remained steadfast in his Putinophilism is former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who has always prided himself in his close relationship with the Russian autocrat. Whereas Austria's ex-chancellor, Christian Kern, and the former French premier, François Fillon, resigned from lucrative posts on the boards of Russian enterprises, Schröder refused to follow suit, much to the embarrassment of the German Social Democrats.

But then, Schröder belongs to the same generation as the Putins, Trumps and Xis of this world, old men living in an alternative reality who would like nothing more than to turn back the clock. In Germany, at least, dreams and illusions

have given way to a new realism, one that is likely to have profound repercussions not only for Germany but for Europe in general.

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The Unthinkable: War Returns to Europe

Gary Grappo
March 01, 2022

The future of democracy in the world now depends on the courage and endurance of Ukrainian defenders and on the economic and financial power of the West.

War has returned to the European continent. President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine is more than a Russian war on one nation. It is a war on the West and everything the West represents — its democracy, rule of law, liberty and the rules-based international world order it has established, largely as a result of America's military power and the combined economic might of the United States, the European Union and various like-minded nations.

Superficially, one might look at the start date of this war as February 24, when Russian forces invaded Ukraine. In fact, President Putin declared his war on the West 15 years ago, when he addressed the Munich Security Conference, lambasting the US and its allies for overstepping boundaries, unsettling global order and threatening Russia itself. He was especially sharp in his criticism of the US invasion of Iraq and NATO expansion to include the countries of the former Soviet bloc.

Putin's Long-Declared War Against the West

One year later, in the summer of 2008, Putin launched his first military campaign. Russian forces invaded Georgia, another aspiring democracy, following its (and Ukraine's) application to NATO. He had drawn his line and made clear he was prepared to resist. In 2014, following the ouster of the pro-Moscow President Viktor Yanukovich during the Maidan Revolution (aka Euromaidan and Revolution of Dignity), Russian forces — disguised by the absence of uniform — invaded and captured the Crimea region in southern Ukraine, subsequently annexing it.

Shortly afterward, Putin threw his support behind Russian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Donbas in eastern Ukraine, on the border with Russia. That conflict continued to fester through last week's invasion.

As he rationalized in Munich, NATO was advancing east, encircling and threatening Russia. In fact, it was the nations of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus moving West, adopting the Western model of democracy and free economy, and electing to formally associate with them. Their rationale has been made ever clearer now: They feared Russian aggression and sought the security of NATO and the prosperity of the EU. Russia and Putin's model of one-man rule, fear and

intimidation, repression and stymied economic opportunity held no attraction, and even less under some misguided, fever-dream version of a resurrected Russian empire.

It may have been easy to compartmentalize Putin's antagonism as directed solely at former eastern bloc states on Russia's periphery. But Ukraine and Georgia have always been merely the staging grounds of Putin's assault on the West. His calculation was that a seemingly enfeebled US, weakened abroad and divided at home, and a fractious and divisive NATO would not respond. They would acquiesce to his vision of a neo-Russian empire and the recently resurgent notion — also supported by China — of the spheres of influence of great powers. He also calculated that Ukraine, after its failure to defend Crimea or defeat the Russian-backed separatists in Donbas, would fold in the face of Russia's superior military might.

Putin doubtlessly also realized that Russia is a declining power. The base for its economy, oil and natural gas, while still much in demand, is facing a declining shelf life as advanced countries turn rapidly to renewable energy technologies. Enormously rich in natural resources and even richer in human ingenuity, it is a one-dimensional economy, making it dependent on the vagaries of commodity markets to keep its budget in balance. Its population has been declining over the last decades and is aging. Russia's status in the global power alignment is fading, and Putin knows it. Now was the time to strike.

Putin's whining aside, the invasion of Ukraine was never about the West's threat to Russia. Democracies go to war only when threatened. In fact, Putin was crystal clear in his purpose when he belittled Ukraine and dismissed its independence in a speech on February 21, a nakedly transparent declaration of Russian expansionism. Holding up NATO as the aggressive villain and Ukraine as an

inherent and natural part of greater Russia was a red herring that earned no perch outside his most ardent apologists.

Calculating Putin Miscalculates

The reputedly calculating Putin underestimated his immediate enemy, the Ukrainian people, and his ultimate enemy, the West. Nor did he grasp the dimensions of the new kind of war that would result when great powers enter the fray in an overwhelmingly interdependent world. His war has all the signs not only of a hot war but also the Cold War, an economic war, an exponentially more expansive information war than he could have imagined, and a cyberwar.

All will claim casualties across the map, most especially in his own country and Ukraine. Importantly, Russia's vaunted propaganda engine may prove no match for the millions of Ukrainians with cell phones and the hundreds of millions cell phone users around the world supporting them.

But the economic disruption of the unprecedented sanctions imposed by the rest of the world's economic powers, save China, suggests that people everywhere will suffer to some degree. Financial flows are massively displaced, most seriously for a Russia that has been effectively cut out of global financial markets. Note the massive falls in Russian financial markets and the Russian ruble, the clearest signs of an economy in freefall as investors and consumers rush to cash out and then run for the exits.

Even the massive \$630 billion in reserves Putin had thought he was so clever in amassing to blunt the anticipated sanctions have become a dead asset. No one will take his dollars, euros, yen or Swiss francs, not even his gold; they're all toxic now.

Oil and grain markets have been colossally disrupted. Import-dependent nations, both developed as well as poor, will pay much higher prices, leading to increased inflation and hardship. We should also expect other secondary effects from the war and sanctions.

Ukraine has become the proving ground for democracy. Can the immense financial and economic powers amassed by the world's democracies counter the brute force military power of one country? Nine of the 10 largest economies in the world are democracies, China the lone exception; Russia ranks 12th.

Democracies run the world's financial systems from SWIFT to the global financial institutions that fall under the UN, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. The US dollar dominates global financial transactions and national reserves. Money has often determined wars' winners in the past, but never one on the scale of this one, especially when the antagonists wield nuclear weapons.

It may all fall to the courage and resilience of the valiant Ukrainians. The longer they can hold out against Russia's onslaught, already fraught with unanticipated planning, logistical and tactical problems and questionable troop morale, the more unbearable the economic costs will become for Russia.

Ukraine possesses some of the world's largest areas of super-rich and fertile black earth. The world is hoping it may also prove to be the perfect soil for democracy to flourish.

*[An earlier version of this article stated that for "the first time since 1945," war had returned to Europe. Updated March 2, 2022, at 15:00 GMT.]

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Is Bosnia-Herzegovina Next on Russia's Radar?

Emir Hadzikadunic
March 10, 2022

Could the vulnerable Balkan state become Vladimir Putin's next target?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised fears among many Bosnians that their vulnerable state could also become a target. Like Ukraine and Georgia, both now having suffered Russia's military intervention, Bosnia and Herzegovina too has NATO membership aspirations that infuriate Moscow. In Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina's Serb-dominated entity that, like the breakaway regions of Donbas, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, is opposed to NATO, Vladimir Putin's prospects are of the highest geopolitical value, namely securing a loyal proxy ready to do Moscow's bidding.

The Russian president has already held numerous official consultations with Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, the latest one taking place in December 2021. During his second consecutive meeting with Putin in the midst of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Dodik shared his unequivocal affiliation with Moscow, saying:

“Naturally, there is no question that we support Russia. We may be a small and modest community, but our voice is loud.” As Russia's current military intervention progressed in Ukraine, Dodik also spoke to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov about the “implementation of agreements” reached during the last meeting with Putin.

Putin's Proxy in Bosnia

In the quarter of a century since the signing of the Dayton Accords, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been the site of occasional political crises but has never come close to military conflict. In recent months, however, Dodik has doubled down on his efforts to tear apart the postwar constitutional order of the country's two constitutive entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. Emboldened by the resurrection of Russia's power, he pressed ahead with his nationalist political agenda aimed at dismantling institutional arrangements that have gradually restored peace and security over the last 25 years. As a result, Dodik was blacklisted by the US government in January this year.

In December 2021, lawmakers loyal to Dodik advanced their secession bid and voted 49-3 in favor of starting a procedure for Republika Srpska to withdraw from central government mechanisms such as common defense, judiciary and intelligence, to name a few. They have also decided that within six months, the government in Banja Luka must recreate its own legislation governing such institutions.

To show it means business, Republika Srpska paraded paramilitary forces on January 9 in a nationalist celebration declared illegal by the constitutional court of Bosnia and Herzegovina; among the participants were the Night Wolves, a black-uniformed group of Russian nationalist pro-Kremlin bikers. On February 10, Republika

Srpska's national assembly adopted the draft version of a law to create a separate judicial system from the rest of the state. Regarding his future plans, Dodik said he won't be daunted by opposition from the Western centers of power, suggesting that Moscow and Beijing will help if the West imposes sanctions.

Notwithstanding Russia's local proxy, fanning existing flames in Bosnia and Herzegovina could be a rational adventure from Putin's viewpoint for additional reasons. First, Serbian and Turkish reactions could fit the wider Russian agenda if this trajectory with opposing power dyads within the Bosnian state takes a turning point.

Second, Putin is aware of the EU's record of conflict management in ex-Yugoslavia, and Bosnia in particular, in the early 1990s. It failed miserably to secure the peace in the heart of Europe, when the EU was a rising star and Russia was at its weakest point. Third, extending the current EUFOR peace mission in Bosnia may be vetoed by Russia at the UN Security Council in November.

It is worth remembering that Bosnia and Herzegovina doesn't have NATO's Article 5 mutual defense guarantee to fall back on, and that President Joe Biden's promise to defend every inch of NATO is meaningless for Sarajevo. Washington's official position on protecting the parameters of the Dayton Agreement is as vague as its strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan.

Serbia and Turkey in the Bosnian Theater

President Putin has many good reasons to count on Serbia to exploit Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal weakness. Belgrade largely relies on Russian weaponry and strong nationalist sentiments with the secessionist movement in Republika Srpska. Serbia's national

defense strategy, officially promoted in late 2019, transcends national boundaries in its content, marking a shift from defensive sovereignty to a more offensive approach.

Serbia's home minister, Aleksandar Vulin, the former defense minister who officially promoted this strategy, often exudes self-congratulatory confidence that the Western Balkans region is there for Serbia's taking. At the ruling Serbian Progressive Party congress in July last year that took place a few months before the joint Serbian-Russian "Slavic Shield" military exercise, Vulin forcefully stated that "Creating the Serbian World, where the Serbs would live and be united, is the task of this generation of politicians."

Serbia has also accelerated military spending at a faster rate for several years now for no rational reason except regional supremacy. According to Global Fire Power, its current defense budget is almost twice that of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo combined. Serbia's reliance on Russian and Chinese military support has also been reinforced. In 2019, it received donations of fighter jets, tanks and armored vehicles from Russia. In 2020, it bought CH92-A drones and FK-3 surface-to-air missiles from China and then purchased, at Putin's suggestion, the Pantsir S-1 air defense system.

It is critical to understand why Serbia is arming so fast: From a realist perspective, its behavior could only become assertive, and more so if Russia's military intervention in Ukraine succeeds.

Turkey is probably the second regional contender to be caught in the Bosnian fire for both domestic and external factors. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Ankara has been projecting soft power throughout the Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, relying on historical, cultural and economic ties. Turkey has

also actively participated in all three peacebuilding missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina: IFOR (1995-97), SFOR (1997-2004) and is currently among EUFOR's 20 contributing countries.

However, in case of conflict, Ankara represents an important geopolitical substitute should EUFOR abandon its commitments or if Russia vetoes its mandate at the Security Council. Western powers have for far too long watched from the sidelines and have practically allowed this trajectory with opposing power dyads within the Bosnian state to take root. Hence, Turkey won't shy away from using its military clout in the region.

The conventional logic of Turkish enmity with Serbia sets Ankara and Moscow on a collision course because Vladimir Putin perceives Republika Srpska and Serbia as natural, historic and strategic allies. However, Russia would not necessarily oppose a Turkish role in the Balkans as long as Ankara's move triggers some cracks within the Euro-Atlantic alliance. It also seems plausible for Turkey and Russia — historically perceived as brothers by the two confronting parties in the Bosnian theater — to test their mediating capacity modeled after the Astana format launched after the Russian and Turkish interventions in Syria.

Given their animosity with Russia or Turkey, some European powers would expectedly oppose their interference in Bosnia and Herzegovina on geopolitical grounds, while the more liberal ones will raise ideological concerns. Speaking on the subject of the priorities of the French presidency of the EU that began on January 1, President Emmanuel Macron assessed that the Western Balkans "is going through new tensions today. History is coming back. Sometimes tragedy is coming back."

Macron also insisted on the "very special responsibility" toward these countries in terms of

fighting external interference. What Macron fears is that extra-regional actors like Russia or Turkey could fill the vacuum, in which case power relations would inevitably become subject to reconfiguration. This scenario is not unfeasible as Russia does not project power in the Balkans for the sake of challenging Turkish interests in the first place. Its prime goal is to replace the existing US-led liberal, institutional and rules-based order with a more anarchic, illiberal and multipolar structure that fits Russia's image.

A Slippery Slope for the EU and US

At first sight, a local collision in Bosnia and Herzegovina would bear a striking resemblance to what transpired in Ukraine in 2013-14. Without full integration into the EU or NATO, Bosnia and Herzegovina is also a vulnerable target, just like Ukraine has proven to be. Bosnia and Herzegovina is also divided along similar geopolitical and domestic lines, between pro-NATO aspirations in Sarajevo and anti-NATO tendencies in Banja Luka.

However, Bosnia and Herzegovina's instability is far more complex than the crisis in Ukraine for one structural reason: It is not in Russia's near abroad but in the European underbelly, which presents both an opportunity and a threat for all opposing sides at the local, regional and international level.

The EU has for some time failed to find a unified response to the Bosnian crisis, let alone taking concrete measures, except increasing EUFOR mission by an additional 500 troops. While some founding member states, including Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, urged sanctions against Milorad Dodik during a recent EU foreign ministers' debate, newer members like Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia oppose them. In fact, some European populist leaders have been

staunch supporters of the Russian proxy in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Croatian President Zoran Milanovic stated recently that he was against the EU imposing sanctions against Dodik, saying that “If someone from Croatia votes for those sanctions, for me they will be a traitor.” Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban offered €100 million (\$110 million) in financial aid to Republika Srpska. Orban also opposed placing EU sanctions on Dodik, signaling an early warning that the EU, as a whole, may be unable to secure a peaceful Bosnia and Herzegovina, which again resonates with the EU’s poor historical record of conflict management in the region.

Hence, one should not exclude a possibility that EUFOR troops could be evacuated from Bosnia and Herzegovina one day altogether, much in the same way the Dutch UNPROFOR battalion was pulled from Srebrenica in July 1995, failing to prevent the Srebrenica genocide from taking place and making a mockery of UN resolutions on safe heavens. Should there be a prospect for this failure being repeated, the EU might decide to pass the buck on to Washington.

In that case, small-nation turmoil and squabbles among Balkan nations could transform into a great-power rivalry. Will President Biden accept that call given his unreadiness for direct confrontation with Moscow? The US would face a choice between realist logic, which is to revert European security to Europeans, or a more liberal and interventionist approach, which is to prevent Russia’s unchecked incursion toward NATO’s eastern border.

There is still time for the US to deflate Republika Srpska’s rebellion and put it back in the political arena. Former Bosnian presidency member Haris Silajdzic recently suggested placing a small NATO brigade in Brcko, the site of fierce

battles during the wars of the 1990s, and a few battalions on the Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbian border. If the US passes the buck back to the EU — which Russia and Serbia will celebrate — the West needs to fasten its seatbelts and brace for impact. More so than the war in Ukraine, a conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina has the capacity to trigger a regrettable European history.

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South Africa’s Enforced Race Classification Mirrors Apartheid

Martin Plaut
March 11, 2022

Despite white rule being eliminated in 1994, every South African is still racially classified by law.

The inability of the African National Congress (ANC) to provide a clean, effective government for South Africans comes as little surprise to anyone who has followed the story. Yet two figures are so astonishing that they really stand out.

The first is 1.2 trillion rand (\$85 billion). It is the estimate of how much money has been lost to corruption. The government's commission, chaired by Justice Ray Zondo, has been unearthing corruption on an industrial scale.

Nelson Mandela himself pointed to this scourge back in 2001, when he remarked: "Little did we suspect that our own people, when they got a chance, would be as corrupt as the apartheid regime. That is one of the things that has really hurt us."

Yet the graft revealed by Zondo has been eye-watering. This is how The Washington Post reported the key finding: "[G]raft and mismanagement reached new heights during the 2009-2018 presidency of Jacob Zuma. While details remain murky, observers estimate that some 1.2 trillion rand (\$85 billion) was plundered from government coffers during Zuma's tenure."

This is a sum that no middle-income country can afford to squander. Many hoped that President Cyril Ramaphosa could rectify the situation, but the glacial pace of his reforms has disappointed many who believed in him.

The other figure is 75%. It is the percentage of youths who are unemployed. While the ANC, and the well-connected elite that run the government, help themselves to taxpayers' cash at will, the young languish without jobs.

Little surprise that the ANC's appeal is fading. The party won fewer than half all votes for the first time when the municipal elections were held in November last year.

Racial Classification in South Africa

Bad as this tale is, at least one could assure friends that state-enforced racial classification is a thing of the past. Gone is the notorious apartheid system

that divided every man, woman and child into four racial subdivisions: "African," "Indian," "colored," "white." One might have assumed that this madness was scrapped when white rule was eliminated in 1994 — or so one might have thought. Yet every South African is still racially classified by law.

Take one case. Anyone wanting to lease a state farm in August 2021 would be warned that: "Applicants must be Africans, Indians or Coloureds who are South African citizens. 'Africans' in this context includes persons from the first nations of South Africa." No "white" South African — no matter how impoverished — would have the right to apply. Poverty is not a criterion; only race is considered. Even young men and women born years after the end of apartheid are excluded.

A complex system known as "broad-based black economic empowerment" (BBBEE) was introduced. Every South African is racially categorized and a system of incentives is applied across government and the private sector. White men face the greatest discrimination, African women the least.

Here is an example of how it applies in one sector. The Amended Marketing, Advertising and Communications Sector Code of 1 April 2016 specifies a black ownership "target of 45% (30% is reserved for black women ownership) which should be achieved as of 31 March 2018. The 45% black ownership target is higher than the 25% target of the Generic Code." To win tenders or contracts, all enterprises must comply with the regulations.

Race Hate

At the same time, South Africa's ethnic minorities face racial abuse and racial threats unchecked by the state. The radical populist Julius Malema made

singing “Kill the Boers” a trademark of his rallies. In this context, the term “Boer,” or farmer, is about as toxic as the n-word is in the American South.

Malema is now on trial. Yet far from the state prosecuting him for stirring up race hate (a crime in South Africa), it was left to an Afrikaans trade union to take him to court. Asked whether he would call for whites to be killed, all Malema would say was that, “we are not calling for the slaughtering of white people ... at least for now.”

The trial has had to be postponed because the prosecutor was so fearful of being ladled a “racist” for bringing the case that she resigned.

Nor are whites Malema’s only target. Malema has attacked South African “Indians” as an ethnic group, accusing them of failing to treat their African employees fairly. “Indians are worse than Afrikaners,” he declared in 2017. In another context, he referred to Indians as “coolies” — possibly the most derogatory term he might have used. Yet the state fails to prosecute him.

One final example. When President Ramaphosa was asked to pick the country’s next chief justice, the public submitted some 500 names. The final four were Justice Mbuyiseli Madlanga, President of the Supreme Court of Appeal Mandisa Maya, Gauteng Judge President Dunstan Mlambo, and Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo. All are fine legal minds. Not one of them is from among the country’s ethnic minorities.

This, despite the fact that some of the most eminent lawyers South Africa ever produced, who fought racial discrimination for years were not African. Men like George Bizos, Joel Joffe, Sydney Kentridge, Ismail Ayob, Edwin Cameron and Bram Fischer would probably not be selected today. Even Arthur Chaskalson, who defended the ANC at the Rivonia trial of 1963 and was chief

justice of South Africa from 2001 to 2005, would probably be excluded.

Fighting Back

Glen Snyman — himself a “colored” or a mixed-race South African — has founded People Against Racial Classification to campaign against discrimination. “The government and private sector should deliver to all South Africans equally and not discriminate on identity,” he argues.

But racial classification has its supporters. Kganki Matabane, who heads the Black Business Council, says that even though “democratic rule is nearly 27 years old, it is still too soon to ditch the old categories,” the BBC reports. “We need to ask: Have we managed to correct those imbalances? If we have not, which is the case — if you look at the top 100 Johannesburg Stock Exchange-listed companies, 75% or more of the CEOs are white males — then we have to continue with them.”

The ANC’s most celebrated document was the Freedom Charter of 1955. It was the statement of core principles of the ANC and its allies and memorably promised that: “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.” With South Africa’s ethnic minorities continuing to face racial discrimination and exclusion from top jobs in government and even in the private sector, it is a promise more honored in the breach than the observance.

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No, the Ban on Russian Athletes Should Not Be Lifted

Hans-Georg Betz
March 15, 2022

International competitions are sources of national pride and national prestige, particularly for countries with autocratic regimes.

In a recent article, Ellis Cashmore raised the provocative question of whether or not we should lift the ban on Russian sport instituted as a result of the invasion of Ukraine. Cashmore advances a number of sensible arguments, most importantly that this ban might turn out to be counterproductive. Instead of coaxing the Russian population to question the neo-imperialist delusions of its "great leader," President Vladimir Putin, it might provoke an in-your-face backlash, reinforcing rather than weakening the despot's grip on the minds of his subjects.

Furthermore, Cashmore maintains, experience shows that sports bans largely failed to have a significant impact on regime policies in the past. South Africa is a case in point. There are good reasons to believe that the bans and boycotts the country was subjected to did little to hasten the collapse of apartheid. The same could, of course, be said about sanctions in general, as Peter Isackson has recently noted in these pages. Cuba is probably the most prominent example of the failure of prolonged sanctions to undermine a regime; Iran is another.

This could also be said about resolutions passed by the United Nations General Assembly condemning acts of aggression. The most recent vote following Russia's attack on Ukraine has demonstrated once again the futility of symbolic gestures, even if supported by the vast majority of the international community. The reality is that for despots and autocrats, the only thing that counts is brute force. After all, what brought Nazi Germany to heel was not boycotts and sanctions but the overwhelming military might of the allies.

The Importance of Sport

Should we, then, lift the ban on Russian sport? In fact, should we lift all sanctions imposed on Russia, given the fact that, empirically, sanctions more often than not turn out to be counterproductive? The answer to the second question is obvious, at least to me. Sanctions might not be particularly effective in their impact on regime behavior, but they serve as an expression of moral revulsion, a signal that we don't want to have anything to do with you, or at least as little as possible. This involves all areas, not only economics — and particularly sport.

It is easy to state, as Cashmore does, that "it would be foolish to hyperbolize the importance of sport; obviously it is not as serious as war, or a million other things. So, why hurt people who are not responsible for the original sin?" Anyone who has ever watched Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film "Olympia," which documented the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, is likely to get a sense of the importance of sport to autocratic regimes.

The Berlin Games were supposed to demonstrate the superiority of Adolf Hitler's Aryan race. But a black athlete from the United States, Jesse Owens, had the audacity to steal the show, making Hitler's sport warriors — "swift as greyhounds, tough as leather, hard as Krupp steel" — literally eat dust. The Führer was not amused;

he hastily left the stadium so not to have to bear witness to the Aryan humiliation.

A famous German strategist once characterized diplomacy as war by other means. The same could be said about sport, particularly during the Cold War period. This was certainly true in the case of the SED regime in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). For the regime, sport was more than a competition, it was a Systemfrage — a question of system, socialism vs. capitalism. Sport victories, particularly against West German athletes, meant confirmation of the superiority of the socialist system and, of course, of the Socialist Unity Party.

At the same time, sport provided the regime with the international visibility it so desperately craved. For this, no price was high enough, including the health of the athletes. Starting in the early 1970s, the regime embarked on a broad-based systematic doping program. Already at a young age, promising athletes were pumped full of drugs, designed to enhance their performance and competitiveness. Many of them still suffer from the long-term consequences.

The East German case is extreme but hardly exceptional. Anyone who has ever visited Rome can attest to that. Rome hosts an Olympic stadium that dates back to the late 1920s, initially forming part of the larger Foro Mussolini. In the 1930s, the stadium was expanded, in preparation for the 1940 Olympics. The games were ultimately canceled because of the war, depriving Mussolini of the opportunity to showcase his Fascist revolution: the massive obelisk at the entrance of the Foro, with its “Mussolini Dux” inscription, the mosaics leading up to the stadium, glorifying the Fascist takeover, the granite blocs bearing excerpts of Mussolini’s speeches.

Mussolini’s reign ended in April 1945 at a gas station in Milan’s Piazzale Loreto. Yet at the

centennial of Mussolini’s March on Rome, later on this year, the obelisk is still there, in Rome, in front of the Olympic stadium, together with the mosaics and the granite blocs — a silent testimony to a dictator’s hubris and the role of sport in it.

Get Real

One of the most often heard arguments these days on the subject of the sport ban is that it is the “innocent” athletes who are most directly affected by it. “I only feel sorry for the athletes” has been an often repeated mantra by those commenting on the ban. Let’s get real. Compared to the suffering and anxieties of millions of Ukrainian civilians subjected to Russian terror bombing, the chagrin of Russian athletes deprived of the opportunity to compete internationally is of little consequence — except, of course, for those, like Daniil Medvedev, who lose money. But then, the ATP has so far refused to follow other sports and ban Russian players.

Finally, one last thought. Before FIFA banned Russia from its World Cup competition, Poland, followed by Sweden and the Czech Republic, made it clear that they would not play Russia in the playoffs for the World Cup at the end of this year. Robert Lewandowski, Bayern München’s star forward and winner of the Best FIFA Men’s Player title two years in a row, was particularly adamant in his refusal to play against Russia.

I am quite curious to know what would have happened had FIFA not banned Russia. Would Poland, Sweden and the Czech Republic have been sanctioned for refusing to play the Russian national team? What would have it done to FIFA’s already dismal image if, as a result, Vladimir Putin’s aggression against his neighbor had been compensated with Russia’s automatic World Cup qualification?

The reality is that international competitions in certain sports, such as football and ice hockey, are more than just sports. They are sources of national pride and national prestige, particularly for countries with autocratic regimes, with star athletes as national icons who are more often than not close to the regime. Alexander Ovechkin, arguably the best hockey player at the moment, has a long history of supporting Putin, including the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

As Czech hockey great Dominik Hasek has put it, this is not a personal matter: “Every athlete represents not only himself and his club, but also his country and its values and actions. That is a fact.” It is for this reason that the ban on Russian sport was imposed. It should not be lifted.

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India's Reasons For Abstaining in the UN on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Atul Singh, Christopher Roper Schell
March 16, 2022

Historic ties, military equipment, geopolitical imperatives and a trust deficit between Indian and American ruling parties lie behind India's UN abstentions.

On February 26, the United Nations Security Council voted on a resolution proposed by the United States. Of the 15 members of the Security Council, 11 voted in favor and Russia unsurprisingly used its veto to kill the resolution. China, India and the United Arab Emirates abstained. Two days later, India abstained on a vote at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva that set up an international commission of inquiry into Russia's actions in Ukraine. The country also abstained at the UN General Assembly, which voted 141-5 to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

India's abstentions have led to much heartburn in the US and Europe. One high-flying national security lawyer in Washington argued that India was wrong to ignore Russia tearing down Article 2(4) of the Charter of the United Nations. Like many others, he took the view that India has sided with an aggressive autocrat, weakened its democratic credentials and proved to be a potentially unreliable partner of the West. The Economist has called India “abstemious to a fault.”

In particular, serving and retired American and British diplomats have been wringing their hands at India's reticence to vote against Russia. For many Americans, this is a betrayal of the good faith that the US has reposed in India by giving the country a special nuclear deal in 2008 and designating India as a “major defense partner” in 2016. In 2018, the US elevated India to Strategic Trade Authorization tier 1 status, giving India license-free access to a wide range of military and dual-use technologies regulated by the Department of Commerce, a privilege the US

accords to very few other countries. On Capitol Hill, India's abstention is further viewed as an act of bad faith because many members of Congress and senators worked hard to waive sanctions against India. These were triggered by the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act when India bought Russian S-400 missile systems.

Many Western business leaders are now wondering if India is a safe place to do business after the latest turn of events. For some in the West, this is yet another example of India slipping inexorably down the slippery slope of authoritarianism under the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Two Unfriendly Nuclear Neighbors

Such fears are overblown. India remains a thriving democracy. Elections just took place in five states after colorful political campaigns. Infrastructure development in India is going on at a record pace and growth remains high amidst inflationary pressures. Despite some blunders such as the 2016 demonetization of high-denomination currency notes and the botched 2017 rollout of the goods and services tax, the Modi-led BJP has become more market-friendly.

As per the World Bank's Doing Business 2020 report, India ranked 63 out of the surveyed 190 countries, a marked improvement from the 134 rank in 2014 when Modi came to power. Like the US, India is a fractious and, at times, exasperating democracy, but it is a fast-growing large economy. Even as US manufacturers Chevrolet and Ford exited the Indian market, Korean Kia and Chinese MG Motor India have achieved much success.

India is also proving to be a major force for stability in the region. After "America's

Afghanistan's fiasco," India has been picking up the pieces in an increasingly unstable region. The country is now providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people even as the US has abandoned them. Thousands of trucks roll out daily from India to Afghanistan via Pakistan as part of India's effort to feed millions of starving Afghans. India is delivering 50,000 tons of wheat to a country led by the Taliban. Earlier, India sent 500,000 coronavirus vaccines as well as 13 tons of essential medicines and winter clothing to Afghanistan. Despite its reservations about the new regime in Kabul that offered refuge to hijackers of an Indian plane in 1999 and sent jihadists to Kashmir, a government branded as anti-Muslim by The New York Times is behaving magnanimously to help millions of Afghans facing starvation.

Despite its thriving democracy and growing economy, India remains a highly vulnerable nation in an extremely rough neighborhood. To its west lies an increasingly more radical Pakistan that, in the words of the late Stephen Philip Cohen, uses "terror as an instrument of state policy in Kashmir." To its east lies an increasingly aggressive China led by President Xi Jinping assiduously using salami-slicing tactics to claim more Indian territory. In sharp contrast to the US, India has two nuclear-armed neighbors and faces the specter of a two-front war given what Andrew Small has called the China-Pakistan axis.

National security that occupies much headspace in Washington is a constant headache for New Delhi. Multiple insurgencies, street protests, mass movements, foreign interference and the specter of nuclear war are a daily worry. During the Cold War, Pakistan was an ally of the US and benefited greatly from American funding of the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union. A 1998 report by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) tells us India was among the top three

recipients of Soviet/Russian weapons from 1982 to 1996.

More recently, India has diversified its arms imports. A 2021 SIPRI fact sheet makes clear that India is now the biggest importer of French and Israeli arms. From 2011-15 to 2016-20 Russian arms exports to India dropped by 53%, but the country still remained the top importer. In 2016-20, Russia, France and Israel's share of India's arms imports comprised 49%, 18% and 13% respectively. A retired assistant chief of the integrated staff estimates that around 70% of India's military arsenal is of Russian origin.

Given Indian dependence on Russian military hardware, it is only natural that New Delhi cannot afford to annoy Moscow. Critical Russian spares keep the defense forces combat-ready. For high-tech weaponry, which has the added advantage of coming at affordable prices, India relies on Russia. Moscow has also shared software and proprietary interaction elements for weapons delivery systems with New Delhi. Furthermore, Russia allows India to integrate locally-made weapons into its fighter jets or naval vessels unlike the US or even France.

From New Delhi's point of view, the India-Russia military-technical cooperation is even more valuable than Russian military kit. Unlike the West, Russia has been willing to transfer technology, enabling India to indigenize some of its defense production. This began in the 1960s when India moved closer to the Soviet Union even as Pakistan became a full-fledged US ally. Since then, Moscow has shared critical technologies over many decades with New Delhi. India's supersonic anti-ship missile BrahMos that the Philippines recently bought is indigenized Russian technology as is India's main battle tank.

As a vulnerable nation in a rough neighborhood, India relies on Russia for security. Therefore, New

Delhi decided it could not upset Moscow and abstained at all forums.

The China Factor

There is another tiny little matter worrying India. It is certain that Xi is observing and analyzing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As a revisionist power, China seeks to overturn the postwar order. Beijing has designs on Taiwan and territorial disputes with many of its neighbors. Its most recent armed confrontation occurred with India though. Since that June 2020 clash, Indian and Chinese troops are locked in a stalemate that repeated rounds of talks have failed to resolve.

More than anyone else, India fears a Russia-China axis. If Moscow threw in its lot with Beijing, India — deprived of technology and critical spares — might face a military catastrophe. If Russia sided with China in case of a conflict between the two Asian giants, India would face certain defeat.

Recent military cooperation between Russia and China has worried India. A few months ago, a flotilla of 10 Russian and Chinese warships circumnavigated Japan's main island of Honshu for the very first time. This joint exercise demonstrated that Russia and China now have a new strategic partnership. Despite their rivalry in Central Asia and potential disputes over a long border, the two could team up like Germany and Austria-Hungary before World War I. Such a scenario would threaten both Asia and Europe but would spell disaster for India. Therefore, New Delhi has been working hard to bolster its ties with Moscow.

In December 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin flew to India to meet Modi. During Putin's trip, both countries signed a flurry of arms and trade deals. Apart from declarations about boosting trade and investment as well as purchasing various

military equipment, Russia transferred the technology and agreed to manufacture more than 700,000 AK-203 rifles in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh where the BJP has just been reelected. In the words of a seasoned Indian diplomat Ashok Sajjanhar, Putin's visit "reinvigorated a time-tested strategic partnership between India and Russia."

Sajjanhar left unsaid what astute Indian diplomats say in private. India's close relationship with Russia is insurance against China. New Delhi wants Moscow to act as a moderating influence on Beijing and act as an honest broker between the two Asian giants. India believes that there is no power other than Russia that could act as its bridge to China.

The Weight of History

When Sajjanhar was speaking about a time-tested relationship, he meant decades of close India-Russia ties. During World War II and in the run-up to independence in 1947, the US earned much goodwill because Franklin D. Roosevelt championed the Atlantic Charter, promising independence to the colonies. However, relationships soured soon after independence because India chose socialism under its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

When the US conducted a coup against the democratically elected Iranian government of Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953, India came to view the US as a neocolonial power. It is easy to forget now that Washington backed the interests of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company over those of the government of Iran, triggering trepidation among Indian leaders who remembered clearly that their country was colonized by the British East India Company. The coup gave both capitalism and the US a bad name and pushed New Delhi closer to Moscow.

In the following years, India's ties with the Soviet Union strengthened. As Pakistan became a firm Cold War ally of the US, India embraced socialism ever more firmly and became a de facto Soviet ally, claims of non-alignment notwithstanding. In 1956, the Soviet tanks crushed the Hungarian Revolution. Nehru censured Moscow in private but refused to condemn Soviet action even as he railed against the Anglo-French intervention in the Suez. As per Swapna Kona Nayudu's well-researched paper for the Wilson Center, New Delhi now became "a crucial partner in international politics for Moscow."

In 1968, the Soviets crushed the Prague Spring, an uprising in then-Czechoslovakia that aimed to reform the communist regime. Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, was prime minister, and she publicly called for the Soviets to withdraw their troops. In the UN Security Council, though, India abstained in the vote on the Czechoslovakia matter, attracting widespread condemnation from the American press.

Three years later, India went to war with Pakistan to liberate Bangladesh. This did not go down well in the US, despite the fact that the military dictatorship of Pakistan was inflicting murder, torture and rape in a genocide of horrific proportions. During the 1971 India-Pakistan War, Richard Nixon called Gandhi a "bitch" and Henry Kissinger termed Indians as "bastards." Indian diplomats repeatedly point out that Nixon and Kissinger ignored their own diplomats like Archer Blood who valiantly spoke truth to power about Pakistani atrocities, a story chronicled superbly by Princeton professor Gary J. Bass in "The Blood Telegram." Instead, they sent vessels from the Seventh Fleet to intervene on Pakistan's behalf. It was the Soviets who came to India's rescue by sending their naval vessels to counter the American ones.

India repaid Moscow's 1971 favor when Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. In 1980, India refused to condemn this invasion at the UN. During the decade that followed, the US funded the mujahideen in Afghanistan through Pakistan. Relations between the US and Pakistan became closer than ever at a time when General Zia-ul-Haq launched Operation Tupac to "bleed India through a thousand cuts" by championing insurgencies within India. First Punjab and then Kashmir went up in flames. Terrorism became a feature of daily life for India, but the US turned a Nelson's eye to the phenomenon until the grim attacks of September 11, 2001.

Since those attacks, India and the United States have moved closer together. Thousands of Indian students study in the US every year, American investment has flowed into India and defense cooperation has steadily increased. The US views India as a valuable partner to contain the rise of an aggressive China, and New Delhi cares more about Washington than any other capital on the planet.

Even as US-India ties have deepened, New Delhi has retained close ties with Moscow. Russia continues to build nuclear power plants in energy-hungry India. Plans to import more Russian oil and gas have also been in the works. Because of these ties, India did not condemn Russian action against Crimea in 2014. The left-leaning government in power at that time went on to say that Russia had "legitimate" interests in Ukraine.

It is important to note that no opposition party has criticized the government's position. Shashi Tharoor, a flamboyant MP of the Indian National Congress party who said that India was on "the wrong side of history," got rapped on the knuckles by his bosses. The opposition and the government have almost identical views on the matter. Neither supports Russian aggression against Ukraine, but no party wants to criticize an old friend of the nation.

Political Factors, Domestic and International

War in Ukraine is obviously not in India's interest. India imports energy, and rising oil prices are going to unleash inflation in an economy with high unemployment. This worries both political and business leaders. In its statement at the UN, India called for peace and diplomacy. In official statements, India has also expressed support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. India does not in any way support Russian aggression but cannot criticize Moscow for a host of reasons described above as well as often overlooked political factors.

Indian leaders have also been preoccupied with elections in five critical states. Political analysts consider these elections to be a dress rehearsal for the 2024 national elections. With stakes so high, the ruling BJP was under pressure to bring home thousands of Indian students studying in Ukraine safely. For this, India relied on Russia. While some might say this necessitated a Faustian silence, 18,000 Indian lives were at stake.

India also had reservations about Ukraine. Reports of Indian students facing racism in Ukraine have been doing the rounds on social media. These may be info ops by Russians, but they have touched a chord among the masses. Press reports of fleeing Indian students facing racism and segregation at the Ukrainian border have not helped, nor have memories of Ukrainian arms deals with Pakistan, which have triggered Indian suspicions. Even though India is against the conflict, New Delhi does not want to forsake an old friend and support a potentially hostile power.

India also suspects the motives of the West in taking on Putin. There is a strong feeling across nearly all political parties that the US would not show the same concern for a non-white nation in Asia or Africa. Left-leaning parties point out that the US and the UK based their 2003 invasion of

Iraq on a pack of lies. A popular Indian television anchor has railed against the “racist reportage” of Western media that treats blue-eyed, blonde Ukrainian refugees differently to Syrian or Afghan ones.

There is also another matter driving India’s hesitation to go along completely with the US in targeting Russia. An increasing trust deficit between the Democrats and the BJP is harming US-India relations. For years, The New York Times and The Washington Post have relentlessly criticized the BJP, accusing the party of being authoritarian, if not fascist. Even food aid to the impoverished citizens in Taliban-led Afghanistan did not get any recognition from the papers of record in New York and Washington.

Billionaires like George Soros who support Democrats have been vocal against the BJP and Modi. Their foundations have also funded Indian organizations opposed to the BJP. Americans see this funding as an expression of idealism that seeks to promote civil society and democracy. On the other hand, many Indians see American funding as a sinister ploy to weaken the nationalist BJP and replace them with weak, pliant leaders. Indians are also irked by the fact that Democrats rarely give credit to the BJP for winning elections, the democratic proof of its platform’s popularity.

Democrats have also been pressuring India to legalize gay marriage, forgetting that the issue is pending before the Indian Supreme Court. Indians point out that it was the British who decreed “unnatural” sexual acts” as not just illegal but also imprisonable during Queen Victoria’s heyday. The BJP has already come out in favor of legalizing homosexuality but has no power to intervene in a matter pending before the court. The failure of Democrats to recognize this reeks of a white savior complex that destroys trust between Washington and New Delhi.

Many BJP leaders are convinced that the Democrats are plotting some sort of a regime change in the 2024 elections. They believe there is an elaborate game plan in place to discredit Modi and the BJP. In this worldview, the Democrat establishment is manipulating discourse and peddling narratives that could lead to some version of the Orange Revolution in India. They are convinced that once Putin goes, Modi might be next. Even though India is opposed to a war that is severely hurting its economy, this fear of Western interference in domestic political matters is one more reason for India to abstain from turning on its old friend Russia.

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Fellow White Women, It’s Time to Talk About Feminism

Colleen Wynn, Elizabeth Ziff
March 18, 2022

When the broad range of women’s experiences is not acknowledged, the feminist movement remains incomplete.

In March, as part of Women’s History Month, we rightfully celebrate women’s achievements and the strides toward equity we have made collectively. Yet we need to be honest about how we got here and how far we still have to go. Women’s History Month should have an intersectional lens and be a celebration of all women and their lived experiences, but it is often the voices of white women that dominate the narrative.

The first official Women’s History Month was inaugurated in 1980 and has been celebrated every year since. There are indeed many milestones and accomplishments to celebrate, including the strides women have made in education and the economy, the increased representation of women in government, and the hard-won legal and social equality. At the same time, white women have leveraged their relative racial privilege to make these gains at the expense of women of color.

Incomplete Picture

While it feels empowering to think of women as a collective group, this category is not a monolith. Failing to consider women and women’s history from an intersectional perspective leaves out the range of experiences and needs of women who do not fit into the white middle-class mold. In short, when the broad range of women’s experiences is not acknowledged, the movement remains incomplete.

Because historical and contemporary women’s movements have willfully and strategically omitted racial justice, there is a legacy of isolating racism from sexism. This ignores the lived

experience of everyone except white women. It has ensured that white women see a competition between issues of racism and sexism, and feel that they lose if the conversation centers around the former.

The suffragettes made the deliberate decision to fight for the right of white — not all — women to vote, choosing not to collaborate with black female activists. More recently, the 2017 Women’s March organizers faced criticism for focusing primarily on white women’s issues.

And in the peak of the #MeToo movement, celebrities like Alyssa Milano, who said that she felt blessed to be the vessel for the movement, and Rose McGowan, who professed annoyance at not being credited with initiating the movement, have by and large been associated with the inception of #MeToo. In reality, Tarana Burke, a black female activist and advocate, coined the phrase and spearheaded the movement to raise awareness of sexual violence against working-class women and women of color a whole decade earlier.

As sociologists and white women, we argue that the discomfort regarding engaging with racism in both the society in general as well as in women-centered movements stems from the idea that white people don’t have to talk about race and racism because they aren’t “our issues.” But, because we live in a racialized society, everyone has a racial identity.

Another way to think about this is by acknowledging that race is socially constructed, meaning that it carries a social, not biological categorization. However, the fact that it is socially constructed doesn’t mean it isn’t real. In a racist society, race has very real consequences for people.

Real Change

To avoid injury and to build a more equitable and just society, white women must become better at talking about race and racism, and recognize that while we experience sexism, we benefit from racial privilege in society. These benefits range from not having to navigate racism when dating to more frequent promotions in the workplace compared to minority women to extensive media coverage when a white woman goes missing, among others.

Real change will mean giving up some of our comfort and power. Making these changes may not feel nice to us as individuals, but will have life-saving consequences for black people and other people of color.

Second, we must recognize racism is a structural problem that is embedded into the fabric of American society. Dismantling it will require supporting anti-racist policies and politicians, and advocating for laws such as the Black Maternal Health Momnibus Act of 2021, which aims to “improve maternal health, particularly among racial and ethnic minority groups, veterans, and other vulnerable populations. It also addresses maternal health issues related to COVID-19.”

To ensure that political leaders truly represent the American public, everyone must have a seat at the table. While there have been four women on the Supreme Court, this month, we have the opportunity to confirm Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, who would be the first black woman on the court.

Finally, we cannot begin to address racism without a shared knowledge of the truth. Ideally, this means casting a wide net and engaging with people from different backgrounds. Black activists and authors can show us the social world through their eyes. But even so, we can't expect anyone to

tell us what “good” white people we are. In the words of the late scholar and activist bell hooks, there is no gold star for “challenging white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal values.”

What's more, since racism is structural, we will all say and do racist things at times. But if we care about making the world a better place, we must listen, learn, apologize and continue to improve. Of course, self-knowledge is not enough. As white women, we must simultaneously work to improve ourselves and engage in the difficult work of dismantling white supremacy. This won't be easy work, but it's work that is worth doing.

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Is Peace Possible in Ukraine?

John Bruton
March 22, 2022

A war in Ukraine that grinds on for months or years is in no one's best interests.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine — an attempt to end the independence of a sovereign nation by force — would, if successful, set a precedent that might frighten smaller countries across the globe. It is an attack on the system of international law that has given us 80 years of relative peace in Europe and allowed international trade to develop, thereby raising living standards.

The United Nations Charter established the principles of the inviolability of borders, respect for the territorial integrity of states and the prohibition of the use of force. When Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons in 1991, its borders were formally guaranteed by Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Now, one of those guarantors is deliberately breaching those borders — for a second time.

The Helsinki Conference of 1975 reaffirmed the respect of borders in Europe, and it gave birth to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which Russia is a member of. Its charter confirms the above-mentioned UN principles. The Helsinki Final Act goes on to say: “They [states] also have the right to belong or not to belong to international organizations, to be party or not to bilateral or multilateral treaties including the right to be party or not to treaties of alliance.” The Russian pretext for war — to stop Ukraine from joining NATO and the European Union — is a direct contradiction of this Helsinki principle.

Many, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, hoped the conflict would be a short one. Yet it looks increasingly like becoming a long war of attrition, much like World War I, where most of the deaths were caused by missiles and shells falling from the sky. This sort of conflict can grind on for months and even years until all is ruined.

The Impact Beyond Ukraine

The devastation will be felt far from Ukraine. Between them both, Ukraine and Russia grow 25% of the wheat traded in the world. Around 12% of all calories consumed around the globe derive from crops grown in Russia and Ukraine. It is impossible to sow and harvest crops on a battlefield. Indeed, both belligerent nations are likely to keep any crops they can grow for the use of their own beleaguered people.

The effect of this on bread prices will be dramatic. Some 75% of all the wheat consumed in Turkey and 70% in Egypt comes from Russia or Ukraine. Israel and Tunisia are also dependent on them for half of their supplies from the same sources. We can expect bread riots and renewed political instability in these countries.

The effect of the war will be increased social tensions everywhere. The higher fuel and food prices that are flowing directly from the conflict will affect poorer families much more than richer ones as these items are a bigger share of the weekly budget in low-income households. They will also hit rural households much harder because people have to rely on a private car to obtain the necessities of life.

The cost of replacement motor vehicles will rise because of shortages of minerals like aluminum, titanium, palladium and nickel, of which Russia is a major supplier. This will hit Germany’s car industry hard. Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia and Finland will be disproportionately hit by the loss of Russian markets for their exports.

China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — creating a land-based route for Chinese exports to Western Europe — is being radically disrupted by a war that cuts right across the BRI’s road westward, and whose effects are being felt all the

way from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The continuance of this war is not in China's interests.

The Possible Way to Peace in Ukraine

The longer the conflict goes on, the more the sanctions on Russia will begin to sap its war-making capacity. Supplies of missiles and shells will become progressively harder to pay for. Those supplying weaponry to Ukraine have deeper pockets. This is the significance of Russia's overtures to China.

These overtures are an opportunity. China has an incentive to broker a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine, and so does Turkey. Of course, timing will be crucial. But the ingredients of such a deal, where there is no trust at all between the parties, are much harder to describe.

Ukraine could perhaps find a formula to give up Crimea, but it can hardly concede an inch in eastern Ukraine. Russian-language rights in Ukraine could be guaranteed, but what has Russia to offer in return? Perhaps reparations for the physical damage that the Russians have done to Ukraine's infrastructure. Ukraine could join the EU but not NATO, with Russia's encouragement, which would be a major U-turn for Moscow.

None of these compromises are palatable, but they are preferable to a war of attrition that could go on for years until all the participants are exhausted or dead.

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Are Tamil Brahmins Finally Shifting Their Outlook on Caste?

S. Suresh
March 25, 2022

Are we seeing signs of change among the traditionally conservative Tamil Brahmin community?

Seeing Devi, our servant maid, brew a cup of hot filter coffee for my mother, thoroughly shook me up. Devi? Enjoying free access to that sacrosanct location in a Tamil Brahmin home, its kitchen? Free to light the stove, boil the milk, prepare a south Indian decoction, make a steaming hot cup of filter coffee? That too, for my nonagenarian mother?

Evidently, Devi has free access to every part of the house, including the kitchen, once considered inviolable by Brahmins. Four or five decades ago, an act like this would have been utterly inconceivable. Growing up, I remember servant maids barely had permission to walk inside our home, let alone enjoy unfettered access to the kitchen. When they did come inside, it was only to sweep and mop the floor, spending the minimal amount of time necessary to accomplish those chores.

The rest of their tasks, such as cleaning the vessels, washing the clothes and drying them on a clothesline, would be done in the backyard. Taking their sense of cleanliness to a new height, vessels cleaned by the servant maid would be rinsed once again with water untouched by the servant before they eventually found their way into the kitchen.

I couldn't help but reflect on the dramatic shift in attitude I observed in my family, belonging to the elite Tamil Brahmin upper caste, toward Devi, belonging to one of the lower castes. Is this experience unique to me and my family? Or is it something that is a reflection of the changing times in the traditionally conservative Tamil Brahmin community?

I knew scientific evidence based on facts regarding the social change I was ruminating on would be hard to come by. But I was convinced that if I tried, I would find anecdotal evidence of this shift toward a more liberal way of life among other Tamil Brahmin — or colloquially, Tam Brahm — families.

A Liberal Infusion

Every parent desires upward mobility and better quality of life for their offspring. Not surprisingly, Tam Brahms also subscribed to the same sentiment. This quest for upward mobility among Tam Brahms resulted in a generational shift in the type of career they aimed for. Gone was their desire to secure a steady job in a bank, central government organization or, as a distant consolation prize, in a state government organization. Instead, they set their eyes on professional careers, armed with degrees in engineering or medicine. Some sought to become entrepreneurs, a rarity in the past.

Securing professional degrees did not come easy for Tam Brahm youngsters. The Tamil Nadu state's 69% caste-based reservation system in higher educational institutions meant many had to leave the comfort of their home and their home state in pursuit of those credentials. They may have left with apprehension, but that provided them an exposure to the outside world that was erstwhile impossible in the cocooned Tam Brahm way of life.

At a recent high school reunion, I had the opportunity to meet several of my childhood friends after a gap of more than 30 years. While many had spread their wings and flown far and wide, there were few who had stayed their entire life in Madurai, the town where I spent the bulk of my childhood. Conversations rarely went beyond the friendly banter befitting a reunion among childhood friends, but there were clear indications on where one stood on the conservative-liberal divide.

A scientific survey, had one been done, would have corroborated the following hypothesis: Those who had the opportunity to explore the outside world, especially at the defining moment immediately following high school, typically subscribed to more liberal views.

Aging and Necessity

Decades ago, living in the rural towns of Tamil Nadu, my parents were steeped in caste-based hierarchical distinctions. Being young, they had little reason to question their belief system or modify their core values. Surely, views and beliefs passed down through generations wouldn't crumble with the nascent liberal perceptions of their youngest children? They did not.

During the phase when they were still strong and able, and I was behaving like an insufferable know-it-all, there were many occasions we simply had to agree to disagree. The shift I allude to started happening only as my parents started aging and developing a dependency on others. That shift accelerated when their primary caregivers, my older brother and sister-in-law, also entered the post-retirement phase of their life.

Most interestingly, the interactions I shared with my parents played out in a slightly modified form among my brother's own family. Dispelling my doubts that this could be unique to my immediate

circle, Purushothaman and Sathesh, two Tam Brahm friends of mine, corroborated very similar developments in their respective families.

Sathesh remarked that his mom started yielding gracefully once she realized that resistance was futile. Puru concurred, albeit, in a less colorful, non-Star Trek language, saying that his mom is not where he is (on the conservative-liberal social spectrum), but that she is far more tolerant compared to her past self.

As my mother entered her 90s, the demands on the care she needed increased. This set the perfect scenario for Devi to start playing an increasingly prominent role in the household work in order to ease the pressure on my brother and sister-in-law. It was not before the sexagenarian couple started embracing the help from their servant maid from an entirely different angle, while the nonagenarian matriarch was forced to let go of her deeply entrenched hierarchical distinctions.

Far from reluctant tolerance, Devi's presence has found grateful acceptance among my family members.

Altruism?

In the past, Brahmins asserted their superiority by employing a variety of oppressive techniques. While many of them involved dehumanizing and stripping away the agency of those beneath them, withholding knowledge was by far the most effective technique they employed to stay on top of the caste totem pole. It is no surprise that the caste-based reservation system targets this very aspect in higher educational institutions, offering preferential treatment to a staggering number of non-Brahmin caste and communities.

This is not an article on the caste system in India, but I would unequivocally recommend "Annihilation of Caste," a speech Dr. B. R.

Ambedkar wrote in 1936, as a must-read for anyone interested in understanding this woeful practice.

In a dramatic U-turn from the behavior of withholding knowledge, it is now commonplace to see Tam Brahm households sponsoring the education of their servant maid's children. Not only does this act guarantee upward mobility for those kids, but it also effectively reduces the supply of future maids.

I asked Puru if this isn't akin to shooting yourself in the foot. Puru, who had sponsored the school education not just of his servant maid's children but also that of his neighborhood vegetable vendor's son, commented succinctly, "It is the right thing to do."

A Glimpse Into the Future?

If I thought I am liberal in my outlook, my children effortlessly put me to shame. The extent to which their ideas challenge the social status quo is more than evolutionary. They are downright revolutionary. But that is a topic for another article.

What is important here is the concept of identity. While I still acknowledge and accept my Tam Brahm identity, to my children, it would hardly be a matter of significance. Sathesh wholeheartedly agreed, remarking that, while growing up, and even now, he was proud of his Tamil Brahmin heritage, but he sees that it makes absolutely no difference to his kids. Thinking about his older son who is a trained classical Carnatic musician, Puru chimed in, saying that despite the rigorous traditional gurukul education, his son espouses far more liberal views than him.

The reshaping of this identity has many ramifications, the most prominent one being the number of inter-cultural and inter-caste marriages

involving Tam Brahms. In the last decade, we have welcomed Gujarati, Malayalam and Punjabi grooms into our family. What was once unthinkable is now so commonplace that it has found broad social acceptance.

Tamil Brahmins, who account for less than 3% of the state's population, may already be an endangered species as the pendulum of poetic justice swings hard to the other side. The threat to their identity from within and without causes many to lament about the future of Tam Brahms as a community. Particularly concerning is the plight of the learned priests, whose profession it is to administer and uphold the rituals and practices in Tamil Brahmin homes, temples and elsewhere.

Me? I am simply glad that my family has embraced humanity over conservative traditionalism — and hope that the anecdotal evidence I have observed in my small circle of friends and family is a harbinger of things to come.

***Suresh** is a writer, avid hiker, dog lover, amateur actor and environmentally conscious. He devotes much of his time analyzing socioeconomic issues and shares his viewpoints and experiences through his blog, newsletter and Fair Observer.

The End of the Extraordinary Abramovich Era

Ellis Cashmore
March 27, 2022

Roman Abramovich, the owner of Chelsea Football Club, proved money can buy anything... almost.

Terry Southern's 1959 novel, "The Magic Christian," is about a billionaire who has a hypothesis: Everyone and everything has a price. His attempts to prove it lead him to offer inordinate amounts of money to people in exchange for irregular behavior. He bribes a parking warden to eat a parking ticket he's just written, for example. He buys a cosmetics company just to sell useless products. The plot climaxes when he acquires a luxury cruise liner just to insult or reject super-rich passengers. Money buys anyone and anything.

I thought of this shortly after Roman Abramovich bought Chelsea Football Club in 2003 and launched the most extravagant spending splurge in the history of sport. In his first year in charge, his total spending in the player transfer market equated to 40% of the entire Premier League's expenditure on players. Was this man trying to prove he could buy anything he wanted?

The club was easy: Already deeply in debt (£60 million — around \$79 million), Abramovich just paid off the creditors and took control of Chelsea. Then he assembled the strongest playing squad available. The cost of the transfer fees plus salaries far outweighed the club's income, and in his first five years, Chelsea posted losses of £447 million — a sum that sounds less fantastic today than it did in the 2000s.

Money, Money, Money

Chelsea, at the time of Abramovich's arrival, was a club of comparable size to, say, West Bromwich Albion. The clubs had similar histories of achievements, comparable fan bases and stadiums. Chelsea was not included in the original elite when plans for the Premier League were formulated in the early 1990s. Abramovich commissioned the transfer of players such as Didier Drogba (in

2004), Andriy Shevchenko and Michael Ballack (both in 2006), signaling that no player was too big — or too expensive — for Chelsea.

The rewards were abundant. Chelsea won the Premier League in the 2004-05 season, losing only one game under the management of Jose Mourinho, and this was but one of a total of 21 trophies, including five Premier League titles, two UEFA Champions League triumphs and a FIFA Club World Cup championship. Chelsea became one of the most garlanded clubs in the history of the Premier League and could lay a legitimate claim to being the best team in the world for long periods in recent history.

If Abramovich's project was something like that of Magic Christian's protagonist, it worked like a charm. Actually, Abramovich didn't need Prospero-like charms — all he needed was money. He spent lavishly and luxuriated in the rewards. But the costs were prodigious. Last year, for example, Chelsea lost £145.6 million. Abramovich made good on the money, as he has done since he took over, by making deposits in the holding company Fordstam Limited, which technically owns Chelsea FC, and which Abramovich owns outright.

Abramovich never explained his profligacy. He didn't give interviews and seemed to prefer anonymity. I was once asked to divine Abramovich's motivation and answered by comparing his ownership of Chelsea with his love of art. He has a formidable collection that includes Bacon's *Tryptych*, for which he paid \$86.3 million. "He has the means to possess things he loves," I said. "He might have bought Chelsea as a trophy at the outset, but he seems to have formed a loving attachment."

Even if he did start with a testable hypothesis, the club became more a passion than a project. He ran Chelsea Football Club not as a business in the

conventional sense, but more like a charitable foundation or an endowed college with only one benefactor.

Prised From His Grasp

And now it is over: Abramovich has had the club he created prised from his grasp. He won't appear at Stamford Bridge again and will probably never again set foot on English soil. The British government, as we know, has invoked powers to freeze his assets (of which Chelsea FC is one; the Bacon may be another), forced him to put the club on the market and denied him access to the proceeds of the sale. He has set the asking price of £3 billion, presumably reflecting the money he has sunk into the club over his tenure, but he won't see a penny of it. (The pertinent legislation is the Economic Crime Bill, which was rushed through Parliament in early March.)

We shouldn't underestimate how much pain he must be feeling as he reads about the bids for his club. Negotiations are being handled by US merchant bank Raine. Abramovich himself is not allowed any input. As an aside, Abramovich has not committed a criminal offense and is guilty only of having "links" (whatever they may be) with Russian President Vladimir Putin or his regime. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said, "There can be no safe havens for those who have supported Putin's vicious assault on Ukraine." Abramovich has consistently denied historical associations with Putin and has done so for at least 11 years.

As I write, a shortlist of bidders for the club is being considered by Raine. Eventually, the preferred bidder will be selected and — extraordinarily — will then be screened by the government. Paradoxically, the only bidder that would be likely to continue Abramovich's munificence was a group from Saudi Arabia, which has withdrawn, presumably sensing tenders

from that part of the Middle East would not be received favorably at the moment. The others are consortia — associations of several companies.

Whoever buys Chelsea will not need due diligence to realize they will have to hemorrhage money, at least for the immediate future. The club has been promising to break even since at least 2009, when then-chief executive Peter Kenyon promised the club would be “self-sustaining” by 2010. It hasn’t come close. Will new owners persist with the lose-money-to-win-trophies approach?

Football’s Land of Milk and Honey

It’s not inconceivable that a consortium could introduce dramatic downsizing over the next three or so years, allow existing contracts to expire, trade prudently in the transfer market and perhaps model itself on Liverpool, a football club owned since 2010 by Fenway Sports Group Holdings, which also owns the Boston Red Sox of Major League Baseball.

If so, transfers on the scale of the £97.5-million Romelu Lukaku deal in 2021 are likely to be a thing of the past for Chelsea. There may also be some surprise departures to lighten the wage load.

Lionel Messi’s move from Barcelona to Paris St Germain came as a bolt out of the blue last year; at least, till the full extent of Barcelona’s debt came to light. The club owed about €1 billion (\$1.1 billion) and Messi’s salary was reputed to be over €50 million. (The ill-fated European Super League was not motivated by greed, as was widely reported, but by the will to survive. Most of the clubs in the original project are ravaged by debt and presumably thought the league offered a route to liquidity.)

The next owners of Chelsea FC will not bring the inexhaustible supply of money Abramovich

did. They will be legally bound to honor existing agreements, so players like Lukaku, who earns £16.5 million per year, and N’Golo Kante, who gets £15 million, will be paid for the remainder of their contracts. But the club is unlikely to offer salaries of this size in future.

More likely, the new owners will introduce some kind of internal salary cap. Arsenal has long operated with a wage structure. Other clubs without benefactors typically try to keep a lid on their salaries. Manchester City is owned largely by the Abu Dhabi United Group and spends with the kind of improvidence associated with Abramovich. Whether Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund will turn Newcastle United into another Chelsea remains to be seen. But Chelsea’s new owners will almost certainly take a more businesslike approach.

UEFA, football’s governing organization in Europe, may complicate life for Chelsea’s new owners if it restricts clubs’ spending to 70% of their income. Back-of-an-envelope calculations suggest Chelsea has typically spent more than the whole of its yearly income on transfers and salaries. Even if it expects income of, say, £400 million, the club will have to exercise self-restraint unheard of during the Abramovich era. Presently, wages alone are thought to be £336 million.

The Chelsea case presents an insight into English football’s rise over the past 30 years. In 1985, England’s clubs were banned from European competition for five years (six for Liverpool) due to violence amongst supporters. Since their return, they have grown to dominance. This is due in no small part to Abramovich. After his takeover, international entrepreneurs enthusiastically bought into Premier League clubs and introduced the kind of money that brings bargaining power in the transfer market. Today, owners include investors from the United States, the UAE, China, Thailand, Egypt and Iran.

England has become football's land of milk and honey. Love him or loathe him, Roman Abramovich is sport's latter-day Abraham. He has instigated a revolution. At a time in history when sport's integration into the entertainment industry was almost complete, Abramovich took Chelsea from a respectable but ordinary English football club to one of the world's foremost names in sport and a brand thrumming with elan and glamor.

A rapacious capitalist to some, a tyrant's accomplice to others and a moral nightmare to a few more, Abramovich remains, without doubt, the most influential presence in football over the past 20 years. People may not approve of what he's done, but the effects — good or bad — of his breathtaking foray into sport will be felt for decades to come.

*[Ellis Cashmore is co-editor of Studying Football.]

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“The Dawn of Everything,” including a New World Order (Maybe)

Peter Isackson
April 09, 2022

A collaborative book recounts the history of our misunderstanding of history.

Over ten years, the late anthropologist and political activist David Graeber and the archaeologist David Wengrow shared thoughts, explored ideas and conducted research on an impressive scale to produce a groundbreaking book that was finally published at the end of last year, more than a year after Graeber's death at the age of 59. Such an exceptional collaboration was bound to contain a bevy of interesting insights about how human societies function and evolve over time. But *The Dawn of Everything* offers much more than that. It is nothing less than a compelling invitation to reframe and radically rethink our shared understanding of humanity's history and prehistory. While ranging across the globe and far back in time to make their case, the authors aim at demolishing the powerful, widely accepted *idées reçues* that our schools, media and writers of popular science have fed to us in the form of what has become a quasi-official account of “the evolution of civilization.”

In their reading, Europe's vaunted scientific revolution that began in the 17th century marks the moment when a certain sclerosis of thinking about the broad sweep of human history began to set in. Only three years after the Treaty of Westphalia that confirmed the triumph of the idea of the nation state, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes published *Leviathan*, in which he proposed what appeared to be a “rational” view of human prehistory. According to Hobbes, civilization emerged as a process of political and economic organization that, by building solid institutions, tamed humanity's initial anarchic state of war of all against all. The secret of a rational civilization's success was the establishment of hierarchies that forced obedience on the otherwise unruly masses.

More than a century after Hobbes, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau turned the Hobbesian view on its head. He posited the

existence of what generations since Rousseau have called “the noble savage,” the innocent hunter-gatherers who cared for little more than thriving in their local settings. Graeber and Wengrow more accurately describe Rousseau’s characterization of innocent humanity as “the stupid savage.” These poor unreflecting, convivial souls were overwhelmed, displaced and their innocent culture corrupted by the principle of property and wealth that followed the discovery of agriculture. They were forced against their will to accept artificial hierarchies and even tyranny.

Paradoxically, the seemingly contrary beliefs attributed to these two philosophers continue to haunt our post-industrial culture. They combine to produce an effect that both restricts our understanding of human history and limits — if not eliminates — our ability to devise political systems designed to respect both the reality of human nature and nature itself. Despite their opposition, the cultural heritage of Hobbes and Rousseau have reinforced the uncritical acceptance of a politicized status quo in which the authors claim we have been “stuck” for some time.

Theorizing the nation state

For Hobbes, the march of history required the emergence of political hierarchy to rein in the selfish and violent instincts of savage, uncultured beings. For Rousseau, the establishment of sophisticated political institutions canceled the original state of human freedom, stifling our naturally cooperative instincts. That binary Hobbes-Rousseau duopoly has defined an artificial line of demarcation between what we now think of as conservative and liberal political ideologies. Hobbesians — cultural conservatives — may complain about some of the features and consequences of the exercise of authority, but they believe human behavior must be severely policed. Rousseauists — the cultural left — predominantly believe that if we just learned to be kind to one

another, like our hunter-gatherer ancestors, we wouldn’t need the repressive institutions that hinder our pursuit of happiness. Both have regrets, but both conservatives and liberals have accepted the political, economic and military status quo of the modern nation state as inevitable.

To get us unstuck, the authors offer a variegated view of societies stretching over space and time, most of the examples deriving from the prehistoric past. Their descriptions are based on the most up-to-date archaeological research. Graeber and Wengrow paint a compellingly varied picture of the surprising choices human societies were capable of imagining and implementing as they worked out their institutions and elaborated their patterns of behavior.

The examples the authors cite persuasively debunk the now commonly accepted idea that there was only one overriding pattern in the evolution of government and social organization, and that it proceeded through a series of logical and ultimately inevitable phases to lead us into the modern world. They contest the deterministic view that certain events, such as the discovery of the benefits of agriculture or the creation of more efficient technology, left the societies that profited from them no other choice than to march forward towards an ever more sophisticated, technology-oriented civilization, transforming their institutions, cultures and relationships to accommodate and adapt to the supposed laws of the “brave, new world” thus unveiled.

The authors are keen to discredit the idea that “the birth of agriculture” inexorably implied the reorganization of societies around the principle of property and the accumulation of wealth. Citing examples from the the Fertile Crescent that reveal a variety of social changes after the advent of agriculture, Graeber and Wengrow complain that “it no longer makes sense to ask, ‘what were the social implications of the transition to farming?’

— as if there was necessarily just one transition, and one set of implications.” They point out that, contrary to what “most general works on the course of human history” tell us, any researcher or student “of agrarian societies knows that people inclined to expand agriculture sustainably, without privatizing land or surrendering its management to a class of overseers, have always found ways to do so.”

So why do we continue to entertain the idea that farming cannot be dissociated from the culture of private property and the accumulation of wealth? One explanation might be that our political and economic leaders feel motivated to inculcate the belief that today’s capitalist creed of “greed is good” is an immutable principle comparable to Darwinian evolution. This conveniently justifies the underlying logic of the consumer society. Such a belief may be designed to liberate us from grappling with any lingering moral scruples concerning the unbridled pursuit of self-interest. The authors present mountains of evidence that serve to demonstrate the disconnect between the discovery of farming and the neoliberal ideology of private property.

Analyzing the testimony from the New World

The first surprise in the book occurs when the authors turn the tables on the usual image we have of anthropological observation. Instead of beginning, as most anthropology does, with a demonstration of the capacity of evolved, literate, civilized and intellectually disciplined Europeans or North Americans to venture into the heart of darkness with the aim of describing and deciphering the cultures of previously unobserved societies, the authors begin by citing the testimony of indigenous Americans in the 17th and 18th centuries who had the occasion to travel to Europe. This experience cast the observed in the role of observers. Some of them assumed the task of

anthropologists ready to comment on the curious rules and customs of European society.

A telling example the authors cite is the discourse of the Huron Chief Kondiaronk as transmitted, with likely literary embellishment, by an impoverished French aristocrat, the Baron de Lahontan. In his book, *Curious Dialogues with a Savage of Good Sense Who Has Traveled* (1703), based on his interviews with Kondiaronk, gives voice to the Native American who astutely compares life in France with pre-colonial North America.

Do you seriously imagine that I would be happy to live like one of the inhabitants of Paris? To take two hours every morning just to put on my shirt and make up? To bow and scrape before every obnoxious galoot I meet on the street who happens to have been born with an inheritance? Do you actually imagine I could carry a purse full of coins and not immediately hand them over to people who are hungry? That I would carry a sword but not immediately draw it on the first band of thugs I see rounding up the destitute to press them into Naval service? If, on the other hand, Europeans were to adopt an American way of life, it might take a while to adjust but in the end you will be far happier.

Kondiaronk’s ideas as expressed in Lahontan’s dialogue are consistent with the testimony of European missionaries who interacted with Native Americans at the time. Lahontan’s work set off a popular literary trend in Europe of fictional commentaries on the follies and foibles of European civilization as judged by imaginary visitors from Persia, China or Tahiti. In the case of Kondiaronk, our authors highlight not only his commentary on Europe, but also what this comparative discourse revealed about social structure and moral principles that regulated life back in the Chief’s “Indian” lands. These were, of course, lands that would in subsequent centuries be

transformed into what generations of US politicians like to refer to as the “shining city on a hill.” The city, as most people are aware, whose defensive walls have taken the form of an imposing military-industrial complex, has now spilled down the sides of the hill and well beyond.

Are human societies and civilization the same thing?

A famous scene at the beginning of Stanley Kubrick’s 2001, *A Space Odyssey*, evoked an idea that has been drummed into the heads of every school child in recent centuries: that there was a mysterious moment in human history we call the “dawn of civilization.” Kubrick’s version was pessimistic and passably Hobbesian. We have all been taught to understand that the world we were born into is something we flatter with the title “civilization.” But has there ever been a more ambiguous word? Mahatma Gandhi once highlighted its ambiguity thanks to his undeniably witty response to an inquirer who had the temerity to ask him what he thought about Western civilization. According to legend, Gandhi responded “I think it would be a good idea.”

Graeber and Wengrow maintain that, instead of thinking of civilization as a simple good idea, we should see it as a lot of good ideas, and of course some bad ones, as well. The authors make the essential point that, contrary to the reigning ideas about how civilization developed almost as a linear process, there is no simple pattern of evolution from primitive to civilized, from a society of dispersed foragers to the megacities of the 21st century. The book contains detailed descriptions of an impressive variety of types of social and economic organization that appear to have emerged not just out of necessity but as conscious, socially coordinated attempts to produce ways of life appropriate to differentiating environments and to the disposition of each specific population.

Rather than appearing as a frozen state of relationships determined by phenomena such as the economy of agriculture and the rise of cities, the various civilizations the authors describe, ranging across every continent, appear far more fluid and open to local creativity than our standard narrative allows for. In contrast, the homogenization of culture that has been taking place and rapidly accelerating at least for the past century could be characterized as the return to a more primitive mindset.

In many ways, our globalized civilization has never been more fragmented. Today’s news is dominated by different groups, including governments, media, identity communities and special interests, all desperately trying to impose the validity of their way of thinking about social and political issues. They all tend to reduce or downright reject the possibility of dialogue and debate. Those who, even in a recent past, still celebrated the humanism bequeathed by the Renaissance, judged that kind of parochialism as uncivilized and characteristic of a “primitive” worldview.

When Machiavelli analyzed the mechanics of power, among the tools he recommended for a successful prince was the virtue of cultural adaptivity. That advice is no longer heeded by today’s princes. Instead, the trend is that those who identify with a particular worldview and have the power to back it up will reject out of hand even the consideration of other worldviews. This has notably infected US foreign policy, at least since the George W Bush administration, and has now become the norm. It reflects an attitude asserting that talking to an adversary compromises one’s integrity.

We are in a privileged position today to see how this attitude plays out in real events. It was the case during the war in Syria, when Americans refused to consider negotiations with Bashar al-Assad

because he was the villain. More recently, days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared that there was no point negotiating with the Russians to avoid a war the State Department itself believed inevitable. The reason given was that Russia had refused to accept the sacrosanct principle that the sovereignty of a nation state included the freedom to join NATO and become the vassal of a superpower. Given the Russians starting position, there was nothing to discuss and so the fireworks could begin. After several weeks of destruction and killing, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky began insisting that neutrality is something he would envisage, which would exclude joining NATO. Even today, as the carnage continues, the US, sure of its principles, appears to be saying, that cannot happen, at least not yet and possibly, not even not on your life (i.e. Ukrainian, not American lives).

The startling example of Teotihuacan

The Dawn of Everything brings home the lesson that nothing is inevitable. Societies are capable of change and may even succeed in inverting the principles they seemed to represent. The authors describe in detail the transformation of Teotihuacan, the site in Mexico whose monumental pyramids testify to the existence of a severely hierarchical, authoritarian tradition. At one critical point in its history, Teotihuacan's population — through a process of decision no one can explain — became a successful and durable “utopian experiment in urban life,” a truly egalitarian society. It wasn't a regression to some dimly remembered forager culture. It was manifestly the result of a conscious and well reasoned social choice.

However constraining the social rules of many of the societies described in the book may appear, the authors insist that prehistoric societies retained a fundamental awareness of a trio of very real

freedoms not written into any society's bureaucratic bill of rights. They list them as the freedom to move, to disobey and to create. This implies the exercise of both critical insight and the freedom to experiment at the level of an entire society, a category of freedom that has disappeared in the era of the nation state. In that sense, history has indeed evolved. We have lost what were once assumed to be manifest freedoms. Once upon a time, migration from a perceived dystopia to another more amenable culture appeared to be a natural choice for ill-adapted individuals. Or an entire population, such as in Teotihuacan, could simply recreate its social rules.

Along with the modern belief in progress, humanity has thus moved away from its earlier phases of societal creativity to a form of social organization that, as the authors insist, has now become “stuck.” Today's social organization systematically stifles experimentation and has increasingly adopted homogeneity as an implicit and legitimated constraining ideal. Resisting that homogeneity or critiquing it, as we are seeing today, can lead to systematic censorship and, in some cases, to highly orchestrated accusations of treason. Every citizen today in almost every corner of the world is now expected to uncritically endorse the abstract hierarchy called the state, an entity that claims in its generosity to offer its citizens a national identity.

The rigidity of a world divided into nation states

In our democracies, we may enjoy (within limits) the privilege of criticizing policies and specific people in power, but we mustn't call into question the authority of the state. Even the Olympic Games serve to consolidate this perception of the state as the central feature of our identity. Willingly or unwillingly, we share a set of political values, a structure of authority and largely emotional connections of belonging to a nation. This is not

unnatural. The capacity humans have to identify with the locality and social groupings in which they were raised is universal. But it can turn into a social constraint when a powerful political entity imposes a more abstract, less locally inspired set of principles or beliefs on its citizens. A European concept born in the 17th century and exported through the tentacles of colonialism, has left humanity under the authority of what we now call the nation state. As citizens, we are told from birth that we “belong to” our nation state.

All nation states invent and then disseminate their specific historical narrative. In most cases, they rely on existing mythologies and legends that highlight local features and traditions as well as celebrate their geographical specificity. Others, especially those with potentially global ambitions, tend towards teleological accounts of their own history that they seek to merge with a more general spiritual, moral or scientific idea of historical evolution. This kind of narrative, a trend spawned by the European Enlightenment, appeals to values that are deemed universal, and serves to grant the nation states that elaborate it a superior moral standing that exists in the minds of its leaders and is shared by its citizens.

Once the nation state finds what it is looking for, it enriches the narrative to make it as spiritual, moral or scientific as it can, according to its needs and living traditions. Each of our modern nation states has thus crafted its unique history. By appealing to various universal political concepts, such as democracy, equality and liberty, some nation states often prefer to create a narrative of progress over time towards an ideal that shares whatever convenient combination of spiritual, moral and scientific assumptions each one is capable of devising. This also includes what in Chapter 10, Graeber and Wengrow call the tendency of nation states to “scour the ancient world for embryonic versions of our modern

nation states.” A past that was very different thus can thus be mobilized to justify the current order.

This helps us to understand the source of the standard reading of human social evolution, even in the clever variations of writers such as Yuval Noah Harari, Jared Diamond and Steven Pinker, who present it as a logical process. It is a process the authors critique throughout the book. In its standard version this narrative leads inexorably from hunter-gatherer societies towards our shared idea of modern civilization dominated by nation states and property or possession, proverbially defined as being “9/10s of the law.” This model supposes that, except for possible minor variations, everything happened with a Darwinian logic and could not have developed otherwise.

A full century before Darwin, in his *Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope formulated the tenet that stands at the basis of the modern belief in progress: “One truth is clear, whatever is, is right.” Most people now consider that Leibnizian sentiment too absolute, especially after Voltaire so sardonically picked it apart in *Candide*. Nevertheless, the idea that history followed a logical, possibly pre-ordained path to reach the type of complex social and economic organization we have today is cemented into the foundation of our civilization’s mindset.

When compared with the multiple examples of creativity practiced by the diversity of the civilizations the authors describe, the reigning ideas we have about the nature of civilization may thus seem simplistic. Our teachers at school taught us to think of the arc of history as a steady progress towards today’s civilization, disturbed only by occasional moments of regression. Through an impressive variety of examples, the authors of *The Dawn of Everything* show that the laws our contemporary theoreticians hold to be self-evident simply did not kick in as automatically as they seem to suppose. The book can be read as a

methodological guide to rethinking, not just prehistory, but history itself.

Schismogenesis and social creativity

One compelling concept the authors develop and return to at various points is what they call schismogenesis, a term coined in the 1930s by the ground-breaking sociologist and anthropologist, Geoffrey Bateson. It describes “people’s tendency to define themselves against one another.” Bateson’s purely psychological treatment of the phenomenon meant that he viewed schismogenesis as a destructive element in the relationships between individuals.

But when the authors apply the concept to societies, the term takes on a different character. At the level of coexisting societies, schismogenesis becomes a factor of creativity. It generates behaviors in which groups seek to define an alternative strategy for constructing their social values and institutions. They do it by reacting to and often inverting the values of a neighboring society. One of the outcomes of schismogenesis can be to correct the distortions created by one culture by emphasizing the opposite.

The authors examine at some length a telling example of schismogenesis between two foraging societies on the Pacific coast of North American territory extending from modern California to Canada. They describe a curiously symbiotic relationship between the Kwakiutl, a hierarchical society in the north that practiced slavery but eschewed the notion of private property, and the Yuroks, a largely egalitarian society that lived to their south. Everything about the pair of cultures differentiated them. The authors contrast “the flamboyant extravagance of one” with “the austere simplicity of the other.”

Citing the historically well documented societies of Athens and Sparta, they explain how such

societies “end up joined within a common system of differences, even as they attempt to distinguish themselves from one another.” Each one “becomes an indispensable alter ego, the necessary and ever-present example of what one should never wish to be.”

The contrast between the two societies on the West Coast of America may remind us of a similar contrast in 17th century England between the Puritans (Roundheads) and the Royalists (Cavaliers) that turned into a civil war and led to the beheading of the king. The difference between the North American and English examples is that the schismogenetic conflict in England took the form of a civil war within the framework of a nation state. To preserve the integrity of England, one party had to achieve absolute victory, leaving no possibility of coexistence within the borders of the state. The Kwakiutl and Yuroks were neighbors who interacted, but like Athens and Sparta, they remained geographically separate.

Graeber and Wengrow insist on the importance of cultural diversity as a laboratory of creativity. The point Graeber and Wengrow make is quite different from the current liberal idea that cultural differences should be tolerated, and that we should all agree to live together while seeking ways of sharing the similar if not the same values. History reveals that diversity is a permanent feature of human societies. It can lead to conflict but it also opens up the possibility of social and societal innovation. Highly differentiated neighboring societies are a natural occurrence. Differentiation allows the exercise of the three essential freedoms the authors believe to be at the core of all viable social organization: “the freedom to move, the freedom to disobey and the freedom to create or transform social relationships.”

The deeper problem of freedom

Throughout his career, David Graeber insisted on the ambiguity of our ideas of freedom that are too easily codified into sclerotic ideologies. He also insisted on the need to embrace the challenge of that ambiguity and to see it as a permanent invitation to modify what exists and especially create and build what is different. Embracing this challenge is the key to any hope we have to become unstuck from a fixed worldview that has spawned institutions seemingly focused on restricting social creativity.

Graeber and Wengrow's book is not only about the intellectual origins of our current quandary. It also presents a rich panorama of examples demonstrating how the facile theories we have created and cling to are contradicted by reality. They document a wide variety of real responses by societies across the globe over many millennia to numerous environmental and social challenges. The authors seem to be hoping we 21st century humans might take the hint from our own complex past to find a way of being at least as creative as many societies of yore. Perhaps, by relying more on history instead of artificial theories of history, we will be able to better respond to the range of challenges that now confront us.

Among those challenges is a huge one that has become more visible in recent weeks. Prominent politicians, notably in the US and China, have been telling us that we are now in the process of defining a "new world order." The war in Ukraine has become a powerful accelerator of a movement that was already clearly underway. The positioning of the nations of the world is already revealing a manifest and growing split, not just between the West and the East, that will inevitably lead to a redistribution of power, but also between the developed, white nations sometimes abusively referred to "the free world" and the rest of humanity.

US President Joe Biden has called this moment of decision-making as an "inflection point," by which he seems to mean a moment that requires reinforcing the existing order to preserve it. Others appear to see it as a schismogenetic moment in which the equivalent of a tectonic shift may be taking place. The transformations of societies in the past that Graeber and Wengrow describe tell us that such a moment can represent an opportunity for creativity. But in a world dominated by nuclear armed nation states sharing a global financial system that itself has become a weapon of mass destruction, the margin for creativity may turn out to be limited.

The Dawn of Everything was written with a definite sense of geopolitical awareness, but it focuses on our knowledge of the past and avoids directly broaching any of the issues that face contemporary society. It can be read as a rich exploration of the struggles human societies have always engaged in as each sought to find its place among its neighbors and within its physical environment. It contains a treasure trove of examples of social organization, cultural construction and economic creativity that invites us to broaden our understanding of our species' past and perhaps better prepare for its future. The book's insights may even help us to become unstuck.

Not many people have the time or energy to keep up with everything that happens in the various digs around the world, which are constantly unveiling new knowledge and new hypotheses about societies that disappeared thousands of years ago. The lay reader should welcome Graeber and Wengrow's book as, if nothing else, a fascinating introduction to the global state of the entire discipline of archaeology as well as a wide-ranging update of its methodological orientations. But *The Dawn of Civilization* is also a major work of anthropological reflection that should incite its

readers to think of social creativity in a new light, even if our political leaders will most likely fail to notice its significance in this historical moment.

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The Significance of South Korea’s New President Yoon Seok-yeol

Thomas Kalinowski
April 17, 2022

Yoon Seok-yeol, the conservative candidate, won the extremely tight presidential race in an agenda-less election. Domestically Yoon’s ability to impose radical changes is limited but he can shift South Korea’s foreign policy by fostering closer ties with the US and Japan.

On March 9, Yoon Seok-yeol of the conservative People Power Party (PPP) won the South Korean presidential elections by a slim margin. Yoon won 48.6% of the vote while Lee Jae-myung, his rival from the Democratic Party (DP) was not far behind at 47.8%. After five years of rule by President Moon

Jae-in of the DP, the presidential Blue House will once again be occupied by a conservative.

Ironically, Moon appointed Yoon as prosecutor general of the country. As the top prosecutor, Yoon secured the conviction of two former conservative presidents for corruption. He also pressed charges against Samsung Chairman Lee Jae-yong who was sentenced to prison in a bribery scandal. “Owing loyalty to nobody,” Yoon then went on to investigate members of the Moon administration, catapulting this star prosecutor into the national limelight and eventually making him the PPP candidate.

Yoon is an outsider. He has no administrative experience and little access to Seoul’s political networks. He has not even served as a member of parliament. The fact that Yoon came out on top confirms that public popularity is now more important than party allegiance and political or administrative experience in the South Korean presidential system.

The election — although very close nationwide — exposed South Korea’s regional division. In this country, political parties are not primarily divided by ideology or political platforms but rather by history and regional origins. In the southwestern Cholla provinces, more than 80% voted for Lee while the southeastern Kyongsang regions voted overwhelmingly for Yoon.

A Terrible Housing Crisis and Gender Issues

The biggest surprise was that Yoon won the capital city of Seoul, a stronghold of the DP. This crucial victory helped him win the election. It hinged on the only political issue that mattered during the campaign: unaffordable housing prices. The Moon administration failed to address this burning issue, which hurt the DP.

The overwhelming importance of this matter can only be understood in the context of the jeonse rental system in South Korea. Jeonse requires lump sum payments and directly links rents to real estate prices. In addition, rental contracts are limited to two years and there is almost no protection for tenants who are left to the whims, fancies and even tyranny of their landlords. The Bertelsmann Stiftung's 2021 South Korea Report observed that: "While regulations on homeowners and tenant protection have been slightly improved, they have failed to arrest the massive increases in housing costs in the urban centers."

In these elections, a gender divide emerged among younger voters. Only 34% of women in their 20s voted for Yoon in contrast to 59% of men in the same age group. This was by far the largest gender divide among different age groups ever recorded. In the past, younger voters have tended to vote for the DP. Yoon appealed to young men by opposing "feminism" and even promising to abolish the ministry of gender equality. Note that South Korea's average gender pay gap is one of the largest in the world. Furthermore, South Korea's labor-force participation rate among women is the fifth-lowest among the 29 EU and OECD countries as per a report on Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI). The authors of the report see a "continued prevalence of traditional ideas about family and gender roles." On a related note, Shim Sang-jeung, the highest-ranked female presidential candidate of the progressive Justice Party received only 2.4% of the vote as compared to 6.2% in 2017, exposing the crisis in which the political left now finds itself in South Korea.

A Tricky Political Situation

Over the years, election campaigns have become almost completely personalized and devoid of political agendas. Negative campaigning now delves into character flaws of the candidates and even of their wives. Particularly shocking is how

vital issues, such as the extreme environmental degradation in South Korea or how the country plans to combat climate change fail to feature in presidential debates. South Korea has the lowest share of renewable energy among the 41 countries examined by the SGI report. A later report takes the view that South Korea "is more focused on [its] growth aspect than on environmental protection."

It is difficult to predict the direction the Yoon administration will take during its five-year tenure which begins on May 10. As a political and administrative novice, Yoon will rely on his party and the bureaucracy. When it comes to economic and social policies, Yoon – the son of a market-liberal economics professor – promised to reduce government interventions. However, he is likely to make little headway because his party does not have a majority in the parliament. The DP commands a strong majority with 172 out of 300 seats. It can shoot down Yoon's economic policies even though it may not have the two-thirds majority needed to override presidential vetoes, amend the constitution, or impeach the president.

While the South Korean president has strong constitutional powers and can rule by decrees, his ability to impose radical changes without proper legislation is limited. If the president ends up in a standoff with parliament, the country could end up in political gridlock. This might cause instability or, on a more positive note, inaugurate a new era of cooperation and compromises between the two camps or even a complete reorganization of political parties. Yoon's election has upped the political ante for the country. Now, all parties are focused on the next parliamentary election in 2024.

If things seem rocky on the domestic front, they are better when it comes to foreign policy. For a long time, relations with North Korea, China, Japan and the US have been one of few ideological divisions between the two large parties. Moon's

presidency adopted the classic DP agenda of engaging North Korea to achieve an as-yet unfulfilled goal of signing a peace treaty or at least an end-of-war declaration. The PPP fiercely opposed the DP on this issue. Conflict with North Korea has long been a means for the conservative PPP to rally its supporters. Members of the PPP also fear that a peace treaty would undermine South Korea's alliance with the US, risking the withdrawal of American troops.

Yoon is likely to use the PPP's excellent ties with the US to strengthen the US-South Korea alliance. His government is likely to repair relations with Japan. Japan-South Korea relations have deteriorated due to friction over Japanese reparations for its colonial atrocities in Korea. Closer ties to the US and Japan will give Yoon less leeway in dealing with China and Russia. When it comes to the war in Ukraine, Yoon is likely to put South Korea more firmly on the US side and against Russia. Under the new president, South Korea, Japan and the US are likely to come closer together to strengthen the rules-based international order in Asia.

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Confessions of a Modern Indian

Maanas Jain
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Indians need to assess the largely subconscious impact of Western values on contemporary Indian culture.

I realized recently that having my peers scoff at my ideals on a daily basis has made it easier for me to introspect and change myself. Since I don't fit in anyway, there isn't any dominant social standard I need to adhere to. If I realize that something about my ideology is wrong, I can change it. The new virtue will be regarded as equally useless either way.

The difference between Westernism and Liberalism used to be a fine line for me until I realized that there was indeed a large gap. What had been bridging the two supposed opposites were some personal, stereotypical, modern-society-influenced grudges. Most of my life has been spent surrounded by upper-middle-class society. I was consciously and willingly influenced in my childhood, unconsciously influenced (while being in denial) in my teens, and began realizing what all this led to as an adult. Sometimes I think that this realization is what makes me worthy of the title of 'adult'.

When I was younger, the main ideology I would scoff at was religion. The paternal side of my family are Jains and they adhere to quite a lot of Jainism's religious standards. Naturally, I was expected to as well. Even more naturally, I didn't want to. Atheism was prevalent at that time, the pointlessness of idol worship was a hot topic, and most of the people around me were wealthy.

I didn't like going to the temple, I didn't like repeating prayers, and the fact that no one could give me a logical answer as to why we followed some seemingly random rules did nothing to bring out more devotion from me. What changed this narrow-minded perspective of mine were three things: I moved to college, I read 1984, and I found that I couldn't empathize with my friends.

The novel 1984 changed my entire perspective of what I found interesting in the world. Suddenly I was dragged into a world of politics and mass mind control and subsequently began looking for these concepts in my world. Getting distance from my parents gave me the chance for uninfluenced, independent thinking. And because I felt that my social circle looked down upon me, I was hungry to do the same for them. I began looking for the faults in their ideologies, and thereafter rid myself of those faults.

Liberalism was a term I didn't understand until I read Ted Kaczynski's manifesto. That was when I realized that being a true liberal was ideal, and that most people were completely different. My understanding of the concept took root during a discussion with my friends. I challenged them with a scenario I invented: Person A aspires to buy a car and upon doing so achieves happiness; person B, for religious purposes, would not cut his hair on Tuesday and upon following this principle, he would feel happy. I claimed that both these concepts were fundamentally the same.

My friends didn't agree. They believed that by being unable to cut his hair on Tuesday, person B was being inconvenienced.

The disparity in our views on the two situations was striking. They believed that buying a car invariably leads to happiness. Person A would spend a few years working hard at his job, and then finally see the fruits of his labor by purchasing a car. They couldn't see anything being

gained from person B using his willpower to adhere to his no-hair-cutting principle.

I believe that happiness is inherently an illusory concept, if we temporarily put aside the question of hormonal (serotonin, endorphin etc.) interplay. Achieving happiness has two components: valuing a certain goal or result, and obtaining the result. The goal is highly variable for different individuals, or at least it used to be before globalization set in. The relationship between earning money or buying cars and being happy isn't an axiom. They are goals that we have been conditioned to accept by our modern society. I use the term modern because I don't think these concepts were prime goals in ancient India.

The real difference between the mentalities is that of materialism. Obtaining a car is a result that can be felt with the external senses. Adhering to a principle, however, is a phenomenon rooted solely in the mind. It's easy to see why material goals like money and big houses are more enticing. They are achievements, tangible objects. They can be immediately appreciated and understood by the achiever as well as the people around him.

Spirituality and philosophy are concepts fundamentally quite the opposite of materialism, consumerism and capitalism, which represent the values at the core of the Western economy. Developing countries, including India, had a largely spiritual dimension to their culture, at least for most of the population. Materialistic goals were primarily the attributes of aristocratic merchants and kings. For better or for worse, a clear hierarchy existed in these ancient kingdoms which meant that the expectations people had in their lives differed.

With the advent of globalization and socialism, goals began aligning. And since the West was what brought the revolution, the new goals being idealized also came from that culture. As the

people of India began viewing themselves as part of a bigger world, they were forced to fit in and compete.

It can be argued that before the British looted India, India was at an economic advantage. After the British left, however, not only was our wealth gone, but we lacked the materialistic and expansionist mindset of the West, the factor that drove their crusades 900 years ago. But now we had to compete with them, which left us feeling inferior from every angle.

That deeply embedded inferiority is now not just limited to a conflicting ideology about whether materialistic goals are better for happiness or not. It has spawned a belief that Western goals are better in every way, even when the fundamentals are comparable. For example, if one was asked to choose between an Indian or foreign brand of clothes, shoes or food, the 'liberals' would lean towards the Western options.

What these liberals really want isn't for people to be able to choose whatever they feel is right, it's for more people to be able to choose Western options and portray Indian options as close-minded and orthodox.

The Hindu religion has been one of devotion. People assumed that praying to a god and following a set of rules would lead to happiness. They believed this. Now people believe that buying cars makes one happy. Both concepts are equally arbitrary. There is perhaps no scientific way to prove which one leads to true happiness. Yet there will always be a bias towards cars in those who consider themselves developed, modern, and liberal.

To realize the falsity of this concept one only needs to think back to a time when cars didn't exist, or rather, when India was free of Western contact. Without these foreign concepts, were

Indians perpetually unhappy? I don't think so. What changed between then and now is only what people are conditioned to believe is their goal.

I am not exempt from this bias. Given a choice, while I might not choose to buy a fancy car, I will definitely prefer having money over following a set of religious principles. But I am ready to accept that this belief of mine is not a concept of my own making, as well as the fact that it has no logical basis.

A true liberal would be able to look at the lives of persons A and B and equate them as equal. However, most people who call themselves liberals cannot do that. In India at least, from what I've seen, no matter how patriotic people claim to be, their dreams of happiness lie largely in Western concepts of money, stocks and global businesses.

***Maanas Jain** is a medical student at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) Jodhpur in India. Maanas was homeschooled by his parents. He is passionate about Lego and mechanical machines and conducted workshops about them. Maanas enjoys reading books on dystopia and exploring ideas related to this theme.

Making Sense of India's Newfound Love for Russian Oil

Shreeya Mishra

April 21, 2022

As an energy importer plagued by inflation, India cannot forego the option of cheap oil from a country that has consistently backed it on

Kashmir, supplies most of its defense equipment and provides key strategic technologies.

India's love affair with Russia began a long time ago. India won its independence from the UK in 1947. Jawaharlal Nehru, its first prime minister, was a self-declared socialist who drew inspiration from the Soviet Union. In the decades after independence, India swerved increasingly to the left. As a result, New Delhi developed extremely close relations with Moscow.

Only after 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, did New Delhi's ties with Moscow weaken. In recent years, India has strengthened its relationship with the US. Both democracies find China a common threat. Furthermore, American investment has flowed into India while Indian students have flocked to the US. Indian politicians, movie stars and cricketers use American social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube to campaign. Therefore, India's neutrality on the Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused much heartburn in Washington.

The recent visit of Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar and Defense Minister Rajnath Singh to the US did not go particularly well. The Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke about "monitoring some recent concerning developments in India, including a rise in human rights abuses by some government, police, and prison officials." Blinken's comment is less about human rights abuses and more about the US disapproval of India's Ukraine policy and its purchase of Russian oil. So, why is New Delhi risking its relations with Washington and buying Russian oil?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has spiked global food, fertilizer and oil prices. The average monthly Brent crude oil price in December 2021

was \$74.17. In March 2022, this had risen to \$117.25. For an energy importer like India, this has spelled disaster. Inflation has shot up and the Reserve Bank of India has cut projected growth rates for the country. As a result, Russia's offer of cut-price oil has become attractive to India.

Given high prices, India is not alone in buying cheap Russian oil. Hungarian, Bulgarian and Greek refineries continue to buy Russian oil as do many others. The Indian press reports that New Delhi "could be buying Russia's flagship Urals grade at discounts of as much as \$35 a barrel on prices before the war." This is a very steep discount that offsets American and Western sanctions. With a per capita GDP that was only \$1927.71 in 2020 and an unemployment crisis in the country, India cannot afford to forego the option of cheap oil.

The option of buying Russian oil is also important for another reason. India sources its oil from many countries with Russia providing a tiny fraction of its energy needs. Iraq supplies 23% of India's oil, Saudi Arabia 18% and the United Arab Emirates 11%. In 2022, exports from the US are likely to increase and meet 8% of India's oil needs. Crucially though, India's purchase of Russian oil gives it more leverage against other sellers. As Jaishankar rightly pointed out, India's "total purchases for the month would be less than what Europe does in an afternoon." Therefore, the US fixation with Indian oil purchases from Russia seems shortsighted and misguided.

As has been said by many foreign policy experts, India has shared a close strategic relationship with Russia for many decades. Once India chose socialism, the then Soviet Union traded preferentially with India. Moscow also provided and continues to provide the bulk of India's defense needs. Even today, an estimated 70% of India's defense equipment comes from Russia. Perhaps even more importantly, Moscow

has shared nuclear, missile and space technology with New Delhi, enabling India to emerge as a major power.

In 1971, the Soviet Union and India signed an important treaty. Later that year, Moscow backed New Delhi while Washington backed Islamabad. India was a democracy that reluctantly went to war to liberate Bangladesh. In the run up to the conflict, Pakistan's military dictatorship was conducting genocide and using rape as a weapon of war against poor Bengalis in what was then known as East Pakistan. Russia has consistently backed India on Kashmir. In contrast, the US has regularly chided India for human rights abuses in Kashmir and taken a pro-Pakistan stance.

Even as ties with the US have improved, relations with Russia have remained important. In 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin flew to New Delhi to meet Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. After the visit, retired Indian diplomat Ashok Sajjanhar concluded that Putin's brief India trip had "reinvigorated a time-tested partnership." Both countries signed many agreements, paying considerable attention to trade and investment relations. Traditional areas like nuclear energy, space and defense also got attention. Here, in the words of Sajjanhar "the most important decision was to commence manufacture of more than 700,000 assault AK-203 rifles with transfer of technology under the 'Make in India' program."

Russia is also helping India indigenize its defense production of T-90 tanks and Su-30-MKI aircraft. Russia also supplies spares and helps upgrade MiG-29-K aircraft, Kamov-31, Mi-17 helicopters, MiG-29 aircraft and multiple rocket launcher BM-30 Smerch. Despite an ongoing war with Ukraine and severe sanctions, Russia is delivering the second regiment of S400 missile defense systems to India.

India is in a rough neighborhood with two nuclear-armed neighbors. Both Pakistan and China claim Indian territory. The specter of a two-front war is a real one for India. Therefore, good relations with Russia, its biggest defense equipment and technology supplier, are critically important. This is a key reason for New Delhi to take up Moscow's offer of cheap oil.

As an independent nation and a rising global power, India has to act in its strategic interest. At the moment, this is best served by buying cheap Russian oil.

***Shreeya Mishra** is a 15-year-old student based in New Delhi. She has an interest in Indian foreign policy and is passionate about astrophysics, Model United Nations and tennis. Shreeya enjoys meeting new people from different fields.

A Confused Atheist's Pilgrimage of Indian Holy Sites

Ruyintan E. Mehta
April 23, 2022

Reflections after a pilgrimage in 2016 to shrines of different religions have left me more confused than ever about faith and god.

My wife and I are not religious. Monica was raised as a Gujarati Hindu while I grew up in an orthodox Parsi family in Ahmedabad, India. Formal religion — hers or mine — plays no role in our day-to-day lives. Both of us studied in the same convent elementary

school and then in a Jesuit college, before she went on to medical college and I joined the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay. Marrying her in 1972 was a VERY BIG DEAL in my family, as I was the first one to marry a Parjat (a non-Parsi). After 44 years of marriage, two wonderful sons and four grandchildren, our family has become truly diverse with Polish and Chinese daughters-in-law. Since both of us are officially senior citizens, we decided to take a tour of some of the holiest places for the different Indian religious groups.

I am not an expert on comparative religions, I simply consider myself more of a curious outsider who critically observes the characteristics of each religious practice in India and develops his own impressions.

In early January 2016, the 1970 IIT Bombay batch had its sapphire reunion, an event to celebrate 45 years of our graduation, in Goa. As part of our tour, we visited the Basilica of Bom Jesus, where St. Francis Xavier's sacred relics lie. Incidentally my high school was named after him. The church was majestically built in the colonial Portuguese days. But the visit was more akin to a tour of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan — people in organized groups following a guide speaking in hushed tones with no shoving and pushing going on.

To be honest, the fact that the saint's body has remained intact did not make a great impression on me. All throughout my school days, there was always an undercurrent of resentment in our mandatory Moral Science class taught by Jesuit Fathers. This might have been due to the fact that the Portuguese and the British imposed Christian faiths on Indians who were primarily Hindu and Muslim. Those feelings from over 50 years ago came flashing back to me as I walked through the basilica.

In 2016, we visited the Golden temple twice — first around 10pm on August 26 and then again on the following morning. The temple was surrounded by a large water-filled moat and at night it really glowed like a large Golden structure. There were literally thousands of devoted visitors; more than 95% were Sikh men, women and children. We were all asked to cover our heads, wash our feet and walk barefoot. The caretakers, called sevadars, were polite but quite stern and kept people in check. We saw the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy religious scripture of Sikhism, being ceremoniously taken from the inner sanctum, called Harmandir, to the Akal Takht, the seat of power, for the night. Dozens of religious Sikhs wanted to touch the Palkhi, the carrier in which the Holy Book was placed, in order to get blessings. Walking around the entire square was a memorable experience.

The following morning, we stood in a long line to get into the inner sanctum and were able to partake in some excellent sweet halwa given to everyone as prasad, an offering to the gods. I found remarkable that during our two visits to the Golden Temple, no one ever asked for alms. Also, considering the large crowds, the place was remarkably clean. Most of the services and management at the temple was conducted by Sikh volunteers. This was an exceptional feature not seen at other religious places we visited. I was really touched by the selflessness shown by the Sikh community.

From the Golden Temple in Amritsar we made our way to the ancient city of Varanasi, which many Hindus deem the holiest of cities. We arrived in the city on August 28. Just a couple of days earlier the Ganga River had flooded over its banks making it impossible to climb down the ghats, its flight of steps. Our day started with a chaotic drive through the heart of dirty Varanasi towards the famous Kashi Vishwanath Shiva temple. After parking the car, we walked over a

mile through narrow and shockingly filthy lanes. It was sad to see the emaciated cows eating garbage and plastic wrappers. To call a cow “holy” and then treat the poor animal in such a disgusting manner is almost criminal.

At first the police guards outside the Kashi Vishwanath temple would not allow Monica and myself to enter the temple. Luckily our guide intervened and we could visit the temple on condition that we left our US passports with the inspectors. Before entering the temple, we had to buy some items for the puja, an offering to the gods, in order to make the merchant who was guarding our shoes and other belongings happy. The Shiva Mandir’s inner sanctum was rather underwhelming with all the worshippers hustled in and out within minutes. The place was unkempt and not up to my expectations. Or maybe it was just my skepticism about religion that made me focus on the negatives.

In my opinion, Varanasi takes the first prize in being the filthiest city in India with little or no civic sense. But to my great surprise whenever we mentioned this fact to the locals, they looked amazed and pointed out that the city had never had an epidemic of malaria or plague like other Indian cities. Even many of the educated folks sincerely believed that Ganga Maiya, which literally means Mother Ganges in the Hindi language, took care of all these issues as a divine matter.

The next day we visited Sarnath, only about 13 kilometers from Varanasi. It remains one of the holiest places in Buddhism. The temple receives an extremely large number of tourists from Southeast Asia and particularly the Sinhalese Buddhists from Sri Lanka. Unlike Hindu temples, the Buddhist place of worship was austere, clean and neat. There was an aura of peace and quiet we had never experienced on previous occasions. We also stopped by the Dhamek and Chaukhandi Stupas – one of them erected by Emperor Ashoka who ruled

in the 3rd century BCE. These commemorative monuments are massive structures and a real archeological rarity.

We continued our 2016 pilgrimage through North Central India to Jaipur, Rajasthan. On August 31 we reached Pushkar about 14 kilometers from Ajmer and walked for quite a while to one of the five most sacred dhams, pilgrimage sites, at the Pushkar Lake. The Brahma temple that we visited was built in the 14th century. According to legend, there are only a few Brahma temples in India because the god’s wife, blinded by jealousy, cursed him that he wouldn’t be worshiped anymore on earth. At this site we had quite an unpleasant adventure with the pujari, the temple priest in charge of the puja. When we refused to pay the entire big sum of money he had asked for to perform the ritual, the priest attacked us claiming that our children and grandchildren would suffer as a result. Needless to say, I gave in to his request, but the whole experience left me quite disillusioned with the significance of religious ceremonies.

After Pushkar, we drove to Ajmer Sharif Dargah of Moinuddin Chishti, a revered Muslim shrine visited by over 100,000 pilgrims a day. Despite being quite crowded, the place was surprisingly clean like the Sikh Golden Temple. My late mother- and father-in-law who were Hindus, used to send money through their Muslim servants to offer a chaddar, a sheet offered in devotion, at the Ajmer Sharif Dargah. In honor of their beliefs, my wife requested one of the Muslim priests to conduct a short prayer ceremony and asked him about the charge. Unlike the aggressive Hindu priest at Pushkar, the Maulvi replied that we could offer whatever sum we wished. For an offering of 2,000 rupees, they prepared an elaborate wicker basket with flowers and fruits and I had to carry it on my head into the inner sanctum of the Dargah. It was an interesting and enjoyable experience. We also saw a huge pot in which rice and dal were

cooked. The food was to be distributed to the poor outside the Dargah.

On September 1 we flew to Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh. After checking into the hotel, we visited the fanciest Sari Palace in town. So, while chatting to the shop owner, we accidentally learned that it would be rather difficult to do a Tirupati Temple Darshan without prior approval from a local official. But everything has a price in India. We were informed that if we gave a substantial baksheesh, a tip, to a certain individual, we would be given immediate access to the world-famous Tirumala Venkateswara Temple's inner sanctum. For this special visit, called darshan, women have to wear a sari or a long plain churidar dress, with tight fitting trousers, while men wear a dhoti and angavastram, a long sarong and a shoulder cloth.

So we purchased the necessary clothes and then patiently waited for a call in our hotel room. At around 9.30pm an inspector with the Vigilance and Anti-Corruption Department with the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) announced he would be our guide and was willing to take us for a very special darshan that same night. We quickly dressed with the right apparel and followed him. Everything about the temple was highly organized in a businesslike manner. We cut across huge lines of pilgrims because of our special dispensation and were allowed to stop and observe the deity of Lord Venkateswara for well over five minutes, whereas others were hustled out with no more than 30 seconds of darshan.

All of this special dispensation came at a heavy price. The next day we were asked to give the inspector who had arranged our visit, a princely sum of 10,000 rupees. Our driver got visibly upset because we were treated as "foreigners." He claimed that we had been overcharged and that the inspector had taken full advantage of our ignorance. Later that day we also visited a couple of other temples and everywhere the business

approach was the same. It felt more like going to a shopping mall than to a temple. No wonder that the TTD Trust receives over \$30 million just in admission tickets and the sale of laddus, sweets, generates a staggering revenue stream exceeding \$10 million. All other donations are probably 100 times more than the numbers mentioned above. The TTD trust does run several universities and claims to conduct many charitable activities.

When Islam came to Persia, some Zoroastrians fled to India. Since then, members of this community have been called Parsis in honor of the land of their origin. In Bombay, I decided to complete our pilgrim tour by visiting all four of the holiest Parsi fire temples called Atash Behrams, which means the fire of victory. This is the highest grade of a fire that can be placed in a Zoroastrian fire temple as an eternal flame. The other two lower graded fires are Atash Adaran and below is the Atash Dadfah. These three grades signify the degree of reverence and dignity these are held in.

As I mentioned at the beginning, my wife was raised as a Hindu and non-Parsis are not allowed to enter these places of worship, therefore on September 4, 2016, I visited on my own the Banaji Atash Behram (AB) on Charni road in Bombay, followed by the Wadiaji AB in Dhobi Talao, then the Anjuman AB also in Dhobi Talao and the last Dadyseth AB in Fanaswadi, Chira Bazaar area.

What came as a great shock to me was, unlike all the other crowded temples we had visited, the ultra neat and clean Atash Behrams were almost empty and there were more priests than lay people. I am a 67-year-old senior citizen, but the vast majority of the Parsis praying in these temples appeared to be much older than me. All the Hindu, Christian, Sikh and Muslim places of worship were teeming with young children, whereas in the Atash Behrams I didn't see any. It is a known fact that the Parsis are a dying breed in India. With our intolerance of not admitting any non-Parsis into

our fire temples and the most outrageously offensive policy of disbaring a Parsi female who marries a non-Parsi in India from entering our fire temples and treating her children likewise, the Zoroastrian Parsi population will continue to diminish rapidly. Now there are only 53,000 Parsis remaining in India and about 110,000 worldwide. At this rate, Parsis will be wiped out in 50 to 75 years unless the orthodox extremists lose their stranglehold on the fast-declining community.

Indian society is quite religious. In daily life, religion often plays a big role in people's lives. Many people make pilgrimages to holy sites and places of worship to thank god/gods, seek blessings and make wishes. I went to places of worship in a spirit of curiosity. I wanted to see if there was something about religion that I had been missing over all these years.

One striking thing occurred to me. There is great spiritual energy among the people who go on pilgrimages. Each of them have their own hopes, desires and beliefs. Yet while the places of worship appeared to be lush with cash, the poor do not seem to benefit from this wealth. Their religiosity benefits the places of worship and the custodians of such places.

As I said earlier, I went on this pilgrim tour with an open mind. I hoped to escape my state of "confused atheism," achieve a deeper understanding of the religious practices and, as a result, become a better person. However, the two weeks of traveling the length and breadth of India increased my disenchantment and disillusionment with religion. Thanks to my 2016 pilgrimage, I remain even more of a confused atheist.

(This article was edited by Senior Editor **Francesca Julia Zucchelli**.)

***Ruyintan E. Mehta** is a serial entrepreneur in plastics manufacturing. He is currently involved in nonprofit work in water, sanitation, and maternal and child health in India as honorary executive director of a US section 501(c)(3) foundation. He was the president of the IIT Bombay Heritage Foundation, the US alumni association of his alma mater. Currently, Ruyintan is the president of the IIT Gandhinagar Foundation.

Appeal to the UN to Protect Hazaras in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's civil society leaders
May 01, 2022

Civil society leaders, human rights activists and public intellectuals write an open letter to the UN, highlighting the persecution of the Hazara Shia community in Taliban-occupied Afghanistan.

30 April 2022

To: H.E. António Guterres,
United Nations Secretary-General

CC: H.E. Ambassador Barbara Woodward,
Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the UN and President of United Nations Security Council

H.E. Ambassador Federico Villegas, Permanent Representative of Argentina and President of United Nations Human Rights Council

Excellencies,

We are writing this letter to express our grave concern about the escalation of violence targeting the Hazara Shia communities in Afghanistan. We are writing to demand your immediate action to address these targeted attacks, which can amount to crime against humanity, and when taken together, constitute an act of genocide. We believe the persistent and deliberate campaign of violence against the Shia Hazara community in Afghanistan requires an urgent and coordinated response by the United Nations and the international community.

On April 19, 2022, a high school and an education center in a Hazara neighborhood in West of Kabul, Afghanistan were bombed, killing and maiming scores of school children. The next day, an attack on a Shia Hazara mosque in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif was bombed, killing thirty one and injuring eighty seven worshipers attending prayers during the holy month of Ramadan. Local reports, however, indicate a much higher level of casualties. Another mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif was also attacked on the same day and in the same manner, killing and injuring dozens. On April 28, two explosions targeting civilian mini-buses in Mazar-i-Sharif killed at least eleven and wounded at least eighteen Hazaras. On the same day, five Hazara miners traveling in a civilian passenger car were stopped and shot dead in Samangan province.

While terrorist attacks such as the last week's horrific attacks on Sufi Mosques in Kunduz and Kabul provinces continue to affect civilians throughout Afghanistan, the attacks on Hazaras represent a pattern in recent years that target Hazara-Shia mosques, schools, education centers, public gatherings, sports clubs, public transports, and even maternity hospitals. In the first six months of 2021 UNAMA recorded 20 deliberate attacks against the Hazara ethnic group, resulting in around 500 civilian casualties. The Islamic

State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), an affiliate group of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), claimed responsibility for most attacks, including recent incidents in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, although perpetrators have not claimed responsibility for some attacks.

Residents, observers of Afghanistan, and international human rights groups have raised constant concern about such a growing trend of targeted violence against Hazaras. In October 2021, after a series of attacks on Shia Hazara mosques in Kunduz and Kandahar, that killed and wounded hundreds, Human Rights Watch characterized the attacks as “designed to spread terror and inflict maximum suffering, particularly on Afghanistan’s Hazara community.” The statement highlighted that “[t]he numerous attacks targeting Hazaras amount to crimes against humanity, and those responsible should be brought to justice.”

In May 2021, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) called on the Afghan government and the international community to consider the Hazaras as a “population at risk of war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing or genocide”. In July 2021, Genocide Watch issued an emergency warning for Afghanistan, stating, “The Hazara religious minority is a portent of an approaching genocide.” In August 2021, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum issued a similar statement underlining the risk of genocide against Hazaras in Afghanistan.

Hazaras have a long history of persecution in Afghanistan at the hands of state and non-state actors such as the Taliban and other extremist groups. This history and recent events align with the warning factors of mass atrocity crimes that the United Nations identified in the 2014 Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes.

The return of the Taliban to power has made the Hazaras more vulnerable and subject to increased violence. On August 19, 2021, Amnesty International released a report documenting the Taliban's targeted attacks against Hazaras and called the group responsible for the "brutal massacre of Hazara men" in Ghazni and Daykundi provinces. Since coming to power in August 2021, the Taliban forcibly removed hundreds of Hazara families from their homes and villages in Helmand, Uruzgan, Daykundi, and Balkh provinces. This is compounded by the Taliban history of brutality against the community, including massacring thousands of Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif (1998), Bamyán (2001), and Zabul (between 1996 and 2001).

In January 2022, following its report on Afghanistan, the UK Parliament's House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence established a bi-cameral and cross-party inquiry team on the situation of Hazaras in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The report stated that "The Hazaras have a long history of suffering state persecution on both ethnic and sectarian grounds."

Following these most recent attacks targeting Hazaras in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, human rights groups and officials in the international community, including The UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan Richard Bennett, expressed concerns about these "targeted attacks on Hazaras", and called for "immediate investigation and accountability" to "end such human rights violations." Similar statements of condemnation and calls for action have been made by special representatives and Ministers of Foreign Affairs in the EU, Sweden, Norway, and Canada. Afghanistan's diplomatic missions to the UN and in many countries in Europe, North America, and South Asia also expressed concerns and demanded immediate international attention to attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructures in

Afghanistan, particularly in Hazaras and Shia communities.

However, more must be done to protect the Hazaras in Afghanistan, especially by the United Nations. Thus, we, the undersigned group of intellectuals, academics, human rights, media, and civil society activists from Afghanistan and around the world, urge the United Nations to take immediate actions addressing human rights situation of the Hazaras in Afghanistan, and adopt appropriate measures to protect the community against risks of genocide and crimes against humanity. We urge you to:

- Call a special session of the United Nations Security Council to discuss, as matter of urgency, the situation of the Hazaras and adopt a resolution ensuring that the community will be protected against such heinous targeted attacks;
- Call for a special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council to discuss and address the ongoing genocidal attacks on Hazaras, and work to prevent such atrocities and bring the perpetrators to justice;
- Launch an immediate investigation into the targeted killing of the Hazara and Shias in Afghanistan, and use instruments under the international law to address and put an end to the perpetual killings of Hazaras;
- Request the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan to collect and publicize substantiated information relating to grave violations of international human rights law, including breaches of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide committed against the Hazaras;

- Request UNAMA and the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan to submit a special report on the situation of Hazaras identifying urgent and practical measures to protect the community against targeted attacks and mass atrocities.

Sincerely,

1. Dr. Sima Samar, Former Chairperson of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
2. Shaharзад Akbar, Former Chairperson of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
3. Dr. Nasir A. Andesha, Ambassador, Afghanistan Mission, Geneva,
4. Naseer A. Faiq, Charge d'Affaires, Afghanistan Permanent Mission to the United Nations, New York
5. Dr. Abbas Farasoo, University of Melbourne, Australia
6. Dr. Ali Karimi, University of Pennsylvania, USA
7. Dr. Arif Sahar, Sheffield University, UK
8. Dr. Dawood Rezai, Legal Scholar, Canada
9. Dr. Elham Gharji, University of Coimbra, Portugal
10. Dr. Farkhondeh Akbari, Monash University, Australia
11. Dr. Hadi Hosainy, Texas Christian University, USA
12. Dr. Hasan Faryaar, Carleton University, Canada
13. Dr. Humaira May Rizayee, Hazara rights activist, UK
14. Dr. Kambaiz Rafi, University College London, UK

15. Dr. Mejgan Massoumi, Lecturer & Fellow, Stanford University, USA
16. Dr. Melissa Chiovenda, Zayed University, UAE.
17. Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahimi, La Trobe University, Australia
18. Dr. Omar Sadr, University of Pittsburgh, USA
19. Dr. Omar Sharifi, American University of Afghanistan/University of Minnesota, USA
20. Dr. Qasim Wafayezada, Kanazawa University, Japan
21. Dr. Rabia Latif Khan, SOAS University of London, UK
22. Dr. Sardar Hosseini, University of Ottawa, Canada
23. Dr. Timor Sharan, Associate Fellow, London School of Economics, UK
24. Harun Najafizada, Journalist, UK
25. Jalil Benish, PhD Candidate, Ryerson University, Canada
26. Jawad Raha, Former Diplomat, USA
27. Kawa Jobran, University Lecturer, Canada
28. Metra Mehran, Fellow, New York University, USA
29. Mohammad Asif Ehsan, Attorney, USA
30. Mohamad Musa Mahmodi, Fellow, Yale University, USA
31. Munazza Ebtikar, PhD Candidate, Oxford University, UK
32. Musa Zafar, PhD Candidate, Fiji National University, Fiji
33. Ofran Badakhshani, Chairman of Gilgamesh Foundation, Brussels
34. Said Sabir Ibrahimi, Non-resident Fellow, New York University
35. Sameer Bedrud, former diplomat, Canada

-
36. Sanjar Suhail, Publisher and Founder, Hasht-e-Subh Daily, Afghanistan
 37. Sayed Madadi, Reagan-Fascell Fellow, National Endowment for Democracy, USA
 38. Shoaib Rahim, American University of Afghanistan/The New School, New York
 39. Tabish Forugh, Democracy Activist and Contributing Editor at Fair Observer, USA
 40. Wadood Pedram, Human Rights Activist, Canada
 41. Zaki Daryabi, Publisher and Founder, Daily Etilaat-e- Roz, Afghanistan
 42. Zuhail Salim, Former Diplomat of Afghanistan to the UN, USA.
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***Afghanistan's** leading public intellectuals from different walks of life come together to stand up for the rights of the Hazara Shia community.

The Tories Get a Thumping in Local UK Elections

Al Ghaff, Atul Singh
May 11, 2022

Do the 2022 UK local elections mark the beginning of the end of Boris Johnson's leadership of the Conservative Party?

The political tremors of the 2022 local election results will be keenly felt for months and years to come across the United Kingdom with potentially severe consequences for the Union.

As the ballots are counted and results are declared across the country, a clear picture emerges: these local elections are the most consequential local elections in decades.

If the results of the local elections were to be replicated in a general election, we will find ourselves in hung Parliament territory where several scenarios could emerge, primarily based on and dictated by the number of seats secured in the House of Commons by the Labour and Liberal Democrats.

Bumbling Boris

Boris Johnson's leadership of the Conservative Party has been a controversial one. The Conservatives and the country have not experienced a leader like Johnson before. His career as a journalist and politician is littered with transgressions and misdemeanors.

Boris Johnson is the ultimate Teflon politician. In the words of his lifelong friend and rival David Cameron, "Boris always been able to get away with things that mere mortals can't". Cameron certainly did not get away with the Brexit referendum that led to his downfall as prime minister. In contrast, Johnson has sailed through one scandal after another and won a thumping majority in the 2019 elections.

Before those elections, Johnson's unconventional leadership of the Tories in its first few months involved unlawfully proroguing Parliament and removing the whip from 21 of his MPs who voted to block a disastrous no-deal Brexit that the prime minister was pursuing at the time. Those MPs included party grandees and bigwigs such as former chancellors of the exchequer Ken Clarke and Phillip Hammond, and former ministers Dominic Grieve, Oliver Letwin, Rory Stewart, Ed Vaizey, and even Nicholas

Soames, the grandson of the revered wartime Conservative Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Johnson's leadership of the Conservatives involves an implicit pact between himself and his party. His history of transgressions and misdemeanors, and economic relationship with the truth and facts as well as his antiques are tolerated as long as he wins elections. In the 2019 elections, Johnson upheld his side of the bargain and delivered an 80-seat majority for the Conservatives.

In the wake of the 2019 election results, Tory strategists and spin doctors claimed that Boris' antics and his scandalous personal life were always 'priced in' by large parts of the electorate. Last week's local election results dispute this Tory claim. It turns out that voters repeatedly raised the partygate scandal when campaigners and journalists turned up at their doorsteps.

The Conservative Party is extraordinary at winning elections. They are good at stealing the clothes of other parties and doing what is necessary to win. That involves ruthlessly knifing their leaders when they stop winning. No Tory leader has been exempt from this rule, including Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher. Yet Tory knifing is a clinical cold-blooded affair. MPs knife their leader when credible successors lie in wait to mount the saddle.

So far, Johnson has ensured that there is no successor lying in wait. Despite partygate and the cost-of-living crisis, Johnson's position is secure because he has ruthlessly eliminated all potential rivals. Rishi Sunak, the current chancellor of the exchequer, was once touted as a potential prime minister but, like Icarus, he has come down to earth. Johnson is a Balliol classicist who wanted to be "world king" when he was young. Cloak and dagger palace intrigues come naturally to him. Sunak and his wife have been thrown to the

wolves by the so-called Bumbling Boris whose team have leaked juicy tales of the couple's domicile, tax and financial affairs, causing outrage among voters. Sunak can now kiss goodbye to prime minister ambitions. A career managing his father-in-law's billions from sunny California seems more probable.

The local elections have been nothing short of disastrous for the Tories. Nearly 2,000 seats were in play. They were voted out in a quarter of the seats they were defending. Losing so many seats should put pressure on Johnson. His fast and loose reputation with the truth has finally come to haunt the Conservative Party. However, the Tories do not have any potential successors in sight and Johnson is secure for now.

Johnson is not like Cameron who resigned after losing the Brexit referendum. He has thick skin and no sense of shame. Johnson is not going to resign because he is found guilty of wrongdoing, misconduct or misjudgment. As one cabinet ally puts it, "He's not going anywhere, his fingernails have been dug into the Downing Street window frames and he would be taken away kicking and screaming."

Johnson is certainly in the mood to fight back against any attempt by Conservative MPs to remove him from power. For now, he still has the support of the conservative-leaning press. Tory-sympathizing journalists have gone into overdrive to spin the disastrous local elections as largely inconsequential and irrelevant for the Conservative Party. They take the view that these local elections were not a referendum on Johnson.

There is another key factor to note. The prime minister has a track record of resorting to unconstitutional methods, unlawful actions and top-level deceit to save his skin. At the moment, the only way Johnson will leave 10 Downing Street is through an election defeat.

Starmer Stakes All

Elections are complicated affairs. They are not as simple as one party or candidate beating the other. In general, power changes hands only when the ruling party loses energy, direction or cohesion or any combination of the three and the opposition party gets its act together to emerge as a ruling party in waiting. In the British system, any change in power takes two to tango. When John Major lost in 1997, the Tories were divided, discredited, exhausted and bereft of new ideas after 18 years in power. In contrast, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown offered fresh energy and projected competence. Like the 1997 elections, other changes in power were also such dual acts involving both ruling and opposition parties.

Currently, Keir Starmer is the leader of the Labour Party. He is a distinguished barrister who headed the Crown Prosecution Service. He took over in April 2020 after two failed leaders. Jeremy Corbyn presided over five turbulent and disastrous years. Before him, the uninspiring Ed Miliband squandered another five years. Starmer seemed like a sane and surefooted choice for the Labour Party. Here was a safe pair of hands who would return competence and order to the office of the Leader of Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition.

Unlike most of his predecessors, Starmer is not a political animal. His approach to politics is measured and forensic. His early performances during the weekly Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) caught Johnson off guard. Starmer's lawyerly approach and mannerisms were in direct contrast to that of Johnson's populist, colorful, and theatrical political style. This rattled some Tory nerves in the early days and cheered Labour backbenchers.

Starmer's star has waned since. His back-handed political operations and communication blunders have not helped. Starmer is comfortable

with big decisions but has a blind spot for the minutiae that drive modern politics. Some of these big decisions have long been necessary. Starmer has removed the whip from Corbyn and purged Corbynistas from key offices. Starmer has also worked hard to make Labour electable again.

On Monday, May 9 — three days after the local elections — Starmer rolled the dice to take the biggest gamble of his political life. The Labour leader announced that he will step down if found guilty of breaking the stringent lockdown rules when he visited Durham, a historic city in Northeast England, in 2021 during the election campaign.

Starmer's announcement is a very bold move. If he is cleared by the Durham Police, Starmer will stand tall next to a prime minister alleged to have misled parliament over partygate, a resigning matter under 'normal' circumstances. If Starmer's move comes off, it will be the political equivalent of checkmating Boris Johnson. If Starmer is found guilty and resigns, his leadership will come to a premature end and it is unclear if the next Labour leader would benefit from such a move. The fate of British politics lies in balance on the Durham Police investigation.

Old Wine in New Bottle

Regardless of what transpires in Durham, the recent local elections provide a roadmap to toppling Tories from power. Starmer and Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey are carefully treading a path once charted by their charismatic predecessors in the 1990s. Then Blair and Paddy Ashdown forged a Labour-Liberal non-aggression pact to unseat the Tories from power. Starmer and Davey hope this may be a winning model for the next parliamentary elections.

While Starmer only became an MP in 2015, Davey first entered parliament in the historic

elections of 1997. He benefits from the advice of Baroness Olly Greender, a veteran of the Ashdown years known for her political nous. Starmer lacks Davey's long history and subconscious memory but the Labour leader is proving to be ruthless and flexible in his pursuit for power.

Starmer and Davey might find it hard to replicate the Blair and Ashdown deal. However, the current leaders are well aware of the dividends such an arrangement could bring. If both their parties can avoid bloodletting, they could mount a challenge to Tories discredited by Johnson's repeated shenanigans.

If the results of the recent local elections were replicated in the next parliamentary elections, the UK would have a hung parliament with no party having a clear majority. If Labour and Liberal Democrats can build on what they have done, they could oust the Tories. Both opposition parties have a strong incentive to cooperate and their leaders seem to be sensible enough to do so.

Brexit Dividend

Even though Brexit is now fait accompli, it continues to haunt British politics. The Brexit business model championed by hardline Brexiteers is flawed, irrational, contorted and thus bound to malfunction. The so-called Brexit Dividend of their dreams has so far failed to materialize. In fact, the Boris-led Brexit is turning out to be an expensive deal for the country. The independent Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has estimated "the decline in trade volumes to bring about 4% reduction in the size of Britain's economy over the long run, in line with its pre-Brexit forecast". Elsewhere, experts have calculated that Brexit is currently costing the economy to the tune of £800 million a week — and counting.

So far, the Tories have managed to hide the economic self-harm caused by Brexit. They argue that the economic downturn is due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the squeeze on household budgets and the cost-of-living crisis is chipping away at this Tory narrative. Voters might not yet be in the mood to punish the Conservative Party for Brexit, but they will certainly punish Tories for the pain they are suffering thanks to economic mismanagement.

For the foreseeable future, the Conservative brand will be intimately associated with Brexit and its economic consequences. The recent elections demonstrate that the national backdrop provides the mood music even for local voter choices. Westminster and Wandsworth Councils, two historically and symbolically significant Tory councils, were won by the Labour Party in the early hours of the morning of May 6. Safe Tory seats in affluent parts of Southwest England such as Richmond and St Albans fell to the Liberal Democrats. In the words of George W. Bush, the Conservatives have taken a "thumping."

The Disunited Kingdom

Bush never quite recovered from that 2006 midterm thumping. He left the US divided over Iraq and in the throes of a global financial crisis. Under Bumbling Boris, the Tories have embraced a disastrous Brexit business model and a toxic English ethnonationalism that threatens the integrity of The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland itself.

On May 5, Sinn Féin achieved a historic victory in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections. This has sent shockwaves through the Unionist Movement that seeks to keep Northern Ireland in the UK. Sinn Féin's victory has caused further embarrassments, anxiety, and alarm for the Conservative and Unionist Party — the full name of the Tory Party — in London.

The Irish Question dominated British politics a century ago. After World War I, Ireland won its long-cherished independence from the UK and disintegrated into civil war. Northern Ireland remained in the UK but the Troubles broke out in the late 1960s. A violent sectarian conflict between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists caused much tragedy in this picturesque land till the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This period of peace might be coming to an end.

Never before have Catholic nationalists who aim for the reunification of Northern Ireland with the Irish Republic wielded power in Belfast. The unionists are unlikely to accept the dominance of the republicans in Northern Ireland.

The election results in Northern Ireland have put into stark relief the Northern Ireland Protocol negotiated by Johnson with the EU. It was backed by his unionist allies, especially the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). In these elections, the unionists were divided and Sinn Féin trumped DUP to emerge as the top dog in Northern Irish politics. Together, the unionists have a greater vote share but the specter of a reunion with Ireland looms large.

Even as Northern Ireland threatens to slip out of the UK, so does Scotland. The Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) has campaigned for independence from London before. The SNP is now the natural ruling party of Scotland and is chipping away at the foundations of the union. In the long run, the SNP wants a second referendum and to turn Scotland into an independent nation. In the Brexit referendum, Scots voted to stay in the EU. Leaving the UK and entering the EU is the SNP ambition. Bumbling Boris and political gravity are helping their cause.

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India Looks to Finland for an Effective Educational Model

Peter Isackson
May 11, 2022

A tiny European country may provide the key to elevating the education of the world's biggest student population.

For some time, the world of education has become aware of the exceptional success of Finland's boldly innovative education system. The ideas that guided the Finnish government were not new or original. They have been debated, applied, experimented and validated by educational reformers in multiple contexts for more than a century. Finland is the only country to have put them into formal practice on a national scale.

The theoretical foundations were pioneered by philosophers and psychologists, with major contributions from Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. They produced a philosophy of education generally referred to as "constructivism." Its fundamental premise is that knowledge is holistic, meaning it is constructed non-linearly through the accumulation of varied and interconnected learning experiences. It opposes the standard linear approach practiced everywhere that breaks the

process of learning down into the mechanical presentation and assimilation of formally defined facts, rules and principles.

Being Guru sums up the major principles that underlie Finland's vision for educational efficacy.

- Cooperation trumps competition.
- Teaching is a profession respected in the community.
- Research on learning trumps political reasoning. Experimentation and diversity of teaching styles are encouraged.
- Playtime is a valuable and necessary part of the learning experience.
- Homework is banned to avoid distorting the emergence of knowledge.
- High-quality pre-school focuses on the preconditions for active, cooperative learning.

Finland is of course a small country of 5.5 million people on the northern edge of Europe. Recently, reformers in many nations have made desultory attempts at applying Finland's success story to their own educational environments. The quest has been elusive, for a number of cultural and political reasons. One American commentator explains, for example, that "Finland's educational system was driven by a culture that supports a strong social contract," something absent in US culture. An even stronger argument is that the educational systems of other nations, with much larger populations, are so entrenched politically and economically that reforming them is a challenge beyond the capacity of their governments.

Al Jazeera reports an initiative in India with the potential to presage a massive cultural revolution. "Schools offering activity-based learning over textbook-based education," the article affirms, "are

emerging across India." The article describes a process that represents "a sharp break from the doctrinaire approach that has long dominated Indian education."

How is it then that India, with the largest student population in the world (an estimated 315 million), appears to be moving towards adopting the Finnish philosophy?

European education was once organized around the humanistic principle of "the liberal arts." With the advent of the industrial revolution that transformed European and ultimately the global economy, education moved its focus to the concept of mechanically acquired, compartmentalized knowledge definitively breaking with the more holistic notion of learning conceived as the mastery of multiple arts.

In 1835, Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay, an Englishman intent on establishing order in his nation's colony in South Asia, began his campaign to format the idea of education in India in a way that would be consistent with the goals of the colony's new masters. England's imperial industrial economy had evolved into a tool of global domination. It was time for "civilization" to displace India's culturally-rooted tradition of "gurus and their shishyas" who "lived together helping each other in day-to-day life."

Over the past two centuries, Indians have learned to accept and replicate an alien education system built by the British. The recent embrace of Finnish educational philosophy may signal a revolution for education but, paradoxically, also a return to at least the spirit of ancient Indian traditions.

All revolutions encounter resistance. Al Jazeera quotes Pia Jormanainen, a founder of the Finnish school now collaborating with the Indians: "We've had schools ask us to craft the syllabus for their

teachers. That's fundamentally against our approach." Bad habits are always difficult to change.

Today's **Weekly Devil's Dictionary** definition:

Syllabus:

A body of formalized knowledge presented as the sum of all useful information, specifically designed to impose a restricted view of the world consistent with the goals of a ruling elite

Contextual note

Collaboration as opposed to competition plays out even at the level of the composition of teaching staff for the Indian schools adopting the Finnish approach. "At Finland International School, every class will have two trained teachers — one Finnish, the other Indian — and an assistant. The aim is "to deliver the best of the Finnish model in an Indian context."

The article emphasizes the obvious fact that, for the moment, the adoption and experimentation of Finnish principles of education is limited to private schools. This has led to concern "that Indian private schools — mostly catering to children from privileged backgrounds — will not be able to ensure equal access to quality education and teaching, a foundational principle of Finland's public school-based model." But institutions such as the Jain Heritage School and Nordic High International have not only adopted and successfully applied the Finnish approach, they have been investing in the teacher training required to make the system work and spread. An Indian company, Finland Education Hub provides this definition of its mission: "to create meaningful improvement in India's school education system by embedding the best educational practices from Finland."

The real question is whether a significant portion of the population, with no access to expensive private schools, can eventually benefit from the effort now being made. "The education minister of Kerala, arguably home to India's best government-run schools," Al Jazeera reports, "announced earlier this month that the state would partner with Finland on teacher training, curriculum reforms and classroom technology." The population of Kerala is 35 million, seven times larger than Finland's.

India's educational needs are massive. Successful educational methods will be the key to India's future geopolitical positioning, notably with regard to China. Kerala's experimentation could provide a model for other states in India. The fact that many of the principles of Finnish education resonate with pre-colonial traditions of India provides some hope that India may finally break free from some of the remaining constraints imposed by a stultifying British administrative system that aimed at competitive domination and focused on stifling both personal and collective creativity as well as all forms of spontaneous collaboration (which the British tended to identify with "mutiny" and "revolt").

Historical note

In 1835, as a member of Parliament, Lord Macaulay, after a visit to India, set himself the task of restructuring Indian education to bring it up to modern civilized standards. In his famous "Minute" he stated clearly his vision of the role of education as restructured by the British. "We must do our best," he encouraged Parliament, "to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, words and intellect."

19th century India inherited a caste system that established rigid hierarchies within Indian society.

Macaulay believed that, under the British Empire, India, like England, deserved a class system. The British colonists tended to be respectful of collaborating local elites, routinely mobilizing their authority for their own economic and military ends. Macaulay was proposing the creation of a class of cultural go-betweens, who would populate an administration destined to govern the mass of laborers producing wealth for the empire. This educated elite would have the benefit of understanding the culture of the illiterate masses but personally identify with the superior European culture that sought to educate them and reward them for their docility.

Most reasonable people today would critique this as an unhealthy, inhuman approach to both education and government. But it represented the deepest logic of an economic empire. Nearly 200 years later, it has left deep traces in Indian society, whose wealthier classes even today identify strongly with Western models of education, despite the fact that education in the West has become crassly commercial and superficial.

One might critique the fascination with the Finnish model as just another case of India's sense of inferiority that pushes it to seek solutions spawned in Europe. But in many ways this is just the opposite. The Finns have no interest in creating an empire, even a merely educational empire. Finland has produced a model of education that boldly contradicts the dominant philosophy and practices of the industrial West. One Finnish professor quoted in Al Jazeera's article "worries that the commercialisation of his country's schooling approach 'can hurt the image of Finnish education.'" They appear to resemble Geoffrey Chaucer's "Clerk of Oxenford" in the Canterbury Tales, about whom we learn that "gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche" ("gladly would he learn and gladly teach"). Learning can after all be fun rather than painful.

The Finnish constructivist approach to education, at its core, has many things in common with the oldest traditions in India. It is holistic and draws its energy from human contact and the spirit of seeking to understand rather than being forcefully taught what others consider it convenient to know. In the West, education has become dominated by the rule of managerial efficiency explicitly promulgated by institutions such as the Gates Foundation that had a powerful influence over US education policy under the presidency of Barack Obama. Its goal, widely accepted by the political elite in the US, is standardized knowledge, standardized testing and homogenized but deeply competitive culture. It is a form of education designed to turn successful students into useful and malleable actors in the capitalist economy. It is Macaulay's system for India perfected thanks to the discovery and elaboration of the rules of scientific management.

The remaining question for India is a difficult one for a nation with a huge percentage of the population living in poverty. Can it afford to make the investment in something that truly bridges the best in both Indian and Western culture and may provide the ultimate key to general prosperity?

*[In the age of Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain, another American wit, the journalist Ambrose Bierce, produced a series of satirical definitions of commonly used terms, throwing light on their hidden meanings in real discourse. Bierce eventually collected and published them as a book, *The Devil's Dictionary*, in 1911. We have shamelessly appropriated his title in the interest of continuing his wholesome pedagogical effort to enlighten generations of readers of the news. Read more of *The Fair Observer Devil's Dictionary*.]

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The Old Woman and the QR Code

Ranjani Iyer Mohanty
May 14, 2022

A flustered senior citizen channels Hemingway to write of her epic battle against the ubiquitous and often exclusive use of QR codes.

I'm not Ernest Hemingway but he did advise "Write hard and clear about what hurts." There was no big fish involved in my story (just an omelet) but the antagonist was a monster. The setting was not the vast sea but it was a room filled with strangeness and uncertainty. In essence, the battle I write of was epic.

The Exposition

The characters were few. But the characters were memorable. First and foremost, there was me: a woman and recently turned 60 and traveling by air. Second, the dratted QR code. How laughable that QR should stand for 'quick response' – but that's a

bit of foreshadowing. Third, the waiter in the lounge. Fourth, my savior.

The time was morning, around 8am. The place was Toronto's Pearson International Airport. Specifically, an airport lounge. Not the Air Canada one, but the one for the rest of the airlines, the children of lesser gods.

The Front Story

The plot was short. The plot was simple. On a lengthy trip begun very early in the morning, I was transiting through Toronto and I went to the airport lounge to get some breakfast and I sat down at a table and I looked around for the menu. No menus were visible. But there was a sticker on the table with a QR code. So I pulled out my cellphone and I turned on the camera and I tried to scan the code. Zip. Zilch. Nada. The code and my camera blissfully ignored each other. I looked at my phone's camera setting but couldn't figure it out. I was reminded of Ernest's reflection; "How little we know of what there is to know."

But I was not going to let such a small thing stop me from getting food. As Ernie counseled, "Now is no time to think of what you do not have. Think of what you can do with what there is." So I walked up to a waiter and I politely explained that my camera was not recognizing the QR code and I asked if I could please have a hardcopy menu. The waiter told me they had no hardcopy menus. Then I asked if he could just tell me what they had on offer and I could give him my order. He said he could not and I would have to scan the QR code to find out. I explained again that my camera was not picking up the QR code. To which he replied the equivalent of "Too bad" and left. Fortunately, a fellow traveler who had overheard our exchange stepped in and saved me. "Luck is a thing that comes in many forms and who can recognize her?" ... or rather him. First, he took my phone and tried to scan the QR code ... to no avail. Second, he

rapidly flipped through various screens and then resigning, mused aloud that perhaps my phone was old. He said the word as though it was something bad, something distasteful, something to be got rid of. Lastly, using his phone, he ordered breakfast for me. Battle over, bruised, humbled, and thankful, I ate.

The Back Story

My story had a happy ending, but why did there even have to be a story?

I realize that QR codes can be very useful for businesses in providing a lot of information about a product or service to customers while using very little space. I see that QR codes have become ubiquitous – such as in restaurants, the travel industry, and advertising. Ironically, even many services specifically targeted for the elderly have QR codes. QR codes are now often used to offer information on a variety of health issues – such as how to care for a fracture, the dosage of medication to take, and post-operative care. I also understand that, over the course of covid, businesses have resorted even more to QR codes to offer touchless services and to make up for staff shortages.

But what happens to people who don't have a smartphone or don't have a smartphone advanced enough to pick up QR codes or don't know how to scan a QR code? Does it mean they don't get to eat? Does it mean they can't avail of services they're entitled to? Does it mean they are ostracized from participating in society?

My story was a non-event – a non-serious situation in which I had other easily available options. I could simply have stepped outside the lounge and found a Tim Hortons to satisfy my breakfast needs. But what happens when the needs are more essential and there are no options? Like the elderly man in China who could not use the

subway because he could not access his own health QR code. In New Zealand, during a covid outbreak, bus travelers who could not scan the QR code of their bus could not be easily traced later. Even showing the proof of vaccination QR code on their phone when traveling or going to a restaurant can be difficult and stressful for the elderly.

The Epilogue

I wonder if in our unreserved rush into automation and an information society, we are leaving some people behind. A 2021 survey noted that 14% of Americans in general find QR codes hard to use. Amongst the elderly, this number rises to nearly 20%, with 18% never having heard of QR codes. Currently, the over-65s are about 55 million in the US (about 16% of the total country population), 7 million in Canada (over 18%), 100 million in Europe (nearly 20%), 35 million in Japan (over 28%), and over 700 million globally. And the percentage in this age group – along with their spending power – is expected to only increase in the near future.

The presence of QR codes should not negate the need to present information in other forms. Just because a restaurant has a QR code does not mean it can do away with all hardcopy menus. I get that in the time of covid people want to avoid touching and retouching menus. Then why not also put up the menu on a screen or board? Or have sufficient staff who can take a moment to tell you what's available. Making QR codes the only way customers or clients can access information may actually reduce accessibility for the technically challenged who weren't born with a phone in their hands as well as the economically challenged who may not have the latest smartphone or even a smartphone at all. And yes, possibly also the 'age challenged.' Papa may well have been referring to QR codes when he pondered, "I wonder if you keep on learning or if there is only a certain amount each man [...or woman] can understand."

Hemingway may have taken an earlier and easier way out when he ended his life with his own hands at the age of 61. Perhaps he understood only too well the challenges that lay ahead when he sort-of said: “The QR code kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”

(This article was edited by Senior Editor **Francesca Julia Zucchelli**.)

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The Education of Priests and the Future of the Catholic Church in Ireland

John Bruton
May 16, 2022

I was asked to speak at a seminar in St Patrick’s Pontifical University in Maynooth County Kildare. The seminar considered plans to develop the seminary for the education of future Catholic priests for Ireland, and for the education of lay people who will play an increasing role in the Catholic life, as the number of priests declines.

It is a great honor to be invited to speak at this important event.

I have lived much of my life in sight of the magnificent spire that is the centerpiece of the college.

My father told me he had met a man who sat on the cross which is at the very top of the steeple. He enquired how the man had managed this miraculous feat. The man paused for dramatic effect and then revealed that he had been present when the steeple was being built and the cross was lying on the ground, waiting to be erected. So he sat down on it, so that he would have this tall story to tell for the rest of his life!

Any time I looked at the steeple I thought of my father’s story, but I have to admit I did not give a lot of thought to what was going on in the shadow of this magnificent steeple within the walls of the college.

Professor Michael Mullaney and Father Tom Surlis will give you an outline of their plans for the college. I hope the discussion today among people of many diverse backgrounds and generations can enrich the plans Michael and Tom have.

I would like to say why the work here is so important.

We need priests and religious.

We also need an educated Catholic laity capable of spreading the message of Faith confidently.

The Education of Priests Remains Vital

First, let me say something about the core task of this seminary: the formation of priests. What did Vatican II say in 1965 about the role of priests? It said their “primary duty is the proclamation of the gospel of God to all,” and, in the words of St

Mark's Gospel, to "go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature."

But Vatican II also referred to Catholics as those who "understand or believe little of what they practice" and added that the preaching of the word is needed for the "very administration of the sacraments." If that was an uphill task in 1965, it is even more so today. Families are going through the motions rather than trying to understand what Baptism and First Holy Communion for their children are really about.

Vatican II put the Eucharist at the center of everything the Church does. It said, "The Eucharistic Action is the very heartbeat of the congregation of the faithful, over which the priest presides." The mystery of the Eucharist is central to everything, and that is what makes the education of priests so important, because without priests there can be no Mass. In the words of Vatican II, "priests fulfill their chief duty in the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice"

Building Communities at the Parish Level is Key as in the Early Church

Vatican II also observed: "The office of the pastor is not confined to the care of the faithful as individuals, but is also properly extended to the formation of a genuine Christian Community."

I think Irish priests do the first of those tasks very well. But, unlike churches in the US, I fear they do the second task, the formation of genuine Christian communities in their parishes, less well. Our churches are not even physically designed to encourage people to meet easily after Mass, and to make contacts that help form a "genuine Christian Community", based and centered on the Eucharist as per the wishes of Vatican II. This is an essential first step towards the involvement of lay people in the work of the Church. Practicing Catholics are a

minority in Ireland, and they need to support one another.

The Increasing Responsibilities of Lay Catholics and the Synod

In 1965, Vatican II said that priests should "confidently entrust to the laity duties in the service of the church, allowing them freedom and room for action." This will be put to the test, 57 years later, by Irish participation in Synod.

How many sermons have been preached in Irish parishes, explaining what the Synod is about, explaining its opportunities and, of course its limitations? I do not feel that job has really been done adequately in every parish, although I am sure it has been done very well in some.

Moving on from the formation of priests, let me say something about the formation of lay people who will play an increasing role in the Church. As I see it, this college can play a vital part in the moral, spiritual and intellectual life of the Irish people.

Filling a Void in Thinking in Ireland

The college could ask questions that go beyond the temporal and material concerns that occupy most of our waking hours in modern Ireland. It could help people to be comfortable considering deeper questions about life.

For instance, what happens when we die? Is this life all there is? Can we communicate with God? Does he hear us? What constitutes a good life? Does it have meaning beyond doing no harm, and causing as little pain as possible to others and to ourselves? What are the obligations we have to other human beings, to human lives born and soon to be born? How do we best cope with suffering and setbacks in our lives? How do we keep them in proportion in our minds?

Not everyone will answer some of these questions in the same way. Many will never even ask themselves these questions at all, claiming to be agnostic. I take the view that this type of agnosticism is a form of laziness. It is not to be confused with the residue of doubt that all of us have after we consider these questions, questions to which there is no simple empirical answer.

But if, as a society, we avoid questions like these, we are, in a sense, not living our lives to the full. This college will enable people, lay as well as religious, to become comfortable discussing profound questions, thus helping them to live their lives to the fullest, with all of life's complications.

There is no doubt Ireland is a very different country now to the one into which I was born in 1947. There is immensely more material wealth now than then. There is less deference now than then. There is less of an obsession with respectability, an obsession that was the cause of many abuses in which society implicated the Church and vice versa.

We have lived through rapid change, a change in what people regard as more or less important. In other words, we have lived through a change in values. Laity and priests can respond to this change either by taking refuge in a past that never really existed, or, alternatively, by just chugging along optimistically and ignoring unpalatable trends, hoping that it will all turn out alright in the end.

In a recent address to priests, The Pope took a very different view. He said we should instead "cast out into the deep" as per the words of St Luke's Gospel, trusting in our God-given discernment to find the right path. Helping a new generation of Irish people, lay and religious, to find the right path, to learn from mistakes, and to correct their course when necessary will be the

task this college will undertake through the priests and laity it educates.

The Limitations of Individualism

In 21st century Ireland, there is a much stronger emphasis than before, on the rights of each individual. These rights are growing in range and scope, and are being litigated through politics and the courts. But the emphasis is heavily on rights, and on the individuals who are to enjoy those rights, rather than on the community as a whole, on shared responsibilities, or on the common good.

Social media has also facilitated the pursuit of celebrity, a desire for personal recognition. This is sometimes accompanied by a desire not to be judged oneself, but to be free to judge others harshly, hastily, and anonymously. "Taking offense" can become a weapon in our culture wars. Feelings can be elevated, above thought, and above careful objective reflection.

The banal truth is that for every right, there must always be a concomitant responsibility. On whose shoulders does the responsibility rest? On the state and the taxpayer, on the family, on the local community or on the courts? Finding a formula to answer such questions was one of the goals of Catholic Social Thinking, which will no doubt be part of the academic activity in this college in the years ahead.

The best antidote to the problems of excessive individualism is a well developed values system. By this I mean a way of evaluating what is more important, and what is less important — without dismissing anything as unimportant. That requires judgment, and we must not be afraid to judge.

It is important to remember that Catholic Social thinking is social. It is about society, rather than just about the individual, and not just about the individual's desire for self esteem and recognition.

Our Church has always emphasized the importance of community, community among believers and community with wider society.

The fact that Ireland has a strong spirit of organized volunteerism still today is due, in no small measure, to the heritage of voluntary organizations formed by, and around, the Catholic Church. That heritage must be preserved and enhanced. I have no doubt Maynooth, through its programs of part and full time education for lay people will contribute greatly to this.

The college will be continuing, as I said before, its vital core responsibility of educating the priests and the religious laity of the future. As I have said, It will be preparing priests to do their work in a very different world to the one that priests ordained in the 1960's faced.

There will be radically fewer priests, fewer people going to Mass, and a much more crowded and unsympathetic communications space through which the Church can communicate its message. As far as Catholicism is concerned, Ireland has become a mission territory.

New Skill Sets for Priests

In the past, the priest could do much of the work himself. In the future, he will have to work increasingly through lay people, most of them unpaid. The skill set of a priest of the 2030s will center on motivating others to do the work, rather than doing it all himself.

Motivating and sustaining volunteers is a skilled and demanding job, in which the priests and the religious laity of the future must become expert practitioners. The priest of the future will have to share power, while at the same time, ensuring that the essential doctrines of the church are accurately conveyed.

Indeed, education in the doctrines of the church will become more and more important. This is because we live in a world in which people of faith want to be listened to but also crave clear answers. There is a real tension between the desire to be heard, and the desire to be led. And it is a tension that will be expressed in the Synod. Faith and reason must sit together in the Synod.

In the past, we may have become used to having clear answers provided for us by church teaching. For some of us, controversy between leading church figures is troubling, even upsetting. We want a clear line we can follow, not a cacophony. That is a feature of politics too, and the church can learn from politics. Parties with too many competing messages do not do well in elections.

And yet we know, from daily life as well as from Scripture, that some situations are hard to fit within a single line of thinking. We need an educated and tolerant laity, educated and tolerant priests, who are willing, as the Pope said, to “cast out into the deep” and have confidence in themselves.

***John Bruton** is a former Irish prime minister and an international business leader. He has held a number of posts in the Irish government, including minister for finance; minister for industry and energy; minister for trade, commerce and tourism; and minister for the public service.

Tibetan Activist and Writer Tenzin Tsundue Talks to Fair Observer

Roberta Artemisia Campani, Tenzin Tsundue
May 28, 2022

In this edition of The Interview, an eminent Tibetan activist and writer discusses exile, a protracted freedom struggle, China, Chinese brutal homogenization policies, cultural and philosophical differences between Tibet and China, and China's tortured relationship with the West.

In October 1950, China's Red Army invaded Tibet's eastern province, posing as an army of liberation from Western imperialism. In 1959, the Dalai Lama fled to India where he remains to this day. Many thousands of Tibetan refugees have streamed into India since. Tibet is particularly pertinent even as US President Joe Biden promises support to Taiwan and Ukraine dominates headlines on a daily basis.

For the last 70 years, Tibet has been under China's thumb even as Hollywood stars swoon at the Dalai Lama's feet. Many people think of Tibet as a separate nation with a definable history and a specific cultural identity symbolized by the Dalai Lama. Many are unaware of Tibet's integration into China and its political subjugation by Beijing. In September 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping made clear that Tibet was an integral part of China's "impregnable fortress" as he decried the heresy of "splittism." The fate of Tibet shines light on a key issue: can political entities bordering a hegemon exercise sovereignty?

We are living in a world where the 1945 postwar order is ending. The collapse of the Soviet Union has been followed by a bloody war between its two biggest successor states. Oil prices are soaring and inflation is skyrocketing. Fertilizers and food are in short supply because the two big exporters Russia and Ukraine are at war. So,

Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and many other countries could soon be short of bread, if not oil.

As the current world order breaks down, what will emerge in its place? Will we see a more fragmented world with regional hegemony competing in their spheres of influence? Or will we see a more multipolar world where dispersed power centers will realize there is no way to survive other than mutual respect and creative collaboration?

I spoke to writer and activist Tenzin Tsundue on a range of issues, spanning from his experience as a Tibetan in India to the state of our modern world.

The transcript has been edited for clarity. Words in brackets are my insertions to provide context and clarity to Tsundue's words.

Roberta Campani: How do the Tibetans live in India?

Tenzin Tsundue: There are about 100,000 Tibetan refugees in India, of which three generations are represented: those who left Tibet (as Tsundue's parents did), their children who are now adults (like Tsundue) and a third generation (children of Tsundue's generation) who no longer have direct ties to Tibet. There's also another group, those who came out of Tibet later on, in the early 2000s and up to 2009 and then it became almost impossible to get out of occupied Tibet. There's a law in India as per which someone who was born prior to 1987 in the country is a citizen regardless of the origin of their parents. (Yet most Tibetans have not applied for citizenship to avoid weakening the Free Tibet Movement.) Like other refugees, Tibetans cannot own property nor vote. In fact, Tibetans don't even have refugee status because India, like most modern nations, does not recognize Tibet as a state or country.

We are considered foreigners, we have to get a document that lasts one year. This makes it hard to plan long-term, build a house or start a family. Some can get the document extended for five years. But it is hard not to have any stability. On the other hand, the positive side of this situation is that it maintains the impetus to keep working towards going back to our homeland.

Even if India granted us 43 settlements where we have built farms, hospitals, and schools where we are self-subsistent, this was a lot of work. And now the young go to cities and have jobs in IT.

Roberta Campani: What can this impetus achieve given the current situation in China?

Tenzin Tsundue: China looks at Tibetan culture and religion as the biggest obstacle to assimilation. The Chinese want to homogenize Tibet and reduce it into Beijing's backyard. They see that Tibetans are united over their cause. They are also united with Tibetans in exile.

Tibetan culture is very different from Chinese culture. China believes in bombing mountains, making money out of Tibetan minerals and resources, and damming rivers. In contrast, Tibetans believe that there are gods and goddesses in the mountains, and they are sacred for our living. Our environment is not to serve us. We are part of the environment. Philosophically, we look at land and resources very differently from the Chinese. They also look at people as resources to make them do cheap labor and make money for the capitalists. That is not how we look at life. Tibetan nomads and farmers are "rehabilitated" in reservations, kind of artificial villages so they lose touch and connection with their own land.

Roberta Campani: Can you give us some background about what brought the situation to this point?

Tenzin Tsundue: Tibet had been a free and independent country right from the beginning until China's invasion in 1951. What is called the western romanticization of Shangri-La is Tibet — 2.5 million square kilometers of land, geographically the biggest and highest plateau in the world. Tibetans have lived in isolation, untouched by western influences — they have hardly had any relationship with many other countries. Of course, Tibet had relationships with Mongolia in the north, China in the east, India to the south and by extension with other South Asian countries, like Nepal, Burma, Bhutan and Pakistan. And that's how Tibet lived as an independent country for all these thousands of years.

And this isolation has also created this very unique language, culture, and identity. In the last 2,000 years, we have received Buddhism from India. It wasn't Tibetan, it came from India and today, we are keeping that and Buddhism has become the primary identity for Tibetan people. And that's how we have lived as a free and independent country and that is still existing today.

The Tibetans inside Tibet that are fighting the Chinese attempt to 1. homogenize, and 2. to use Tibet as a colony, which the Chinese mine and make money off. The reason why Tibetans have not been co-opted by Chinese mining and industrialization is because Tibetans have a very different idea of natural resources and the environment and that is a part of Tibetan identity. We look at nature as a larger universe where human beings are part of. We are servants to nature.

This identity comes from a much larger picture of the Tibetan civilization. That civilization, what we are getting to see, is something many countries have lost. We have not. Our Tibetans in Tibet still believe that the country is more important than the people. We are part of the environment. So the continuity of tradition that we are seeing resists the

damming of rivers, mining for resources and clear felling of trees in order to make money through all the cheap made in China products.

China is mining and taking all of these natural resources — lithium, copper, and gold — to make cheap products for the world. See, how China looks at natural resources is very different to Tibet. The China that is emerging today is not even the China of Deng Xiaoping or of Mao Zedong. China has completed a cultural revolution in so many different phases. So many times, China has completely changed. Tibet may have modernized in different ways, but as a civilization, we are continuous.

Roberta Campani: It seems that this view makes even more sense now that we have climate issues: how could your experience be made useful for the world in general?

Tenzin Tsundue: I don't want to be condescending by saying we have the best ideas for the world to copy. We will continue our religion, our culture, we have our very unique civilizational beliefs, and if the world, if the international community see that this is of value, they will anyhow take it.

Roberta Campani: Do you think there is something positive in the "common prosperity" doctrine that China has brought forward these past few years? In particular, if we consider that inequalities and the wider income gap are creating discontent in most of the traditionally democratic countries.

Tenzin Tsundue: You and I know it very well, it's all optics. It's what political parties create to fulfill their own self-interest, like Trump tried to create something for America while pursuing his own interest and Biden is now trying to do that today. The same goes for the propaganda war between

Zelensky and Putin. All these optics are for consumption and you cannot just blindly consume that. When China says that it is creating a more equal society by getting rid of the gap between the rich and the poor, we understand it very well. These are political agendas and not social services.

And as I said earlier, homogenization means that China already has what it calls the Chinese identity and Beijing is trying to impose that on the rest of the people. Homogenization does not mean there is no culture. There is a culture but it's the majority culture that they are trying to impose on the minorities or the people that are living under China's occupation. That is homogenization and this is the biggest threat that is happening in Eastern Turkestan, southern Mongolia, and in Manchuria. And the same thing is happening in Hong Kong.

And there is a threat that China may physically, and militarily invade Taiwan in the future. So this homogenization is the main factor why Hong Kong didn't want to become completely Chinese because the Hong Kong people have their own identity, a social and a cultural tradition there. And they say "we are not like the Chinese in mainland China." So you see, the Hong Kong people resist because they don't want to homogenize. They don't want to be turned into a Chinese backyard.

Of course, physically, Hong Kong is a part of the People's Republic of China. Still, they have lived separately for almost one or two hundred years. They have their ideas, identity, ways of living, and culture. It's much more vibrant and democratic there. Now, they are being homogenized. And the international community did not care much about losing Hong Kong.

Roberta Campani: What are your thoughts about how the situation could unfold for Tibet?

Tenzin Tsundue: Today there are many possibilities. I think that the 63 years of exile experience have given us enough sense of resilience and understanding of the world's political scenario and our own existence. The early shock we got after coming out of Tibet to the outside world where there were already so many scientific advances. For example, when my parents came to India, they were unable to understand what is a bus, what is a car and what is a train. From there we have come to a situation where the third generation is working in IT companies in India.

So you see this fast-forward advance and experience has given us the understanding that ultimately our freedom struggle is something we have to do ourselves. And we have created enough cultural resistance and even resilience that even if no one helps us today we are still able to maintain our resistance and we'll come to a point when China collapses we will go back to our country and we will re-establish a free, independent, democratic Tibet. This much confidence is what we have now.

Today, the Tibetan issue is not isolated. More than ever, the issue of the Dalai Lama, who is the reincarnation (of his predecessor), is now more useful to the United States, to the European countries and to India because China has now evolved from a communist country to an industrial nation and a superpower. China is today a threat to the western countries, India, and many other countries that need to tackle China. Now, we have to work with these other countries that might find the issues of Tibet useful to their causes.

Tenzin Tsundue: Look, when we were protesting in 2008, we were saying that China is killing Tibetans and that there is a genocide happening in Tibet, no one cared. Everyone went to participate in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

This year too, in 2022, when the Winter Olympics are happening, suddenly the United States realizes that there are human rights issues with China. That does not mean that they did not know about human rights violations in Tibet and East Turkestan in 2008. This year, 15 countries boycotted — a diplomatic boycott — these countries are now finding these issues useful for them against China.

This is the understanding we are now getting as Tibetan refugees. Earlier, Tibetans were nothing — oh, these are just nice, good, goodie people — and the Dalai Lama is non-violent. Now they find the issue of Tibet politically useful. So, how do we have to position ourselves with countries that want to deal with China differently? Are we able to do it? Perhaps, we can even work with China's pro-democracy activists who would want to see their country as a democracy.

Roberta Campani: Are you in touch with people in China who want democracy?

Tenzin Tsundue: Of course, we are in touch with them but they were themselves persecuted in China and they are now living in foreign countries.

Roberta Campani: How could this experience that has given you and the Tibetan communities skills and consciousness be helpful? How can you use that experience to raise awareness about other refugees, as it's a problem all over the world?

Tenzin Tsundue: It is not that the West doesn't know. It is pretending not to know because its interests up until today have been more into trading with China and not with promoting human rights. We are very well aware of this. As much as we would like to work with western countries on human rights and democracy in China and also

freedom for Tibet, we are also aware that the West may be using Tibet today. We would like to work with western countries for democracy in China and freedom in Tibet.

Roberta Campani: Do you know there is a fascination with Tibetan culture that is actually not so well known?

Tenzin Tsundue: I am not surprised. The consumerism that has taken over the world has, in a way, homogenized entire production units that have centered on easy production. This has come about with big international corporate companies as producers and the rest of the people are just consumers. This model is a danger to the environment and also to human civilization. (That is why there may be a fascination for Tibetan culture.)

Roberta Campani: What is the mission or role that you have chosen?

Tenzin Tsundue: I am a small activist based here in India. The role I have assigned to myself is that of a writer, I look at certain changing aspects in the Tibetan community, culturally and emotionally, and I write about these aspects. Also, as an activist, an important part of my role is to keep the freedom struggle going, maintaining the restlessness in the movement. And also come up with new ideas on how to deal with the changing political situation in the world and how to guard against certain threats, and, at the same time, look at opportunities that might appear.

So, mine is a very small role. Still, I see it in the larger picture. There is the Tibetan government in exile, there is His Holiness the Dalai Lama, there are members of parliament, there are many other leaders, and as an activist and as a writer, I also play my small role. But in the larger picture, I see that the Tibetan freedom movement up until now has been inspiring both for the international

community and us because we have maintained nonviolence as the main thrust of our movement led by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

This has inspired many individuals, people in the West, in India and in many other places. They say that this is one peaceful community and a movement that they would like to support, and of course, we have a huge number of sympathizers and supporters, which is how we have maintained the health of the movement. We are hopeful that we will be able to carry on in this way, and when the opportune moment comes about, we can recreate Tibet as a free and independent state and a democracy.

Roberta Campani: How could this happen?

Tenzin Tsundue: There are three important factors.

First and the most important are the Tibetan people themselves. As long as we don't give up, there is always a chance for us to gain freedom. And if we do give up, no matter even if the entire world comes together to support us, there is no cause to support!

So finally, the ultimate goal, the ultimate authority over the Tibetan freedom movement, is the Tibetan people. This is the most important fact.

The second factor is China, because it is China who, without any provocation, entered Tibet, plundered Tibet, captured Tibet and, for the past 70 years, China has been maintaining a military occupation of Tibet. There should be a new kind of understanding within China. The Chinese must completely change the way they run their government and reform their entire structure. They are no longer able to maintain the occupation of Tibet.

China's superpower status comes from how western countries use the country as an industrial factory floor to make cheap "Made in China" products and ship them to the West. That is how the West created China and made it into a monster. Until 1971, China was not even a member of the United Nations. And American intervention replaced Taiwan with China in the UN. That is how China became a permanent Security Council member at the UN and a superpower. Now, China is trying to throw out the United States from the United Nations.

(So, China will not continue to be the workshop of the world and occupy Tibet forever.)

The third factor is how China is going to maintain its relationships with western countries, and, with that, what are the changes that are about to come about. We have seen in the past two years during the pandemic how the West has started to behave very differently towards China. Issues of human rights are coming out for the first time and the western relationship with China is changing. And I think this relationship will undergo dramatic changes in the next five years. All these things will throw up lots of opportunities for us.

Roberta Campani: Thank you! Are you still hopeful?

Tenzin Tsundue: I have to be! There is no option.

***Roberta Campani** looks after business development at Fair Observer. She studied philosophy, history and linguistics at the University of Bologna before researching the Rwandan genocide. Roberta worked for a few years in an internet start-up as a marketing and business development assistant. She then interned

for a year at the Centro Frantz Fanon in Torino, Italy.

***Tenzin Tsundue** is a Tibetan writer and activist, born and raised in India. The award-winning author has four books to his credit and is working on his fifth. He lives solely off his writing by selling his self-published books. Tsundue combines activism and academia.

Time for the US to Rethink Its Failed Cuba Policy

John Elliott
May 30, 2022

The US has persisted with cruel sanctions that have hurt the people, not the elites, in Cuba. It is time for a bolder foreign policy that builds upon the goodwill Americanos receive among Cubans and aims at long overdue rapprochement.

The United States has for almost six decades pursued an embargo policy toward the government of Cuba with rare resolve. But there are few who would point to any success from this dogged approach. Instead, the specter of a common enemy to the north has entrenched the Communist government and cemented its restrictions on freedoms, while the Cuban people daily and deeply suffer from the economic choke hold of US sanctions.

I began a life-long understanding of the island nation decades ago in my graduate studies. Last December, I spent three weeks there, engaging

with Cubans in many cities about their lives. I spoke with a range of demographics, from humble cabbies to senior Communist leaders. I was shocked at the depth of desperation of the people, who have no alternative but to queue up for exhausting hours each day to buy a few rationed basic foods. Most items are available only to those who receive currency from émigré relatives, and the US sanctions even block international donations of medical supplies.

Most people I met knew little but deprivation, yet harbored no disdain for US citizens. I never sensed anything but interest in and respect for this Americano. Whether such a charitable response is borne out of the memory of Fidel Castro's legendary approach of brotherhood with Americanos, or the fact that so many must rely on overseas donations, the reality is that there has always been a wide-open door in Cuba for amicable Cuban-American relations.

The Strong Do What They Can and the Weak Suffer What They Must

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN estimated that the US embargo had cost Cuba \$130 billion since 1962. This is a terrible cost for a tiny impoverished island. In last year's UN General Assembly, virtually every one of 184 member countries voted in favor of a resolution to demand the end of the US economic blockade on Cuba. Contrary to its intentions, this de facto blockade does not much impact the government elites in Cuba. In spite of a professed socialist system, there is a small subset of Cubans with political leverage enjoying luxury. But, since the Cuban government can continue to point to a proximate enemy as the cause for suffering — especially since the misplaced policies of the Trump administration — it can avoid blame and the inequities persist.

I have long been familiar with the charity and sacrifices of the Cuban people. I worked alongside

many Cubans during Haiti's recovery from the 2010 earthquake. As a US Foreign Service officer, I worked in many Latin American countries and witnessed the incredibly positive impact of the Cuban doctors and medics.

As a counterpoint, I retain insights into the perspective of Cuban-Americans from living in South Florida for many years. My father's second wife was a Cuban-American who immigrated to the US in the 1960s. I would often listen to her excoriate Fidel Castro and hone my Spanish by tuning into Miami-based radio stations that regularly condemned the Cuban Revolution.

Over the years, Cubans have faced increasing and unhealthy privations. Obesity and diabetes caused by nutritional deficits are a growing cause of premature deaths that well exceeds those caused by COVID-19. Thousands of Cubans find no recourse but to make the life-threatening journey by land or sea to the US as refugees and end up becoming financial burdens to the US taxpayer. The number of Cubans arriving at the US-Mexico border is presently at the highest level in more than a decade.

Because the nation has found itself in a virtual state of war since the early 1960s, the authoritarian government was able to muffle the spontaneous cries for libertad last July by thousands in the streets of key Cuban cities quickly and expeditiously. Dissenters were arrested or exiled. Sham trials have followed since and arbitrary punishments meted out. Subsequent protests have, for the most part, been stymied for fear of reprisals. The Cuban people desperately yearn to be unshackled from both the blockade and their government — yet without bloodshed.

Joe Biden Reaches Out But Not Much

President Joe Biden recently made some helpful but limited removals of US embargo restrictions.

The Wall Street Journal was not pleased. Yet the real trouble with Biden's measures was not that they did too little, not too much. This was a huge missed opportunity. Biden could have improved bilateral relations in the context of Russia's invasion and genocide of the Ukrainian people.

After additional US warfare materials arrived in Ukraine in early February 2021, Russia threatened to retaliate by moving troops or military equipment to Cuba. The US government could have revisited its approach to the Cuban government and reduced tensions. Innovation and vision were some of the few remaining practical options in this extremely dangerous situation. Removing the counter-productive US embargoes would have signaled to Russia constructive intentions regarding their allies, and the onus might have inclined V. Putin to likewise pull back the concerning troops on Ukraine's borders. Such timely response would not have been a quid pro quo, but rather one of many positive effects of a fresh U.S. policy toward Cuba. Alas, the door was closed in February, tens of thousands have been killed, millions have been uprooted, much of the nation has been leveled, and utter famine from absent wheat crops confronts much of the developing world.

The visions and voices of thousands of long-suffering Cubans I encountered remain fixed in my memory. Yet, in spite of its proximity to the United States, the plight and misery of Cubans somehow remain veiled for most in the West. Cuba, as all marginalized nations throughout the world, must now confront impending famine and even mass starvation given disruption of grain production and exports from Russia and Ukraine.

When it comes to Cuba, I believe the Biden administration is now on the right track. But the administration must urgently implement more common sense political and economic solutions to the grave humanitarian crises caused by a counter

productive, decades-long, and devastating US embargo of Cuba.

***John Elliott** recently retired after 11 years with the US Foreign Service, where he served as the Senior Regional Policy Officer for the Western Hemisphere. He is presently Executive Director for AidWEST Humanitarian Missions (www.aidwest.org). Elliott's recent reportage and photography from Cuba can be found at bit.ly/thehumanpulse-cuba

Shireen Abu Akleh: The Journalist Martyr

Swaleh Idris
June 05, 2022

Al Jazeera longtime journalist Shireen Abu Akleh was shot by Israeli forces on May 11, 2022. Her brutal killing has shocked the world.

Saying that the brutal killing of Shireen Abu Akleh has shocked the world would be an understatement. Talking to fellow journalists within my circle and in numerous East African journalists' WhatsApp groups, I could feel grief, anger, confusion and in some, I could even sense fear.

No Story Is Worth Dying For

In most Kenyan media schools, the phrase "No Story Is Worth Dying For" is quite a common saying. However, what happens when you fall in love with your work?

Describing herself as a “product of Jerusalem,” with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shaping much of her life, Shireen Abu Akleh has shown the world what it means to be a journalist and what it means to tell stories that affect you as a journalist and your community. In her own words, her only mission was to be close to her people, and within her people she was killed.

“I chose to become a journalist to be close to people. It may not be easy to change reality, but I was at least able to bring their voice to the world,” Abu Akleh said in a video taped for the Qatari channel’s 25th anniversary.

Journalism in Africa Has Become a Travesty

When I was growing up, I listened to Kenya Broadcasting Corporation’s Radio Taifa and watched KBC Channel 1 — that’s what we had at that time and I must say that the type of journalism exhibited was mind-blowing. A type of journalism that can only be compared to Abu Akleh’s.

Today, African journalists have turned their craft into a very ordinary career reserved for cool kids, who spent most of their time in big cities or overseas. After spending time overseas, these cool kids return to their homeland and land jobs in major newsrooms, thanks to their polished English. Sadly, most of them have zero journalism skills or storytelling abilities.

While journalists like Ahmed Hussein-Suale, a renowned investigative journalist from Ghana, was killed in 2019 for his role in exposing the corruption in his country, and Jamal Farah Adan of Somalia, Betty Mtekhele Barasa of Kenya, and dozens were killed in Ethiopia covering the Tigray conflict, it is very unfortunate that some journalists still find it right to use journalism for fame, power, and build future political careers.

Today, some Kenyan journalists engage in uncalled-for social media wars with critics who point out their lack of skills and unreasonable theatrics for clout chasing.

We have lost the basics of journalism such as good storytelling. Instead, journalists are thirsty for social media numbers, likes, and retweets. We don’t verify anymore. As long as it helps increase the number of followers, it goes for publishing. Right now, distinguishing a professionally trained journalist from a socialite is becoming an uphill task.

African Governments Must Learn from Palestine

Shireen Abu Akleh was shot dead by Israeli forces just eight days after the world marked the World Press Freedom Day on May 3. With such events, African governments need to step up and steer clear of Israeli-like behaviors of gagging the media, and instead, just like Palestine gave Abu Akleh the freedom to tell her people’s story, they should also give the same freedom to their journalists.

In March, Ugandan authorities raided the offices of Digitalk, an online tv station known for airing critical views of President Yoweri Museveni and his family. Other than confiscating the TV’s production and broadcasting equipment, they also arrested and charged its reporters with cyberstalking and offensive communication. The charges could see them facing up to seven years in prison.

The killing of this brave journalist who dared to tell the stories of the oppressive Israeli should not kill the spirits of journalists worldwide. Instead, this should be an inspiration to every reporter to work even harder, to help give voice to the voiceless, uphold justice and make the world a better place for every person whether in Gaza,

Tigray, Libya, Syria or Afghanistan among other countries and regions experiencing instability.

(Senior Editor Francesca Julia Zucchelli edited this article.)

***Swaleh Idris** is a Kenyan journalist, author, and media entrepreneur who covers humanitarian crises, conflict, and disasters. Prior to founding Najm Media; a multimedia communications agency based in Nairobi, he worked at Kenya's oldest media organization; Standard Media Group as a creative.

India's Foreign Minister Schools Western Journalist

Peter Isackson
June 18, 2022

An interview with India's Minister of External Affairs bizarrely takes the form of a show trial.

In the first week of June, the 17th edition of an event called the GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum took place at a particularly tense moment in European history. Among its programmed events was an interview with India's Minister for External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. In a tweet following the event, the minister modestly summed up the interview in these words: "Animated discussion, reflecting a perspective from India and the Indo-Pacific." It was that indeed, but much more.

The GLOBSEC Policy Institute defines itself as a think tank and "a leading authority on security matters in Central and Eastern Europe." The announced mission of its annual forum is to facilitate "the free exchange of ideas" by providing "a meeting place for stakeholders from all sectors of society."

Like most institutions that claim the title of think tank, GLOBSEC is less focused on thinking than on implementing an ideology and an explicit activist agenda. This year's conference, it boldly announces, "will serve as a platform to mobilize the West's support and action for Ukraine."

GLOBSEC selected the seasoned journalist Maithreyi Seetharaman to interview Dr. Jaishankar. Chartwell Speakers describes the broadcaster as specialized "in connecting the dots between business, policy, civil society and the economy." She turned out to be the perfect choice for GLOBSEC. Seetharaman's personal worldview clearly aligns with the objectives of the conference. Less interested in the "free exchange of ideas" than the think tank's agenda, she focused on the real purpose of the interview: mobilizing "support and action for Ukraine."

The West's Trickle-Down Diplomacy

Seetharaman sets the scene by reminding her interviewee that the issue of the day is the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Perhaps influenced by her own ideology, that of a top-down world embracing trickle-down economics, she prefaces her questioning with the curious remark that the Ukraine war is now "trickling in terms of effect... to the rest of the world, the East, the global South."

Seetharaman's illustrious career over the past 20 years has propelled her through some of the top media outlets specialized in financial and economic news, including Bloomberg, CNBC and more recently Fortune. Her rhetoric even in this

seemingly innocent introduction to the interview reveals that she has fully absorbed this fundamental notion of economic ideology used traditionally to justify wealth inequality.

To kick off the conversation, Seetharaman then employs an artistic metaphor. “Paint us a little bit of a picture of India and how India’s being impacted,” she begins. With a few bold brushstrokes Jaishankar quickly passes in review the topics COVID, India’s economy, China and Afghanistan. After evoking India’s tension with China, he cuttingly drops the “useful reminder to Europe that there are other things happening in the rest of the world that perhaps Europe does not pay enough attention to.” How is that – he seems to be suggesting – for a “a little bit of a picture” of “the rest of the world?”

Seetharaman then intervenes with a question she deems important submitted by a member of the online audience: “How interested are the Indian people in the war in Ukraine? Is it a major concern, or a minor one?” The suggestion that it may be a minor one sums up the tone the journalist develops throughout the conversation that minimizes India’s importance with regard to the real issues in the world. It contains an implicit reproach of Indian indifference to what Westerners see as a defining existential drama.

The minister responds with a detailed explanation of the nature of the impact of events in Europe on both the Indian government and Indians themselves. This provides the first opening for what Seetharaman considers the big question, and indeed perhaps the only question: the problem of India’s traditional stance of “non-alignment.” To make her point, she brings up the question of India’s importing of oil from Russia, which she sees as the nation’s defiance of the West’s campaign to cripple Russia’s economy. Assuming the role of a police interrogator, she aggressively frames her question as an accusation of criminal

behavior: “Is that profiteering? Is that looking out for your own interests? What does that really mean for the foreign policy of India and how do you tie non-alignment with nine times more oil imports out of Russia?”

Politely and in appropriate detail, Jaishankar explains why the question of imports has nothing to do either with alignment or non-alignment. He points to a double standard, given that Europe, enthralled by American sanctions, is still allowed to consume Russia gas. He adds that Western sanctions on Iran’s oil had already cut off India’s most reliable traditional source.

Undaunted and seeming not to have processed the minister’s remarks, Seetharaman follows up with another accusatory question. “How do you then sit back,” she asks, “and define Indian foreign policy at this point where the West seems to be quite vociferous in trying to curtail funding for the war in Ukraine whereas by purchasing this oil for its national interest, India is being asked, ‘are you funding this war?’”

Her rhetoric is not only insidious and transparent but also insulting. Accusing the government of her own forebears of “sitting back” and presumably playing deceptive games cannot be considered either good journalism or acceptable diplomacy. She is directly challenging India’s and her interviewee’s integrity. And of course, Jaishankar has just answered exactly that question.

Maintaining a polite tone, the minister responds saying, “I don’t want to sound argumentative” to her clearly argumentative question. He then comes back to a point he had already made, this time in the form of a rhetorical question. “Tell me that buying Russian gas is not funding the war? It’s only Indian money and oil coming to India which funds but it’s not gas coming to Europe that funds?”

From Oil to Wheat

Seetharaman then seeks a new angle of attack that she has some difficulty articulating. She asks her guest to explain “the second aspect that India’s foreign policy being questioned [about] at this point.” Instead of “aspect,” she could have said “the second invented accusation.” This one concerns measures Indians have taken to ban wheat exports in a time of need, with Russian and Ukrainian exports blocked and the global South facing possible famine.

The journalist asks if the minister sees that as “supporting Russia... or is it a completely different element that we don’t understand in the West?” With a wry smile, Jaishankar replies: “I think the answer is B. You don’t understand in the West.” He then helpfully explains to this journalist supposedly specialized in the workings of the economy that it was an element of the West’s ideology that is to blame for this restrictive policy. India was forced to adopt these measures to keep its wheat exports out of the hands of speculators in Singapore and Dubai, who in this time of crisis have been seeking to monopolize the market with the intent of selling at higher prices to high income countries, while neglecting the most needy.

This exchange reveals a reflex that now exists among all the proponents of the Western coalition in the media. Any action taken by a friendly country that fails to conform to the most arbitrary and ill-thought-out dictates of the NATO-allied West can be deemed to be “supporting Russia.” This marks a return to the “global war on terror” reasoning of George W Bush, whose binary logic informed us, “if you are not with us, you are against us.” Bush, however, had the excuse of being physically at war in Afghanistan and Iraq. In contrast, today, even while bullying the world into joining its effort to cripple Russia’s economy and undermine Vladimir Putin’s presidency, neither the

US nor Europe wants to be seen as being literally at war with Russia.

Jaishankar uses the occasion not just to clarify that it is mere fantasy to suppose Indian complicity with Russia, but especially to highlight the fact that the West’s approach to management of supply to the needy nations of the world leaves a lot to be desired. He cites the disastrous management of vaccine distribution that was monopolized by the wealthy nations, victimizing the poor and prolonging the pandemic’s global effect.

The Wall Street Journal as the Font of Truth

Seetharaman then reads a question submitted by a member of the online audience, who cites the authority of The Wall Street Journal (WSJ), this time accusing India of the transshipment of Russian oil. The minister mockingly dismisses the very idea of transshipment as a nonsensical fantasy. Seetharaman seems astonished that Jaishankar’s should dare to deny something the WSJ reported and asks him if he deems it “inaccurate.” Though superficially accepting his denial, she immediately tries to reframe the accusation by asking whether India may be playing the role of “conduit to any Russian oil transactions.”

This exchange reveals two important facets of today’s Western propaganda. The first is that unfounded suspicions of practices that deviate from Western norms are routinely presented as facts by the most “respectable” organs of the press. The second is that readers of such supposedly informative journals – whether it’s the WSJ, The New York Times, The Economist or The Washington Post – accept as unvarnished truth reporting that is little more than speculative rumor. Like the adepts of Q-Anon, they have difficulty accepting any denial of such invented accusations, on the grounds that these organs of the press are above reproach. That impression alone facilitates the work of political and economic propagandists.

At this point a Lithuanian journalist stood up with a new accusation, that India was “essentially ignoring war crimes in Ukraine, not condemning Russia, not doing sanctions.” Referring to its “struggle” with China, the journalist asked “how do you think you’ll be trusted by others after that?” Correctly perceiving the question to be a mix between a reproach and a threat by powerful Western nations not to back India in its differences with China, Jaishankar returns the question. He reminds the journalist that since “Europe collectively... has been singularly silent about many things which were happening, for example, in Asia, you could ask why anybody in Asia could trust Europe on anything at all.” Turnabout, as the proverb tells us, is fair play.

The minister clarifies once again that what the journalist claims is “mischaracterizing our position” and explains why. More pertinently, he points to the absurdity of the implied reasoning, characterizing it as “a transaction” following the idea “that I come in one conflict because it will help me in conflict two,” adding this pertinent remark: “That’s not how the world works.”

Once again, instead of processing what the minister has just explained, Seetharaman tries to reformulate the same accusation in very much the same terms. “You have a problem with China on the border,” she begins before continuing with the question, “what position does that leave you in when it comes to seeking support if further incursions are done?” To bring home the seriousness of her claim, she poses another question coming from “one of the foremost geopolitical strategists on Wall Street,” who wants to know to whom, in a moment of crisis, India would look for support, the US or China? The questioner refers to this as “a defining moment that comes out of the defining moment that we face with Russia right now.”

Europe and the West Have a Mindset Problem

Perceiving this challenge to be a frank attempt at psychological bullying by a particularly bellicose group of ideologues, Jaishankar reacts by providing what should be remembered as one of the best political quotes of the 21st century. “You know,” he intones, “somewhere Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe’s problems are the world’s problems, but the world’s problems are not Europe’s problems.” India has been living with that mindset for more than two centuries.

He goes on to characterize the binary logic promoted by that mindset: “Your grand strategy must be about how you will choose.” Once again refusing to acknowledge the minister’s line of reasoning, Seetharaman interrupts him by interjecting what she takes to be a truism: “There will always be two axes. At this point it’s an understood, accepted fact. You have the West, US-led. You have China as the next potential axis. Where does India fit into this?”

The minister correctly identifies this as a “construct you are trying to impose on me.” In other words, a perfect illustration of the Western Eurocentric mindset. He asserts that India is entitled to weigh its own interests and make choices that, contrary to the worldview of the West, “are not cynical and transactional.” In other words, the self-interested “buying, selling, trading” logic of Wall Street – quintessentially cynical and purely transactional – is not appropriate to democracies.

Once again, discarding what Jaishankar has just explained, Seetharaman reformulates the same question, this time in even more cynical and transactional terms. With one fifth of the world’s population, she admonishes him, “you cannot sit on the fence with regard to foreign policy matters.” She adds the warning that “non-alignment isn’t

plausible if you want to take your position on the world stage.”

Jaishankar responds that the accusation of sitting on the fence “just because I don’t agree with you” makes no sense. Instead, he counters that “I’m sitting on my ground.” Seetharaman’s rhetoric is revealing. For her, the world is a stage, a hyperreal platform on which decisions are made by important people. Those who are incapable of holding forth on the stage, where, as we know, “poor players” are wont to “strut and fret” while those who don’t deserve to join them are condemned to sit on the fence. But, as Shakespeare told us, being on the stage accomplishes little. All that strutting and fretting ultimately signifies nothing.

He goes on to state what should be obvious to all, listing “the big challenges of the world” that transcend the “sound and fury” of a complex war in Eastern Europe. He identifies them as “climate change, terrorism “and the emergence of a world order,” as well as security and sustainable development goals. He implies that cooperating on solving those problems should have priority over what the rest of the world see as a proxy war for military dominance in one corner of Europe.

In this curious rhetorical fencing match, he then attempts a fatal thrust. “A lot of things are happening outside Europe,” he tells this Western journalist of Indian heritage. He informs her that “the world cannot be that Eurocentric as it used to be in the past.”

When journalism imitates Lewis Carroll

After this sally comes the final great moment of the interview. Anyone who remembers Lewis Carroll’s *The White Knight’s Song* in *Through the Looking-Glass*, will recognize the resemblance between Seetharaman and the narrator of Carroll’s poem, a poet who interrogates a man he happens

upon in the countryside. Repeating the same question over and over again, the poet fails to take any account of the man’s answers, drifting off into his own speculations and fantasies. At least the narrator of the poem (Carroll’s parody of William Wordsworth), unlike Seetharaman, admits his inability to listen and process information. He confesses in the first stanza that “his answer trickled through my head/ Like water through a sieve.”

And so it is that, like Lewis Carroll’s persona, Seetharaman reformulates the same question, this time with these words: “And who will India play with? Will it be Europe and the US or will it be China and Russia?” The minister follows his nuanced answer with a serious recommendation as he attempts to appeal to the journalist’s sense of professionalism: “Don’t use necessarily a caricature version of one situation as a yardstick to pass a sweeping judgment.” Alas, that is all she has been doing for the past half hour.

Concerning the Ukraine conflict itself, he adds a thought that seems curiously absent in all official Western discourse. He reminds Seetharaman and the public that one day a negotiated peace will have to come, meaning that “it is in our collective interest to find some kind of resolution... unless you’re throwing your hands up and saying this is not fixable.”

This time it is Jaishankar who is guilty of mischaracterizing Seetharaman’s position and indeed the position of the entire Western coalition. They are not saying it isn’t fixable. They are saying it is only fixable on our terms, following the unimpeachable wisdom of geopolitical strategists on Wall Street.

These exchanges offer yet another illustration of how Western journalists are locked into an ideological program that requires them to endlessly repeat invented narratives already present in the

media. In their interviews, they strive to confirm those points rather than to explore other avenues of understanding. That this happens routinely in newsrooms and editorial meetings should not be surprising. They have copy to deliver in conformity with the editorial line. But this is true even when the valuable resource for their reporting is sitting in front of them in the same room.

Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jainshankar must be congratulated for being one of the rare political voices that dares to challenge Western media to its face and find the appropriate tone for doing so.

Take Away From the Interview

India's Minister of External Affairs put in a brilliant performance but offered nothing radically new about India's stance. His impressive pedagogical dexterity permitted him to confirm with appropriate factual detail what is already public knowledge about India's non-alignment. After all, he is the author of a book, *The India Way*, that provides the scaffolding for everything he says in this interview. Surely, Seetharaman herself, with her Indian heritage, already understood that.

What the rest of us can take from this fascinating confrontation has less to do with understanding India than coming to grips with the mindset of the media in the West, particularly its refusal to handle or even admit any diversity of perspective. For Western journalists, even of Asian origin, it doesn't matter how much you already know or even what you may be able to learn from a source sitting in front of you.

What matters is your capacity to unfailingly repeat the mindset of your Western corporate and political masters. They have clearly enunciated their own unshakable geopolitical strategy, which is regurgitated in the news cycles on a daily, if not

hourly, basis. They are intent on seeing it repeated ad nauseum until the public, hypnotized by the repetition, accepts their narrative as divine truth and deems no other possible truth valid.

Seetharaman may understand more than she lets on. She may well be playing a role that has been scripted for her. That would be perfectly understandable. After all, she is continuing to pursue a shining career. What is regrettable is that she seems to identify with that role.

It is worth noting that this interview has been the object of commentary across the full span of Indian media. Not one Western outlet has even referred to it. But there is a reason for that. In the West, nuanced discourse, curiosity about others and diversified perspectives are simply not considered news. News consists of two things: dramatic events of any kind and what may be called the official or authorized account of the meaning of those events.

In US media, there may be as many as two official accounts of certain events, but no more than two. The implicit rule seems to be that those two narratives correlate either with Democrat vs Republican, liberal vs conservative or even woke vs un-woke or anti-woke positions. Even then, when it comes to US foreign policy, the Democrat and Republican positions tend to align in a single direction of assertive militarism.

The rhetorical advantage of this alignment is that any other perspective than the official one will be systematically denounced as a form of complicity with the enemy. Fox News's Tucker Carlson was thus ostracized as a Kremlin agent by a near unanimity of the media when, in the runup to the Russian invasion, he claimed that the US had no legitimate reason to engage or even take sides in a possible conflict. That take was verboten. Every visible critic of the US

commitment to the war, including Carlson, was branded a Kremlin puppet.

The language of Cold War

The other takeaway is that the mindset Jaishankar refers to is not only solidly established in both official and media circles in the West but it is also clearly a worldview built around the logic of a New Cold War. It will not tolerate the very idea of multipolarity. It expects every nation and every people on earth who are not named Russia and China (or Iran and North Korea) to align with the US and implement all its policies. To call the side aligned with the West “the free world” thus becomes little more than a sick joke. No nation claiming membership in the free world is permitted to think or act freely.

What is most surprising is that three quarters of a century after the breakout of the first Cold War that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the effective globalization of the world’s economy, the language of the 1950s is once again on the lips of supposedly serious commentators. When Seetharaman affirms “there will always be two axes” and that “sitting on the fence is not a plausible option,” it becomes apparent that it isn’t Western political philosophy, with its commitment to democracy, but the Western economic system that dictates how the world must work.

Western political philosophy has accordingly been reduced to a litany of empty slogans about democracy, freedom and human rights, as an economic oligarchy has grabbed the reins of power. The capitalist economy has become dependent on its dogma of competition that can now only be envisioned as a binary, Manichean conflict between good and evil. Multipolarity would be too confusing for Western leaders and pundits to seek to come to grips with.

Cold wars are always about ideology. But the easily recognizable ideologies of the past have disappeared or been transformed beyond recognition. US President Joe Biden has replaced the easier-to-understand rivalry between capitalism and communism by an imagined conflict between democracy and authoritarianism. But he has done so at a time when authoritarian practices have become the dominant trend in the culture of the indispensable leader of the free world. They increasingly include censorship, mass surveillance (both public and private), fomenting a climate of suspicion, shaming and jailing of those who think differently, mass incarceration and military bravado.

As a proclaimed think-tank, GLOBSEC might have used its forum to offer an example of thinking and problem-solving when it invited into its field of political research the Minister of External Affairs of a nation that comprises one fifth of the human race. Instead, it conducted an exercise in thought repression and enforcement of global conformity to its controlling mindset.

Few people in the West will have the opportunity to watch this interview, despite its obvious interest for anyone interested in global reality. It’s a pity that Americans and Europeans will continue to be told that “the whole world” is aligned with NATO’s objectives in Europe. It means they cannot even begin to suspect a more fundamental truth: that the vast majority of humanity has a nuanced view of complex political conflict in Eastern Europe.

Included in that majority are both Americans and Europeans, a thinking minority. But their voices are never heard because, as noted above, nuance has no place in the news. Whether it is Noam Chomsky or Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, people with something important to say will be allowed to speak, but their message will never be heard by more than a few. And when they do

speak up, even in an interview, their words will trickle through the heads of their listeners and their interviewers, like water through a sieve. That is how effective the New Cold War censorship has become.

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Russian Imperialism, Not NATO Expansion, Caused the Ukraine War

Bhaskar Majumdar
June 27, 2022

With Vladimir Putin evoking Peter the Great, it is clear that Russian imperialism is alive and kicking. Neighbors fled to NATO precisely to avoid the sharp claws of the Russian bear. After 1991, the West did not expand east. Instead, Eastern Europe moved west.

When it comes to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is easy to get into the popular narrative of the Cold War. Three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this narrative still lives subconsciously, if not consciously, in people's minds. It puts things in easy perspectives: a binary black and white, the

US against Russia, us versus them. To quote George W. Bush (Bush Junior), this narrative is simple: "If you are not with us, you are against us."

While the Cold War mindset might be obvious, other modes of thinking are less so. A key one is imperialism. In my naive youth, I had never believed that Americans would think of their role in the world from a great-power imperialistic perspective. When the Iraq War broke out in 2003, my impression was rudely shattered. I met a doctor in Connecticut and told him that I had just come from Kuwait. The good medic had never been outside his native state of Connecticut. Yet he expansively waved his hands and asked me: "So how are we managing the region?" I realized then that this attitude was as imperial as the British one of "managing" India or the French one of "managing" Algeria or that of any colonial power "managing" a colony.

Our good doctor was well aware that the US Army had a base in Kuwait and the gateway to Iraq was directly through Kuwait. He assumed that the US was responsible for the whole region as some form of a world's policeman and sovereign states in the region had little say in the matter. Given the fact that the US is the top dog as the sole superpower, it is easy to blame it for neo imperialism and more. Yet imperialism is not an American monopoly and it is important not to view the world through a monochromatic lens.

US Provocation or Russian Imperialism?

Some of the popular narrative in many countries is that the US is responsible for Putin's invasion of Ukraine, at least in part. John Mearsheimer, professor at the University of Chicago, has popularized this line of thought. He argues that NATO's eastward expansion provoked Russian President Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine. The problem with this argument is that it is curiously imperial.

As per Mearsheimer's worldview, NATO in general and the US in particular were at fault for welcoming countries that were in the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. Admitting the three former Soviet republics in the Baltics was rubbing salt into wounded Russian pride. This view forgets that the Russian Empire and its successor, the Soviet Union, expanded in western Europe as well as in the east all the way to the Pacific. In 1979, the Soviet troops even marched into Afghanistan to protect the communist government.

None of the countries that suffered under Moscow's yoke wants to go back to those. That is what so many of them lined up to join NATO when the Soviet Union fell. Eastern European nations also turned to the EU because of economic opportunities on offer. Poles, Lithuanians and even Hungarians prefer to work in France, Germany and the UK instead of in Russia. In a nutshell, NATO guaranteed security against an imperial Moscow while the EU boosted the economy for Eastern Europe.

An imperial view would see the expansion of NATO as a win for the US and a loss to Russia. However, it might be a good idea not to think of NATO or even the EU expanding east but Eastern Europe moving westward. "Go West, young man" had a new meaning for Poles suffering from nightmares of the 1943 Katyn Forest Massacre when the Soviets slaughtered the flower of Polish society.

Obviously, Russia did not like the eastward expansion of NATO or the EU. For a historically imperial power, this was deeply humiliating. In particular, the Soviet collapse scarred Vladimir Putin. This former KGB officer ended up driving a taxi for a bit. As Atul Singh and Glenn Carle write, the 1990s deeply traumatized Russians "who interpret almost every US action and statement as pieces of a long term, coherent plan to undermine

Russia." Russia claims that NATO threatens its sovereignty by encroaching on its near abroad.

What Is the Conflict Really About?

The reality is that NATO armies have no designs on Russian territory. It is Russia that annexed Crimea with impunity and in contravention of international law. Now, it has attacked Ukraine without provocation. It is razing entire cities, killing civilians and committing atrocities in a classically brutal Russian way. The history and the current reality of Russia puts fear into the hearts of its neighbors. That is why Finland and Sweden have applied to join NATO. Their action is defensive, not offensive.

US President Joe Biden may have been at fault in Afghanistan but he is not at fault for Ukraine. Putin is the man responsible for this conflict. Running a kleptocratic regime, this authoritarian leader needs to squash a democratic Ukraine. This removes the risk of calls for democracy in Russia. If Russian forces had taken Kyiv, a Moscow-friendly government would be in place. That was a key objective for Putin's reckless assault on Kyiv. Unfortunately for the new tsar of Russia, Ukrainians beat back Russian forces.

Now Russian troops are taking over the Donbas region and much of Ukraine's Black Sea coast so that Russia has a land route to Crimea. Putin's constant references to history are self-serving justifications and too clever by half obfuscations. Putin recently compared himself to Peter the Great who fought the Great Northern Wars from 1700 to 1721. Addressing young scientists and entrepreneurs, Putin "talked politics and power." He spoke about the new battle for geopolitical dominance and proclaimed Peter the Great to be a role model who in Putin's eyes reclaimed Russian land. For Putin, it is all about land. Russia wants the Donbas, period. And maybe some more.

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No - Not just Russian Imperialism Has Triggered War in Ukraine

Peter Isackson
July 03, 2022

We sometimes forget that “casus belli” in Latin is both a singular and a plural noun, and it should always be treated as such. A close look at history reveals that there are no simple causes for the Russia-Ukraine war and pinning blame on the villain-like figure of Vladimir Putin or historic Russian imperialism is intellectually sloppy and politically propagandist.

The problem with any war is that both sides always believe they are right. In this age of electronic communication and sophisticated tools designed to distort reality, both sides also heavily invest in propaganda. Those who attempt to introduce nuance while a conflict is raging are typically bullied by one of the sides to fall into line, as we pointed out in our analysis of an astonishing interview by a Western journalist of India’s Minister of External Affairs, Dr. S

Jaishankar. In times of war, perspective itself becomes the enemy.

Decades after the final victory or peace treaties, historians may calmly assess the events that led up to a war, tease out the play of rivalries that triggered it, elucidate the economic and cultural factors that defined its emotional character and assess the impact of the the personalities involved in launching and prosecuting the war. Such analyses, when conducted by objective historians, reveal complex networks of meaning and multiple factors hidden from public view at the time of the war. The “truth” concerning the causes of any war can never be fully described. More significantly, for a true historian, it can never be reduced to a simple attribution of blame.

The title of a well-argued article by Bhaskar Majumdar that appeared on Fair Observer a week ago illustrates a risk that has become all too common in today’s journalism. It is the temptation to reduce the analysis of every conflict to a simple blame game. Its ultimate aim is to identify a single individual who will bear the brunt of the blame. Who can forget the evil Saddam Hussein, purveyor of weapons of mass destruction so deviously hidden no one could ever find them? Our politicians and media explained how he had to be eliminated to usher in a glorious period of peace and prosperity that would inevitably follow. Or Muammar al-Qaddafi? Or Bashar al-Assad? To say nothing of Ho Chi Minh, Salvador Allende or Hugo Chavez, who were never elevated to absolutely Satanic status but still became the focus of a noble combat to replace pure evil with unadulterated good.

None of the cases cited above ended well. So why do our politicians and media persist in the same vein even today? Is it just a lazy habit or is there a novel strategy this time around? Psychologists understand that attributing blame to one group of people for some social, political or

economic ill is easy to do. One day it's Mexicans and another, Asians, Arabs, Russians, Jews or simply immigrants in general. Animosity towards such groups obviously becomes exaggerated in times of war. But we should also be aware that, even in times of peace, this tendency persists. It is at the core of every form of racism.

To successfully stir the emotion of the population of any nation committed to war, propagandists cannot rely only on suspicion or hatred of the group alone. An effective war mentality requires two other essential factors that will become the foundation of every effective effort of propaganda. The first is an ideological gap, a factor of cultural differentiation that claims to describe what another group of people believes in or is committed to. The second has become even more important in this age of media celebrities. It is the focus on a single personality to bear the blame. Eliminating that agent of evil will restore purity to the world.

Ideology can be many things. It can even be assembled from diverse components. These include religion, language, economic theory (capitalism vs. communism), implicit or explicit moral codes, and style of government (e.g. democracy vs. autocracy). The ideology need not be real in the sense that it is consciously embraced by all or even a majority. It can simply be a convenient label based on officially inculcated aspirations. In today's Western anti-Russian propaganda, the preferred choice for labelling the ideology combines one abstract notion, "autocracy," and one supposedly concrete reality, "Russian imperialism." Both notions appear rather nebulous, a simplistic formulation of a far more complex reality. The key to believing that they amount to an ideology is the identification of a unique and consummate evil-doer, whose mind is focused on that credo. The arch-villain who embodies the ideology we are authorized to hate today is of course Vladimir Putin.

How nuance can be overtaken by simplification

In his article, Majumdar makes a number of pertinent points about the Russian context that help clarify some key aspects of the conflict. He evokes the background to the conflict and acknowledges its complexity. He also reminds readers of the tendency, in times of propaganda, to revert "subconsciously, if not consciously" to the reflex developed during the Cold War. He describes it as putting "things in easy perspectives: a binary black and white, the US against Russia, us versus them."

After this promising start, the mood changes. In the course of the article Majumdar even appears to contradict himself. He slowly builds up to a position that denies the very nuance and perspective he promoted in the opening paragraphs. Towards the end of the article, he simplifies history to the very pattern of black vs. white that he earlier warned against. How else may we interpret this pair of assertions? "US President Joe Biden may have been at fault in Afghanistan but he is not at fault for Ukraine. Putin is the man responsible for this conflict." Back to the Manichean blame game.

How did the author slide into the kind of reasoning he derided? He commits three common errors of pseudo-historical reasoning that deserve our attention. They can be seen as illustrative of the process by which, in times of armed conflict, propaganda falls, "subconsciously, if not consciously" into place. The first is logical, the next, linguistic. The third is what literary critics call the "intentional fallacy."

In the very first sentence Majumdar aptly calls into question "the popular narrative of the Cold War." He identifies it with George W. Bush's famous assertion: "If you are not with us, you are against us." In other words, it reduces a problem to two competing and mutually exclusive narratives, one of which will be considered right or good, and

the other wrong or evil. At this point, we would expect the article to highlight the importance of nuance and complexity in its analysis of the conflict in Ukraine. Nuance means that attribution of an absolute moral quality to any position is likely to be inaccurate. Complexity means two things. The first is that there will likely be other factors that will inevitably lead to formulating more than two competing and mutually exclusive explanations. But, whatever the number of causes identified, even when they seem contradictory, they may prove to be complementary. For example, Russia's motivation may be simultaneously imperialistic (expansive) and anti-imperialistic (countering NATO's expansion). Selecting one and ignoring or suppressing the other is what propaganda typically does.

Majumdar appears to veer towards propaganda when, after evoking the fact that the US might be justifiably blamed for "neo imperialism and more," he tries to answer the question that appears after the subheading: "US Provocation or Russian Imperialism?" His argument begins with a curiously hesitant assertion about blame for the war. "Some of the popular narrative in many countries is that the US is responsible for Putin's invasion of Ukraine, at least in part."

Why "some" of the narrative? And why "popular narrative?" What does this convey? It is clearly dismissive of the idea he hasn't even begun to explain. It is the first step in the logical error of reducing the complex to a simple opposition and discarding one of the terms of the binary pair by branding it illegitimate. Instead of exploring the relative merit of two views of the conflict, this paragraph presents them as mutually exclusive hypotheses, one of which must be eliminated from consideration. There is a simple choice to be made: Russia is to blame or the US is to blame (though possibly only "partly"). In other words, the reader is confronted with a formulation identical to the

Cold War logic that the author critiqued as simplistic in his first paragraph.

To make his case for placing the blame on one side only, the author astonishingly writes: "John Mearsheimer, professor at the University of Chicago, has popularized this line of thought." This is a curious and rather disingenuous linguistic trick. Those who are familiar with Mearsheimer know that he is a very serious academic who, despite the interest of doing so, is never invited by the popular media to clarify public issues. In other words, contrary to Majumdar's assertion, he has never "popularized" anything.

With a verbal sleight of hand the author puts the political scientist's well-researched analysis into the category of "popular narrative." This is both an unjustified factual distortion and, in terms of logic, a category error. Its effect is to dismiss Mearsheimer's very serious contribution to an issue of monumental importance for all of humanity by invoking a misattributed adjective: "popular." Mearsheimer as a writer of pulp fiction?

Majumdar is by no means a propagandist, but this kind of confusion of terms and categories is precisely what propaganda encourages. To be fair, the author's assimilation of the ambient propaganda is most likely subconscious, if not unconscious in the Freudian sense. But that is how propaganda works, as Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, explained in his own book, *Propaganda*. The word propaganda in Latin means "things that are spread or propagated" through the cultural atmosphere. That means we are all the designated receivers. That should remind us why in times of propaganda, when the Cold War mentalities Majumdar describes are developing, it is important to apply logical and linguistic rigor to everything one receives. Even that won't make us immune.

What Mearsheimer says

Majumdar takes Mearsheimer to task for daring to suggest that NATO's eastward expansion might have provoked the Ukraine war. He implies that the distinguished University of Chicago professor has mistakenly (if not treasonously) chosen the other camp in the binary choice concerning the attribution of blame. But Mearsheimer never hesitates to qualify Russia's invasion as illegal and an unambiguous act of aggression. What he refuses to accept, because history makes the case clear, is the literally unprovoked idea that Putin's aggression was unprovoked. Western propaganda, echoing the White House and State Department, has created a Pavlovian association between Russia's invasion and the adjective, "unprovoked." In so doing, it dismisses with a swipe of the hand decades of historical evidence easily available to anyone even mildly curious about events in the region, especially over the past eight years.

The point Mearsheimer has been making for many years is simply that this conflict was predictable. Because meteorologists study the conditions of pressure, temperature and humidity, they can reasonably accurately predict the dynamics that will define the forecast for days or even weeks to come. One of the main factors Mearsheimer focused on was the evolving attitude and actions of the West, and more particularly the United States as the reigning hegemon. Telling that story in no way resembles "a popular narrative." Instead, it's a complex bundle of facts contained within a systemic chain of events. And the US has consistently played a major role at every phase.

In a second and perhaps even more astonishing category error, Majumdar dismisses Mearsheimer's analysis as "curiously imperial." Perhaps he believes that Mearsheimer is a "useful idiot" or a Kremlin stooge. Is he suggesting that Mearsheimer seeks to justify a Russian plan of imperial conquest for which there is no evidence

other than the invasion of Ukraine itself, which can be more easily and neatly explained as the reaction to a very real campaign to expand NATO right up to Russia's border?

To buttress his case, Majumdar cites the concerns of the Baltic nations based on the history of their relations with tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. In so doing, he appears to suggest that there is some kind of essential character trait in Russian civilization that requires it to act as an imperial power and to repeat identical or at least similar actions that took place in entirely different historical conditions. There may be some truth to this when studying the long duration, but basing the hypothesis on the feelings of the neighbors rather than the words and actions of the agent cannot be considered evidence. After all, Russia never reacted "imperially" to the Baltic states' integration to NATO, despite seeing it as a broken promise by the United States.

Though cultural continuity will always be a factor that plays out over the long term, making such suppositions about Russian imperialism fails to acknowledge that the modern Russian state is fundamentally different from both tsarist Russia and the USSR, just as the modern French republic and Britain's parliamentary democracy no longer function as absolute monarchies, while nevertheless retaining numerous vestiges of the tradition of aristocratic privilege and colonial reach.

As the leader of the school of realism in geopolitical analysis, Mearsheimer focuses not on vague fears and historical memories, but on how power is structured, the tools it possesses and how it uses them. He seeks to detect patterns and laws that tell us how the power game will play out, given what we know about the playing field and the assets of the teams. Just as empirical science constructs hypotheses, predicts effects and draws conclusions on the basis of the success or failure of

the empirical facts, prediction plays a fundamental role in political science.

Accurate prediction, when it is taken seriously, can render a vital pragmatic service. It can facilitate prevention. Forewarned is forearmed, says the proverb. In contrast, as Hamlet noted, “taking arms against a (predicted) sea of troubles” ultimately leads to being drowned in the tsunami. Mearsheimer claims his predictions could have spared us the drowning Ukraine is now undergoing. Anyone enterprising enough to consult his predictions from as long as seven years ago would notice how accurate they have been. We are witnessing a conflict that, in multiple ways, is now threatening the world. Western propagandists seem more tempted by the hypothesis Hamlet wisely rejected: in this case, the West’s decision to massively provide “arms against a sea of troubles.”

Mearsheimer is neither a politician nor a propagandist. He has no dog in the fight, no stake in the game. None, that is, other than his quest for scientific clarity. In the past, he has generally sinned on the side of promoting American hegemony. But that is precisely why he, as an American patriot, has consistently mobilized his capacity for scientific observation not with a view to condemning or excusing other empires, but in the interest of improving the chances of preserving US hegemony, which he admits has provided him with a way of life he has stated on many occasions that he appreciates.

Is there a distinction between hegemony and empire?

The same cannot always be said of Mearsheimer’s critics. This is especially of those who possess – or rather seem possessed by – an imperial rather than a merely hegemonic mindset. Because whether or not Russia, with its already large landmass and unimpressive economy, has imperial ambitions, it

is clear that the US has consistently had such ambitions, and never more so than in the past 75 years, a period in which it consciously took over Britain’s role of dominant Western empire.

Hegemony, Mearsheimer’s focus, or empire? What is the difference between these two similar notions? Hegemony is about relative geopolitical influence, the famous “balance of power” that regulates matters in any global or extensive system of relationships that admits of a “rule of law” or, at the very least, a “law of rules.” The idea of hegemony relies on and implies a respect for authority. Empire, in contrast, is about exercising control and exploiting resources. Respect of any authority other than its own, if it exists, is secondary. Empire is driven by its capacity to extract wealth from other parts of the world and enforce the obedience of other peoples. Hegemony is abstract; empire is concrete. Thus there can be a science of hegemony but only a history of empire. The first is a game, the second, a racket.

Mearsheimer justly claims to be a political scientist. He analyzes behavior, but as a respected intellectual – in contrast with opportunistic think tank academics and consultants – he typically does not seek to directly influence or alter other people’s or his own government’s behavior. He nevertheless hopes his work will have an impact on political decision-making, but makes no special effort to frame policies and even less to enforce them. The most valuable outcome of a true political scientist’s work is prediction, just as the most valuable outcome of a natural scientist’s work is the confirmation of laws of nature.

That is why Majumdar’s claim that Mearsheimer has a “curiously imperial” mindset makes little sense. Predicting a behavior based on one’s understanding of physical or psychological laws combined with familiarity with context simply should never be interpreted as in any way excusing the behavior thus described or serving the

interests of the party it describes. But that is what authorities in the West have been doing systematically with anyone who suggests an alternative to their version of propaganda.

An accurate prediction of an unwanted event should thus never be confused with consent. But that is what Majumdar appears to be suggesting. Mearsheimer has been studying the situation in Ukraine and speaking about it publicly for the past decade. Some are now hailing him as a modern Nostradamus for predicting in eerily accurate terms the current war back in 2016. Is that what Majumdar means by a “curiously imperial” argument? One might say the same thing of the soothsayer who told Julius Caesar: “Beware the Ides of March.” That marked the historical moment the Roman republic disappeared, to be replaced after years of civil war by the empire.

Majumdar persuasively begins his article like a political scientist but somewhere along the line drifts into a discourse that resembles propaganda. Statements such as “US President Joe Biden may have been at fault in Afghanistan but he is not at fault for Ukraine” are doubly doubtful. First, with regard to Ukraine, it is far too early to accurately allocate fault in such a long, complex story. As for Afghanistan, and whatever fault one can attribute to Biden, that is even more complex.

Biden’s relationship with events in Ukraine is in itself a complex story. Anyone even vaguely aware of the events leading up to and including the Maidan uprising in 2014 or who has heard the voice of US State Department’s Victoria Nuland in her hacked phone call with Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt, will be aware of Biden’s active role in Ukraine. At the time Barack Obama had made Biden his point man in Ukraine.

Is it really stretching things to suspect that Biden, even before becoming president, had already been implicated in the events that led to

the invasion? Did what happen in the Obama years have nothing to do with the events that accelerated as soon as Biden was took over as president in January, 2021. Nitpickers may go further and mention another seemingly insignificant player known to have played a peripheral role in the drama: Hunter Biden. How peripheral was it? In short, it’s far too early to let Biden off the hook for his potential personal fault in Ukraine. Just as many accused George W Bush of wanting to finish his father’s unfinished business in Iraq, family relations may have something to do – however marginal – with the events that have unfolded in Ukraine over the past eight years.

The ambiguity of words chosen to describe historical relationships

After categorically exculpating Biden, Majumdar focuses on what he represents as the unique fault of the Russians and Putin in particular. White House and State Department propagandists can only applaud.

Propaganda always uses the shifting and imperfectly perceived meaning of words to create beliefs meant to distort reality in ways that are slight enough that the public is unlikely to notice. Majumdar provides an interesting example when he casually calls NATO’s attitude with regard to Ukraine as “welcoming.” Let’s call this a generous interpretation of a somewhat less palatable reality. This verbal ploy elides the subtle distinction between a pair of related actions: welcoming and inviting.

If Ukraine had simply asked to join NATO, it would be fair to describe NATO’s position as “welcoming.” It is even true that at the very beginning, back in 2005, Viktor Yushchenko, Ukraine’s president at the time, actually did formulate a request to join both NATO and the European Union. That set off a period of debate,

both internal and involving Russia, about the long-term implications of Ukraine joining NATO.

That debate was never resolved. But there was a critical moment in 2008 when US President George W Bush insisted not on “welcoming” Ukraine but on actively inviting it to apply for NATO membership. In reality, Yushchenko’s earlier request itself had already been the result, not of the spontaneous desire of Ukrainians, but of pressure from the US that had already been expanding NATO. The initiative by the US with regard to Ukraine, unlike the Baltic states, was consistently resisted by France and Germany, two major members of NATO.

Things took a different turn when the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich was elected president in 2010. The Ukrainian parliament voted specifically to exclude the goal of integration into not just NATO but to becoming a member of any military bloc. It’s a status called neutrality. The law nevertheless permitted and even encouraged cooperation with alliances such as NATO while promoting the idea of joining the European Union.

The annoying complexity of history

In other words, at the end of 2013, the status of Ukraine was that of a nation that in 2008 had been invited to join NATO by the US, though – and this is significant – not by Europe. But because Ukraine itself had declined the invitation, the question of being welcomed became moot.

At the end of 2013 – as is now well documented – the CIA stepped in (not for the first time) to help foment the protests that had begun peacefully but were becoming increasingly violent. This was the direct effect of the American initiative of “welcoming” the participation of Ukraine’s ultra-nationalist groups, known for their extremist neo-Nazi culture and their taste for brutality. The strategy worked. This became clear when the

elected president Yanukovich fled the country, leaving it in the capable hands of a band of political actors vetted and briefed by the US State Department.

The rest of the story is well known to anyone who even vaguely followed events in Ukraine. A corrupt billionaire fully aware of the US agenda was elected president. Petro Poroshenko served out his five-year term presiding over a deeply kleptocratic state. With a civil war raging in the east and corruption installed as a way of life, he nevertheless managed to become unpopular enough to be voted out of office in 2019 in favor of a comic actor who convinced 73% of Ukrainian voters that he would be more competent than the incumbent. Or at least that he would be less corrupt, like the president he played on television. Moreover, Volodymyr Zelenskyy promised to be the outsider capable of doing what Poroshenko had been unwilling to do: collaborate with Russia, Germany and France on applying the Minsk accords that granted autonomy within the Ukrainian state to the disputed Russian-speaking areas of the east.

Majumdar simplifies things in the extreme when he describes Putin’s ambitions in these terms: “Running a kleptocratic regime, this authoritarian leader needs to squash a democratic Ukraine.” This is half correct. Russia is indeed kleptocratic and authoritarian, but no more than – and some might claim even less than – any of the regimes that have been installed in Kyiv since 1991. Ukraine is no more a democracy than Russia itself and has never found a way of recovering durable political or economic stability since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It might be more realistic to rewrite Majumdar’s assertion with this formulation: “Running a kleptocratic regime, this authoritarian leader [Putin] needs to squash another kleptocratic, authoritarian regime: Ukraine.” In their majority, the Ukrainians definitely want to be independent

of Russia, but they have never shown any aptitude for democracy.

The promoters of the war in the West never ask themselves why the US is so heavily engaged in Ukraine? Are they so averse to killing or the ways of war? If so, shouldn't they have stepped in on Yemen's side in the Saudi war on the Yemen republic?

When interrogated about the problem of organized crime in the US, many Americans will shrug their shoulders and say, "Well, at least the Mafia essentially kills its own and leaves the rest of us alone." One might expect them to conclude that when two authoritarian neighbors in Eastern Europe begin slaughtering each other on their own disputed territory, why should we feel concerned to the point of funding their entire military?

That actually was President Barack Obama's policy. He famously told The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg: "The fact is that Ukraine, which is a non-NATO country, is going to be vulnerable to military domination by Russia no matter what we do." As with everything concerning nations that have acquired the habit of meddling in the affairs of others, this has to be taken with a grain of salt. Obama said it at the very moment when his State Department was intrusively working in the wings to favor one of the two authoritarian rivals (Ukraine) over the other (Russia). To some extent washing his hands of this troubled zone, Obama delegated to his Vice President Joe Biden the task of managing what were essentially covert operations of deep military engagement in the name of NATO.

Majumdar's informative article highlights some important aspects of Russia's and Putin's authoritarian ways as well as his often illegal and destructive actions. But when analyzing the causes of a complex drama that has now become dangerous for all of humanity, it is always helpful

to refrain from simplistic explanations that rely on identifying a blameworthy individual. We always want to understand the psychology of leaders guilty of aggression, but speculating about their "real" motives and asserting that they explain everything is precisely what propaganda does as a routine. This is especially true when teasing out the causes of something that has become clearly much more than just "a major geopolitical crisis."

As the days go by, the war in Ukraine increasingly resembles the initial rumblings of World War III. At the NATO summit in the final days of June US President Biden responded to a question about how long Americans would have to support the high price of gas with these words: "As long as it takes, so Russia cannot, in fact, defeat Ukraine and move beyond Ukraine."

Apart from the message to Americans that their comfort and well-being is less important than the government's commitment to a foreign war, this can be interpreted in several ways. One possibility is that this reveals what has been a pattern for decades: the inclination of every US government to commit, though in a slightly modified role, to yet another forever war. It is the duty of an empire to maintain a permanent military presence at all strategic points around the globe. Time in such endeavors is never an issue, especially when, with no troops on the ground, no Americans are coming back home in body bags.

Another rather more surprising possibility, is that this may indicate a serious change of strategy. The conditions Biden evokes could presage the terms of a negotiated settlement. If the end of hostilities could be presented officially not as a victory of Russia over Ukraine but as Ukraine's heroic achievement of a newly defined independence from Russia accompanied by the assurance that Russia would make no other territorial claims and accept NATO on its borders everywhere except Ukraine, everyone might save

face. That rosy scenario seems unlikely, given another remark Biden made in the same interview: “What happens if the strongest power, NATO, the organizational structure we put together, walk[s] away from Russian aggression?”

A third is that the US will continue until it has put a dagger in the heart of Russia, or at least of Vladimir Putin. That may explain why the chit-chat in the West has increasingly turned to considerations of Putin’s bare chest. That lighthearted banter assumes that at no point would Russia, or the US itself, be tempted to use nuclear weapons capable of compromising the survival of humanity itself. Or that, profiting from the confusion, Israel might take the initiative to nuke Iran or North Korea to nuke its own chosen targets, just for the sport of it.

When the future of the human race and the planet itself is at stake, offering simplistic takes on who is at fault tends to be destructive rather than constructive. Taking time to tease out all the details -- something John Mearsheimer and a few others have been doing over the years -- is probably worth the effort. We owe them our respect.

[Fair Observer invites its authors to dialogue with one another in the spirit of what we call a “crucible of collaboration.” In any crucible, things may get heated, but that is how good alloys are produced. The aim is to go beyond each contributor’s monologue to produce what may become a productive dialogue.]

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Sultan Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Erdonomics is Driving Turkey to Disaster

Atul Singh
July 21, 2022

The Turkish president is insisting on cutting interest rates when inflation is rising, causing the currency to crash and the economy to collapse. If Erdoğan does not change course, the opposition might triumph in the 2023 elections, ending 20 years of the strongman’s rule.

Not a very long time ago, there was a plucky young Turk who was an outsider in politics. He entered public life and became mayor of the capital of his nation. Against the odds, he even went on to become prime minister. No, this is not the tale of Boris Johnson (who has Turkish ancestors). This is the story of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

As a rising Islamist politician, the football-playing Erdoğan took on corrupt Scotch-drinking elites and a power-drunk military. He was even banned from politics for a while. Yet Erdoğan came roaring back and, unlike the recently dethroned Johnson, has emerged as the strongman of his nation.

A Truly Historic Leader

Even his critics would concede that Erdoğan has etched his name in Turkey’s history. He is the most significant leader of the country since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the general who created

the modern Turkish state on the dying embers of the Ottoman Empire. Atatürk dragged the country screaming and kicking into secularism and towards Europe. In a land where the sultan was seen as the caliph by the Muslim world, Atatürk abolished the caliphate.

For all of Atatürk's herculean efforts, much of Turkey was far too religious to turn secular like Europe. The elites of Istanbul inhaled the liberating air of Europe but, over time, lost touch with their people. The secular military managed to keep "Muslim parties in check and rebellious Kurds under control" through military coups. In 1997, the military forced an Islamist prime minister to resign. Then, Erdoğan was a young mayor of Istanbul.

To cut a long story short, the Islamist tide could not be held back by the military dam. Eventually, Erdoğan led them to power. He cut the wings of the military, initiated a rapprochement with the recalcitrant Kurds and made Islamism the new guiding principle of the country, both at home and abroad. Out went Kemalism, in came Erdoğanism. In the early days, this meant moving closer to Europe to avoid yet another military coup and fairly sound management of the economy.

As war rages between Russia and Ukraine, the early era of Erdoğan seems a lifetime away. In June, some researchers estimated inflation in Turkey to be 160%, more than twice the official estimate of 79%. The country is also facing a currency crisis. In 2021, the Turkish lira fell by 44% against the dollar. In 2022, the lira is in freefall, the current account deficit (imports minus exports) is rising and the budget deficit (expenditures minus revenues) has reached a record high. Millions of workers, young people and pensioners have fallen below the poverty line, which is set at \$1,200 a month for a family of four. While much of the economic pain was inevitable given the global economic downturn, some of it is

self-inflicted. By stubbornly insisting on cutting interest rates at a time of soaring inflation, Erdoğan has scored a spectacular own goal.

Elections and Revolutions Depend on the Price of Bread

The Turkish economy has struggled with its economy long before Erdoğan. With an oversized military, Turkey spent too much on defense. The country has long relied on dollar-denominated debt, which leaves it very exposed to external shocks. As a NATO member and a frontline state against the erstwhile Soviet Union, Turkey was regularly bailed out by the US and institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Like Pakistan, Turkey extracted geopolitical rent from the West and bailouts have been par for the course. Only last year, the IMF doled out \$6.3 billion to Turkey.

Erdoğan has been putting a gun to the head of European leaders to wring some cash out of them. In 2016, the European Commission coughed up over \$6.6 billion (€6 billion) for Turkey to host refugees and not disgorge them into the EU member states. Like a good bazaar merchant, Erdoğan has somehow kept the Turkish economy from falling into collapse because the US, the EU, the IMF and NATO all need Turkey for one reason or another. It is too important to fail.

Even geopolitical rent and political blackmail have limits. They do not yield infinite amounts of cash or gold. When inflation rises, central banks raise interest rates so that people keep their money in the bank instead of spending them on goods and services or assets. Inflation is a regular feature of the Turkish economy. In the 1980s and 1990s prices soared. Then, the central bank raised interest rates and brought it under control.

Erdoğan wants his central bank to keep interest rates low. Some of his key supporters have long

been small businessmen who resent high interest rates. Turkish economists privately tell this author that Erdoğan thinks raising interest rates would put a spoke in the wheels of the economy. Like many politicians who want economic growth, Erdoğan wants to print money to achieve it. After all, he is doing what the Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank did when they printed money through their policy of quantitative easing.

The US and European central banks have since reversed course in the face of rising inflation. Erdoğan has held the fort and pressured his central bank to cut rates instead. This means there is more money sloshing around in the Turkish economy than necessary. With oil, food and commodity prices high thanks to the Russia-Ukraine War, Erdonomics has sent prices soaring even further.

Turks are scrambling to get rid of liras as fast as they can. They are buying dollars, properties (prices are up by 182% over the past year), cars, electronics and other consumer goods, and even high-risk volatile assets such as overpriced stocks and cryptocurrencies. Turkey might not be Sri Lanka yet but Erdonomics is causing its economy to collapse.

Over the last few years, he has become a de facto sultan. He has built Ak Saray, a pure white palace of 1,000 rooms on 50 acres of Atatürk Forest Farm, after razing Atatürk's country lodge to the ground. Hagia Sophia is no longer a museum but a mosque. Secular Kemalist Turkey is dead. Istanbul's elites have been defenestrated. Critics have been castrated. Furthermore Erdoğan has been able to project himself as a key leader of the Muslim world and won much popularity in places like Palestine and Pakistan. Recently, he even changed Turkey's name to Türkiye.

In his 19 years in office, Erdoğan has accomplished a lot. He has changed the nature of the state and the arc of Turkey's destiny. Yet he is

increasingly vulnerable. Turkey may not be Sri Lanka yet but it is in turmoil. Elections and revolutions depend on the price of bread. Erdonomics has set that on fire. At some point, the mob might turn on the sultan.

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Brains Explained: Vibration all the Way Down

William Softky
July 28, 2022

Some scientific explanations are so simple and universal they seem to defy logic. For example, vibrations explain almost everything about brains and bodies, in particular how “good pain” works. This article previews a talk for the Festival of Consciousness in Barcelona.

There is a story with the infamous ending “Turtles all the way down,” which means two opposite things. Once you understand the deeper meaning, you'll understand your most important biorhythms, and how to tune them up.

Mostly the story mocks simple-minded people. A thousand years ago an unnamed guru said the world is supported on a turtle, but couldn't say

what the turtle rested on. A hundred years ago a little old lady, believing the Earth to be flat, made the same claim to scientist William James:

"If your theory is correct, madam," he asked, "what does this turtle stand on?"

"You're a very clever man, Mr. James, and that's a very good question," replied the little old lady, "but I have an answer to it. And it's this: The first turtle stands on the back of a second, far larger, turtle, who stands directly under him."

"But what does this second turtle stand on?" persisted James patiently.

To this, the little old lady crowed triumphantly,

"It's no use, Mr. James—it's turtles all the way down."

Fair enough. Infinite stacks of turtles, or infinite stacks of any real objects don't fit well in finite space. So the lady's version of what holds up Earth lacks support, and thus falls flat.

But other infinite stacks work fine. In computer science, for example, the concept of infinite regress shows up in iterative approximations, or when a program invokes itself (recursion). In geometry, some patterns contain smaller copies of themselves, patterns inside patterns (fractals). In those cases, the phrase "all the way down" represents nested multiscale interactions, among the most elegant structures possible. That's the kind of simplicity scientists love, because it lets one theory cover everything. Let's call it a multi-scale theory. So simple it defies logic.

For example, music is built of multi-scale vibrations. Beats, quarter-beats, sixteenth beats, fundamental notes and overtone harmonics, consonant chords of notes, predictable progressions of chords, repetitive sonata form. I propose here that human bodies ring with similar

multiscale vibrations, whose ultra-faint, ultra-high frequencies convey sensation and implement motor control.

Coherent vibrations explain bodies so well you don't need anything else. Human bodies absolutely rattle with vibrations, from circadian rhythms down to myofascial ultrasound. Vibration all the way down.

The Vibrational Bandwidth Stack

Take this very moment, as you read this sentence. While the paper (or screen) is fixed in space, your eye must move in order to see its subtle shapes of bright and dark. Muscles swing and vibrate the eye to release showers of fresh data, using all kinds of movements, ultra-fast atop slow. A few big lurches per second (called saccades) re-aim your eyeball toward interesting spots, like corners or edges, spots which promise refinement of your brain's blurry hunches by zooming in.

Moving your eyes semi-intentionally is the normal process of looking. But being made of jelly, the eyeball also wiggles after each yank, adding subtle quick back-and-forth motions (micro-saccades) dancing around the region of interest. Within the micro-saccades are even tinier and faster wiggles that only the eyeball itself can sense.

Same for hearing. The brain sends boosting signals to the ear, using its predictions to anticipate arriving sound. Especially to locate a sudden scary sound like a twig-snap, a task honed by millionths of a second. The brain doesn't just predict sound into the ears, but into sensitive skin all over the body. When sound impacts you, the waves go everywhere. Ideally you hear sound not just with your ears but with your face, your neck, your chest, your gut and back. Ideally, your physical experience is unified enough that "sound" and "feeling" merge, no telling the senses apart.

Hearing and mechanical sense shouldn't be separate, in fact their nerve inputs overlap enormously.

Hearing and seeing are external senses, not as important as awareness of one's own internal configuration. Every animal must feel its body to live. The internal sense (interoception) is built from mechanical vibrations in bones and muscles, vibrations which constitute the information field of the body.

What do those vibrations look like? We can build our way down from the big slow obvious ones, into the realms of invisible and inaudible. Any muscular motion is fair game, even if it doesn't repeat. Here goes:

Breathing takes a few seconds per breath. Waving at a friend takes a second or two per wave. Heartbeats and walking clock in at one to a few (beats/strides) per second, as does shaking someone's hand. Those muscle motions happen faster than the "biorhythms" medicine usually talks about (like circadian rhythms and menstrual rhythms), but are slow by data-flow standards. Most motions slow enough to see use big external muscles like the bulging "heads" of biceps or quadriceps.

Smaller, faster motions deep inside you are easier to miss. They originate from muscles close to the spine like the multifidus and psoas. But they carry much more information. Aiming a laser pointer at a wall reveals body tremor wiggling ten or twenty times per second (Hz). A basso profundo might sing a low note severalfold higher, say 50 Hz, and a soprano a high note ringing fifty times faster at 1000 Hz, with harmonics even higher adding to vocal texture (children can squeak even higher than that). Singing proves humans can vibrate at least that fast.

The threshold of consciousness

But this is where consciousness fails. Frequencies higher than 10-20,000 Hz are beyond human hearing (technically ultrasound), so it's easy to think our bodies can't make or use such information. But as engineers know, higher frequencies carry more information, ad infinitum. In fact inside human bodies, ultrasound carries so much information, merely keeping track of it would tie our brains in knots. Ultrasound is unconscious on purpose, for maximum throughput and bandwidth.

In fact, it's a law of Nature (pointed out by physics Nobelist Richard Feynman in 1959) that the tiniest things store the densest information. Claude Shannon showed that fast-changing things carry the most bandwidth. In other words, the tighter the resolution in space and time of any signal, the more data it can carry. So vibrations in a body aren't created equal, not at all. Information is mostly carried by the smallest, faintest, fastest ones, which sustain and drive the others. That is, they form a carrier wave of interoception and control.

To find the central carrier-wave, we ought to look for precise timing signatures and low-amplitude motions. What are the tiniest, fastest signals in a body? Which vibrations carry the most information? Let's look as tiny as we can, at the quantum scale.

The quantum of muscular motion is molecular, as actin and myosin filaments slide past each other, consuming energy to tug a tiny bit. Every whole muscle is made of thousands of such fibers which fire in concert. A single filament's length is one millionth of a meter, that is one millionth of the hand-wave at our friend. The filament's motion endures about one billionth of a second, almost a million-fold faster than anything humans can hear. Yet because our muscles are made of those

nanoscopic fibers, in aggregate those molecular tugs create everything we feel and do.

The principle of aggregating muscle pulses is like ocean surf, but backwards. When a wave crashes in the surf, a big, single, heaving thing turns into millions of tiny hissing droplets. Big breaks up into small, all by itself, which is all that can ever happen without adding energy. But life can add energy, so it can run that process backwards, amplifying little things into big ones.

Take a tight flock of seabirds, flapping as they skim the waves. Their vocal cries synchronize their nervous systems tighter than milliseconds, and their eyes see the flapping of each other's wings almost as precisely. So all the time, each bird can see and hear exactly how her fellows flap, and can arrange her wing-flaps right in line, dead center. Meaning her brain can amplify the tiny, subtle correlations of collective resonance, then add her own energy to sharpen up the central peak. In this arrangement each bird takes in only tiny signals, but by timing magic makes the whole flock heave as one. Turning small and fast to big and slow is the opposite of surf.

So tiny muscle firings, synchronized and lined up just so, produce gross motions in our bodies, just like single flapping birds produce a flowing flock. How could the brain resolve its timing sharp enough to make that work? By recycling the "wasted" information from those same muscle firings.

The brain as frequency manager

Human brains are special-purpose timing processors, encased in solid bone and kept at constant temperature, computing by using nanoscopic wavefronts passing inside neurons. In function a brain is roughly a vibration-replicator, anticipating and sculpting vibrations, as fed by echoes from the recent past. Human brains send

about a million neural pulses out to muscle fibers every second, and receive about million pulses back from neural sensors. Every tiny "pluck" between actin and myosin filaments, as triggered by a pulse, radiates ultrasound waves in all directions. If those plucks add up coherently—the brain's goal—then some wavefronts will be strong enough to trigger pulses back, telling the brain what's going on and how to make it better. These are the same dynamics a "supercollider" uses to shape its packets of protons. It uses the process of tracking precisely-timed kicks.

Please bear with me while I calculate some nervous system bandwidths. Or skip the next four paragraphs, restarting with the phrase "grand mystery." So let's do the numbers: first interoceptive bandwidth, then visual.

How many interoceptive nano-vibrations might fit inside a human body? Fifty kilograms of muscle roughly takes up fifty litres, each containing 10^{15} cubic chunks of one micron on a side (the size of an actin filament, cubed). Of course independent fixed chunks are nothing like smooth, ever-moving vibrations. But chunks make calculating information easy. By that admittedly clunky standard, at any one time a body contains $5 \cdot 10^{16}$ volumetric elements (voxels), meaning roughly 10^{16} bytes of information capacity. Now multiply that by frequency (10^9 /sec) to get an upper bound on internal bandwidth of 10^{25} bytes/second (ten million billion billion). 10^{25} bytes/second is the maximum bandwidth we can hope for in a body. That bandwidth is the resource converting molecular tugging to motion.

In particular, precise synchrony determines whether motor output is efficient vs. inefficient. In the efficient version, micro-tugs synchronize into macro-tugs. In the inefficient version, the micro-tugs are jumbled, they cancel each other, and dissipate as heat instead of force. Sculpted microvibrations are also the best way for muscles

to nudge clumsy blood-cells through narrow capillaries. And the only way to sense squishy soft mucus clogging squishy soft lungs, and the only way to aim muscular force to expel it.

How does visual resolution compare to the crazy 1025 bytes/second bandwidth of interoception? Imagine your whole 3D visual world has the same resolution as a high-definition TV. That is, imagine a Virtual Reality environment having HDMI spatial resolution (5 pixels/mm) spanning a cube 40m on a side. (This flight of simulation fancy is just for calculation, it isn't how brains actually work...that's actually the point). The total number of volume elements (voxels) in the simulator-cube is $(40 \times 5000)^3$, i.e. 8×10^{15} voxels, or 8 peta-voxels. That spatial resolution is insane by current standards of VR technology (and also MRI tomography). But it's still less than we calculated for interoception.

The brain as creative artist

The grand mystery is this: our bodies, and also separately our eyes, have spatial resolution in the neighborhood of 1016 dots at least. But our spinal cords, and also separately our eyes, receive as input only 106 neural pulses per second. The ratio between the two is ten billion to one. Meaning (roughly) that the brain synthesizes and confabulates ten billion dots for every actual data point it gets. By this calculation, our brains make up 99.9999999% of what we see and feel.

Likewise, the nervous system runs at up to a billion "clock cycles" per second, but our conscious minds can only manage a few words or thoughts per second. By this calculation, our conscious brains miss 99.9999999% of our internal processing. Thus in terms of both data and time, humans brains basically fake it.

The proof of a good idea is how much work it does. Here are some teasers for applying these

principles of vibration and confabulation to your life:

- **The spine is the center of everything.** Nanovibrations run fastest down the center of the spine and myofascial tissue, making the spine the physical channel, akin to an optical fiber, containing the carrier wave. A central spine is the perfect trunk-line for coordinating metabolism, interoception, muscular motion, and breath. In fact people with perfect spinal and breath control, like Harry Houdini and the Iceman Wim Hof, can "clench" their spines and breath muscles so that most muscular energy is intentionally "wasted" as heat to keep them warm (i.e. muscular activity for thermogenesis, not motion). A bonus is that according to deep geometric principles, when a spine is operating optimally it ought to feel ecstatically extended and inflated, enlightened in multiple senses. Spinal bliss is what humans ought to feel all the time.
- **Emotions are vibrations too** Certain sounds made by many species, not just humans, originate in specific spinal zones, and carry emotions: whining, roaring, laughing, gasping, snarling, moaning, crying.
- **Emotional connection cross-correlates vibrations** Eye-gazing, singing together, praying together, holding hands.
- **Accelerometers can measure biorhythms.** Silicon accelerometers are everywhere, even in smartphones (like the **Sensie** platform I helped design), small, fast, and cheap. While they are still far too slow to detect the carrier wave directly, by sheer dint of bandwidth they could still measure

emotional connection via cross-correlation, or individual synchrony by algorithmic measures like symmetry and 3-D power spectrum.

- **Energy is information.** What sensitive people colloquially call “energy”—the various internal sensations including tingling, opening, connection, electricity, “chi,” and heat—in biophysics corresponds to vibratory information flow. Vibrations flow along meridians and concentrate in chakras. Those stripey sensations arise in the myofascial conduits tracing the spine and limbs, then are simplified into sensation by the brain’s often-mistaken motor data map (or mental whiteboard). That virtual map tries valiantly to know exactly which conduit runs where, even without good data.
- **Discomfort is data.** A brain can learn that map correctly (from healthy experience), or incorrectly (from trauma, constraints, overtraining, or lack of experience). A bad map has defects like wrinkles, kinks, or knots. Defects lead to inconsistencies, which create zones in the body the brain mis-locates, can’t control, can’t make sense of, or can’t even feel. A brain doesn’t like operating in such zones and wants to avoid them. But dodging discomfort worsens the problem by avoiding exactly the data the brain needs to fix its map. The good news is that “good pain” (intense neuromechanical discomfort short of tissue damage) delivers clean fresh data and improved motor function in direct proportion to felt sharpness and intensity. Every pop, click, opening, release, or even spontaneous cramp results from removing a map-

wrinkle, acting and feeling like snapping back to grid. Each shift instantly increases motor operating space, often feeling weird or wobbly while getting used to it.

- **Ultrasonic grounding = ultragrounding**
The weirdest new trick for recalibrating the motor map consists of pressing heavy hard things against central bones, like draping one’s back across iron weights. Pinning down painful myofascial “trigger points” against a heavy inert object provides the brain a guaranteed “zero vibration” reference signal. The pain might even feel sweet. Beyond “foam rolling,” imagine “iron rolling.” Deliberate discomfort, pain on purpose.

In summary, multiscale vibrations describe virtually everything in a body, in particular how nanovibrations help it sense and move. The better we know our bodies’ operating principles, the better we can fix and tune them up.

All that in about 2600 words. Is that simple enough to defy logic?

***William Softky** is a biophysicist who was among the first neuroscientists to understand microtiming, and among the first technologists to build that understanding into algorithms. Thousands have cited his scientific work, his PhD in Theoretical Physics is from Caltech, his name is on 10 patents and two of the companies he inspired were acquired for \$160 million total.

The Debate On Transgender Athletes Is Fundamentally About Fairness

Jennifer Wider
July 30, 2022

Science tells us that there are biological differences between women and transgender women. Allowing them to compete together is unfair to those born as women and the fear of even discussing this issue is unhealthy for our society.

Amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US engaged in a national debate on who was eligible to compete in women's sports. As a country which was founded on the principle of "all men are created equal," most would argue that this rule never applied to women and minorities. Over time, the US has striven to become a more inclusive country. Both women and minorities have the vote. Many have risen to top positions in the country. Even with all of these achievements, the road to equality for female athletes has been incredibly bumpy and many would argue we aren't there yet.

In 1967, Kathrine Switzer became the first woman to run the Boston Marathon. She was physically assaulted by numerous men, including the race director who tried to remove her bib number and throw her out of the race. Switzer's courage became a symbol of the struggle for inclusiveness in sports. Her determination paved a path for so many other women athletes. Billie Jean King is viewed as one of the most iconic women in tennis. In 1973, she founded the Women's Tennis Association and led the fight for equal prize money for women in tennis tournaments. In 2007, Venus

Williams pressured Wimbledon to offer the same prize money to women as they do to men, actualizing the goal envisioned many years before. Simone Biles won a total of 25 world championship medals, the most global competition series medals out of any male or female gymnast ever.

Gender is Controversial

Women have been fighting for equal footing in sports for decades, so it's no surprise that the idea that gender is a choice is proving to be controversial. At the heart of the debate is Lia Thomas, a transgender woman who swam for the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) located in the historic city of Philadelphia where the Founding Fathers of the US signed the declaration of independence in 1776. Thomas competed on UPenn's men's swim team from 2017 to 2020. Thomas then started competing on UPenn's women's team from 2021. In 2022, she became the first transgender athlete to win the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Division 1 national championship in any intercollegiate sport. The event was the women's 500-yard freestyle race.

Thomas began hormone replacement therapy in the spring of 2019. It was at this time that she came out as a transgender woman to her coaches and friends. She was required to swim for the men's team during the time she was going through hormone treatment. Thomas swam for the women's team in the 2021-22 season. The 2020-21 swimming season was canceled due to COVID-19. Thomas competed in intercollegiate swimming after adhering to all of the guidelines set forth by the NCAA to compete as a woman.

Nonetheless, Thomas found herself in the middle of a national firestorm. Her taking part in women's swimming elicited criticism from her teammates, coaches and national and international

competitors. Thomas also received support from current and former NCAA swimmers, Team USA and international swimmers across the globe. In December 2021, Thomas achieved the nation's fastest times in the 200- and 500-yard freestyle races, smothering the competition.

Thomas's record-breaking success caused public uproar. Legislators introduced bills to restrict the participation of transgender athletes in women's sporting events. Many were concerned that Thomas' participation would destroy women's sports and rob cisgender (denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex) women of achievements. The number of transgender athletes competing in women's sports is probably very low and this data is not collected formally. Regardless, the argument on the transgender issue is fierce and many question the difference between assigned biological sex and gender identity.

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines transgender as "an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth." The APA goes on to state that "gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of being male, female or something else."

Making Sense of the Controversial Transgender Debate

I am a women's health doctor and a former collegiate athlete. It goes without saying that I am a feminist. I have and will always be a staunch supporter of women's rights. I have fought for equality in women's sports since I was in grade school. The boys lacrosse team at my high school would always compete on the best field with an electronic scoreboard while the girls team, of which I was the captain, was relegated to an inferior field at the back without a scoreboard. I

was part of a very vocal group that fought for the girls team to be treated the same as the boys team.

I believe in equality in sports and I fully support the right to transition to another gender. But we have to recognize the anatomic, physiologic advantages that a transitioned woman (XY) has over a biological woman (XX), regardless of hormone treatment. If we ignore that, it's almost like we are partaking in a version of the Emperor's New Clothes, ignoring what is obvious because we want to be politically correct, progressive and inclusive.

Men and women have different bodies. We have recognized this from the beginning of time. We can try to distill the differences down to hormones, but that we would be oversimplifying and quite frankly, ignoring inherent differences that are on a variety of different levels.

Once a biological male body hits puberty, there are a host of physical changes that result in larger muscle mass, denser bones and higher fractions of lean body mass. It's the reason why male athletes on average run faster, can lift more weight and throw farther than the average female athlete. And the differences can be seen on a microscopic level. Take skeletal muscle kinetics and muscle fiber composition for example. One of the many research studies on the subject tells us: "The identification of over 3,000 genes differentially regulated in male and female muscle highlights the complex differences that occur in skeletal muscle from both sexes."

This study reveals that gender differences are present across numerous species. It observes: "Sex-based differences in skeletal muscle fiber-type composition and function are apparent in numerous species and are present in specific anatomical locations. Here, we present findings on sexual dimorphisms present in the mammalian musculoskeletal system." These scientifically

observed differences simply cannot be wished away.

Many famous biological women athletes are against the inclusion of transgender women in competition. Three-time Olympic swimming gold medalist Nancy Hogshead-Makar told ESPN: “We need to prioritize fairness for biological women in sports. A category that is for half the world’s population is worth defending. Only then can we talk about ways to include transgender men and women, ways that respect everyone with all their differences and that don’t harm biological women.”

A cohort of swimmers from the University of Arizona, including several former Olympic athletes wrote a letter to the NCAA after Lia Thomas decisively won at a swim championship in Atlanta, GA. The letter blamed the NCAA Board of Governors for “successfully failing everyone by allowing Thomas who has distinct biological advantages, to compete against women to ‘appease everyone.’”

In a recent interview with The New York Times, internationally recognized sports physiologist Ross Tucker pointed to peer-reviewed studies that highlight top transgender women athletes having a substantial edge over top biological women. Hormones aside, biologic men who transition have inherent advantages. He says, “Lia Thomas is the manifestation of scientific evidence. The reduction of testosterone did not remove her biological advantage.”

Not everyone in the scientific community agrees, Dr. Joshua Safer, an internist and executive director of the Mount Sinai Center for Transgender Medicine and Surgery in New York was quoted by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) as saying, “A person’s genetic make-up and internal and external reproductive anatomy are not useful indicators of athletic performance. According to

Safer, “For a trans woman athlete who meets NCAA standards there is no inherent reason why her physiological characteristics related to athletic performance should be treated differently from the physiological characteristics of a non-transgender woman.”

Genetic advantages may not be limited to assigned gender at birth, according to some experts. Discussing genetic advantages is a slippery slope, Alexi Kuska, assistant swimming and diving coach at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee says. “Every elite swimmer has a genetic advantage.” Analysis of 23-time Olympic gold-medalist American swimmer Michael Phelps illustrates this point. Kuska says, “His measurements (height, wing-span, etc) are inches beyond of what the ‘perfect’ swimmer would be.” This raises the question: Should someone like Phelps be sidelined?

An Issue of Fairness

But in my opinion, that’s not really the point. Everything can be distilled down to genetics and gender definitely plays a role in sports. It’s really about where you draw the line, and a line must be drawn in order to maintain fairness in women’s sports, an ideal that has been fought for, for decades. Assigned gender at birth is a rational and very reproducible method for delineation.

The debate continues to rage on. Fédération internationale de natation (FINA), the world’s swimming governing body, recently banned transgender women from competing in women’s events. It has decided to permit only those transgender swimmers to compete in women’s events who transition before the advent of puberty, which they have set as 12. FINA has also proposed an “open competition category,” for trans swimmers to compete in. This ruling makes sense to me but clearly not to everyone involved.

We are living in a time where people are afraid to offer their opinion, where facts don't seem to matter as much as they should. The transgender issue is one where people are afraid of expressing themselves lest they be damned like the noted Scottish writer JK Rowling. In 2020, she took a strong view about the current debate.

Rowling argued:

“We're living through the most misogynistic period I've experienced. Back in the 80s, I imagined that my future daughters, should I have any, would have it far better than I ever did, but between the backlash against feminism and a porn-saturated online culture, I believe things have got significantly worse for girls.

She went on to make the case that there was indeed a difference between trans women and women. She found the demand that “women must accept and admit that there is no material difference between trans women and themselves” unacceptable. In her memorable words:

“But, as many women have said before me, ‘woman’ is not a costume. ‘Woman’ is not an idea in a man’s head. ‘Woman’ is not a pink brain, a liking for Jimmy Choos or any of the other sexist ideas now somehow touted as progressive. Moreover, the ‘inclusive’ language that calls female people ‘menstruators’ and ‘people with vulvas’ strikes many women as dehumanising and demeaning. I understand why trans activists consider this language to be appropriate and kind, but for those of us who’ve had degrading slurs spat at us by violent men, it’s not neutral, it’s hostile and alienating.”

Rowling has a right to raise these issues as do I. If we are afraid to speak out aloud about the issues that matter most to us, everyone is bound to lose out.

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We are Living in an Increasingly Dangerous World...

John Bruton
August 05, 2022

The former Irish prime minister points out that a supply side shock is causing inflation, leaving central banks and governments with few good options. Increasing funding is the populist choice but is likely to burden future generations. Increasing interest rates is likely to be unpopular.

There is more to worry about in the world today than in any time in my memory. I remember the Cuban missile crisis. It was a very dangerous moment. The crisis was defused by secret diplomacy between the Soviet Union and the US, and the willingness of the US to accept a communist state in the Western Hemisphere and the openness of the Soviets to turn their ships back.

If a similar crisis arose now, is there a basis on which Russia and the US could even talk to one another to defuse it?

Ambiguity, the enemy of peace

Tensions between Russia and the US might be high right now but the US-China confrontation is more serious. It will be far more long lasting.

China has dramatically increased its military spending. Confronting China is almost the only thing on which Democrats and Republicans in the US can agree. The US is pledged to support Taiwan remaining politically separate from China, even though it is part of China, and the US is theoretically prepared to go to war to defend that position.

Reality is more complicated. The US position is ambiguous and so is the Chinese position.

Ambiguity is often the enemy of peace. World War I arose from ambiguity in the pledges that the powers had given to one another in the event of attack. If the pledges had been clearer, the risks might not have been taken.

Inflation, the enemy of peace too

Inflation, and an artificially induced recession to cure it, are increasingly expected. Central banks will use higher interest rates as the main tool to fight inflation. The political effects of this could be very serious. Public opinion is unprepared for increased interest rates and the ensuing hardships will not be evenly spread. As the adage goes, inflation hits everybody, though not equally.

High interest rates are even more selective. They hit states who have overborrowed, such as Greece and Italy hardest. They also cause unemployment, which hits people with marginal jobs hardest. Those in secure employment with savings or even

low borrowings are less affected. Inflation led to high interest rates in the 1980s, which led to political tensions. Such tensions are back.

Some posit the idea that we should tackle inflation by extra state spending. This can only be paid for either by increasing taxation now or by borrowing, which increases taxes for our children and grandchildren. This does not seem sensible to me. Yet everyone is advocating it.

The current inflationary surge has come from a global supply side shock. It has made countries that import energy and food poorer. Attempting to redistribute this poverty through state action raises expectations that cannot be fulfilled. It will inevitably damage democracy. Government spending increases demand, which fuels inflation. The cure for controlling inflation is increasing supply but that is not in the gift of any western government.

It is important that voters understand the gravity of the problems we are facing. Populism confuses facts with emotion. Anger is not a policy. Blame is not a policy either. Instead of acting rashly, we need to think things through carefully and choose sound economic policies.

***John Bruton** is a former Irish prime minister and an international business leader. He has held a number of posts in the Irish government, including minister for finance; minister for industry and energy; minister for trade, commerce and tourism; and minister for the public service.

Al-Zawahiri's Killing Will Increase Global Chaos and Insecurity

Vas Shenoy
August 09, 2022

The killing of the aging top dog of al-Qaeda might unleash a can of worms in Afghanistan and Pakistan, worsening security worldwide. The timing of the killing leads to the suspicion that it was motivated by short-term electoral calculus, not long-term strategic interest.

On August 3, I was supposed to meet an old friend at a coffee shop near the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, next to Rome's famous Termini station. Thanks to Roman gods or perhaps the heat, both of us got our wires crossed. I turned up for coffee while my friend embarked to Tagliacozzo, a charming medieval village in the Abruzzo region of Italy an hour from Rome. Despite the heat and the distance, I decided to make the journey to Tagliacozzo to meet my friend.

How do Rome and Tagliacozzo come into the picture in an article on Afghanistan?

Well, both places are relevant because my friend Tonino Bettanini is a philosopher, a politician and a Renaissance man with much expertise on Afghanistan. He was presenting his latest book, *Bruxelles, Les Pelouses des Anglais* (Brussels, the Lawns of the English) at the prestigious 38th mid-summer international festival of Tagliacozzo. Fortuitously, Stefano Pontecorvo, a noted Italian diplomat and author was also presenting his book at the same time. Pontecorvo was NATO's last

senior civilian representative to Afghanistan and served as Italy's ambassador to Pakistan.

Furthermore, Pontecorvo spent his childhood in the 1960s in Kabul and Islamabad, where his father also served as a diplomat. The good ambassador was presenting his book, *L'ultimo aereo da Kabul* (The Last Flight from Kabul), which describes the last few days of NATO's hurried withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and his own departure on one of the last flights out from Kabul.

Going to Tagliacozzo did not only give me an hour with one of Italy's most talented and colorful diplomats, it also gave me Pontecorvo's point of view on the current situation in Afghanistan. This was a godsend because the US had just killed Ayman al-Zawahiri on July 31. Obviously, Italy's star diplomat had a lot to say and I have done a lot more thinking on the matter since.

Why kill al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri?

The killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the lackluster, pedantic ideologue of Al-Qaeda, brings a strange closure to the US "War on Terror," which began with 9/11. Egyptian-born al-Zawahiri, was known to be a confidant of Saudi Osama bin Laden, who was America's public enemy number one, until he was found and killed in Abbottabad, Pakistan, over 10 years ago.

The world had all but forgotten about al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda. This organization had declined dramatically since the days of bin Laden and was no longer the most dangerous global Islamic terrorist organization. More deadly organizations such as ISIS have taken its place. Islamic terrorism has evolved extensively since bin Laden and al-Zawahiri masterminded the attacks on New York and, before 9/11, on several other US targets. The aging al-Zawahiri neither had the finances nor the sophistication to upgrade to

“Terrorism 4.0,” a concept popularized by Adewunmi J. Falode in 2018. Falode argues this terrorism “has two basic and definable characteristics: it is fratricidal and genocidal in nature.”

The killing of al-Zawahiri marks the end of a chapter for the US. However, its timing, significance and collateral results open uncomfortable questions. Since the killing of Osama bin Laden by the Obama administration in which Biden was vice president, al-Zawahiri’s role and importance has been downgraded by intelligence and political analysts. After bin Laden’s death, al-Zawahiri was proclaimed the leader of al-Qaeda. Under his leadership, the organization was unable to launch any significant attack on the West.

After hurriedly abandoning Afghanistan less than a year ago, the Biden administration has steered clear of South Asia. This has allowed China and Russia to increase their influence in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The region is now literally in flames. Myanmar is being ruled by a pro-China military junta that executes democracy activists arbitrarily. The Taliban control Afghanistan. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are at war with the Pakistani establishment despite Pakistan’s close relationship with the Afghan Taliban and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) exercising much control over the Haqqani network. Both Pakistan and Sri Lanka are facing unprecedented economic catastrophes.

As if the mess in South Asia and Ukraine was not enough, Speaker Nancy Pelosi had to fly to Taiwan to fan flames in East Asia too. Curiously, this is precisely the time that the Biden administration authorized a drone strike to kill the most famous face in the US after bin Laden. That al-Zawahiri might never have been that relevant or important an operative is immaterial. It made

Americans feel good and took Pelosi as well as Ukraine off the headlines for a day or two.

Not only Indian analysts but also South Asia expert Michael Kugelman, suggest Pakistan might have had a role to play in al-Zawahiri’s killing. The army and the ISI need US support. So does the ragtag coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif who is dealing with “an ailing economy amid political turmoil.” To ride out the crisis, Pakistani bigwigs have done what they always do: go with a begging bowl to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). With US support, Pakistan could get the latest installment of funds from the IMF and avoid defaulting on its debt a la Sri Lanka.

Other analysts suspect that “Mullah Yaqoob, Afghanistan’s defense minister and son of the late Taliban founder Mullah Omar, disclosed al-Zawahiri’s location during his recent visit to Qatar.” Who enabled the killing of al-Zawahiri is neither here nor there. The key question here is simple: what does it achieve?

Justice, Revenge or Convenient Distraction?

One argument for killing al-Zawahiri is it brings this terrorist to justice. A reason to kill is America's emotional need for revenge, which curiously might not be that different from the Pashtun tradition of badal. As this author mentioned earlier, the killing might just have been a convenient distraction at an inconvenient time.

The Russia-Ukraine War is not going terribly well. Boris Johnson and Mario Draghi, two great proponents of war, have been defenestrated. The Russians are making slow but steady and bloody progress. Inflation has ripped through the global economy, putting hundreds of millions at risk of starvation. Biden, Pelosi and their fellow Democrats are increasingly nervous about November's midterm elections. The word on the street in Washington is that Democrat staffers are

now gunning for lobbying positions in anticipation of the defeat of their bosses.

The youthful-looking 82-year-old Pelosi has flown to Taiwan arguably to boost Democrat poll prospects and burnish her legacy. This visit has been an unmitigated disaster. The Economist has opined that her “trip to Taiwan highlights America’s incoherent strategy” and that the Biden administration’s foreign policy is a mess.

After al-Zawahiri’s killing, the farce of the 2020 Doha Agreement has been formalized. The Taliban never observed this agreement. It is fair to say that it paved the way for the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul. After all, al-Zawahiri was living in a building owned by the Haqqanis in a posh Kabul neighborhood. The Haqqanis are infamous and powerful. They hold key positions in the Taliban government. As per the BBC, the Haqqani network is “one of the region’s most powerful and feared militant groups.” With al-Zawahiri’s killing, the US has joined the Taliban in signaling that the Doha agreement is dead and buried six feet under.

The Consequences of Killing an Aging Has-Been

The Biden administration might have scored a big point at home by killing al-Zawahiri. However, this killing will not go down well with the Haqqani network. As per the honor code of the Pashtuns, which is known as Pashtunwali, they are now duty bound to avenge the killing of a guest. After all, al-Zawahiri was under the protection of the Haqqanis and they have now lost face. Honor dictates that they act against the US.

As and when the Haqqani network strikes, Pakistan will find itself in a tight spot. Pakistani elites need to keep Uncle Sam in good humor. Inflation is rising, unemployment is skyrocketing and the state’s coffers are empty. For the 23rd time since 1958, Pakistan needs loans from the

Washington-based IMF. This is only possible with US blessing. If the ISI-backed Haqqani network strikes American targets, any politician in Washington will find it hard to make a case for Pakistan getting more IMF cash.

There is another fly in the ointment. Pakistan is not only suffering from economic meltdown but also political turmoil. The Afghan Taliban brokered talks between Pakistan and the outlawed TTP. They have ended in deadlock. A spike in cross-border terrorist attacks by the TTP have followed. In retaliation, Pakistan has launched airstrikes in Afghanistan targeting the TTP. This has led to a dangerous deterioration in the internal security situation in Pakistan.

The jihadist groups that the still somewhat secular Pakistani military backed to dominate Afghanistan and undermine India are now turning against their masters. It is yet another case of Dr. Victor Frankenstein not being able to control his monster. In Islamabad’s case, it has to deal with too many monsters.

Pakistan’s turn to violence is also because the state has become completely dysfunctional. The populist Imran Khan has been turfed out by Pakistan’s traditional dynasties. Military rule failed the country and now democracy is not delivering either. Kleptocratic elites are packing off their children abroad in droves. It is an open secret that property prices in Dubai go up when IMF money comes into Pakistan. The people are fed up with the system and are turning to jihadis for recourse.

Pakistan’s colonial state has been unable to deliver basic services to its people. This includes elementary education. Religious schools termed madrassas have stepped in to fill the void. These madrassas teach millions of male children the Quran and the teachings of the prophet. Numerous reports by various intelligence agencies and think tanks chronicle how these schools have increased

fanaticism and become breeding grounds for terror. The Taliban are their most illustrious alumni. Even China's CCTV News, generally not known for its worldliness, has now started making documentaries on madrassas.

Reports that Pakistan provided the information that led to al-Zawahiri's killing will cause many, if not all, of radical Islamist Frankenstein's monsters to turn on their master. Terror incidents are likely to increase in the country. Even if Pakistan is absolved of blame, the blame may land on Yaqoob. This will pit the Loy Kandahar faction led by Yaqoob and Mullah Baradar against the Haqqani network, creating conditions for yet another civil war in Afghanistan.

As Pontecorvo aptly summed up, "When Osama bin Laden flew to Afghanistan in the early 1990s as a guest of Mullah Omar, he started marrying Arab fighters to local women and vice versa. This created over 300 mixed Arab-Pashtun families who were part of bin Laden's al-Qaeda entourage. Now, many of them are senior members of the Haqqani network, including Sirajuddin Haqqani himself. These families have both Arab and Pashtun blood, making it improbable that al-Qaeda and the Loya Paktia faction of the Haqqani network will ever separate." The killing of al-Zawahiri might set off the Loya Paktia and the Loy Kandahar factions of the Taliban against each other.

Apart from triggering fratricidal fighting within the Taliban, al-Zawahiri's killing will cause an upheaval in al-Qaeda itself. A new leadership will take over and might be leaner, meaner, younger, hungrier and bloodier than bin Laden's sidekick. In fact, the killing might lead to just the sort of CEO change that al-Qaeda needed.

The Biden administration has clearly not thought beyond its nose while killing al-Zawahiri. This White House is proving to be fractious,

overstretched and incompetent in its foreign policy decisions. Instead of closure to the trauma of 9/11, al-Zawahiri's killing has opened a Pandora's box in one of the most dangerous times since 1945.

This is not only my thinking but also those of my eminent Italian friends with whom I enjoyed an aperitivo in the glorious piazza of Tagliacozzo before driving back home.

(In an era of a global pandemic, social media wars and explosively evolving geopolitics, the human spirit and its expression have suffered the most. With apologies to Edward Morgan Forster, "Rome, with a View" is a view of humanity from an interesting perspective. The author, a third culture kid, gathers from his various perches in the eternal city of Rome — Caput Mundi, the capital of the ancient world — the whispers of wisdom through the ages imperfectly and perhaps even unwisely.)

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Belgium's Regrets Not Enough: Congo Deserves Apology and Reparations for War Crimes

Mehdi Alavi
August 13, 2022

Belgium committed war crimes and vicious human rights abuses against the Congolese people. The Belgian King has finally expressed regrets but still not offered an apology. Belgium must offer an apology, pay reparations and bring its brutal officials to justice. So must the US, which colluded with the Belgians to exploit the Congolese.

On June 8, 2022, Belgian King Philippe expressed his regrets for the exploitation, violence and racism during the colonization of the Congo Free State, now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This followed years of denials and excuses by Belgian authorities.

The DRC, a territory 76 times bigger than Belgium, is the second largest country after Algeria in Africa and the 11th largest in the world. Today, it is torn by conflicts between armed groups that recruit children as soldiers. To make matters worse, DRC's security forces operate with impunity. They continue harassing, threatening, attacking, arresting and murdering human rights defenders, journalists and members of the political opposition. Civilians are arbitrarily killed and abducted. Women and girls are systematically raped and subjected to other forms of violence. Communal violence and ethnic cleansing are widespread. Most minorities including Hutu, Tutsi, Hema, Lendu, Lunda, Luba, Mbororo, and Batwa

live under continuous threat. The country remains the source and destination point for trafficking in children and women for prostitution. The country desperately needs humanitarian assistance.

The DRC's problems are not entirely the fault of the Congolese people. Their roots can be traced back to Belgian King Leopold II and successive Belgian governments.

The Belgian King belatedly expresses regrets

Before his recent admission, Philippe denied Belgian atrocities and made excuses for Leopold II and Belgium for years. Despite pressure from his own country's people along with that of the international community who were inspired by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Philippe hesitated to take any action other than offer excuses for the last two years.

On May 27, 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke at the genocide memorial in Rwanda's capital Kigali where many victims were buried. He asked Rwandans to forgive France for its role in the 1994 genocide. On May 28, 2021, Germany apologized for its genocide against Herero and Nama tribal people in Namibia and offered to launch "projects over a billion euros" as compensation. Even those apologies did not inspire Philippe to admit Belgian atrocities in the Congo.

Over a year later, increased Belgian and international pressures finally forced Philippe to face reality. When he finally spoke out, the Belgian king just expressed regrets. Philippe stopped short of formally apologizing for Belgian atrocities during the colonial period. "This [Belgian] regime was one of unequal relations, unjustifiable in itself, marked by paternalism, discrimination and racism," he said before a joint session of parliament in the DRC capital Kinshasa,

He want to state: "I wish to reaffirm my deepest regrets for those wounds of the past."

The toxic legacy of the past

Leopold II was a tyrant who pursued a brutal pogrom that resulted in the deaths of millions. His policies also led to the destruction of the livelihoods and cultures of the people of the Congo. Leopold II came to power in 1865 and was determined to build an empire. Authorized by the 1885 Berlin Conference, he formed the Congo Free State, separate from Belgium but privately owned and controlled by himself. Leopold II knew evangelization was the most effective way to dominate people. He took the view that, if the Congolese converted to Christianity, they would become more subservient. This would allow Leopold II to plunder Congo's valuable resources. So, this ruthless Belgian king brought in missionaries to convert the Congolese people to Christianity. He issued and enforced inhumane decrees that not only caused misery and death but also pushed the Congolese to convert to and practice Christianity.

To extract ivory, rubber, and minerals, Leopold's men viciously used whipping, wounding, enslaving, beheading and severing body parts, including the penis. They routinely resorted to sexual violence against the Congolese people. They treated the Congolese as animals, exhibiting them in their zoos in Belgium. Their atrocities are estimated to have caused the deaths of around 10 million, then 50% of the Congolese population. This led to international scandal and outrage, forcing the Belgian government to take over the colony.

In 1908, under immense international pressure the Belgian government took over Leopold II's private estate and made it a Belgian colony, christening it Belgian Congo. After 23 years of Leopold II's rule, the Belgian government ruled

Belgian Congo for another 52 years. The colony only gained its independence in 1960.

Under Belgian rule, genocidal actions reduced in number and severity but persecution and forced labor continued. The racism initiated by Leopold II continued though. Africans were excluded from education, employment and other opportunities. Children of mixed race were abducted and sent to orphanages in Belgium.

After World War I, European and US companies moved in and used the Congolese as indentured laborers to produce cotton, coffee, cacao, palm oil, rubber, copper, gold, diamond, cobalt, tin, zinc, uranium and other raw materials. They used forced labor to develop roads, railroads, utility stations, and other public facilities in Belgian Congo. During World War II, the US was heavily involved in mining uranium in the Congo. When postwar decolonization began, Belgium insisted that the Congolese were not mature enough to run their own country. So, Belgium stood firm on retaining its Belgian Colony, forgetting that the Belgians had wanted freedom from Nazi Germany themselves.

Under Belgian annexation, Congolese education undermined critical thinking and ripped up the social fabric. Only a very few were allowed to get basic education by the government-paid Christian missionaries whose primary goal was to advance colonization and conversion to Christianity. Only in 1954, a Congolese was first admitted to a Belgian university to study a subject other than Christian religion. To this day, the DRC is hobbled by its toxic colonial legacy.

Independence is snuffed out, exploitation continues

Starting from 1919, the Congolese began fighting for their independence. Their revolts were regularly suppressed by the Belgian authorities. In

1958, the Congolese formed their first political party. Riots broke out in 1959 with mobs demanding independence. A year later, Belgium capitulated, granting its huge colony independence. On June 30, 1960, the nationalist leader Patrice Lumumba became the prime minister and Joseph Kasavubu president. They put Colonel Joseph Mobutu in charge of the defense. Backed by Colonel Joseph Mobutu, Kasa-Vubu soon removed Lumumba. In January 1961, the US and Belgium backed a military coup. Mobutu murdered Lumumba. Mobutu went on to take over the presidency from Kasavubu in 1965. Backed by the US, he ran the DRC as a brutal dictator for 32 years, embezzling government funds at a gargantuan scale.

In 1997 backed by Rwanda and Uganda, Laurent Kabila took over the presidency and ruled for 4 years, causing over 3 million deaths. In 2001, he was killed and his son Joseph Kabila took over the presidency and ruled until late 2018 when opposition leader Felix Tshisekedi supposedly won an election that did not meet international expectations and was contested by the country's dominant Catholic Church. He has remained in power as president to the present time.

In the 1880s, the US was becoming a world power. Leopold II used the services of an American to survey the Congo. He also sought American recognition of his personal rule over Congo. Some Americans were fearful of the power of American blacks who were demanding equality and liberty. They saw Leopold II's request as an opportunity to cleanse the US of its black population by sending them to the Congo. In exchange for the favor, Leopold assured the US that its citizens could buy lands in Congo and US imports would be exempt from all customs duties. Leopold received recognition of his rule in Congo by the US, paving the way for him to earn recognition from European powers. Leopold II's

deal with Uncle Sam also opened the gate for the US to plunder Congo's wealth.

The US emulated Leopold II's egregious abuses in minute detail, including displaying Congolese people in zoos in numerous cities across the country. As late as 1906, New Yorkers would rush to see a Congolese in the Monkey House at Bronx Zoo. This led to protests by American blacks and became a national scandal.

Suffice to say, the US has been exploiting Congo since Leopold II's days. In particular, the US has been extracting uranium from Shinkolobwe mine since the 1930s. This small mine in the southern province of Katanga provided most of the uranium used in the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Today, US mining companies backed by the American military continue taking cobalt, copper, zinc and other minerals from the DRC, giving the country peanuts in return.

The Belgian role in the Rwandan genocide

After World War I, the League of Nations transferred Rwanda and Burundi from Germany to Belgium. Taking a leaf out of its Congo playbook. Belgium yet again resorted to Christian evangelization and appointed white agents to dominate and control the new colonies. It also implemented a caste system, decreeing the minority Tutsis, a cattle-herding people, as superior to the majority Hutus, a farming people, and the native Twa, a pygmy people.

In Rwanda, the Hutu king was removed for refusing to convert to Christianity. Then, the religion was forcefully imposed on the masses. Imana, the local monotheistic religion, was wiped out. For centuries, it had been the cultural force unifying the community. To dominate Rwanda, Belgium offered the Tutsis access to education and designated them as superior to others. The Tutsis

became subordinate agents of Belgian colonial administration.

Belgium authorized the Tutsis to impose forced labor and punishments on other communities. Belgian policies imposed by Tutsis caused several famines. Later, Belgian colonial authorities took the administrative step of issuing identification cards for each ethnicity. That racial segregation policy along with the removal of their king angered the majority Hutus. To the Hutus, the Tutsis became known as “invaders”. In the late 1950s, the Hutu movement began to organize to oppose the Tutsis and expel Belgium. The Hutus also finally began to earn some sympathy from Belgians.

When Rwanda won independence in 1962, a Hutu campaign to incinerate Tutsi huts sent many Tutsis fleeing into exile. The Hutu president Juvénal Habyarimana, known for his anti-Tutsi rhetoric, maintained a good relationship with Belgian King Baudouin. On April 6, 1994, a plane carrying Habyarimana, Burundian President Cyprien Ntarvamira, and other high-ranking officials was shot down, killing all on board. Blaming the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), Hutu extremists began the slaughter of Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers. On April 7, 1994, Rwandan forces killed 10 Belgian officers. They threatened Belgium not to intervene in the ongoing genocide against the Tutsis. Belgium dutifully abandoned Rwanda to the Hutu killers. In April 2000, Guy Verhofstadt, the Belgian prime minister, went to Rwanda and said, “In the name of my country and of my people, I beg your forgiveness.”

French forces were also present in Rwanda during the genocide. They watched the massacres, but did nothing. The French government persistently denied this until recently. After 27 years of denial, France was finally forced by its own government commission to officially admit its

complicity in the 1994 Rwanda genocide. As stated earlier, Macron asked Rwandans for forgiveness in May this year. He said, “Only those who went through that night can perhaps forgive, and in doing so give the gift of forgiveness.”.

As in Rwanda, Belgium divided Burundi people into Tutsis and Hutus, which led to ethnic conflicts and civil war, causing the deaths of 300,000 people. In 2009, Belgium officially apologized for its atrocities.

Imperial powers must compensate their victims

In 2022, the time for reparations has come. So far, the UN proved impotent in the face of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The oppressed people of the Congo are still waiting for justice and reparations for Belgian atrocities that still haunt them. It is for good reason that Human Rights Watch observed, “Belgium cannot undo its colonial past but it’s not too late to redress its contemporary fallouts to build a future based on justice and equality.”

Fortunately, many Belgians today recognize that apology must be accompanied by reparations. Patrick Dewael, the speaker of the Belgian federal parliament, said: “apart from any apologies or excuses ... anyone who makes a mistake, says our legal code, must compensate for the damage.” In 2001, the Belgian Parliament found the nation morally responsible for the assassination of Lumumba and apologized for its role. Belgium has yet to make any reparations though.

The “Belgium’s Colonial Past” commission, founded in 2020, is still working on issues related to the pre-independence history of the country’s three former colonies: Belgian Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda. To address the crimes of the past, Belgium must take these actions:

Acknowledge all the past abuses that include genocide and crimes against human rights. Bring to justice all those individuals, living and dead, who perpetrated those egregious abuses. Make reparations to all three former colonies based on the harm done to the Congolese people from Leopold II's personal rule as well as Belgian colonial exploitation. The reparations must meet the following criteria: correlate directly with all the economic profits Belgium earned from Congo, and ensure that reparations do not go to the coffers of DRC's corrupt government but are spent to improve education and infrastructure, bringing them to Belgian standards within 10 years.

As we have seen above, the US was Belgium's accomplice in colonization of the Congolese people. Therefore, the US must take the following actions.

Acknowledge its collaboration with the Belgian authorities in the Congo regarding human rights abuses, including violence and genocide, and economic exploitation. Form a committee that brings to justice US officials, living or dead, who abetted Belgian atrocities in the Congo. Make reparations to remedy the harms done to the Congolese people. The reparations must meet the following criteria: include a bipartisan committee to evaluate all the economic profits earned by the US from the Congo, starting 1885 to today, and ensure that reparations do not go to the coffers of DRC's corrupt government but are spent to improve education and infrastructure, bringing them to Belgian standards within 10 years. Emulate Belgium and apologize for assassinating the nationalist leader Lumumba,

None of these actions can destroy the hurt and pain from the past but they will make our world a kinder, gentler and more just place.

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Why Women Support Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Christopher Roper Schell
August 19, 2022

More women than men now vote for the BJP. By building toilets, providing homes with piped water, delivering gas cylinders that replace firewood for cooking, and focusing on menstrual health, the BJP has won the trust and support of female voters.

In the leadup to the 75th anniversary of Indian independence, a variety of articles appeared in the US press writing the epitaph for its democracy. The future of India's democracy "looks increasingly bleak," according to the Associated Press, and we learn in The Washington Post that India's democracy "dies in prime time." These articles attributed many of India's woes to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Yet few of these articles asked why Modi and his party continue to win elections. One answer might be his success in attracting female voters.

Few in the US or the UK realize that Modi's party has been increasingly successful with women voters. This year key Indian states went to the polls. The BJP did better among women than among men. In India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), 48% of women voted for the BJP in comparison to 44% of the men. Despite the BJP's UP success, the BBC dryly asked "Are women really thriving in UP as PM Modi claims?" The article concludes with the quote "Women here have very little freedom. They are told who to vote for and they often vote along with the rest of the family."

Data shows women exercise choice

The BJP is facing a common refrain: India is a misogynistic country that disempowers women, and women vote dutifully for the BJP because they are instructed to do so by their men. If that is true, how do we explain women voting for the BJP in greater numbers than men?

According to a survey done by India Today-Axis My India (the group that most accurately predicted the May 2019 national election results), 46% of women voted for the BJP and its allies, 27% for the Congress and its allies, and 27% for other parties. In comparison, 44% of men voted for the BJP and its allies. The male vote lagged the

female vote by two percentage points. Notably, this election marked the first time more women than men voted for the National Democratic Alliance, a coalition of the BJP and its allies, in a national election.

So what is going on here? Are women doing as they're told more often than they're being told to do it? Some have concluded the data suggest "women voters are perhaps making different political choices from the male members of their families." If so, then why? The answer seems to lie in the BJP's prioritization of women's issues. From toilets and menstrual hygiene to piped water supply and cooking gas, the BJP has made women's issues central to its agenda.

In 2020, Modi broke a longstanding taboo by addressing the issue of menstrual health in his August 15 Independence Day speech. He declared "Through 6,000 Jan Aushadhi centers, about 50 million women have got sanitary pads at [Rupee] 1. We have worked for women's empowerment. Navy and Air Force are taking women in combat roles...women are now leaders." Note that one rupee is a little over one cent. This means that women can get sanitary napkins at the cheapest rate in the world.

Modi's claim of putting women in positions of power is no empty boast. In Gujarat, he was succeeded as chief minister by Anandiben Patel, who is now the governor of UP. This year, Modi's BJP has elected Draupadi Murmu as president. She is the second woman to hold that office. More importantly, she is the first woman who comes from India's long-oppressed scheduled tribes to become president.

Modi's outreach to women is part of a longstanding BJP tradition. From the very beginning, the party created Mahila Morcha, its extremely active women's wing. It had strong female leaders such as Vijaya Raje Scindia and

Sushma Swaraj, both of whom died after decades of public service. With Murmu as the head of state, the BJP is sending the signal to women from underprivileged backgrounds that they too can rise to the top.

Well-implemented schemes prove popular with women

Newly independent India's socialist state proved adept at highfalutin rhetoric but poor at the delivery of public services. Since Modi came to power in 2014, these fundamental services have been prioritized with effective outcomes. Some schemes are noteworthy to understand what is going on.

In 2014, the state of sanitation in the country was poor. Only around 40% of households had access to a toilet. With the introduction of Swachh Bharat Mission - Grameen (SBM-G), over 100 million household toilets have been constructed in rural India over the last six years. Toilets have led to improved sanitation and better hygiene for millions, especially women and girls. Household toilets ensure better menstrual hygiene, fewer bladder infections and better reproductive health. Women's personal safety improves because they are not going out to the fields or the train tracks where they could be harassed or even assaulted by men. On May 1, 2016, the Modi government launched Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) to provide a clean cooking fuel: liquified petroleum gas (LPG). For decades, Indian women were using firewood, cow dung and other biomass to cook. Long term exposure to biomass as cooking fuel is disastrous. The disastrous effects of long-term exposure to biomass as a cooking fuel are well known: it damages lungs for life and shortens lifespans. With the implementation of PMUY, the national LPG coverage has increased

from 61.9% percent as of April 1, 2016, to 99.5% as of January 1, 2021. Academics rightly point out that this transition from biomass to clean cooking has faced challenges. However, it is also clear that the Modi government's efforts are starting to pay off. Since Modi came to power in 2014, his BJP government has focused on the Jal Jeevan Mission. By 2024, the government aims "to provide safe and adequate drinking water through individual household tap connections to all households in rural India." Access to clear water is a common problem throughout developing countries and causes deaths of millions. To Modi's credit, he has focused on solving this problem for India. As recently as 2019, only 17% of Indian households had access to functioning tap water supply in contrast to 52% today. Strikingly, more than a third of India (35%) gained access to clean water in just three years. Hundreds of millions no longer have to trek to community wells or other water bodies away from their homes. Now, they can get water through the tap. Note that fetching water is an arduous job that is almost invariably done by women, who are delighted that the Modi government is delivering on something that matters to them. Launched in 2015, the Modi government's Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save Daughter, Educate Daughter) has sought to change attitudes towards birthing and the rights of girls. Over the course of just a few years, the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) has improved by 16 points from 918 in 2014-15 to 934 in 2019-20. Some of this might be a feature of economic growth.

The narrative of a fashionable, barrel-chested Modi may have an element of allure. It may even appeal to some voters. However, this narrative is woefully incomplete. Under Modi, the polls give a

sense that the BJP has successfully delivered on issues that matter to women.

Cannily, Modi is cultivating his female voter base. Earlier this year, the prime minister declared: “Women...have blessed us – we have won splendidly in areas where women voters have dominated.” He went on to say, “It is our good fortune that BJP has got so much love, so many blessings from mothers-sisters-daughters.”

Women seem to have blessed the BJP, and a fair review of the data might reveal this fortune is no mere accident, nor the result of “toxic men” telling women how to vote, but because the Modi government has been successful in improving the domestic lives of women. As independent India celebrates its 75th birthday, western journalists and Americans should recognize India is a robust democracy. Honest assessments are fair and to be lauded, and no one should uncritically accept any narrative, but the recent stories in Associated Press, The Washington Post or The New York Times seem facile at best and dismissive at worst. Women from disadvantaged groups in India’s society are rising to better lives, greater hopes, and hundreds of millions have reason to believe a healthier, brighter future awaits them. If that’s not a democratic ideal, I don’t know what is.

[An earlier version of this article referred to the president belonging to the scheduled castes. This error was spotted by many readers and was corrected at 15:00 GMT]

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India’s Tradition of Tolerance Offers Lessons in Light of Salman Rushdie’s Stabbing

Soundarajan Narendran
August 22, 2022

The Indian dharmic and karmic traditions prize debate, cross-examination, self-reflection and introspection. With no central authority figure, they lack popes or ayatollahs, leading to a relatively more tolerant society over many centuries. These traditions have renewed relevance in this new age of intolerance.

Salman Rushdie is battling for his life. He was stabbed multiple times for merely being a writer. A cartoonist in France lost his life for merely being a cartoonist. Many other writers and artists across centuries have paid the price of expressing themselves with their lives.

Intolerance is not new to humanity. After all, ancient Athens made Socrates drink hemlock. The Catholic Church did better. On 17 February 1600, a great Renaissance mind was hung upside down naked and then burnt at the stake in Rome’s Campo de’ Fiori. His name was Giordano Bruno who envisioned an infinite universe whose center was everywhere and circumference nowhere, teeming with countless stars. He was also a pantheist who believed in the transmigration of the soul. The Catholic Church saw it fit to dispatch his soul to hell and his ashes to the Tiber.

Like Bruno, Rushdie was condemned to death. Unlike Bruno, he has managed to evade death for a long time after Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for his death. Rushdie's editors, translators and publishers were not spared in this 1989 fatwa, In the West, even as people were celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall and, by extension, of communism, a new menace was emerging to threaten freedom and peace.

What was Rushdie's great sin?

Well, this Mumbai-born writer authored a book, *The Satanic Verses*. Apparently, this book demeaned Muhammad whom Muslims consider a prophet. Iran's supreme religious leader thought that this was reason enough to send Rushdie to hell.

Fast forward to 2022. Rushdie was giving a talk at the Chautauqua Institution. My American friends tell me this is a magical institution. The audience gets to interact with authors. There are no elaborate security checks and people can really get to know each other. This is tragically going to change because of Hadi Matar.

The BBC reports that this 24-year-old who reportedly attacked Rushdie had read just two pages of *The Satanic Verses* but believed Rushdie was "someone who attacked Islam" and deserved to die. This is madness. Actually, this is not just madness, it is medieval madness.

Throughout history, a number of the most path breaking ideas have offended someone. Today, scientists and philosophers celebrate Bruno. There is a foundation in Germany by his name. Socrates is considered the father of European philosophy. Among others, the editor-in-chief of this publication is known for using the Socratic method in his instruction. Sane people would agree that the killings of the likes of Socrates and Bruno are the great human tragedies of all time.

In my view, so is the fatwa against Rushdie and his stabbing. It brings to the fore the challenge Islam faces today in an increasingly questioning, plural and multicultural world. In an article co-authored with the eminent scholar Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed, Singh has argued that "minorities are fleeing Muslim countries and radical Islamists are taking to the sword, raising a critical question about Islam's ability to secularize." Their thesis is validated by Matar's murder attempt, Iranian media calling Matar's stabbing "divine retribution" and thousands of both Shia and Sunni Muslims celebrating Rushdie's stabbing on social media.

A case for sanity, plurality and tolerance

No two people see the world the same way. As Singh often remarks when he speaks about Fair Observer, all of us view the world through our own prisms. No two apples are exactly the same. Any two tea bushes or any two mango trees are never the same. The same holds true for any two pigeons or any two lions or any two whales. The point I am making is simple: every living or even non-living thing in this universe is unique.

Even factory-made cars, phones, refrigerators and other mass-produced goods have tiny if unobservable differences. We live and have always lived in a heterogeneous world. Yet it is also true that human beings tend to seek homogeneity. Japanese culture imposes its tea rituals, France its laïcité and, even immigrant America, a pledge of allegiance to its flag.

We will never overcome this human instinct to achieve some form of homogeneity. However, we have to accept a base level of heterogeneity. Intolerance of diversity and plurality is insanity in an increasingly globalized world of nearly 8 billion people. It could unleash violence of terrible proportions and the loss of many lives. Even more importantly, it would create a culture of fear,

imprisoning minds, dampening creativity and throttling ideas.

As a deeply spiritual Indian steeped in the Upanishadic tradition, I believe in the uniqueness of all living and non-living things. It is for this reason that I go both to the heights of the Himalayas and the shores of the Indian Ocean. My ancestral land has nearly 1.4 billion people, more than 1,600 languages, over 10 religions and hundreds of ethnicities. We have lived in relative peace for centuries. Yes, independence in 1947 was accompanied by partition but there are still more Muslims in India than either Pakistan or Bangladesh, which was East Pakistan until its independence in 1971.

Some argue this is just a historical accident. They view India as a ticking time bomb where everything will blow up in some sort of mob violence if not civil war. I disagree. It is my fundamental belief that Indian philosophy with its continuous, unbroken tradition of thousands of years has extraordinary collective wisdom and valuable lessons for mature societies.

As Singh constantly points out, the Indian Shastrarth tradition is analogous to the Socratic method. India also came up with the example of sages looking within to find insights and even enlightenment. Siddhartha was one such sage who is now known and followed from Sri Lanka to Japan as the Buddha. The essence of this tradition is not adherence to a holy book, one son of god or an infallible prophet. Instead, every being is seen as unique. All of us are drops in the ocean and the ocean itself is nothing but infinite drops coming together.

If every drop of water has the right to be unique, it follows that each of us has the right to think, speak or write what we want. It follows that blasphemy could not exist in such a society because there is no reigning god or authority figure

to blaspheme against. Yes, people might get offended but they would have the right to avoid the offending individual. People could agree to disagree.

In such a society, there would be no need to burn the libraries of Nalanda or blow up the statues of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Lest we forget, these were both the work of intolerant jihadis who deemed these intellectual and artistic creations blasphemous to Islam. The Turkish general Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji destroyed Nalanda in the 1190s AD and the Taliban destroyed the invaluable 6th century AD Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 to the cries of Allahu Akbar.

The same intolerance that led to the slaughter of thousands of Buddhist scholars has caused both the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shooting and the 2022 Rushdie stabbing. This intolerance must end. Every individual must have infinite freedom. Freedom of expression has to be unlimited. The likes of Socrates, Bruno and Rushdie must not pay with their lives for their ideas, thoughts and works of art. Neither should anyone else.

In India, we have never had a religious authority like the Pope. There is no one holy book. The ideas of dharma, the essentially individual pursuit of righteousness, and karma, the carrying out of the dharmic action, still form the bedrock of various Indian philosophies. The idea of shishtachara where we set an example by our behavior and our lives instead of fatwa or edict has held strong in this diverse land. Such ideas prizing the individual, which Europe adopted during the Enlightenment, have limited violence in India for centuries.

A case in point are the Khajuraho Temples built between 885 AD and 1000 AD by the Chandela dynasty. Peter Popham has called these temples the “apogee of artistic development” and lauded the “fabulous efflorescence of erotic sculpture.” They are one of the one “of the most stunning UNESCO

World Heritage Sites in India.” To this day, hardline Islamists see these temples and want to do to them exactly what they did to the Bamiyan Buddhas.

In India, we have long seen things differently. I am an Ayyangar Brahmin from Tamil Nadu. We come from an ascetic, mathematical tradition. Our editor-in-chief is a Rajput with a Chandel grandmother. He comes from a more rambunctious, sensuous tradition. Yet neither of us claims or argues that our version of the dharmic or karmic tradition is what everyone must follow. Each of us is unique like any drop in this ocean of humanity. All of us have to learn to live together as per the ancient Indian idea of the world as one family: vasudhaiva kutumbukam.

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Has the West Pacified the World Too Well and Allowed the East to Emerge as a Challenger?

Felicia Gooden
September 01, 2022

Democracy has softened the West, which is struggling to cope with the challenge from the East, where autocratic Russia and China

believe in using brute force and deft diplomacy to challenge the rules-based order.

The West has mastered the Roman strategy of pacification so thoroughly that the entire world is now in danger. Liberal institutions have made the global citizenry comfortable and complacent. They now lack the will to fight or engage in war.

Pacification finds its origins in the Latin *pacificatum*, the “pacifier”, which is a role that was held by the magistrates of the Roman Republic. The geopolitical concept borrows from the Latin *pacificatio*, which translates from French as “return to peace, accommodation, reconciliation.” Pacification was used as standard foreign policy by Western powers during the colonial period and has continued through democratic institutions since. Most notably, the policy of pacification was used during the Vietnam War to raze the grounds inhabited by the Viet Cong and then establish control by building schools and clinics to win the hearts and minds of locals newly under South Vietnamese control.

A pacified West has emboldened Russia and China

Research shows that the disinterest in coercive and repressive acts that comes from democratic institutions have successfully pacified the West. Unfortunately, that pacification and illusion of widespread security have made the world less safe. US President Joe Biden faced the vitriol of a constituency that had no will or desire to continue with a war on terror in the Middle East, and Eastern great powers took that as a signal to move in their own interests. Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to launch a “special operation” in Ukraine not long after the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan by the US. China has exhibited

an increasing appetite for invading or reclaiming the island of Taiwan, which has strained relations not only between the US and China but also the US and Taiwan. However, China has likely held back on taking decisive action in the likeness of Russia due to the international blowback against the Ukraine invasion. The international fallout from the war in Ukraine presents an opportunity for China to claim a moral high ground on how it moves forward in defending its sovereignty and right to territories of interest.

China's recent flyovers in Taiwan and expanding presence in the South China Sea send the message that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is prepared to act with violence within its own territory if necessary while globally engaging in hybrid warfare tactics that remain below the threshold of armed conflict. The message shows finesse in Chinese foreign policy. Chinese President Xi Jinping is keenly aware of the peace guaranteed by the international order and seeks to manifest a global balance of power with China in the lead rather than outright hegemonic conquest.

A clash of values: democracy v autocracy

One must contemplate the future of the international order at a time when great power competition shows sharp contrast in ideologies. A clear line has now been drawn between democratic pacification and autocratic coercion. Morality and good governance are the name of the game in these times, but the methods of achieving and showcasing both are the competition. Liberal institutions and their democratic pacification have proven to be inherent liabilities in a world where human nature continues to reign supreme, aggressor states and non-state actors continue to use violence, and great powers compete in flexing their political as well as conventional firepower.

Autocratic coercion has grown in popularity among conservative groups around the world,

which is a concerning trend for liberal idealists and the state of democratic institutions. Russia's circumvention of global sanctions strikes a big blow against the narrative that democratic institutions are most effective in international relations. As it stands, coercion and brute violence reign supreme, as the East continues to weather the geopolitical storm of international isolation. With Beijing kicking off its largest-ever military exercises around Taiwan, China continues to become more troublesome. Also, while Beijing may maintain a neutral stance on Russian actions in Ukraine, it is still supporting Moscow in a measured and indirect way in the game of great power competition with the US.

The world can expect a contentious competition between the West and the East. Hybrid warfare and information operations will increase. Violence will also continue to increase as the world witnesses one last power grab by world powers dedicated to traditional forms of culture and governance through repression, violence and coercion. Unless the West pulls off a quick and swift win for democratic pacification through institutions and diplomacy, the world will likely become a less safe, secure and equitable place for humanity.

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Supply of 5G Dives Demand for This Technology, Ignoring Downsides

Mansoor Hasan Khan
September 12, 2022

Most people are served well by 4G technology and do not need 5G. Besides, this technology seems to have adverse health effects and needs closer examination before mass adoption. Instead, 5G is being quickly marketed in the same way as smoking was in the past.

If we read the news, we constantly read about 5G. A key question arises: do citizens need 5G?

Those working in certain sectors, such as space technology, medical industry and national security, gain benefits from 5G technology. However, many of us function perfectly well with 4G technology. For surfing the internet, e-commerce or using social media, 4 G suffices perfectly well. Prima facie, most consumers do not need 5G just as healthy persons do not need to pop multivitamin supplements.

When I think of 5G, I cannot help but think of iodized salt. Growing up in India, most of us have eaten this form of salt. Salt was iodized in the country to avoid goiter among the population. This condition commonly develops because of iodine deficiency and leads to irregular growth of the thyroid gland. In poor households, this disease was common. So, the government pushed iodized salt as a public health measure. It was immaterial that healthy people did not need more iodine. They had to consume it.

Today, 5G is being rolled out around the world. In India, Reliance Industries Limited is rolling out 5G technology this year on Diwali, the iconic festival of lights. Millions will adopt 5G with enthusiasm. Some will spend hours watching cricket or Bollywood on YouTube. Others will video chat with family and friends. Still others will use 5G for every conceivable purpose.

Yet is there really a need for 5G in India right now?

As per the old adage, necessity is the mother of invention. Today it seems that invention is the mother of necessity. This is not a new idea. In 1803, Jean Baptiste Say took the view that supply creates its own demand. Say's Law has come to define classical economics and holds that the production of goods creates its own demand. As per this law, if we manufacture televisions, demand for televisions will appear. Supply-side economics favored by the Republicans in the US is based on this law.

It might be fair to say that this law often holds in most economies. If you introduce something in the market, the masses often get addicted to it. In the US, cocaine is a classic example. A hundred years ago, few people snorted this fine white powder. Today, it is a drug of choice for Wall Street traders and anyone with money. People rarely apply their mind about the need or utility of a product.

In the case of 5G, there have long been doubts about its effects on human health. As of now, there is limited research on the subject. We know that 5G technology uses higher-frequency bandwidths, right across the radio frequency spectrum. Two types of electromagnetic fields come into being thanks to 5G technology: ionizing and non-ionizing radiation.

We know that ionizing radiation can damage human cells and cause cancer. Non-ionizing

radiations are not supposed to cause any harm to health. However, a 2019 study concluded that electromagnetic frequencies (EMF) from mobile phones are linked to DNA damage in mice and rats. Another 2016 study concluded that electromagnetic radiation of any frequency can harm the nervous system. A 2020 research review also examined how electromagnetic frequencies affect organisms like snails and frogs. The researchers were unclear if these frequencies have negative effects on animals. It is clear that more research is needed.

The World Health Organization launched the International EMF Project to assess the health and environmental effects of exposure to static and time-varying electric and magnetic fields in the frequency range 0-300 GHz. Lennart Hardell, an oncologist from Sweden, was critical of this EMF project. In a 2017 research review, Hardell revealed that five of the six members of EMF's core group were affiliated with the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP). This hinted at the project's members having a conflict of interest.

Hardell also pointed out that many members of ICNIRP are affiliated with industries that use wireless networks. This raises questions about the organization's legitimacy. The Scientific Committee on Health, Environmental and Emerging Risks of the European Parliament, has concluded that the scale, urgency, and interactions of EMF with ecosystems and species are potentially hazardous. Like smoking, 5G seems to have adverse circumstances that will take years to come to light.

Already, 4G technology has caused much harm. People are increasingly addicted to their phones. In India, it is not uncommon at family gatherings for everyone to be glued to their cellphones and ignore each other. Filter bubbles and echo chambers have

damaged journalism. Many live in a post-truth world thanks to 4G technology.

We have also slipped up on simple things. Many have no sense of direction because they rely on Google Maps to get somewhere. At airports, planes, trains, buses and the metro, people are increasingly glued to their screens. They are no longer looking each other in the eye or striking up a conversation. Myopia is on the rise. Late night screen exposure causes eye pain and poor sleep. Screen addiction is also causing a decline in reading habits, attention spans and critical thinking.

In such a situation, should we be rolling out 5G or do we need a cost-benefit analysis first? The argument that people are demanding 5G technology does not hold. Supply is creating its own demand and perhaps society or at least not everyone in society, needs 5G.

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Under the Taliban, Afghanistan's Madrassas Increase and Harbor Terrorists

Mohammad Shoaib Haidary
October 09, 2022

The number of madrassas has surged in Afghanistan. The Taliban is making them a safe haven for terrorists and threatening the security of the region and the world.

On August 12, Salman Rushdie was stabbed and injured severely by a Muslim man at an event in the US. The attack on him reveals that hatred against freedom of speech has reached boiling point and terrorist threats are on the rise. Fanatical ideologies that spread through social media in the West and madrassas in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan are key reasons for this increase in terrorism.

Since the takeover of the Taliban in August 2021, the number of madrassas in Afghanistan has increased dramatically. These institutions have long been breeding grounds of terror. Their illustrious alumni include the Taliban who emerged from Pakistani madrassas in the 1990s. Madrassas help the Taliban to spread their ideology, achieve cultural hegemony and dominate Afghan society. This phenomenon is a threat to global security.

Why are madrassas a threat?

Madrassas can be referred to as Islamic religious schools or seminaries. Some of them go back almost 1,000 years in South Asia. The Taliban's top focus since taking over Afghanistan has been building madrassas. According to the BBC, there are nearly 13,000 unregistered religious schools and 1,275 religious government-registered schools in Afghanistan.

Recently, some madrassas have relocated from Pakistan to Afghanistan because of the patronage provided by the Taliban after their takeover. In the two decades in the period 2001-2021, not as many

new madrassas opened up under the non-Taliban governments who focused on a more modern education. This has changed under the Taliban who have allocated significant resources to seminaries. Sheikh Rahimullah Haqqani, an influential Taliban leader recently killed in a suicide attack, was among many who moved their madrassas from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

Even as madrassas open up in or move to Afghanistan, the Taliban are converting modern schools into madrassas. A well equipped modern school in the province of Khost was transformed into a madrassa, where 6,000 students and 130 teachers have been forced to depart. The Taliban have turned Metra, a local television station, into a seminary education center. A Taliban leader has reportedly issued a decree to create a big jihadi school in each of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan. The salary of jihadi school teachers is three times that of regular school teachers.

To further promote jihadi schools, the Taliban are converting high schools, institutes, teacher training institutes, women's affairs departments, and human rights commission offices into madrassas. The Taliban have also modified the university curriculum, increasing the total teaching requirements for Islamic studies from 8 to 24 credits.

Prior to the Afghan war with the Soviets in the 1980s, the madrassas in Pakistan were training future religious scholars. Thereafter, curricula began to teach jihad and militancy to Afghan learners in order to prepare them for war. Most of the Taliban were trained in Saudi-financed madrassas in Pakistan. The curriculum was a combination of puritanical Saudi Wahhabism and anti-western Indian Deobandism. Deobandis hold westernization to be the source of corruption in contemporary Islamic states and deem the laws of such states illegitimate. Educators in Afghanistan's madrassas are mostly graduates of their Pakistani

counterparts. Unsurprisingly, they are influenced by fundamentalist interpretations of Islam.

The difference in teachings between the religious schools and the modern schools has deepened division and fueled extremism. Madrassa scholars loathe secular learners and consider them followers of the western “infidels.” This hatred explains why the Taliban bombed or burned many secular schools after 2001. In some of the madrassas like the famed Darul Uloom Haqqania in the town of Akora Khattak in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar are hailed as heroes. The top leadership of the Taliban graduated from this madrassa, which has been called Pakistan’s ‘university of jihad.’”

When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021, they prohibited girls in most provinces from attending secondary school. They dismissed all women from leadership posts in the civil service, forced women to cover their faces in public, and banned them from traveling unaccompanied by a male relative. Afghanistan’s madrassas teach their students to hate democracy, freedom of speech and women’s rights. These seminaries also inculcate intolerance against other Muslims who do not follow the straight and narrow interpretation of Islam followed by the Taliban. Shias are singled out for particular scorn and madrassas have been known to cause sectarian violence.

The Taliban is allocating more funds for madrassas and plans three to ten madrassas per district. With 350 districts, Afghanistan could soon see an additional 1,000 madrassas. Money from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries are flowing into madrassas. Rural communities donate land, labor, food, clothes and services to madrassas. The combination of foreign money and local support makes madrassas formidable.

It is clear that the Taliban is systematically brainwashing the next generation through madrassas. This will strengthen their social base and churn out footsoldiers who would be willing to kill themselves for jihad. This bodes ill for Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and, indeed, the rest of the world.

What do the 1980s foretell?

This is not the first boom in madrassas in the region. Under General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, these religious schools proliferated. Many catered to refugees fleeing Soviet rule in Afghanistan. As mentioned above, the Taliban are alumni of these Pakistani madrassas.

As is well known, the Taliban oppose education for girls and women’s rights. Their puritanical version of Islam involves public flogging, stoning to death and decapitation in public. It is an open secret that the Taliban offered sanctuary to al-Qaeda. This dreaded terrorist outfit first burst into public attention on August 7, 1998 when it bombed two US embassies in East Africa. Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania were the targets. As per the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 224 people died, including 12 Americans, and more than 4,500 people were wounded.

Given the Taliban’s extremist Islamist ideology, it is inevitable that they will harbor terrorists again. Numerous reports indicate that “al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Khorasan [have been] growing in strength since the U.S. withdrawal.” Jihadi groups around the world have been inspired by the victory of the Taliban. Afghanistan’s madrassas will provide these groups with footsoldiers, a social network and a base for their operations.

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The US Dollar's Global Dominance Is Facing a Big Threat

Syed Zain Abbas Rizvi
October 13, 2022

The US dollar has dominated the global economy since World War II. With the emergence of new challengers, American power is waning, the dollar is weakening and its hegemony is fading away.

The tale began in 1944. World War II was at its peak in Europe. Amidst such insecurities, 44 allied nations convened in New Hampshire to establish the Bretton Woods System. Under the stipulations of the system, all countries adjusted their currencies to the US dollar while fixing the dollar to gold. They assumed that fixing a gold standard would reduce volatility in the global economy. Conveniently, that agreement also established US hegemony over global trade. However, by the early 1970s, that system collapsed as the US encountered a gold crunch.

The US faced a balance of payments crisis. The Federal Reserve did not have enough gold reserves to back the dollar. The infamous Nixon Shock ended the US dollar's convertibility to gold.

The waxing and waning of the petrodollar

Henceforth, the US dollar plummeted as countries rapidly lost confidence in the greenback. This is the point that pivots the reality of today. In the mid-1970s, President Richard Nixon struck a deal with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to trade oil exclusively in dollars in exchange for US military assistance. Consequently, the petrodollar emerged, oil prices quadrupled, and the rest is history.

Ever since, the US dollar has been the undisputed exchange-reserve currency across the world. Agreements with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Middle East reinforced the global oil trade in the greenback currency. Trading oil and gas futures, denominated in the dollar, entrenched the position of the US as the global superpower. While the euro surfaced as a strong contender in the 1990s, dollar-based finance continued to flourish. Developing economies like China and Russia had no choice but to hold US Treasuries and accrue massive dollar reserves to hedge currency risk. And, while fractious elements, like Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Gaddafi relentlessly attempted to derail the petrodollar, those efforts led to invasion, assassination, and decimation.

Today, multiple geopolitical and economic factors are again turning the tide against the supremacy of the US dollar. Rapid globalization was already a ticking time bomb situation for the greenback. Now, China's rise as the next potential economic powerhouse, Russia's exclusion from the dollar-driven SWIFT system and a global economic slowdown are challenging the dominance of the US dollar.

The trend towards de-dollarization is not exactly a novel phenomenon. Latin America attempted to move away from the dollar in the 1990s. In response to US sanctions, Venezuela sought to pay for oil payments in Chinese yuan instead. Chile de-

dollarized in the 1980s and generally avoided dollarization. In the early 2000s, Iraq attempted to sell oil in euros while Libya actively lobbied for years to forge a pan-African gold standard.

However, the global financial crisis of 2007-08 reversed this trend to de-dollarization. Over the last decade, no significant development emerged to diminish the dominance of the US dollar. With a rift emerging between the US and Saudi Arabia, the dollar faces a new challenge.

The US and Saudi Arabia drift apart

With 17.2% of global exports, Saudi Arabia is the world's largest crude oil exporter. In the past, it was the biggest supplier to the US. It is because of oil that Saudi Arabia emerged as a core US ally in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia leads OPEC. In the past, this gave the US an indirect sway over global oil prices, which are denominated in dollars. This allowed successive American governments to run massive trade deficits and take cheap debt. Since 1979, the Saudi Kingdom has been a US proxy against Iran.

In the past few years, the US has boosted shale oil production and built up its Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR). In the 1990s, the US imported an estimated 2 million barrels per day. By 2021, this figure fell to mere 500,000 barrels per day, a fall of 75%.

Recently, the Saudi royalty has been particularly dissatisfied with US President Joe Biden's policies in the Middle East. Biden's decision to withdraw support for Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen annoyed Riyadh. Houthi attacks on Saudi oil facilities and Biden's attempt to revive the nuclear deal with Iran has increased Saudi insecurities. Riyadh believes that the US is backtracking on the historic security guarantees to the House of Saud.

Biden's recent Middle East tour was an abject failure. He failed to achieve his principal objective: get Saudi Arabia to increase oil production. Most recently, the White House has accused OPEC+ of aligning with Russia after this grouping of oil producers agreed to deep oil production cuts. In turn, OPEC+ has accused the West of "wealth arrogance" and hypocrisy.

China and others emerge as an alternative to the US

Over the years, China has emerged as the top importer of Saudi oil. In 2020, Saudi Arabia exported \$95.7 billion worth of oil. China accounted for \$24.7 billion of that figure while the US imports were a mere \$6.59 billion. China's Belt and Road Initiative has invested in Saudi Arabia and Chinese investments reportedly reached \$43.47 billion in 2021.

Saudi Arabia is planning to invest in Chinese companies. Aramco has signed a \$10 billion deal with Chinese petroleum companies. Talk of the petroyuan oil trade has hit the headlines. As of now, the \$13.4 trillion eurodollar market and the \$25 trillion US Treasury market offer depth and liquidity that no one else can match. Yet this could change in the future. Rising interest rates have strengthened the dollar, causing import bills of poorer economies to shoot up and triggering a global debt crisis. This might shake the global faith in the US dollar and at least China's trading partner might become more amenable to trading in yuan.

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently addressed the BRICS Summit, a grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. He spoke of an alternate mechanism for international payments and an alternative to the International Monetary Fund's Special Drawing Rights (SDRs). Instead of denominating against the dollar,

countries could use a basket of their respective currencies instead.

Talk of Iran and even Saudi Arabia joining BRICS has emerged. Were this to happen, such a grouping would make up more than a third of the global GDP, over 25% of the global oil output, roughly 40% of the global iron production, and about half of the world's agricultural production. Even a weakened Russia has caused havoc in global oil and commodity markets. An expanded BRICS with its own reserve currency could seriously challenge the dollar.

Russia and China are already engaging in ruble-yuan trade. Russian energy giant Gazprom recently announced that Beijing would start "making payments for Russian gas supplies in the national currencies of the countries -- the ruble and yuan." Frozen out by the West from SWIFT, Russia is now using China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS). In due course, CIPS could emerge as a big winner of the Russia-Ukraine War. India is openly defying American pressure by increasing its oil purchases from Russia. Now, Russian oil makes for 21% of Indian oil imports, up from less than 1% before the war. India is buying discounted Russian oil to curb inflation and this trade is no longer denominated in dollars. Along with closer Russia-China ties, India's imports of Russian oil dent the dominance of the dollar. So are moves by NATO member Turkey to buy discounted Russian oil. If such trends continue, the days of the US dollar may be numbered.

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Why are Young People Protesting in Iran?

Mehdi Alavi, Atul Singh
October 15, 2022

Women are chafing against intrusive restrictions. Young women and men worry about lack of opportunities and well-paying jobs, making marriage difficult. Resentment is on the rise and the regime faces a rocky ride.

Headlines in the BBC, The Guardian and other western media have focused on protests in Iran. They erupted after a tragic incident in Iran. On September 13, Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurd, was arrested by irshad, the morality police. She was taken to a detention center to receive training to observe hijab rule where she fainted. Amini was then taken to a hospital. Three days later, she died in police custody. The next day, protests broke out across Iran and continue to this day.

The BBC tells us that women around the world are now cutting their hair to show their solidarity with their Iranian counterparts. Abir Al-Sahlani, a Swedish Member of the European Parliament, cut her hair in the midst of her speech, giving a rallying cry: "women, life, freedom."

Why are women protesting?

Since 1979, Shia clerics have ruled Iran. They have imposed strict moral codes and restrictive

rules on society. Women are supposed to dress modestly and cover their hair in accordance with clerics' strict interpretations of Islam. As education levels increase, Iranian women are increasingly unwilling to play by such rules.

Irshad can stop and intimidate any woman for the most arbitrary of reasons. Over the years, Iranian women have become highly educated. The percentage of females in higher education increased from 3% in 1978 to 59% in 2018. Women have entered almost all professions now. Their expectations have risen similarly. Even when there have been no protests, there is a simmering discontent among women about the restrictions they face on a daily basis. Many women hate the morality police.

So unpopular is irshad that conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad proposed to parliament to get rid of this morality police but he was shot down by those far more conservative than him, led by Parliament's members Mutahari and Pizishkiyan. He explained that the police are also young people and they cannot make a correct diagnosis. Overall, Ahmadinejad opposed forcing people to observe the hijab rule. He held that people had rights to choose and they must be given choices so he was accused by ultra-conservatives of supporting indecency.

While women may have done well in gaining an education, jobs have been hard to find. Glass ceilings remain thick and strong. Few women make it to top positions. They also find it difficult to get married because educated men with good jobs are in short supply. Furthermore, strict rules make it difficult for women and men to socialize. Like women elsewhere, Iranian women want some choice when it comes to their life partners.

Last year, Ebrahim Raisi was elected president. He is a conservative cleric who has sought to reinvigorate the old cultural revolution. Irshad

have stepped up patrols and taken women away for "re-education" because of their supposedly improper dress. A hijab-and-chastity decree bans women without headscarves from posting pictures of themselves on social media. Naturally, women are dissatisfied with the tightening of restrictions and Amini's death has set off a powder keg.

Why are men protesting?

Not only women but also men have taken to the streets. If Iranian women are dissatisfied, so are the men. They are really frustrated with the lack of opportunities. Many have lost hope in the future. In particular, educated men are most discontented. They are unable to get decent well-paying jobs. This restricts their marriage opportunities.

Young people are increasingly influenced by western media. They think of the US as a land of milk and honey. Alumni of the elite Sharif University of Technology leave the country in the search of a better life. Those who remain behind are frustrated by the lack of jobs in Iran. They access western media and want similar lifestyles to what they see on screen. This exacerbates their discontent.

American sanctions have taken their toll on the Iranian economy. Since 2012, per capita income has stagnated. After the Russia-Ukraine War, inflation has further soared. To make matters worse, Iran is facing an environmental crisis. Rivers have run dry, groundwater is falling, lakes are drying up and farmland is parched. A growing population has led to wanton felling of forests. In turn, deforestation has exacerbated desertification. As in India and China, pollution is choking cities. Young men find it very difficult to be hopeful about the future.

Over 60% of Iran's 84 million population is under 30. Historically, young single men have been a source of instability in any society. Iran has

millions of discontented young men. During the recent protests, unknown assailants have attacked banks, police, ambulances, other government officials, mosques, clerics and religious people. The 1979 revolution may not yet be at risk but Iranian society is volatile and could erupt in a volcanic eruption given the slightest provocation.

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High Time for Africans to Reclaim Their Agency

Claire Price, Olúfẹmi Táíwò
October 16, 2022

In this edition of The Interview, Professor Olúfẹmi Táíwò argues that Africans are authors of their own script. To plot Africa's entire current realities on the sole axis of colonialism is just plain wrong.

In this edition of The Interview, Nigerian academic Professor Olúfẹmi Táíwò explains why Africa's decolonization movement has got it wrong – and why Africans urgently need to reclaim their agency. Táíwò works at Cornell University in the US, where he is Professor of African Political Thought and Chair at the Africana Studies and Research Center.

Táíwò is a noted scholar and a provocative thinker. His views can be controversial. He says: “A lot of the decolonization movement is complete nonsense, it's totally irrelevant. And I use very strong language because these people are causing a lot of damage in the continent.”

It is for this reason Táíwò fights back against the movement that spurred ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ and called for colonial reparations. Before this interview, he had just returned from Nigeria where his mother passed away but Táíwò says he's keen to take his mind off his loss. And while he starts off gently, his appeals become more impassioned as he warms to his theme.

Táíwò's book, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously*, prompted a FO° Live discussion on June 28 earlier this year: In 2022, Can and Does Africa Determine Its Own Destiny?

Táíwò's book has now been recommended by The Financial Times. As per this venerable British newspaper, the book “makes a powerful case for how Africans can get out of their malaise: not by being trapped in a psychological state of victimhood, but by reclaiming their agency.”

The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Claire Price: Agency is a big theme of your book – how do you define it?

Olúfẹmi Táíwò: One of the central tenants of modernity is the idea of the self. That's the agency that I'm talking about - that the individual is the

author of her or his life script. Many of us are messed up and write very terrible scripts for ourselves but however we write it, what is important is that we own it. The colonialists substituted themselves for the agency of the colonized. While that lasted, the colonized didn't give up their agency – they kept on contesting the power and authority of the colonizers. But much of the decolonising literature does not take seriously this agency of the African. And by making it seem as if colonialism is the axis on which to plot Africa's entire phenomenon is just wrong.

Price: Do you feel that many African writers deny their own agency by blaming colonialism for their problems?

Táíwò: Much of the decolonising literature, not African writers but decolonising literature, is vested in that. But the fact that we can't blame colonialism for everything does not mean we can't blame colonialism for anything.

Price: Have you faced criticism that you underplay the impact of colonialism?

Táíwò: Unfortunately no, I haven't faced criticism.

Price: Is that fortunately or unfortunately?

Táíwò: Unfortunately! Who knows, in this book, I might get some people's goat and they might challenge it. But previously, it was thought that colonialism brought modernity to Africa. I argued in my first book that modernity was introduced to Africa by the missionaries and that those ideas were stifled by colonialism. And 12 years since its publication, no-one has challenged this thesis. That's not a boast, it's just the honest truth.

Price: I'm going to go through a few things that people blame colonialism for. First, borders. Isn't the decolonisation movement right to

blame Europeans for drawing up arbitrary borders and causing all sorts of trouble?

Táíwò: I have argued in the book that it's been 60 years now that most of Africa has been independent. If Africans don't like their borders, they could do something about them. Those borders are not sacrosanct – look at Eritrea, Sudan and the secessionist movements in Cameroon. There is no country in the world that is natural, all borders are artificial. In fact, most of the world's countries are multinational states. Just look at the United Kingdom and Russia.

Price: The second charge is tribal conflict, which people claim was exacerbated by the colonizers' divide and rule policy. We can see how that played out in the recent Kenyan elections.

Táíwò: First, you need to get rid of that terminology. There are no tribes. That's straight out of racist colonial anthropology. You don't look to the national group that I belong to and call it a tribe. It's global, it's multi-ethnic, there are a lot of different dialects with regional variations. It has a civilization that dates back at least one thousand years.

When Europe was making the transition to modernity and the feudal structure was being broken up, they migrated to cities under their tribal affiliations. As capitalism grew, they started organizing themselves according to guilds and that was the start of the trade union movement. Africans wanted to do the same under the colonial movement - but the colonial authorities pre-empted them and insisted that Africans organized themselves by tribal unions.

Price: So they can be blamed?

Táíwò: Yes, they could be blamed for exacerbating tensions but some Africans have tried

to craft different identities since independence – and some of their experiments have succeeded. For example, you don't have those tensions in Tanzania, which is made up of various ethnic and national groups. That's not the way they organize their elections. Even when you talk about Zanzibar, those tensions are religious rather than ethnic. And in Senegal, everybody now speaks Wolof – we're seeing the Wolofisation of Senegal.

Claire: You've talked about languages there. Can African thinkers be truly “decolonized” if they write in English or French?

Táíwò: Why do people assume that you cannot domesticate a language? We live in a world of several Englishes. I work in the US and I went to school in Canada and they don't speak the same English. And they are not the same as UK English. Why are Indians celebrated for calibrating English in their own way and Africans are treated as if they are still minions. It doesn't make sense.

That's the reason why a lot of the decolonisation movement is complete nonsense, it's totally irrelevant. And I use very strong language because these people are causing a lot of damage in the continent.

English did not just come with colonialism. Africans have been writing in English since 1769. Formal colonialism did not come to West Africa until 1865. Do you want to throw away 100 years of history?

And who insisted that Africans should speak their own indigenous languages and only speak enough English to service the colonial machine? The colonizers!

Price: Ethiopian American academic Adom Getachew has said that: “Acknowledging that colonial history shapes the current inequalities and hierarchies that structure the world sets the

stage for the next one: reparations and restitution.” What are your thoughts on that?

Táíwò: Honestly, I don't touch that. And the reason why is a very simple one. There's a reparations movement for those who were forcibly brought to the Americas, which was later expanded to include reparations for colonial rule. People need to separate the two.

As an African immigrant to the United States, I cannot be part of the reparation movement for black people in this country because there's no basis for it. If I come from West Africa; a country like Nigeria, Ghana or Sierra Leone, from which many people were shipped off as slaves, I need to do some very serious genealogy. Because if I'm from one of those families that profited from it, I should be paying reparations! We need to take history very seriously.

The idea that people went in and kidnapped people – yes that's how it started but eventually a market was created. Willing buyer, willing seller. Unfortunately, we're still making the same deals. If we say we were coerced then and we're still being coerced now, then we're permanent children.

In 50 years, maybe our grandchildren will be asking the Chinese for reparations for what they're doing in Africa right now. And that's the fault of the Chinese? No, I'm sorry. We need to have internal debates about this. We should not pretend that Africans are victims all along.

Price: Why do these ideas matter?

Táíwò: As I did my research for this book, I said wait a minute, is this what people are peddling about pre-colonial history? Are you suggesting that how life was led in Africa in 15th century was the same as in the 19th century?

The kind of granular engagement with the complexity of life and thought in different parts of

Africa is being effaced on a daily basis. That cannot be good for the future of scholarship about the African continent. That for me is not just a disservice, it's really bordering on the criminal.

I'm sorry that I have to speak in very strong terms. This is not a divergence, it's not academic. It's about how Africa is going to deliver for its citizens. These are ideas that go to the heart of human dignity.

I don't see the decolonisation movement getting into all that. It's all about chasing slights. Not slights for ordinary people but for academics.

***Claire Price** is the chair of Fair Observer. She is a video journalist and media trainer, with nearly two decades of experience at the BBC and Agence France-Presse (AFP). Prior to going solo, Claire worked as AFP's Africa editor for the agency's video service, where she commissioned, coordinated and directed coverage of breaking news in sub-Saharan Africa.

***Olúfẹmi Táíwò** is a professor at Cornell University who has expanded the African contribution in philosophy and has, simultaneously, worked to indigenize the discipline. Over the years, Táíwò has made philosophy more relevant to Africa and African students.

An Open Conversation on Buddhism

Srinivas Reddy, Peter Isackson, Steven Elleman

October 23, 2022

Three people from three different backgrounds, age groups and parts of the world discuss Hinduism, Buddhism and the role of religion in society.

In the summer of 2022, Professor Srinivas Reddy, Scholar, Translator & Musician at Brown University, and Anne Hofmann, Chair of the English & Humanities department and a Professor of English at Frederick Community College, conversed for over an hour on the global significance of Buddhism. Their conversation led to the discussion below, which exemplifies Fair Observer's belief in the criticality of discourse.

You can find below how three authors from three different generations in three different locations wrestle with issues pertaining to Buddhism, religion and society that are still relevant today.

Steven Elleman: Did the deification of Buddha represent an ancient process of co-opting?

Srinivas Reddy: I think the rise of worshiping Buddha like a god reflects the move from a strictly monastic tradition to a more popular religion for the general public. Older well-established practices of ritual and praise were hard to eliminate and so they were gradually incorporated into Buddhist practice. Also the idea is that we do not worship the Buddha as a human god but rather an outward manifestation of the internally realized Buddhist truths.

Elleman: In this context, did Buddhism represent a process of opting out of Hinduism, i.e. when Buddhism was starting out did it actively oppose Hinduism or did it just go its

own way, avoiding and circumventing Hinduism altogether?

Reddy: There are indeed some aspects of Buddhism that critique Hinduism, or rather elements of brahmanical culture, particularly caste and the Vedas, but the important thing to keep in mind historically is that there were multiple diverse traditions within what we commonly call Hinduism, and also several other "non-Hindu" traditions circulating at that time alongside early Buddhism. It was a rich and diverse religious landscape. Later on one could argue that Hinduism co-opted Buddhism, which is one reason why Buddhism died out in India. In the modern context, Ambedkar did indeed opt out of Hinduism in favor of Buddhism because it did not enshrine a doctrine of caste.

Elleman: Did Buddhism have a typical pattern of social organization, and how did it contrast with Hinduism? Forgive me for the comparison, but Protestantism and Catholicism really come to mind, where Protestantism was a reaction against entrenchment, centralization, and ossification in Catholicism. It feels like one of the ways it "fought back" was to be flat and decentralized compared to Catholicism.

Reddy: As in the previous question, Buddhism did critique the prevailing social structure of Hinduism, particularly in regard to caste divisions, so in that sense it was a movement reacting against the rigidity of brahmanical social norms. But again, this was not Buddhism's *raison d'être*. Buddhism opened up previously inaccessible forms of knowledge to various communities, particularly merchants. Like many reform movements however, Buddhism evolved to include many of the hierarchies and structures that it once critiqued.

As you said, I do think we're in a similar situation these days vis-à-vis capitalist systems,

and I think the lesson from Buddhism is two-fold: first, the need to focus on developing your individual self and reforming your daily practices; and second, to be wary of becoming the thing you want to change.

Steven Elleman's reflections on Srinivas Reddy's answers

Professor Reddy,

Wow, thank you for such a thorough, thoughtful response.

This definitely helps. To provide a bit more context, I believe we're in an era framed by a secular religion that we might call "State-Sponsored Objectivity." Just like religions before it, Objectivity makes universal claims about the world, but unlike Christianity, its sins are of omission instead of commission. It abstains, and in abstaining it pretends to remain neutral, but at its root it establishes a false dichotomy with damning implications. Objective, distanced, neutral, become the new good. Subjective, close, biased, the new bad. And just like in times past, we've been gaslit into believing that insight comes externally, rather than internally.

In each of these historical periods (Buddhism, Reformation, and the secularized, objectivized present) a broad realization emerges of our collective gaslighting. I suspect one major catalyst of this is the new avenues of diffusion. Perhaps it was trade and merchants with the rise of Buddhism. The printing press during the Reformation. And today's internet.

Forgive me for my idealism (delusions of grandeur?), but by looking at history and applying its lessons to the present, perhaps we may detect an opportunity to figure out what's next, what may be an alternative to State-Sponsored Objectivity? What are philosophies needed for a Post-Truth

world, where "Truth is dead" joins "God is dead"? This is a theme I've thought a lot about and would love to develop it in a dialogue. No pressure to join if this feels a bit too idealistic, but I think it would be invaluable to have your particular vantage point. History never repeats itself, but it rhymes, and perhaps Buddhism follows the same rhyme scheme?

I'm including Atul and Peter in this conversation because I believe Fair Observer is seeking to offer us this kaleidoscopic sense of the world where subjectivity and different vantage points are valued. But we still tend to express these things in the language of Objectivity and the trappings of BBC's supposedly neutral eye. Could we need to develop a different vocabulary? Then again, a different vocabulary requires a different guiding philosophy.

All the best,

Steven

Peter Isackson's Reply to Steven Elleman's Response

Steven,

Many thanks for initiating this back and forth with Srinivas after his unambiguously "enlightening" and supremely enjoyable talk. This supplementary dialogue perhaps highlights the limits of Zoom-style educational endeavors, where questions and even answers are emptied of their human content (i.e. subjective, sensory meaning, or deeper social sense).

I expect you may not be aware of the fact that my very first article in Fair Observer – which Fair Observer's founder and CEO, Atul Singh, pushed me to write – was the result of a spontaneous exchange on the Oxford Alumni LinkedIn discussion group. I contested Atul's representation of religion. Atul pressed me to cogently pen an

article in which I might express why I thought he was wrong for publication.

Thinking back on it today, in the light of what you have just expressed, I was contesting an example of what you call the religion of Objectivity. It was something Atul had gleaned from Neil de Grasse Tyson's pontifications on his updated version of Carl Sagan's Cosmos. It sounded like science, so it must be objective (i.e. true)!

One thing to take away from this dialogue, thanks to Srinivas's explanations, is something that has always been known across many civilizations, but which is too complex for the religion of Objectivity (which is also the religion of corporate media) to handle. Any and every religious tradition encompasses a spectrum of human activities from the purely mental to the most formally executed and often meticulously controlled physical rituals. At the purely sociological level, all religions incarnate the idea of "religio" (literally tying people together in Latin), but with variations from loose and voluntary to legally constraining. Call it community building. They all include a serious approach to ethics that spans the Buddhist idea of individual mindfulness (that correlates in some ways with Christian or Augustinian conscience... which only in recent centuries became focused on the emotions of guilt and shame) to the acknowledgement of formal laws. Buddhism's major distinction may be that it refuses to formulate any of its recommendations or even strictures as laws (though perhaps Srinivas will inform us that some Buddhist traditions do precisely that).

The Judaic and Isamic traditions insist on the primacy of the law enshrined in scripture. St Paul's formulation of Christianity announced the abolition of "the (Hebrew) Law," preparing the terrain for Augustinian conscience. But the social vocation of pre-Reformation Christianity, partially

compelled by the feudal system that had something of a caste element to it, progressively built up a parallel set of ritualistic imperatives that effectively took on the force of "law" in the Hebraic sense. That is what Luther protested against, spawning a movement that ended up proclaiming there is no collective law ("the priesthood of all believers").

This subsequently evolved from a principle to become a doctrine. In that sense, it followed the pattern Srinivas mentioned: "becoming the thing you want to change." The uncomfortable cohabitation of competing doctrines inevitably led to some seriously violent conflict (130 years of religious wars), decimating the population of entire regions. It was all based on the opposition between competing doctrines, all of which, by the way, had the pretension of being someone's "law of the land" according to the apparently rational but ultimately explosive compromise of *cuius regio, eius religio* that left the question of an established religion to the discretion of the local monarch or lord.

The reaction to that fundamentally unstable status quo was the emergence in 1648 of the nation state as the unique framework for collective identity. The state replaced religion as the ultimate binding force in society. Logically enough, to fill the gap after the marginalization of theology, it produced the Enlightenment, which supposed the possibility of purely rational laws governing not only the functioning of the state but also public morals. These rational laws could only be based on empirical principles uncontaminated by subjectivity. Thus was the ideology out of which today's religion of Objectivity was born. It's worth noting that though it relied on grand principles – such as Jefferson's famous "all men are created equal" – it didn't exclude largely shared personal feelings about the inferiority of other admittedly "useful" races.

Interestingly, all societies recognize but apply diversely a wide range of co-existing laws: natural laws (or what are deemed the laws of nature), formal (constitutional) laws, some variations on common law (e.g. case law), religious laws (depending on the religion) and the laws of decorum. PC or the implicit code of "politically correct," for example, is a new set of prescriptions that some people feel has or must have the "force of law." The real problem at the core of Objectivity is that the notion of law, which can be organic, has been reduced to the idea of constraint and prohibition. This has always been an implicit but not always dominant factor in the behavioral laws of specific religions (e.g. Judaism, Islam, Mormonism, Jainism...). In any case, the borderline between moral laws and imposed rituals in every society will always be ambiguous.

I may be wrong, but one of the lessons I drew from Srinivas' talk was the desperate need we have of understanding what religions (including Objectivity!) share and what those common traits tell us about human society itself. Not with the aim of establishing some kind of syncretic truth, but of helping to build what Steven calls "this kaleidoscopic sense of the world." Beyond that is the other big issue: the individual and the cosmos. Society will always stand somewhere between the two.

Since my very first article in Fair Observer was about religion, I still hope that at Fair Observer we can find a way of building a kind of open think tank (but a tank with no walls) that deals with religion and society, metaphysics, ethics and philosophy in their interaction with geopolitical events and purely social and economic phenomena. Publications like Aeon feature articles on these topics, but they tend to be academic, i.e. knowledgeable and informative, but cold & distant, according to the norms of Objectivity.

Perhaps we could use your reflections on the religion of Objectivity as a starting point. In any case, this discussion is already a model of how dialogue can be productive. Which makes me think of David Bohm, who promoted true dialogue. Though an incontestably "Objective" scientist (an influential theoretical physicist) he was also inspired by Krishnamurti's version of Buddhism.

Many thanks, Steven, for pushing this forward.

Warm regards,

Peter

Srinivas Reddy's Conclusion

Thank you all...lots to mull over indeed! As the Buddha urged, we must keep questioning and refining our thoughts, just as a goldsmith assays gold by melting, forging and polishing.

***Srinivas Reddy** is a scholar, translator and musician. He studied classical South Asian languages and literatures (Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu) at UC Berkeley, and learned music from his guru and mentor Sri Partha Chatterjee, a direct disciple of the late sitar maestro Pandit Nikhil Banerjee.

***Peter** is Fair Observer's chief strategy officer. He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology. For more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management.

***Steven Elleman** is a software engineer working for Okta in San Francisco. He recently graduated from UC Berkeley where he received a double major in computer science and economics and a minor in anthropology.

You are Free (Except to Speak Truth to Power) in America

Vikram Zutshi, Lee Camp
October 30, 2022

This wide-ranging conversation with Lee Camp aka "America's Most Censored Comedian" provides an overview of the dysfunction of America's stumbling hegemon.

The topic of censorship has featured prominently in ongoing conversations about big tech and its deep links with the U.S establishment, particularly the security state. Activists and journalists known for speaking out against the depredations of the American empire and challenging the official narrative are promptly banned from the major platforms. The journalist and comedian Lee Camp used to host a satirical comedy show called Redacted Tonight on Russia Today (RT) where he exposed the machinations of corporate media, the security state and global elites, in his own inimitable style.

Following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, RT was taken off air in the US and so was Lee Camp's show. So explosive were Camp's revelations that, soon after RT was pulled, YouTube banned his videos globally and Spotify deleted his podcast. Note that Facebook has shadow-banned Camp since 2016. RT gave him unfettered freedom to

express his views candidly. Now, American platforms have pushed Camp into the shadows.

Camp has been a biting critic of NATO expansion and American hegemony. So successful was Camp in upending prevailing tropes about the inherent goodness of America that both The New York Times (NYT) and National Public Radio (NPR) published hit pieces on him in rapid succession.

Ironically, the US, which likes to admonish other countries for muzzling dissent, is notorious for punishing those who dare to challenge its political and cultural hegemony. Julian Assange and Edward Snowden were both branded as enemies of the state for spilling the beans on the largest illegal mass surveillance program in history. While Assange, the founder of Wikileaks, is currently locked up in a dingy cell in Britain's infamous Belmarsh prison, awaiting extradition to America, Snowden was forced to seek asylum in Russia, where he was recently granted citizenship by President Vladimir Putin.

In a candid and wide-ranging conversation with Camp, we spoke about his relentless activism to unmask the hidden face of the American empire, the origins of the US proxy war in Ukraine, the lies and distortions published in corporate media outlets, the way the CIA has infiltrated major media organizations and American military assistance to 73% of the world's dictators. Camp responds to accusations of being a "conspiracy theorist," shares his thoughts on the FBI raid on Donald Trump's residence, opines on the rise and fall of the petrodollar and claims that asset management firm Black Rock is "the one entity that really owns the world."

The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Vikram Zutshi: A common accusation leveled against journalists like yourself, who regularly

speak out against the crimes of the American empire, is that you are assets of the Chinese or Russian deep state. In fact, your show, *Redacted Tonight*, was hosted on the Russian state channel, *Russia Today*, later shut down by the US government in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. How do you respond to these charges?

Lee Camp: US media and television is kept carefully within a small Overton window, a small area of acceptable thought. There are no true anti-war voices regularly on US media, no anti-capitalist voices, and no anti-imperialist voices. Therefore, for an anti-war, anti-imperialist comedian/commentator such as myself, there was essentially nowhere one could host a comedy TV show like *Redacted Tonight*. In 2014, just about the only channel that would allow such a thing was RT America.

I chose to house my show there because a) I could be unabashedly anti-war and anti-imperialist and b) I was completely uncensored and unrestricted. For the eight years *Redacted Tonight* lasted, I wrote every word I ever said. I was never told what to say or what not to say. I was not instructed on where to stand or what to believe. Such freedom is completely unheard of on American television.

Not only are news broadcasters and reporters heavily censored — just look at people like Phil Donahue or Chris Hedges being forced out for being anti-war — but even comedians are kept in a small cage. Even back to the days of The Smothers Brothers, comedians were "canceled" for being anti-war. Nowadays, there are essentially no anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist comedians on television. Well, for eight years there was at least one until the US government shut down RT and my show this past March.

So to sum up, if you're asking why I would air my show on RT America, then you're really

asking why I would want to be free and uncensored. Hopefully the answer to that is pretty obvious.

Zutshi: On August 26, you tweeted, "New documents show the US & EU plans to plunder Ukraine have been in the works for years. They plan to sell off public infrastructure, destroy worker rights, and secure massive giveaways to billionaires. Much of this has already begun." What is the invasion of Ukraine really about in your view and what are these "new documents" you refer to?

Camp: Here are the documents I refer to. And while this sort of plundering is the standard operating procedure when a country has been "acquired" by the West, that is not the root reason for the proxy war. I have said since day one that I'm opposed to the Russian invasion, but because I'm a thinking adult, I can say that and also realize the US and NATO have been creating this scenario for years. Anyway, the root cause for this proxy war is that the US is a late-stage empire, and the ruling elite believe they own the world. They are not willing to allow the rise of any other large countries.

Economically Russia is not much of a competitor to the US, but if Russia were allowed to align with China, France, Germany, India etc. then US hegemony would very much be at risk. The US ruling class deals with this threat by attempting to chip away pieces of Russia and China and create a wedge between them and the rest of the world. Of course in many ways, this plan is backfiring.

Rather than turning Russia into some sort of failed state, US/NATO actions seem to be speeding up the splitting of the world economies with many states moving beyond the petrodollar. Meanwhile the US has begun to collapse internally as we can see by the fact that the UN's Office of

Sustainable Development now ranks us with Cuba and Bulgaria as a "developing country."

Furthermore, the moment the petrodollar is no longer king, the US empire will be over, because without it the US can't print as much money as we want and still have a powerful currency. The ruling elite realize this and that's the true reason they have destroyed Iraq, Libya, and Syria and tried to crush Iran and Venezuela. All of those nations were/are outside the petro-dollar and outside the grasp of our central bankers. (Not to mention if humanity is to ever do anything about the climate crisis, step one is to end the petrodollar).

As it stands now, the most powerful country in the world will do everything it can to make sure oil is still the main energy source of the world – because the power of our currency depends on it.

Zutshi: You have spoken about the CIA's tentacles spreading far and wide, infiltrating all aspects of public life including Google and social media. It's been well documented that the US intelligence community is firmly embedded in corporate mainstream media. In this context, how do legacy organizations like The New York Times and The Washington Post succeed in projecting themselves as stridently anti-establishment and champions of the underdog?

Camp: Well, it's all just propaganda, marketing, and branding. The CIA has a long history of being heavily involved in mainstream media. Operation Mockingbird in the 1960s and 1970s involved placing CIA personnel in most mainstream outlets to help control the reporting and slant the coverage. The CIA and the US government pretend all of those shenanigans are long over. However, nowadays they don't need to do anything secretly. CIA agents and Pentagon officials are regularly interviewed and "consulted" on mainstream media. They are viewed as the final

word in truth, when in fact it is their job to lie to the American people (and the world).

The Washington Post and NYT act as if anything said by the CIA, the FBI, the Pentagon or the State Department is the absolute truth. They are not reporters but rather stenographers for the corporate state. Of course this results in wild inaccuracies in their reporting.

Fairly recent fake stories like Russia paying the Taliban bounties to kill Americans or Cuba using advanced sonic weapons to give US diplomats mild headaches made the “legacy media” look like clowns. Then there are past epic failures like WMD in Iraq or the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

The New York Times famously essentially refused to cover the Holocaust throughout World War II. Even when they covered the liberation of Auschwitz and the horrible acts that took place there, they still failed to mention the victims were Jews. They basically ignored the genocide of the Jewish people. NYT also talked very positively of Hitler all the way up to the US entrance into World War II.

Anyway, why are these legacy media outlets still held up as the highest form of journalism? Because that’s what helps the US empire – repeating the lies of the corporate state and attacking those who reveal the truth, such as the attack piece NYT did on me which was filled with lies and misinformation.

Zutshi: Was there a singular incident or series of events that turned you stridently against the American empire and its relentless efforts to preserve and maintain economic and political hegemony at all costs? How do you respond to those who dub you a conspiracy theorist?

Camp.: To answer the last part first, those who call me a conspiracy theorist are either willfully

ignorant or trying to defend the status quo at all costs. They clearly don’t want to discuss these subjects in an adult, rational sense.

You ask when I turned against the American empire, but in fact, I believe I act in support of the truth and in support of freedom for all peoples. If someone is intellectually honest and they support freedom and truth, then they will find that they are opposed to the viewpoint being pushed by the American empire on most events that take place these days.

Empires in general are never built in order to spread equality, justice, and sustainability. They are built out of greed, ego, and hunger for power. For example, a report by the Congressional Research Service found that the US has perpetrated over 250 military interventions over the past 30 years. I think any honest person would be hard-pressed to find one of these interventions that is motivated purely by a need to help others or defend human rights. Sure, those types of things sound nice when printed in The New York Times, but they’re never the truth.

With every US military intervention (and even with all of our economic sanctions), the true motivation is always power, wealth, and resources. One can see proof that the US does not care even remotely about human rights in the fact that our country gives military assistance to 73% of the world’s dictators.

Zutshi: You recently stated that the asset management firm Blackrock is the one entity that “really owns the world.” It’s a sensational claim but one that begs further enquiry. Tell us more about your investigations into Blackrock.

Camp: I’m certainly not the first to cover this, but BlackRock has over \$9 trillion in assets, which is more than the GDP of every country except the US and China. To put \$9 trillion in perspective, if you

make \$40,000 a year after taxes, in order to make \$9 trillion, it would take you 225 million years. That's not a typo.

And you won't be surprised to hear that BlackRock does not generally use their insane wealth for good. They are one of the largest investors in weapons contractors, fossil fuels, and deforestation. They also are the one of the top stakeholders in every major media company in the US, so they can control the message. This is one of the reasons you hear so little about BlackRock. They don't really want people talking about them, and they exert massive control over American media. They are also one of the top stakeholders in most big banks, including many outside the US.

Anyway, long story short, it's tough to overstate the amount of control BlackRock has. No person or company should have anywhere near that amount of wealth and power.

Zutshi: What is the truth behind the unprecedented FBI raid on Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence? Does Trump have the goods on Biden, Obama, Hillary and the intel community as some are saying?

Camp: No. I don't think he has anything on them. Keep in mind I don't support either of the main parties, which are really just one party representing only corporate America. The raid on Trump's residence – and all other legal attacks against him right now, whether legitimate or not – are all meant to stop him from running (and winning) in 2024.

Trump represents a rift in the elite ruling class, who don't actually care about the terms "Democrat" or "Republican." The ruling class wants to continue American hegemony and continue the bonanza of wealth they've enjoyed. A certain percentage of them support Trump because he oversaw one of the largest transfers of wealth to

the top percentile ever, along with a massive tax break for the wealthiest Americans. But a larger percentage of the ruling class don't support Trump because he's not a good CEO for America. He says things out loud that are meant to be government secrets. He alienates allies and befriends "enemies."

Zutshi: Finally, do you see the American empire unravel as the dollar ceases to be the global currency standard and more and more nations begin transacting in their national currencies? Is there likely to be a new "rules-based order", one that is not dependent on the NATO agenda?

Camp: Yes, the writing is on the wall for the American empire. It is in its last years, which could mean decades, and there are two or three ways America can deal with that decline. Accept it and transfer into a sustainable, mostly happy country that does not control the world but also does not have as much Ponzi scheme wealth for corporate America. Or use all military might to maintain control, thereby precipitating some sort of horrific nuclear war, which the proxy war in Ukraine has put us on the cusp of.

Waning empires can shrink and not collapse, the way Britain has done, though not without hundreds of years of trouble. But waning empires can also collapse into a horrific kind of fascism. Right now the US seems to be racing towards the later choice.

But another aspect that people should take into account is climate change. Climate catastrophe is putting all of this on steroids. And the end of the American empire and the climate crisis are inexorably linked in a way that most people are not talking about. I mentioned this in an earlier question.

When the US left the gold standard, we created the petrodollar to make sure our currency would

still be incredibly powerful. We made a deal with Saudi Arabia that all oil sales would be in dollars and then all the other OPEC countries joined on. So in order for the US to maintain hegemony, the world must keep selling/buying oil in US dollars.

The moment oil is no longer king and green energy takes over or the moment oil sales switch to other currencies, the US piggy bank will collapse. So unfortunately this means the most powerful country in the world has a very strong vested interest in making sure oil is the world's main energy source. Therefore, the most powerful country in the world demands that climate change because of fossil fuel use continues unabated. It's horrifying. And it honestly amazes me so few are talking about it.

***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.

***Lee Camp** is the former host and head writer of the hit comedy news show Redacted Tonight with Lee Camp on RT America. He is now the host and writer of The Most Censored News with MintPress News. He's also the author of Bullet Points & Punch Lines and a former contributor for TruthDig, ScheerPost, The Huffington Post, MintPress, Consortium News, CounterPunch, and The Onion. Camp has also been a professional stand-up comic for over 20 years.

The Dirty Secrets About How Reza Shah Destroyed Iran

Mehdi Alavi, Atul Singh
October 31, 2022

Outside Iran, many Iranians believe Reza Shah was great. During his and his son's regime, all Iranians were told he was great. The reality is that Reza Shah was an egomaniac lackey of the British who oppressed his people, stole from the exchequer and betrayed his country.

Today, Iran is ruled by a theocratic regime. It is easy to blame the mullahs for all of Iran's ills. However, it is an inconvenient truth that their path to power was paved by the British and the Americans.

In the recent protests, unknown assailants have attacked banks, police, ambulances, other government officials, mosques, clerics and religious people. During their attacks, protesters often yell, "Reza Shah ruhat shad," a phrase that literally translates to "Reza Shah, may your soul be happy." These protesters are totally ignorant about the fact that, if Reza Shah was in power, he would have all of them killed. History tells us that Reza Shah dealt brutally with his opponents and crushed any sign of dissent.

British Domination and Exploitation

The British began interfering in Iran as early as the late 18th century. At that time, Persia, as Iran was then called, was under pressure from the Ottomans and the Russians. To Persians, the British seemed a countervailing power. To Britain, Persia was like Egypt, a buffer state to protect the jewel in the crown: India. The British did not rule Iran directly

but dominated the country through bribery and intimidation. A cadre of collaborators helped the British Empire to run Persia as an informal colony. The British drained the Persian bullion to support their Indian ventures. Unlike Egypt though, Persia never became a protectorate thanks to the resistance of Shia religious leaders.

Persia became increasingly important to British interests in the early 20th century. While Egypt had the Suez Canal, Persia had oil. In 1914, before World War I broke out, the House of Commons backed Winston Churchill's proposal for the British government to acquire 51% of the shares of Anglo-Persian. Churchill was determined to keep Anglo-Persian an absolutely "all British Company" and spent a then princely sum of £2.2 million to do so. The goal was to ensure energy security for Great Britain where the Royal Navy switched from coal to oil to compete against the fast-rising German navy.

After World War I broke out, Persia remained neutral but supplied oil to Britain. In fact, Persian oil arguably led to Allied victory. The "conversion of the British fleet to oil... [gave them] advantages over the German fleet powered by coal--greater range and speed and faster refueling." In keeping with their imperial tradition, Britain paid a pittance to Persia for oil.

Britain not only exploited Persia for oil but also grain. This led to the 1917-18 famine. About nine million Persians died, an estimated 40% of the population. Scholars have called this a genocide and, arguably, it was the biggest tragedy of World War I, exceeding the loss of life in Somme and Verdun. The British skilfully blamed the Russians and the Turks, and the genocide remained unknown for nearly a century.

The British Enthroned Ruthless Reza Mirpanj

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Persia became a frontline state for the British Empire to counter the Bolshevik menace. As in other countries, the Soviets tried to foment trouble in Persia. Britain countered by propping up Reza Mirpanj, an officer in the Persian Cossack Brigade. He went on to depose the Qajar dynasty in 1925 and declare himself shah. The rubber stamp parliament approved Reza Mirpanj's power grab.

Once he became shah, this opportunistic officer changed his name to Reza Shah Pahlavi. Importantly, the Persian language was called Pahlavi during the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanian dynasty centralized Persia and made it a great power. Choosing Pahlavi was a very clever public relations stunt. Not everyone bought into Reza Shah's sham. Four courageous legislators opposed the new shah. One of them was Mohammad Mosaddegh who would go on to become prime minister years later. The British managed Reza Shah's coronation using the coronation of George V as their guide.

Reza Shah presided over the greatest loot of Iranian historical and cultural relics. In 1931, he allowed foreign archaeologists to explore Iran and excavate Persepolis, the capital of the ancient Persian Achaemenid empire founded by Darius the Great in the 6th century BCE. His regime looked the other way as they loaded invaluable ancient artifacts onto big trucks. Then these trucks made their way from Persepolis to the Persian Gulf. Eventually, these artifacts ended up in the US and other prosperous countries of the West. Many relics ended up at the University of Chicago where they are housed in the appositely colonial sounding Oriental Institute.

The new shah turned out to be a classic British lackey. He stamped out Soviet influence and built the Trans-Iranian Railway connecting the Caspian

Sea to the Persian Gulf. Built at ruinous cost to the Iranian taxpayer, this allowed British troops to deploy faster to counter the Soviets. Most importantly, the shah increased oil concessions to the British. The British increased their oil production in Persia from around 5 million tons (37 million barrels, equivalent) in 1932 to 10 million tons (over 74 million barrels, equivalent) in 1938. Note that very little of this old money trickled down to the Persian treasury and oil revenue comprised merely 10% of the budget.

In 1936, protests against Reza Shah's policies erupted in Mashhad. The security forces cracked down the protesters. The protesters sought sanctuary in the holiest place in Iran: Imam Reza's mausoleum. On the shah's order, security forces entered the mausoleum and viciously massacred people. After that slaughter, Reza Shah became damned to eternity to most Iranians. After that incident, many people feared to even say his name, but referred to him as sag, which means dog—considered the most derogative of abuses in the Farsi language.

For increasing military might and expensive projects, Reza Shah had to increase the tax burden on the people. He also pursued a policy of centralization and Persianization. This meant ethnic minorities had no place in Persia, which he named Iran — the name used by natives of the land. Reza Shah's detribalization and Persianization led to ethnic cleansing and genocide. William Douglas, a noted American judge, had the following to note about one community that fell foul of Reza Shah:

“Lur after Lur was beheaded. Again and again, the plate was heated red hot and slapped on the stub of a neck....The colonel started betting on how far these headless men could run.... Every man, woman, and child had been killed. Not a living soul was left.”

Overall, Reza Shah was a disaster for Iran. He banned all newspapers, organizations, and any opposition. Intellectual and political expression was censored. This undid the remnant of reformist efforts kicked off by Amir Kabir, the remarkable modernizer of the mid-19th century. who preceded him about 80 years earlier. This reformer had started Vaqaye Etefaqieh, Iran's first newspaper whose name literally translates as “The Happened Events.”

Inspired by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk of Turkey, Reza Shah banned Iranian traditional dress. Both men and women now had to wear Western clothing. If they did not do so, they were beaten and even taken into custody. This policy caused a massive rupture with tradition. In small towns and villages, people ignored the shah's edict. In cities, people suffered, especially the women. Many women stopped going to public places to avoid harassment and became involuntary prisoners within their own homes. Like many other policies, the shah's policy on clothing was an unmitigated disaster. It led to resentment across the country and had unintended consequences. Today, the mullahs enforce rigid rules of dress on women in much the same way as the shah. Then too, women protested as they are protesting today.

Bloodthirsty at Home, Weak Abroad

Reza Shah might have been ruthless to ethnic minorities and deserters but he was always subservient to the great powers. He gave away many parts of Iran to buy peace. Scared of the Soviets, he gifted them the Firoze region, which lies today in Turkmenistan and is home to its capital Ashgabat, in 1933. Later, Reza Shah succumbed to British pressure and parted with more land. In 1937, the wily Brits convened a meeting to unite Muslims against the Bolsheviks. The Saadabad Treaty was signed. As per this treaty, Reza Shah gave the Helmand wetland to Afghanistan, full rights of Shatt al-Arab to Iraq

and the strategic Ararat Mountain to Turkey. This Iranian that Reza Shah gave to Turkey allows Turkish troops access to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan, which is an enclave of Azerbaijan within Armenia. Consequently, Turkey has replaced Iran as the natural ally of Azerbaijan even though the country is 85% Shia and Azeri culture has been deeply influenced by its Iranian counterpart.

In World War II, Reza Shah overplayed his hand. The rise of Nazi Germany swayed his head. By engaging with the Nazis, he began playing a dangerous game. Once the Germans invaded Russia in 1941, the British and the Soviets invaded Iran to secure oil supplies and continued access to warm waters. Reza Shah's troops capitulated. The reason was simple. Reza Shah had started as a cavalry gendarme. These gendarmes were backed by landlords and their main job was to keep the peasants in check. They were bullies who lived off the fat of the land and not patriots who were serving to fight for their country. When the British and the Soviets invaded, most of Reza Shah's top officers simply fled. Reza Shah himself proved to be a coward who did not resist the invading powers in the slightest. The military historian Robert Lyman observed that the British victory was, "one of the fastest capitulations in history."

Part of the reason Reza Shah lost was because he was a corrupt, cruel and incompetent autocrat. He was a lowly cavalry officer who was part of a coup and then conducted a coronation. Once on the throne, this autocrat engaged in a massive land grab across the country. By the time the British packed him off to exile in 1941, Reza Shah had become Iran's largest landowner. He also deposited a fair bit of cash at British Barclays Bank. The money that should have been used to build roads, schools and hospitals became the private property of a bloodthirsty upstart.

Fundamentally, Reza Shah was a narcissist, not a patriot. When the British took over Iran, he was more worried about preserving his private wealth instead of fighting for his country. By this time, this king had lost the trust of his people. The canny British had been keeping an eye on him. About 15 years ago, the imperial diplomat Harold Nicholson observed, "He [Reza] is secretive, suspicious, and ignorant; he appears wholly unable to grasp the realities of the situation or to realize the force of the hostility he has aroused." Nicholson proved prophetic.

The Modern Reza Shah Myth is a Lie

When Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Shah ruled, writers and teachers lied to survive. Flattery was the order of the day. Reza Shah was glorified as a "social, economic, and political" reformer who laid the foundation for modern Iran. He was even given credit for reforms instituted by Amir Kabir. The regime kept Iranians in the dark about Reza Shah's paranoid, violent and oppressive rule. Iranians did not realize how this corrupt king betrayed Iran to the British and stole from the exchequer.

Apologists for the Pahlavis claim that Reza Shah brought modern medicine to Iran. The truth is that the Pasteur Institute of Iran had begun in 1919, many years before he seized power. It was the first public health institution in the Middle East, producing vaccines for the region. Hospitals existed even in ancient Iran. Reza Shah was not the first to build hospitals in the country. To be fair, he did build a few but so did almost every colony from Nigeria to Vietnam.

The most incongruous myth pervasive in the Iranian diaspora is that Reza Shah ended capitulation and expelled foreign forces from Iran. History tells us that Iranians had always opposed foreign troops. Amir Kabir had called for their expulsion 80 years ago. The British saw the

writing on the wall, withdrew their troops but exercised power behind the scenes. British troops did not march down streets in Tehran in contrast to New Delhi. Instead the British used Reza Shah to do their dirty work in Iran.

Some give credit for railways, roads, industries and instituting a civil registry in Iran. The railways were for British strategic interest and cost the Iranian taxpayer a fortune. The roads were few and terrible. Industries came because Iranians have traded for centuries. Entrepreneurs learnt from Europeans and set up factories. Besides, Iranians had been producing sugar and textiles, two industries showcased by his supporters, for centuries. The registry was demanded by the parliament five years before Reza became shah.

Reza Shah's regime failed to serve Iran. At the moment of reckoning, he and his troops just ran away. He was a thug in uniform who looted the country and killed innocents. He served imperial powers, not his people. Ayatollah Khomeini was not wrong when he said, "The Pahlavi monarchy was against the law from the day it was established. They formed a fake Constituent Assembly and forcefully made him [Reza Khan] the ruler over Iran. "Today, protesters in Iran chanting "Reza Shah rahat shad" need to study their history. Iran needs freedom, democracy and equality, not the glamorization of a paranoiac, cowardly, murderous, and traitorous shah.

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A Young American Woman Loses Faith After Dobbs Ruling

Rachel Logue
November 06, 2022

Following the US Supreme Court's reversal of the landmark Roe v Wade case, women throughout the nation will not have the same reproductive rights as they have for the past half-century. The ramifications of this decision could be wide-ranging going forward.

After a full day at school, I pull out my phone and open Instagram as I would on any other weekday evening. But instead of the smiling faces of my friends, a post in The New York Times, "Breaking: Leaked Supreme Court Draft Would Overturn Roe v. Wade" stares straight back at me. My heart drops, as I reread the headline. An overwhelming sense of hopelessness overtakes me. What's going to happen now?

Although there wasn't an act the US Congress made to guarantee abortion rights, state legislatures for 50 years couldn't enforce laws when it came to denying reproductive health access. The court decided in 1973 that a woman's right to an abortion was protected by the right to

privacy, the 14th Amendment of the Constitution. However, upon its reversal, that federal constitutional right no longer exists.

This fall, I will be a freshman at Emory University, located in Atlanta, Georgia. Like many other southern states in the United States, Georgia has passed legislation prohibiting a woman's right to an abortion after six weeks of pregnancy. Before *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, this bill could not be enforced. But through the *Dobbs* ruling this past June, the Supreme Court is giving states the right to decide. Women are no longer protected. Young female students like me will still face the repercussions of this devastating ruling, regardless of the university's political leanings. However, while I can travel and gain access to reproductive care, women in lower socioeconomic backgrounds living in cities like Atlanta will be disproportionately impacted by the court's decision.

The *Dobbs* ruling shattered my once idealistic, naive view of the United States' protection of women. Growing up in Connecticut, a progressive state in the northeast, I took for granted that women of all demographics had the freedom to choose what to do with their bodies. In high school, I was surrounded by teachers and classmates who shared the common belief that it was a right for a woman to have equitable reproductive healthcare. As a junior, I took an American Studies course where we discussed topics related to the oppression of women. I was disgusted by how commercials in the 1970s subjugated women, reducing them to the confines of the household. When it came to dealing with the threats of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, I denied the possibility of such an outcome. While the right to an abortion was and is a polarizing, controversial issue, I never thought that the country would revert to a place where women are prohibited to decide their future.

Looking to the future

Although it can be hard to find hope at a time when women are being marginalized, we are living in a different world than half a century ago. There used to be underground societies where women were able to get abortions and avoid the law. Now in 2022, with the help of technological advancements in medicine, there are safer ways for women to get reproductive care. For instance, since the overturning of *Roe*, there has been a huge surge in the use of two drugs called misoprostol and mifepristone, often referred to as the "abortion pills." This medication has been approved by the FDA for 20 years, making it a proven alternative for women. According to the *New York Times*, medication abortion is less expensive and less invasive while providing more privacy than surgical abortions. Women can even receive these pills by mail after an in-person or initial virtual consultation with a doctor. Another advantage of this medication is that it's difficult for the state to track and monitor. There is comfort in knowing that innovations such as these exist. Even though I foresee legal challenges in southern conservative states, I hope there continue to be solutions for women to get the support they need and deserve.

If I had known the outcome of the *Dobbs* ruling when I was applying to college last year, I would have reconsidered attending a school in the south. Many of my friends expressed a preference for staying in the northeast for their higher education, both when talking in class or during extracurriculars. One of my former classmates, who is in the process of applying to college, told me that she is only looking at universities where abortion rights are protected. I believe many young women who grew up in the north will apply to institutions in states that protect women's reproductive rights over those that do not. As I look to the future, I have faith that northern policymakers and scientists around the nation will come together to protect vulnerable populations of

women in need of proper reproductive healthcare. At this point in our country's history, millions of women's lives are on the line. It is up to us, the people, to be the change we want to see.

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Revolution Erupted in Iran Because of Mohammad Reza Shah

Mehdi Alavi, Atul Singh
November 08, 2022

Outside Iran, many believe Mohammad Reza Shah was a modernizer. The reality could not be more different. Like his father, Mohammad Reza Shah was an egomaniacal lackey of the British and Americans who oppressed his people, stole from the exchequer and betrayed his country.

In our previous piece, we examined how Reza Shah destroyed Iran. In this piece, we put his son Mohammad Reza Shah under the microscope. We do so because, to understand the Iran of 2022, we have to make sense of its tortured past.

Currently, Iran is ruled by mullahs. Iran's theocratic regime is disliked, if not despised, by the US and its allies. Many, including prominent Iranians, blame the mullahs for all of Iran's ills. However, few are aware of an inconvenient truth.

It was the British who paved the path to power for the mullahs with the Americans constructing the mile.

Over the years, the mullahs have faced many protests. In the current wave, protesters have attacked government officials such as the police, ambulance attendants and bank officials. They have also targeted mosques, clerics and religious people. Many protesters chant "marq bar dictaator," a phrase that literally translates as "death to the dictator." Some of them have a soft spot for Mohammad Reza Shah whom we will subsequently refer to as the Shah.

Sadly, the Shah so beloved by some Iranians was an oppressive dictator. His secret police SAVAK kept an eye on the people. Hence, a famous proverb was born: divar mush dare, musham gush dare — the wall has a mouse, the mouse has ears. Under the Shah, Iran was a surveillance state much like the Soviet Union and East Germany. If you said the wrong thing to the wrong people, SAVAK would throw you into prisons like Evin and Qasr. You also faced the risk of torture and murder. After all, the US had taught SAVAK the tricks of the trade.

Young women who wish for a return to the halcyon days of absolute monarchical rule do not know that the Shah was deeply sexist. He believed that women were less intelligent than men. In his interview with Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, the Shah remarked, "You may be equal in the eyes of the law, but not, I beg your pardon for saying so, in ability." Hence, it is unsurprising that the Shah objectified women and saw them purely through the lens of sexual pleasure.

A Classic Comprador

When the Portuguese pioneered European colonization of the colored peoples, a term came into being. A comprador or compradore came to

signify a “person who acts as an agent for foreign organizations engaged in investment, trade, or economic or political exploitation.” The Shah was a comprador who ruled Iran first as a British vassal and then as an American one.

The circumstances of the Shah’s accession to the throne are most instructive. The British deposed Reza Shah for cozying up with the Germans in 1941. After sending the father packing, they placed the weak, callow 22-year-old son on the throne. They chose the young Shah precisely because they were convinced that he would do their bidding.

The Shah proved to be a good pick. The British and the Soviets occupied Iran. The British used Iran’s north-south railroad to supply the Soviets against Germany. In 1942, both promised that they would withdraw their forces within six months of the end of the war. This promise was intended to appease Iranian nationalists. In 1943, American troops arrived in Iran too. When the war ended, the Soviets troops failed to leave the country as per their promise. Only American pressure made them leave by May 1946. Iranians were appreciative of American commitment to the integrity of Iran and its right to self-determination.

Foreign occupation fuelled national pride and democratic discourse in Iran. Once foreign troops left, this continued. While foreign troops left, foreign influence did not stop. The British continued to extract and export oil from Iran for a pittance. They treated Iran as a de facto colony and the Shah acted as their comprador.

Naturally, dissent emerged. Mohammad Mosaddegh emerged as the key leader. Reza Shah had put him under house arrest. Once the bloodthirsty ruler was deposed in 1941, Mosaddegh returned to public life and was elected to parliament. Protests in 1949 against fake elections led to the founding of Jebhe Melli, which

literally translates as National Front. As its leader, Mosaddegh promised to end the British control of Iran’s oil industry. He demanded that the British share profits equally with Iran. At the time, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) was paying more money to Britain as taxes than to Iran as a share of the proceeds.

The British opposed Mosaddegh tooth and nail. They refused to share profits equally with the Iranians, claiming it would be a breach of contract. The very British idea of duress invalidating a contract did not apply to Iran. The Iranians had signed a deal that gave them 17.5% of AIOC’s profits when the British held a gun to their head. The AIOC cooked its books and Iran never really got the promised 17.5% either.

In late December 1950, the American-owned Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) agreed to share profits with Saudi Arabia on a 50-50 basis. The British rejected the idea of any similar agreement for AIOC with Iran. This left the Iranian parliament with no choice but to pass a bill nationalizing the oil industry in March 1951. The Shah did not sign the bill. Mosaddegh was elected prime minister in April and the Shah was now forced to sign the nationalization bill.

The British responded by manipulating the Americans to conduct a military coup in 1953. The Cold War was on and the Americans were turning paranoid about communism. Nationalization allowed the British to paint Mosaddegh as a potential Soviet ally. Like a wily old uncle manipulating a sinewy nephew, the British got the Americans to do their dirty work for them. Mosaddegh was packed off to prison and the Shah emerged as an absolute ruler just like his father.

Until the 1953 coup, the Shah had one master: the British. From now on, he had two masters: the British and the US. As the American star rose, they came to dominate Iran. The British debacle in the

1956 Suez Crisis strengthened the American hand. As part of the Cold War, the US began beefing up the Shah's regime. Washington provided the regime with military advisers, intelligence agents, and arms and ammunition worth millions of dollars. The Iranian taxpayer paid for such help most generously. American oil companies got a share of the Iranian oil pie.

The Shah's Oppressive Police State

After 1953, life in Iran deteriorated. For Washington, the Shah was a key Cold War ally. Iran was a frontline state against the Soviet Union. So, in 1957, CIA and FBI helped the Shah's regime to set up the dreaded Sazman-e Etelaat Va Amniat Keshvar (SAVAK), a secret police to cow his people into submission. The US and, later, Israel coached Iranian military, police and intelligence officials in the arts of surveillance, coercion and torture.

By 1960, the Shah had a vise-like grip on the country. He had eliminated, imprisoned, and silenced the opposition. Nobody dared to protest. SAVAK routinely scrutinized students, civil service employees and industrial workers. It censored and controlled all forms of media and professional associations. SAVAK also monitored Iranian communities abroad. It had over 5,000 full-time employees and many part-time agents around the world. SAVAK used all forms of torture necessary to extract to extract information and punish dissenters. Nobody felt safe in Iran.

Such was the brutality of SAVAK that American public opinion began to turn. The US put pressure on the Shah to reform. In 1963, the Shah announced a plebiscite for an ambitious program of social, political and economic reform that has come to be known as the White Revolution. The most important element of this revolution was land reform. He broke down large land holdings to give away land to poor

cultivators. In theory, this sounds like a good egalitarian measure. In reality, it led to disaster.

Poor cultivators did not have money to run their small farms. The government gave them land but did not give them farming implements, seeds, fertilizers, irrigation and funds. Unsurprisingly, they abandoned their farms to become landless laborers in cities, particularly Tehran. The urban population exploded and, in due course, so did discontent.

It was in 1963 that the then relatively obscure Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini spoke out against the White Revolution. Khomeini was teaching at the prestigious Fayziyyeh Madrasah in Qom. He was already a prominent ayatollah. The Shah arrested Khomeini and killed many students at Fayziyyeh. Luckily for Khomeini, the Shah did not kill him or confine him to an Iranian prison. In 1964, Khomeini publicly criticized the Shah for awarding the US capitulation and called him a lackey of US and Israel. The Shah first arrested Khomeini but, after 19 days in Qasr and a another few days in a military base, packed off the ayatollah into exile who ended up living in Turkey, Iraq, and, eventually, France.

Extravagant Opulence by Foreign Lackey

When the Shah was not oppressing his people, torturing dissidents or locking up his opponents, he was lavishly blowing up Iranian tax money on obscenely extravagant events. In 1967, the Shah crowned himself in an occasion that still lives on in Iranian memory. This American lackey assumed the resonant but meaningless title, "His Imperial Majesty The Shāhanshāh of Iran," and wore a crown that was studded with a mere 3,380 diamonds. He gave his wife Farah the title, "the Empress of Iran," an unprecedented act in Iranian 2,500-year history.

In most monarchies, coronation is held soon after the king or queen ascends to the throne, as the coronation of Charles II in the UK demonstrates. In the case of Iran, the coronation ceremony was a reflection of the Shah's perverted narcissism. He wanted the world to see him as a secular reformer, a great modernizer, a savior of an ancient civilization, the resuscitator of ancient Persia and a historic emperor beloved by his people. Four years later, he threw what has come to be known as "the world's greatest party" to celebrate 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy.

In 1971, the Shah held this party in the ancient ruins of Persepolis, which now lies in the middle of a desert. An airport, a highway and an entire tent city were built for the occasion. This "billion-dollar party" has come to be known as "the Devil's Feast." As his people toiled in poverty, the Shah and his foreign guests were quaffing the fanciest of champagnes and gorging on caviar.

Many kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers were impressed by this ostentatious desert party. However, canny observers were not entirely convinced. The most memorable of these was US diplomat George Ball who attended this party and saw the spectacle of the crowning of the "Sun of the Aryans." His words sum up this 1971 incongruous big bash:

"What an absurd, bathetic spectacle! The son of a colonel in a Persian Cossack regiment play-acting as the emperor of a country with an average per capita income of \$250 per year, proclaiming his achievements in modernizing his nation while accoutred in the raiment and symbols of ancient despotism."

While the Shah was good at throwing lavish parties, he was not as savvy at retaining Iranian territory. Bahrain had been overwhelmingly Shia and was under Iranian suzerainty before the British took over. The British were supposed to return this

island to Iran. Instead, the British pressured the Shah to let Bahrain become an independent state in 1970. They had installed a comprador Wahhabi Sunni dynasty just as they had installed the Pahlavis in Iran. This Wahhabi dynasty still rules over Bahraini Shias with an iron hand.

While the Shah projected himself as a mighty emperor, in reality, he was the gendarme of the Persian Gulf for Uncle Sam. The US relied on Iran as its leading security partner in the Gulf. Iranian oil revenues were spent to protect American interests in the region. The Shah also supported the US in the Vietnam War.

A Sordid and Dissolute Despot

Today, many Iranians see the Shah as a liberator of women. During his time, glamorous women in elegant dresses sashayed down his red carpets. This is in stark contrast to the current regime of mullahs that imposes draconian dress codes on women. The nostalgia for the more permissive pre-1979 era obscures the fact that the Shah did not really see women as equals. He made his wife regent but did not think she would be able to rule as well as him.

The Shah led a famously dissolute life, visiting nightclubs across Europe and chasing beautiful actresses. One of them was Grace Kelly who became the Princess Grace of Monaco in 1956. The Shah spent millions on Kelly. He gifted her "three pieces of Van Cleef & Arpels jewelry: a gold birdcage housing a diamond and sapphire bird, all fashioned into a perfect pin; a gold vanity case with a clasp set with thirty-two diamonds; and a gold bracelet with an intricate pearl and diamond face." He gifted others ancient jewelry from the treasury. Tragically, the poor, toiling Iranian taxpayers funded this libertine lifestyle. They also paid for the Shah's gambling addiction. This magnificent emperor often lost about 50 million

tomans (\$42 million) in a single night as peasants went hungry in his homeland.

More importantly, the Shah was the Harvey Weinstein of his day. In fact, he was much worse than Weinstein. Not only pimps but also government officials were supposed to procure beautiful women for the Shah. Some of these women were underage. The Shah was a serial sexual offender who preyed on vulnerable women and got away with it.

Given the Shah's lack of loyalty to his nation, his excessive ostentation, brutal oppression and moral turpitude, a revolution was inevitable. Monarchs cannot eat cakes forever when their people struggle for bread. Even though SAVAK had imprisoned, tortured or killed opposition leaders like Mosaddegh, the Iranian people were seething in rage against their "Playboy Shah." Iranians revolted in 1979, exactly 190 years after the 1789 French Revolution. Once the dust settled, the mullahs led by Khomeini took charge.

Today, the Shah's eldest son Reza lives in the US and continues the family tradition. Reza dreams of the restoration of the Pahlavi dynasty and a return to good times for his family. He has been financed not only by the CIA but also the Saudis. Like his grandfather and father, Reza is also a lackey. The apple has not fallen far from the tree.

Today, people are out on the streets protesting against the mullahs who run a theological state. Most of them are very young with some barely 15. Some of them are vulnerable to myths about a glorious past and look favorably upon the Shah. Even in 2022, there are Iranians who glorify and glamorize the Shah. They must remember that he was a corrupt tyrant who stole from his people, gave territories away, helped foreigners destroy Iranian democracy, killed innocents and sexually abused innumerable women. The Shah belongs to

the dustbin of history. Iran's future has to be about liberty, equality, human rights, freedom and democracy.

[The authors corrected and updated this article on November 9, 2022.]

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Totalitarianism Now Presents an Unprecedented Global Threat

Gary Grappo
November 12, 2022

Totalitarianism is on the rise again and democracies are distracted. The gathering of all nations together to staunch the advance of aggressive totalitarianism is necessary and urgent.

I am not a pessimistic person usually. My personal inclination and more than two and half decades as a diplomat have taught me the importance and value of remaining optimistic. Optimism for a diplomat is as essential as courage for a soldier. An effective diplomat is confident that persistent and effective diplomacy can solve a great many problems between and among nations.

But my usual optimism is being sorely tested these days. One glance at international headlines is enough to send anyone into extended binge-watching of online films or some other manner of escapism. At some point, though, one cannot ignore the dark clouds on the horizon, or in some cases directly overhead.

It's easy to compare the foreboding circumstances of today's world with those preceding World Wars I and World War II. Indeed, there are some real similarities: headstrong dictators bent on conquest, tense regional rivalries, distracted democracies beset by internal problems or economic challenges, and restless publics stirred by extremists of all manner. But 2022 presents its own unique conditions that make it very different from the years preceding previous global conflicts. The most obvious looms menacingly over the entire planet: nuclear weapons. Another is the already present danger of climate change and the inescapable need for nations to work together in addressing it, especially the major powers. So, no, today's crises are not like the previous world wars. The stakes are much higher.

Rising of Totalitarians, Distracted Democracies

The closing of the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in which Xi Jinping effectively made himself dictator for life of the world's most populous country and second largest economy, was at once predictable and

ominous. Xi made clear that he isn't backing off. China's aggressive and belligerent behavior will continue. Having named sycophants to sit with him on the party's politburo and its standing committee ensures that he will hear no opposition, no alternative ideas and no dissent to his diktat. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has now moved decidedly from authoritarian to totalitarian government. That is not only dangerous for the people of China but also for the rest of the world as PRC's military forces gear up for a potential conflict over Taiwan.

Juxtaposed against that looming threat is China's "no-limits" partnership with President Vladimir Putin's Russia. Putin, another autocrat seized with blindly conceived grand ambitions, has already laid his cards on the table, or, to be more accurate, on Ukraine. Granted Xi's commitment to him was made before Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, but China has yet to back away from its Russian relationship. This is despite the fact that the war in Ukraine has largely been a disaster for Putin. In fact, Putin's setbacks might have turned Russia into a veritable vassal state of China. Arguably, this is good for Xi (maybe) and bad for Putin. Despite this situation not being good for Russia, what are Putin's options?

Next on the totalitarian hit parade is the Islamic Republic of Iran, which maintains very good relations with the aforementioned autocrats. Its ruling theocracy governs with comparable iron-fisted policies and a heavy dose of neolithic ideology. As hundreds of thousands throughout Iran take to the streets again at considerable risk of arrest, torture and even death, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei responds with pearls of medieval wisdom: "If we want to prevent our society from being plunged into corruption and turmoil, we should keep women in hijab."

Protesters show no signs of backing down. So, naturally, the Iranian government needs a

distraction. The mullahs blame America. It is the Islamist Republic's timeless trope, ignored by the vast majority of Iranians for its sheer baselessness. Despite public discontent, Tehran has thrown its lot with fellow autocrat Putin in his unjust war against Ukraine. Iran has joined Russia in attacking the people of Ukraine by sending drones, missiles, and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps operators and trainers for Russian troops.

Protesters show no signs of backing down. So, naturally, the Iranian government needs a distraction. It has joined Russia in attacking the people of Ukraine by sending drones, missiles and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps operators and trainers for Putin's troops. By throwing in its lot with Russia in a brutal and illegal war against Ukraine, Iran reveals the single-minded obtuseness of Khamenei and the desperation of Putin. Such is the wont of dictators who do what they want. They need not listen to their citizenry and even foreclose the possibility of doing so.

Further down the list of the planet's wretched leaders, one cannot ignore the head of the model pariah state, North Korea. One would be hard pressed to identify a single policy or manner of behavior that is not repugnant and anathema to the UN Charter and the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the helm of the Hermit Kingdom is Kim-Jung Un, aka "dear leader," (the titles "supreme leader," "paramount leader," and "great leader" having been already taken by others). The North Korean economy is almost entirely dependent on neighboring China, which sees the tyrant-ruled nation as a useful nuisance and distraction for the US, South Korea and Japan. Otherwise, were North Korea to fall into the ocean tomorrow, it would hardly be missed by the people's colossus next door. Kim fulfills his role well, periodically launching intermediate-range missiles menacingly near and over South Korea and Japan. The dear leader has most recently threatened to test nuclear weapons, which it

continues to produce in flagrant contravention of numerous UN Security Council resolutions.

Three of these nations have nuclear weapons capable of annihilating millions. The fourth, Iran, seems poised to get them unless the P5+1 negotiators can manage to pull a rabbit from their negotiating hats and conclude reimposition of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to curb Iran's nuclear weapons development program. But that agreement seems very unlikely after three months of moribund talks, the growing popular protests in Iran and the Islamic Republic's decision to join forces with Russia against Ukraine. Even so, many predict, Iran's eventual acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability within the near-to-medium term is almost certain. Such a prospect would almost assure across-the-Gulf neighbor Saudi Arabia's rush for its own bomb.

Although Saudi Arabia is nominally led by an absolute monarch, currently King Salman bin Abdulaziz, its effective leader today is his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. MBS, as he is widely known, is an absolutist autocrat but oversees a nation dependent on protection from the US. That dependency relationship could easily change if the kingdom was to obtain or develop nuclear weapons. Unlike North Korea, it has enough oil the world desperately needs to sustain its economy. In fact, Saudi Arabia has so much oil that Iran-like economic sanctions are unlikely. They could lead to a meltdown of the global economy.

Given the deteriorating relations between the kingdom and the US and, in particular, between MBS and US President Joe Biden, the world should not discount the prospect of Saudi Arabia acquiring nuclear weapons and of MBS finally severing his nation's dependency on the US, thus empowering one more autocrat with the ultimate weapon. It will require herculean diplomacy on the part of the US and others to ensure that doesn't

happen. Autocrats have their ambitions and are rarely disposed to changing them.

Arrayed against this dangerous lineup of totalitarian states is the US, still considered the world's premier superpower. Its network of alliances and defense treaties in Europe and Asia give the US formidable military and economic clout. The US and its allies are united not only by treaties and alliances but also and especially by shared values, particularly democracy, liberty, respect for human rights and the rule of law. The aforementioned autocrats see these values as an American imposition on the international order because the US had overwhelming power since the end of World War II.

This anti-American posturing is self-serving. Let us be honest. The problem with these values is not that they are American, the problem with them is that they counter the autocrats' justification for one-man rule. Antipathy toward the US and toward the values it espouses is what unites the world's autocrats. There really is nothing more these nations share, which is revealing in itself.

The Global Rest

Left unmentioned is the "global rest," the large majority of nations in Africa, Latin America, South and Southeast Asia and elsewhere that have avoided choosing sides. Their reasons are several and not always unjustified. Many are former colonies with lingering resentment toward and suspicions of their former colonizers. In addition, many may see getting drawn into the conflict as counterproductive to their own interests, particularly their economic interests. The larger nations of this group — India, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia and Nigeria — are stressed democracies like Turkey, Hungary and even the US. Despite their flaws, these democracies would find the ruling styles of China or Russia anathema. For the time being, however, they are not

threatened directly nor are their interests jeopardized by the current tensions.

That could easily change, though, and perhaps faster than anyone would want or could predict. An unrestrained Xi might decide to order an invasion of Taiwan, consequently closing the Taiwan Strait, shutting down half of the world's tanker traffic and sending the global economy spiraling. If Western nations currently supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia were to let up on their support, it would assure a Russian victory. This would empower Putin to plan further expansion in accordance with his revanchist imperial dream of a greater Russia. All of Western and Eastern Europe would be drawn into a resulting continental conflict, also creating conditions for global economic disaster and fertile ground for totalitarian opportunists elsewhere. Overhanging both scenarios is the prospect of nuclear conflict, already broached by a flailing and ever-desperate Putin.

Inability to resurrect the JCPOA nuclear accord would remove any incentive for Iran to shut down its nuclear weapons program. Whether it actually builds a nuclear bomb or not, the mere prospect could set off war in the Middle East as Israel and possibly Saudi Arabia act militarily to foreclose Iran's nuclear advancement. As we have seen in the past, war in the Gulf is highly destabilizing to both the region and to a global economy dependent on the region's oil. China alone looks to the region for 40% of its oil needs.

None of this is over-the-top alarmism. All of the autocrats mentioned have at one time or other threatened use of force. What recourse do democracies have against this unprecedented alignment of nuclear-empowered autocrats? Is it even possible to talk a dictator out of carrying out actions seen as indispensable to some grand plan? And if not, then what?

Perhaps the first step is shaking the citizens of democracies, most especially in the United States, out of their domestic political navel-gazing and into an awareness of the enormity of the challenge before them. In their increasingly partisan culture wars, Americans appear to be swatting at mosquitoes as dragons, bears and snakes stalk the neighborhood. They would be wise to follow the advice of Franklin D. Roosevelt in his May, 1941 fireside chat. The 32nd president argued then that defense meant not only a well-armed military force but also "... the use of a greater American common sense in discarding rumor and distorted statement... (and) recognizing, for what they are, racketeers and fifth columnists, who are the incendiary bombs in this country of the moment." Substitute disinformation and alternative facts for "rumor" and election deniers for "racketeers and fifth columnists" and Roosevelt's words ring true for America today.

Roosevelt was facing a major threat to the world's oldest democracy. In the interwar years of the 1920s and 1930s, America had withdrawn into its isolationist island, flirting with all manner of "America First," racist and Nazi ideas, and organizations. Meanwhile Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan had begun their march through Europe and Asia, and expansion across the Pacific. Only Japan's strategic blunder in attacking Pearl Harbor succeeded in breaking America out of its isolationist never-never land and launched it into a war to reestablish global security, and ultimately the international global order we know today. It is this very order that Xi, Putin, Khamenei and Kim-Jung Un seek to undo. Neither the US nor other nations should count on either Beijing or Moscow making a mistake like Pearl Harbor again.

The attention and support of voters well informed of the threats before them are indispensable to successfully confronting Totalitarianism Incorporated of today. The alignment of these dictatorial states could be

described by the same words Roosevelt used in his December 1940 fireside chat, an "unholy alliance of power and pelf to dominate and to enslave the human race." The totalitarian order is predicated on obedience to a single authority, aka the great leader. It is an order and peace of the dictator. The democratic alternative is an alliance of nations composed of citizens loyal to a set of ideals and principles. It is an order and peace of free people.

Deterrence, Diplomacy and Unity

What then is to be done? Deterrence is critical. And it is also expensive. Yet it is essential because totalitarians respect power. Therefore, democracies will have to arm themselves to demonstrate resolve and a clear determination to resist totalitarian ambitions. Ukrainians prove today that dictators, regardless of level of brutality, can be stopped. It's an example to all democracies.

Diplomacy is important too. Yet it can only be effective when backed up by unflinching deterrence and iron resolve. Diplomacy may work with dictators when they see the costs of challenging well-armed and resolute democratic states. In the absence of credible deterrence, diplomacy descends into appeasement, enabling the easiest of victories for a dictator.

At the moment, the US and the West have to embark on a vital diplomatic initiative with the rest of the world. Many nations are still unwilling to commit themselves to confronting the totalitarian challenge. They must be convinced that their continued fence-sitting ultimately will undermine their respective national goals, and the very global order that permits their flourishing. The rallying cry must be that in a peaceful, prosperous and secure world, sovereignty, borders and a rules-based international order are the sine qua non of peace. They are sacrosanct. Without an explicit, unqualified embrace of these simple concepts, no nation is safe. Peace and prosperity for all peoples

become elusive. Fear and foreboding envelope societies. Liberty evaporates. Human progress is stymied.

That undertaking — the gathering of all nations together to staunch the advance of aggressive totalitarianism — is necessary and urgent. Done successfully, it may be the best way to avoid war and fix a barrier around all those seeking to impose their will on other nations. No nation, regardless of size, should or can afford to be neutral on this matter.

The lessons of the last century's two world wars and the Cold War taught us that both military power, and principled and determined diplomacy are necessary when confronting totalitarianism. It is time to apply those lessons with renewed vigor today.

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Fascistic Tendencies in the Muslim Brotherhood

Amir Darwish
November 18, 2022

Right from its beginnings in 1928, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood was inspired by fascism. Even today, its animating ideas, guiding principles, policy positions, and organizational structure are fascist in some way or form.

Encyclopedia Britannica tells us that the Muslim Brotherhood is a “religiopolitical organization founded in 1928 at Ismailia, Egypt, by Hassan al-Banna.” It is important to note that the Muslim Brotherhood was born precisely when fascism and Nazism were taking off in Europe. Scholars from both Egypt and the West have found similarities between the Muslim Brotherhood and the authoritarian European ideologies of this era.

In particular, the Muslim Brotherhood's social and economic policies were similar to fascist ones. Furthermore, al-Banna sympathized with both Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. Since the 1960s, some scholars have even argued that the Muslim Brotherhood is inspired more by nationalism and socialism, less by Islam. Manfred Halpern's iconic book, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa*, argues that the Muslim Brotherhood embraced totalitarianism and rejected modernism.

The MB totalitarian vision

The Muslim Brotherhood's totalitarian vision was inspired by Islam. It saw modernity and individuality threatening. The organization championed tradition and belonging to a community instead. This community was of pious Egyptian Muslims who would live in an egalitarian society. Traditional Islam, not multiparty democracy, was to act as a guide for the future. This future would only be born after a struggle. As in the case of fascists, violence was a legitimate tool in the Muslim Brotherhood's struggle. Like all totalitarian ideologies, the Muslim Brotherhood pledged allegiance to al-Banna, its sole leader, and treated his vision as absolute.

The Muslim Brotherhood's conception of gender roles was remarkably similar to the Nazis. They encouraged marriage and large families. Women were meant to be mothers and men to be

fathers. In this traditional view, men were breadwinners for the family while women were the nurturers of future generations. For this socially conservative organization, promotion of family values was a key goal. Therefore, the Muslim Brotherhood argued for closing down cabarets and dance halls, and censoring plays, films and novels. The organization also suggested improvements in song lyrics to make them more virtuous.

Antisemitism within the Muslim Brotherhood

Just like the Nazi Party, the Muslim Brotherhood too shared an intense hatred for Jews. For example, Sayyid Qutb, the ideological father of the Muslim Brotherhood, espoused his antisemitism in many of his major works such as the book, *Milestones*. The book is still considered to be a foundational text for Islamist groups. According to Qutb, the world is divided between the realm of God (Islam) and the realm of Satan (Jews). In *Milestones*, he writes: “[The Jews’] aim is clearly shown by the Protocols [of the Elders of Zion]. The Jews are behind materialism, animal sexuality, the destruction of the family and the dissolution of society.”

In 1938, seven years before Israel was established, the Muslim Brotherhood led violent demonstrations against Egypt’s Jewish community. That same year, they organized the Parliamentary Conference for the Arab and Muslim Countries in Cairo, where they distributed Arabic translations of *Mein Kampf* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

In his book, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, Jeffrey Herf explores the Nazi Party’s brief but intense efforts to gain support amongst Muslims in the Middle East. He details the prominent role played by Haj Amin al-Husseini, then the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. In 1937, Al-Husseini fled Palestine, evading arrest by the British for instigating the riots that became known

as the Arab Revolt. The Grand Mufti had recruited armed militias to attack Jews but his efforts were ultimately unsuccessful.

By 1941, al-Husseini established himself in Nazi Germany and Italy. During the war, he collaborated with the Germans in their efforts to recruit Bosnian Muslims for the Waffen-SS. In 1945, the Grand Mufti was taken into custody by French troops but he escaped and settled in Cairo where he was welcomed with praise. The Muslim Brotherhood’s issued a statement to *Al Misri* that is still telling: “One hair of the Mufti’s is worth more than the Jews of the whole... should one hair of the Mufti’s be touched, every Jew in the world would be killed without mercy.”

That the Muslim Brotherhood was, and still to this day, inspired by fascism is a history that needs to be examined in greater detail. The Muslim Brotherhood has been able to establish itself as a moral, social and political force because of the guiding influence of the authoritarian ideologies that emerged in Europe during the interwar period. By studying the Muslim Brotherhood’s conception and development, we may come to better understand how such ideologies transcended the borders of Europe.

[Naveed Ahsan edited this article.]

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Portuguese UN Chief Preaches to India: Is it White Savior Complex?

Soundarajan Narendran, K.T. Jagannathan
November 19, 2022

During his recent India visit, the UN chief asked India “to protect and promote the rights of all individuals, including members of minority communities.” India is doing that and more. It is a force for global good and deserves not preaching but respect.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently visited India. In more ways than one, it was a significant visit. For a start, it underscores India’s rising geopolitical importance. After 75 years of independence, in the words of Guterres, India is finally a global “powerhouse.”

The secretary-general lauded the country’s contribution to sustainable development goals. In his words, “India’s recent development journey is characterized by high impact programmes delivered at scale. This includes the world’s largest food-based social protection scheme and the massive expansion of access to clean water and sanitation services.”

Guterres also noted that India is the biggest provider of military and police personnel to UN missions. Importantly, India has provided the first all-women UN police contingent for a peacekeeping mission. More than 200,000 Indian men and women had served in 49 peacekeeping missions since 1948.

One False Note

Yet Guterres was not all sweetness and light when it came to India. He gave a speech at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay. During his oration, he gave India some unwanted advice. Guterres said, “As an elected member of the Human Rights Council, India has a responsibility to shape global human rights, and to protect and promote the rights of all individuals, including members of minority communities.” He went on to add, “India’s global role will benefit if concrete actions are taken in support of the rights and freedoms of journalists, human rights activists, students and academics.”

Guterres comes from Portugal. He could do well to remember that his forefathers brought the Inquisition to India. Vasco da Gama arrived in 1498 to kick off an era of rape, murder and theft by Europeans in Asia. Unlike the British, the Portuguese did not leave in good grace. The largely pacifist Jawaharlal Nehru whom Guterres quoted had to send troops to kick the Portuguese out of Goa in 1961.

Given the historical record, Indians do not take kindly to Europeans, and especially the Portuguese, preaching to them. The trope of India becoming less inclusive and pluralist has been bandied in Western newspapers. In New York, where Guterres resides, The New York Times has poured pure poison about India in its recent articles. The story is simple. It goes something like this. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a Hindu fascist party. It marginalizes minorities, tramples freedoms and weakens the rule of law. Ipso facto, white knights in shining armor have to ride to India’s rescue.

By preaching to India about human rights, Guterres displayed a breathtaking lack of sensitivity. Indians have noted that the likes of Guterres ignore their history of conquest,

colonization and continued plunder while merrily preaching to India. India has played its part and is playing more than its part as a force for global good.

Some Key Facts

India conducts elections regularly. The BJP recently lost to the opposition Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the sensitive border state of Punjab, which was partitioned in 1947. West Bengal, another border state, is ruled by the Trinamool Congress (TMC). India has been a democracy for much longer than Guterres's Portugal. Few remember that Portugal only became a democracy in 1975. In India, power changes hands from the BJP to the AAP or the Communists to the TMC peacefully. India is the world's largest and most diverse democracy.

India also has a vibrant legal tradition. Indian courts are slow but they are not dominated by the political elite. Unlike the US where judicial appointments are a game of political football, the Supreme Court Collegium has complete autonomy to appoint judges to India's highest court. The prime minister or parliament has no say. This is unimaginable in most countries where the political elites appoint judges. Unlike American presidents, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not appointed a single judge. Judges have appointed their fellow judges. Most of them come from elite English-speaking families that historically owe their allegiance to the Congress Party still run by the Nehru dynasty.

India upholds human rights of its citizens resolutely. Are there abuses? Of course. No country with over 1.3 billion with so many religions, ethnicities, languages, castes and communities can avoid some incidents. Yet it is in the US where Guterres resides that one in three black men "today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime, as can one of every six Latino boys —

compared with one of every 17 white boys." The American Civil Liberties Union also observes that, since 1970, "the number of incarcerated people has increased sevenfold to 2.3 million in jail and prison today, far outpacing population growth and crime." India does a lot better in protecting rights of Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and all other minorities than the US.

Importantly, India has made great progress in improving the rights and plight of women. The government banned the practice of triple talaq. Muslim men cannot utter "talaq, talaq, talaq" and get rid of their wives. The human rights of over 80 million Muslim women have improved thanks to this measure. As per The Independent, "India is on the greatest toilet-building spree in human history." In 2018, it reported that, since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took over in 2014, his government built an estimated 80 million toilets. By now, the number has crossed over 110 million. This means that women do not have to go out into the fields to defecate or urinate. Their health, welfare and dignity have dramatically improved.

India also vaccinated hundreds of millions against COVID-19 for free. It distributed vaccines to citizens regardless of class, caste, religion, sexuality or any other discriminating factor. It fed the poorest sections of the population during the pandemic too. India even sent 50,000 tons of wheat to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan when millions faced hunger and starvation after the US abandoned this tragic country to its grim fate.

India's humanitarian measure for Afghanistan gives the lie to Rana Ayyub of The Washington Post calling the BJP government anti-Muslim. If Ayyub's claims are true, why would a Hindu fascist government feed millions of Muslims living under the Taliban?

Americans forget that the Taliban gave refuge to hijackers of an Indian plane in 1999. This

hijacking of a plane from Kathmandu in Nepal to Kandahar in Afghanistan is seared into India's consciousness. The BJP was in power then and humiliatingly released three terrorists who have killed thousands since. One of the three released was responsible for abducting and killing the American journalist Daniel Pearl. Another founded Jaish-e-Muhammed that attacked the Indian parliament in 2001 and launched the devastating Mumbai attacks in 2008. The third continues to send jihadis to Kashmir.

Despite this record, the allegedly Hindu fascist government negotiated with its Taliban counterpart and buried the hatchet. India not only fed millions in Afghanistan but also enabled their vaccinations. As per Voice of America, "India invested billions in development projects" in Afghanistan. The BJP government's humanitarian assistance has saved the lives of millions of Muslims despite the fact that the Taliban government has supported jihad against India.

Less Preaching, More Respect

As a guest in India, Guterres demonstrated subcutaneous racism when preaching to his hosts. He forgot that the institution he represents is frozen in time. The winners of World War II sit in the Security Council, the masters' table. Others sup at the servants' table without any veto power. The masters still talk down to nations they perceive as servants.

Guterres is not from one of the five veto-wielding nations in the Security Council. Yet he comes from a country that inaugurated the European imperial age. *Os Lusíadas* is still the national epic of Portugal. It is a story of Vasco da Gama's voyage to India. Unlike the BBC, this epic does not mention that "da Gama began a campaign of terror against Muslim shipping off the Malabar Coast." In 1502, this greatest of Portuguese heroes captured *Meri*, a ship full of Muslims returning

from their Hajj to Mecca. He burnt the 400 men, women and children on board. It took four days for all of them to die. Unlike da Gama, Guterres is not a bloodthirsty imperialist. However, like many Americans and Europeans, he suffers from the white savior complex. The likes of Guterres rarely give former colonies like India their due.

But as Nobel laureate Bob Dylan sang, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Portugal no longer has an empire. Instead, it is drowning in debt. The Financial Times tells us that Portugal's debt-to-GDP hit a record 135.2% in May. Other European countries are also facing a debt crisis. To make matters worse, Europe is suffering from double-digit inflation and rising interest rates that make both further borrowing and servicing more expensive. The Russia-Ukraine War has proven to be an unmitigated disaster for this war-scarred continent.

Other dominant powers are not doing too well either. The US stands weakened on the global stage after it abandoned Afghanistan so cavalierly. Saudi Arabia and OPEC+ have thumbed their nose at Uncle Sam and a petroyuan trade is emerging. China is suffering from Xi Jinping's hubris and a catastrophic zero-COVID policy. The UK has yet another new government after a third world style economic crisis. To balance its books, this government is planning big tax rises and spending cuts.

Given such a grim global scenario, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva has been very complimentary about India. In her words, "India deserves to be called a bright spot on this otherwise dark horizon because it has been a fast-growing economy, even during these difficult times, but most importantly, this growth is underpinned by structural reforms." India has come a long way from 1991 when it went through a currency crisis thanks to decades of failed Nehruvian socialist economics. Now,

Guterres's fellow European Georgieva is praising India for its sound economic management. A projected growth rate of 6.8%–7.1%, a robust democracy, magnanimous humanitarian aid even to hostile states, massive contributions to the UN and dynamic multiculturalism make India a force for global good. White saviors must realize that India needs less preaching, more respect. A seat at the UN Security Council would be a good start.

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How Capital Eats Its Young

William Softky
November 20, 2022

Capitalism's endgame of harvesting the future is in play, now that markets value children's attention as more valuable for revenue than for learning. There are possible solutions if we can first acknowledge the problem. A review of Dr. Susan Linn Who's Raising the Kids? provides some clues to the solution.

Attention is valuable, especially that of children. Unfortunately, that value, a profoundly human value, is undermined by the business world's idea of valuation, a concept focused exclusively on commercial or monetary value. Insofar as markets are informational mechanisms, they undermine perception and damage mental health, especially that of children. The exquisitely sensitive human attentional system evolved to aim itself at Nature, not to be targeted by revenue-seeking interruptions, distractions, and deceptions. A brilliant new book *Who's Raising the Kids?* makes clear the structure, science, and scale of the problems posed by the attention economy, problems especially salient for children.

Attention, in the most basic sense, is a creature's informational-management strategy. We use our attention to determine what matters, where it is, and whether I can trust it? Vertebrate attentional systems evolved over hundreds of millions of years to let a body use and trust its senses. The brain's hardware learned to squeeze meaning from scenes like the savannah, scenes containing multiple tiny, faint cues. To a sensory system, faint statistical outliers are eye-candy, attractive, like sugar, precisely because they are rare. Attention works properly only in a world of sticks, stones, sky, people, fauna and flora, and not much else. Man-made things distract and mis-direct human attention even without meaning to. And now they mean to and are built to do so, automatically and at scale.

At the finest level, tiny pixels use microsecond tuning to draw our eyes toward interesting things which aren't there. Video games anticipate our anticipation in order to dose us with dopamine. Social media synthesizes the illusion of friendship. Search engines synthesize illusions of meaning. Smartphones rule from our pockets. Smartphones are the grandest intruders, allowing multinational

corporations skilled at using science to design what we will see, believe, and love.

They have successfully commandeered and monetized the growing brains of children and are inflicting widespread damage, according to a powerful new book by the psychologist who saw this coming thirty years ago. Decades ago Dr. Susan Linn was a child psychologist (and puppeteer!) who appeared on the famous US children's show *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*. Seeing firsthand the damage done to kids by marketing and monetized play, she founded the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (now *Fairplay*). It is among the few child-advocacy groups accepting to follow neuroscientific principles, and not accepting corporate money. Now Linn is a professor of psychology at Harvard.

The best possible book on the topic

With that background Professor Linn is the best possible person to write this book. And she has produced the best possible book. While her sentences are often professorial (of course!), there are plenty of cute anecdotes, appearances of charming children, wry observations, and tales of comically misguided products, like the video game advertised to make going to sleep exciting (p. 104). For a relentless point-by-point compendium of why moneyed interests must be kept away from children's play, *Who's Raising the Kids* still provides a remarkably funny, easy read. While it employs US examples for a US audience, her reasoning applies outside the US as well, and will probably be easier to act on in those other places. This book is for the world.

Most thoughtful people already know that commercial influences are bad for kids, so they don't need to read this book. They don't need its ruthlessly clear thinking and comprehensive, evidence-laden summary of fifty years of scientific

study, because their parenting instincts are already fine. Besides, pondering such depressing content is a grim reward for reading what one already knows. On the other hand, some responsible officials hoping to make their case may demand even more powerful evidence. Some might even hold out for the formulation of undisputed natural laws to provide them with the clout to successfully rearrange budgets. I'll give them such laws at the end, since that's my professional specialty. As a general rule, many parents already have the evidence. They don't need even the best book imaginable to tell them about the obstacles to raising functional children provided by a market-saturated world.

On the other hand, if you are in a position to influence children or guide their experiences—as a superintendent, teacher, nanny, app designer, marketer—you must read this book. Your ignorance would be a moral hazard when other people's children are entrusted to your care. And when you finish digesting its contents, to double your investment. Mail your well-thumbed copy to your favorite venture-capitalist or corporate executive, since they need wisdom even more than you do. Ignorance is no excuse when truth is so important, and easily available.

Professor Linn's barrage of evidence is overwhelming: the wasteful excess of crinkly packaging around toys, kids falling in love with characters from ads, apps designed to spy on kids. Her list of all the easy ways there are to make money from kids' innocence goes on and on. Like taking candy from a baby.

After this book, there should be no dispute that markets threaten children's sanity. Only Self-serving industry will of course gripe about how impractical solutions are to protect the status quo. Those gripes are true as far as they go, because the only sustainable solution is a tough sell in a pro-capital society. It implies neutralizing market

forces present in domains affecting kids. So, in a word, this book is about changing everything.

This book is so good, the best possible review need only use Professor Linn's own words. Which I will do. No reviewer could add anything more than praise to this magnificent work, except perhaps a commonsense explanation of how this crisis has been mounting for thirty thousand years, and what society must do to save future generations.

Who's Raising the Kids, Compressed

Herewith the titles and a few representative lines from each of the thirteen chapters of *Who's Raising the Kids* by Prof. Susan Linn (To each quote I append in italics a dense comment using the technical language of trust-formation, to simplify a unification at the end).

Chapter 1: What Children Need and Why Corporations Can't Provide It

"The more a toy or app drives the form and content of children's play and the more the characters or the toys kids play with are linked to popular media properties and franchises, the less children get to exercise curiosity, initiative, creativity, flexible problem-solving, and imagination." (p. 19)

Comment: Children's innate learning algorithms need autonomy and real life detail as inputs. Standardization, broadcast, and synthetic attractiveness undermine those algorithms by restricting freedom and damaging data, and thereby undermine learning and trust.

Chapter 2: Who Wins the Games Tech Plays?

"Technologies are problematic when they optimize profits at the expense of the health and wellbeing of individuals and the larger society. Yet

no independent review of the potential harms and benefits is required before they go to market." (p. 35)

Humans evolved to capture attention from each other in real life, and to defend ourselves from it. Now cheap and tireless machines capture our attention all the time, everywhere. They are inhumanly designed to dodge our defenses. Accumulated micro-distractions and micro-deceptions erode everyone's trust and mental function. Yet regulators cannot agree either about how to limit the overall damage, nor even about how to measure it in the first place.

Chapter 3: And the Brand Plays On

"When commercial values dominate children's environment, kids are in danger of losing out on exposure to some of the best human values, such as altruism, generosity, nonconformity, and critical thinking." (p. 69)

Our brains evolved to associate meaningful phrases with actual human values (e.g. Motherhood, God, Country). When a child's mind instead locks onto a slogan optimized for attractiveness by a focus group, the child fixates on something slippery which can never teach it trust.

Chapter 4: Browse! Click! Buy! Repeat!

"When corporate executives talk about reducing friction, some of what they mean has to do with reducing external barriers to buying, but it also means reducing or eliminating our intra-psychic friction—the cognitive and emotional brakes that enable us to set limits on consumption. For that reason, kids are not just fair game for advertisers—they are essential targets. Their immature capacities for judgment and impulse control render them especially susceptible to marketing messages." (p. 81)

The younger a child is, the more innocent its brain, apt to believe the propositions it is exposed to, the longer damage to learning will last. For a child to waste crucial brain-cells learning bad habits and things which are not true is a tragedy, while for a marketer those represent long-term investments.

Chapter 5: How Rewarding are Rewards?

“In nurturing environments where there are opportunities to explore the world on their own terms, young children are intrinsically motivated to learn, to gain competence, to strive for autonomy, and to satisfy their curiosity.” (p. 107)

Natural environments (unlike synthesized ones) can be instinctually explored in continuous space and time, exactly what a brain evolved to do. Only interaction with unbiased, natural statistics allows a brain’s zooming algorithm to converge on trustworthy solutions. Alternative statistical profiles, such as artificially “intermittent rewards,” undermine that algorithm by over-stimulating dopamine release.

Chapter 6: The Nagging Power of Pester Power

“Except for the fact that children and families are being harmed, there’s something darkly comic about living in a commercialized culture that thrives on business models dependent on encouraging obnoxious behavior in children. No sane parent would welcome people into their home whose every interaction with children is designed to instill in kids such intense desires that they nag incessantly to get them fulfilled. Yet that’s exactly the goal of all advertising to children.” (p. 123)

Messages and interactions optimized to produce revenue from children must of course somehow free that money from the family coffers. But using children to communicate a sales pitch inserts family conflict and undermines trust.

Chapter 7: Divisive Devices

“Whether with reluctance or open arms, we have invited into our homes powerful, seductive entities designed to generate profits by monopolizing our attention. And they don’t give a damn about our family relations or our children’s wellbeing.” (p. 131)

“Like all other nervous systems, ours evolved to forage, not produce. Humankind uniquely produces things that captivate our senses, and now they do” more than ever. (Sensory Metrics of Neuromechanical Trust, p. 2334)

Chapter 8: Bias for Sale

“A society’s material culture simultaneously reflects and influences the values, norms, preferences, and taboos of that society. Stories and toys represent a significant component of the material culture belonging to childhood, and they profoundly influence how children make sense of the world around them, including how they view and experience themselves and others.” (p. 154)

Stories and toys sell better when optimized for pre-existing concepts and stereotypes. Oversimplified ones sell best of all. But when it comes to social values, pre-existing means backwards-looking, and simplified means caricatured. Backwards-looking caricatures describe regressive attitudes like racism, sexism, and mercenary individualism. Those are already built into mass-produced communication, but kids absorb them fastest.

Chapter 9: “Branded Learning”

“Because [corporate-sponsored teaching materials] are often slickly produced, require no up-front cash outlay, and can bypass school boards and be sent directly to teachers, they may appear to be a godsend to cash-strapped schools.” (p. 169)

Corporations have money and underfunded schools have young eyeballs, so an inevitable market-driven (but corrupt) transaction lets corporations disguise their advertising as educational material, offered to schools for free. But there is no such thing as free information. In this case kids and society pay the price.

Chapter 10: “Big Tech Goes to School”

“The value of quality, teacher-driven instruction is well supported by research. There is no credible research supporting industry claims that online, personalized learning programs improve academic outcomes. Test scores do not rise. Dropout rates do not fall. Graduation rates do not improve.” (p. 185)

Human brains evolved to learn from physical objects and physical people in real life. Pixels and frames on screens are so chopped up, they only carry one millionth of the detail young brains need to trust their eyes, as long-established laws of neuroscience prove. So screen-based inputs of any kind not only don’t help reading and writing, they cause actual harm to seeing itself.

Chapter 11: Is That Hope?

“In the United States, two types of laws would help to stop tech companies from exploiting children. A national privacy protection law, which we do not have, and adequate laws protecting the rights of children, which we also do not have.” (p. 199)

As long as US law more successfully protects growing capital than growing brains, capital will damage children.

Chapter 12: Resistance Parenting: Suggestions for Keeping Big Tech and Big Business at Bay

“Six principles of child development to help adults make decisions about introducing tech to young children:

1. Young children live and learn in the context of social relationships.
2. Young children use their whole bodies and all their senses to learn about the world.
3. Young children learn best and benefit most from direct, first hand experience in the world of actual relationships and objects.
4. Young children are active learners who learn by inventing ideas.
5. Young children build inner resilience and coping skills through play.
6. Young children make sense of the world through play.”

(p. 210)

All humans, young children especially, evolved for interaction in the three-dimensional real world, which is our native sensory interface. Synthesized inputs, or even real inputs selected for impact, provide fake data and thus undermine real learning.

Chapter 13: Making a Difference for Everybody’s Kids

“I am for a world where children are universally valued for who they are, not for what they or their parents can buy. Where family and community values no longer compete with commercial values for precedence in children’s lives. Where kids have lots of “in the real world” time with their friends and with the adults who love and care for them. Where their friendships can flourish without

interference from, and monetization by, tech and media companies.” (p. 239)

The environments in which brains grow and learn best are the natural, socially supportive ones for which they evolved. Because all experience is training data for a growing mind, commercial interference damages learning in often irrecoverable ways. Monetizing children’s brains means the end of our species.

The Battle for the next generation’s sanity

This point summarizes Professor Linn’s book. The sensory and social needs of growing children are actively opposed by the needs of capital. Widespread and growing monetization technologies are already eating the brains of our young. Legally. And sometimes the young even like it.

Attention is easy to harvest because humans offer it so freely. But that doesn’t make the ethics of attention-harvesting different from those of organ-harvesting. Both attack vital biological systems, and thus share a dysfunctional dynamic which, above a very low threshold, ensures that revenue can only derive from inflicting harm. As targets, children provide the easiest profit and suffer the longest-term damage.

In recent years bosses and hiring managers worldwide have privately lamented the latest generations’ poor social skills, low attention span and diminished motivation, to say nothing of their defective team spirit, absence of critical thinking and decline in physical endurance. Young people now don’t simply work as well as earlier generations. Studies confirm these mass deficiencies, which happen to be the same problems this book reveals. Thus, the decision made decades ago, under US President Reagan, to expand the dissemination of kids’ ads has now exploded into what one should expect: sad,

damaged, dysfunctional adults everywhere. The economy is already hurting from how it abused human brains twenty years ago, long before today’s far more invasive technologies took hold.

Although Linn doesn’t stress this point, the class of guilty parties is obviously not limited to large corporations. Tiny startups and lone influencers can also do damage as they desperately flail about to attract revenue and attention. The problems Linn points to are deep systemic ones: How can society neutralize a wide class of market mechanisms which have been optimized for hundreds of years to produce revenue by any available means, including means that have a damaging effect on children? Is it reasonable to think we can stop capital from doing what it’s best at? Legislation—like the Five Rights bill in the UK and COPPA2 and KOSA in the US—is a start. But it’s not enough.

As of now, the biggest companies in the world have promised their shareholders money produced by strip-mining the brain-cells of future generations. Can that be stopped? Seen from the coldly mathematical perspective of information flow through space and time, the problem is even worse than what Professor Linn describes. And the possible solutions will inevitably be more profound.

It Started with Cave Art and Loincloths

Allow me a parable. A long long time ago, in Paleo Paradise, people were only exposed to each other and Nature, and paid attention accordingly. But human interests are fickle, so to manage them somebody, let’s say a proto-administrator, invented figurines and cave art for people to look at, and loincloths to keep them from looking away. Ever since then, humans have seen less and less of each other and the natural world our sensory instincts evolved for, and more of man-made things which exploit those instincts. In fact as a

species we're proud of those creations. We call them art. When they make money, we call them entertainment or advertising.

The takeaway message is that attention has long been for sale, but it's never been so cheap. The ancients had salesmen, but not rack-mounted computers serving a million times the harassing sales pitch for the price of a human salesman and with no qualms about the quality of the message. A few decades ago new active technologies—radio, television, video, cable, internet—let machines represent live talking people. Recently, the ability of The Machines — designed to micro-monitor, micro-monetize, and micro-prod — increased hundreds-fold thanks to the omnipresence of mobile devices. As a result, machines now capture attention far too efficiently for human sanity and safety. The open security holes of our nervous systems have been utterly hacked. Human communication is corrupt in every medium but the air we breathe.

Roughly, a species whose intimate, subtle social communications evolved through a million years of live campfire singing, dancing, and group hugs has in a couple generations become thoroughly immersed in ever-more-mesmerizing panoply of blinking things, whose primary purpose is to capture attention and induce belief. And those things work. The bandwidth and authenticity of human interaction has been dropping steadily since cave-times. Now humans know less and less how to feel, to move, to see, or to connect with one another in more than caricatured ways. The mechanism at the core of the problem is recordable communication. Things like texts, tweets, likes and videos are not even empty calories in terms of biological signals. They provide no calories at all. Our nervous systems are failing from informational starvation, and trust — the essential cement of human society — is dying by the year.

If you worry about Platform Capitalism and the Rise of the Machines, then think about this: robot-toys, robo-calls and robo-therapists pretend to be our friends, but secretly they obey their spreadsheet overlords.

Grand Projects

Humanity has solved problems this hard before, or almost as hard. Water-pipes made of lead, exploding boilers, crashing trains and cars, toxic food, fake accounting, risky drugs, filthy restaurants, the list goes on and on of tricks we've learned to keep the things we make from killing us. As a general rule, when society realizes that saving or making money here creates danger over there, it makes laws and sets up snap inspections. Think financial enforcement, or health inspectors who check that restaurant dishwashers use water that's hot enough.

Killing bacteria by turning up a thermostat is straightforward. Killing the influence of money in communication is far harder, since at present capital owns the major channels and doesn't want to part with them. In that light, here are some angles for regulators to use in protecting children from toxic commercial interactions:

Disclaimers don't work; double-blind does. Any self-respecting judge, I hope, would laugh out of the room the legal fiction that a printed disclaimer will insulate the unconscious against manipulation. The unconscious doesn't work that way. Learning requires autonomy, so all manipulation harms it. Fortunately manipulation can be measured objectively, as advertisers do, using randomized testing ("A/B testing"). As long as regulators can look over the shoulder of marketers measuring ad impacts, honesty has a chance.

Disgorgement discourages damage. Ill-gotten data, like ill-gotten money, should poison the well.

If for example algorithms are trained on kids' private profiles, or on racist historical data, not only should the data be purged, algorithms and workflow trained on it should be wiped clean. As an incentive principle, the ease by which technology violates trust must be balanced by draconian consequences when it crosses that line.

Transparency brings balance. Trust only works when everyone has the same high-quality information. So private claims about ad “eyeballs” or behavioral impact — the kind of claims companies use to get money from investors and advertisers — must be equally available to the public and to regulators, because those claims are proportional to the public harm being done.

Health Not Test Results. Until kids again become happy, energetic, social, curious, and motivated, they should get more music, art, live games, and physical activity, and less of everything else, especially technology. Written tests of academic performance mean nothing compared to live 3-D tests of nervous system function.

This month, the US Senate is considering two laws which would help the situation enormously: the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0), and the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA). The Senators who vote should read this book. In fact, *Who's Raising the Kids* should be required reading everywhere, especially in countries (like France) with strong protections for public health. But also in countries (like India and Pakistan) whose advertisers seem proud of teaching kids to nag and pester parents (p. 117). When well-paid grownups brazenly brag about wrecking kids' relationships, children are doomed.

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and among the first technologists to build that understanding into algorithms. Thousands have cited his scientific work, his PhD in Theoretical Physics is from Caltech, his name is on 10 patents and two of the companies he inspired were acquired for \$160 million total.

Qatar Will Change the World Cup Forever

Ellis Cashmore
November 26, 2022

The World Cup is no longer just about football. Humanity is intractably divided, culturally, politically and religiously, and sporting spectacles have and will become a focal point for some of these clashes.

Every World Cup in future will be a cauldron of dispute, confrontation and conflict, a long day's journey into hostility. Instability and strong emotions will turn what purists once regarded as quadrennial celebrations of global harmony into reminders that humanity is intractably divided, culturally, politically and religiously.

For over 90 years, the World Cup has rivaled the summer Olympics for scope, grandeur and athletic excellence. It still does. But, from this point, it will also be an occasion for gathering forces of dissent. Many will despair at the wrangling that's changed the character of the 2022 tournament in Qatar, while others will be excited by the way sport can force into world focus problems, affairs or just

situations that might otherwise be ignored or dismissed as unworthy of international attention.

Cultural Changes

Twelve years ago, when football's world governing organization FIFA agreed to let the sheikhdom on the coast of the Persian Gulf with a tiny population of 2,200,000 to host the tournament, the problems posed seemed logistical: weather, accommodation, timing and so on. No one could have known what was coming. The Harvey Weinstein case came to the fore in 2017, and led to the subsequent surge of the MeToo movement. The comparably potent cultural movement of Black Lives Matter that grew after the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in 2020. Gender fluidity and the challenge to the traditional sexual binary. Transgender politics, not only in sport but in every area of society. These were among the cultural shifts that changed ... well, practically everything in society, including perceptions and expectations of sport.

The days when sports governors tried strenuously to prevent political or social issues fouling the onetime pursuit of amateur gentlemen are now gone. Sport is now fully weaponized and the majority of its fans not only accept but insist that it should be used as an instrument for exposing injustices and promoting causes (I have soon-to-be-published research that provides evidence of the rise of politicized fans).

Sports has a mixed record in promoting social change. While it's hailed as partly responsible for bringing down South African apartheid, there is no persuasive evidence that boycotting South African sport was effective in any more than a symbolic way. The memorable black power salutes at the Mexico Olympics of 1968 are now iconic reminders of the fight against racism in the USA, though many neglect how athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who gestured with their gloved

fists, were actually punished and demonized at the time rather than vaunted. Muhammad Ali is often regarded as champion of civil rights as much as a boxer, though, in 1964, when he dropped his name Cassius Clay and converted to the Nation of Islam he was attacked for his separatist philosophy.

Criticism of Qatar or Islam?

Some believe revealing Qatar's exploitative treatment of migrant workers and its admonition of homosexuality will hasten a change in both. In the first instance, this is possible. In the second, unimaginable. Islam decrees that homosexuality is sinful. No Islamic country on earth, nor any Muslim, whether in the middle east, Britain, USA or anywhere else will demur. Qatar is among at least eleven other countries that consider homosexuality a capital offense, which may be punishable by death.

At this point, I should perhaps declare an interest: I am a white, cisgender heterosexual male, born in the UK, part-educated in Canada, having lived in Asia and the USA. In common with other sociologists, I understand the deep cultural significance of religion, but believe in the primacy of humanity, making me atheist. I am also reflexive, meaning that I don't accept there is a neutral position from which to assess cultures: the very fact of my existence implicates me in culture and precludes objective analysis. I remain aware that I am steeped in the culture of my upbringing and mature development. So, while I've supported gay rights and opposed racism for my adult life and argue against others who do not, I try to resist privileging my own culture over all others. I include this detail because my interpretation of much of the recent condemnation of Qatar is that it is a disguised attack on Islam.

Close to a quarter of the world's human population are Muslims. I find the Islamic code on homosexuality repugnant. I also acknowledge that

its source is in faith and no amount of argument will change this. So, when Qatar is described by western journalists as “medieval,” it discloses a sneering, ignorant disrespect. And, when I hear western Europeans, who are not Muslims, describing their commitment to “cultural inclusiveness” or “inclusivity,” I suspect they mean excluding any party that disagrees with popular western principles, standards and values.

Intolerance is an old-fashioned word so maybe neo-intolerance is how we should describe the new form of western cultural pompousness. The affectedly -- and usually self-congratulatory -- manner with which west European liberals make pronouncements on practically anything that deviates from their own rules of thought and conduct is sure to be challenged. Possibly by the time of the next World Cup.

Politics and the 2026 World Cup

The 2026 World Cup will be shared by three hosts all from the same land mass and all predominantly Christian: Canada, USA and Mexico. Not all countries are equally worthy of opprobrium, of course. The USA will bear the heaviest burden, with laws on the possession of firearms framed in the nineteenth century (far from medieval) and laws on abortion that were reformed in 1973, but which may by the time of the World Cup, be retroceded to the 1820s. Mexico decriminalized abortion only last year. As for Canada, that perennially inoffensive territory in the north, consider: last year, Pope Francis publicly apologized for the 150,000 indigenous children who were separated from their families and taken to residential Catholic schools where they were beaten, starved and sexually abused, between 1881-1996. This will be one of a number of concerns regarding indigenous people that will surface when the World Cup arrives.

Once more, there will be sanctimonious critics offering their insight, resonance and misplaced sense of superiority. There will also be earnest interrogation that will lead to useful and possibly productive developments. Qatar is not going to abandon Islam, but its citizens live on planet earth, eat, work, catch buses and do many of the same things as the rest of the world. That includes examining their lives from time to time -- as we all do. They have been made forcibly and, I am guessing, uncomfortably aware of what many others regard as their shortcomings and may choose to revise them accordingly in future.

What is football for?

Football is ridiculous, isn't it? Eleven grown men kicking a ball in one direction while another eleven grown men try to stop them and move the ball the other way. Can you think of anything more trivial and purposeless? The attention granted the World Cup might lead a friendly alien to assume the tournament takes us closer to world peace, or finding a cure for cancer, or maybe saving the planet from self-destruction. It does none of these things. But this sporting wasteland may yet produce some good: if, as I expect, World Cups from this point become cultural tinderboxes, then they might cease to be trivial and conjure larger, more meaningful campaigns that will bring genuine benefits.

Those who wish football and other sports to ablate themselves of politics will rue the day FIFA awarded the 2022 World Cup to what was once a British protectorate where they speak Arabic and which got rich through its oil. But the sustained fury the decision has engendered may yet be the greatest blessing, not to football, but to the world.

Ellis Cashmore's latest book is “The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson.”

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A New Fusing of Japanese-Aussie Synergies in the Indo-Pacific

Ved Shinde
November 27, 2022

A rising China is pushing Australia and Japan closer. Both want a free and open Indo-Pacific. Therefore, they are cooperating to counter China's efforts to dominate this region.

Australia and Japan have been in the news lately. The prime ministers of both countries got together to issue a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC). They reaffirmed their vital "Special Strategic Partnership." The two leaders also promised to "strengthen economic security, particularly through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative." So security now includes not only defense but also economics.

The Dragon in the Room

Why is love in the air for Australia and Japan?

The answer is simple: China.

The Middle Kingdom has taken an increasingly assertive posture in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing has made "historical claims" on the Senkaku islands

claimed by Tokyo. It has increased its military maneuvers in the South and East China Seas, building artificial islands and bases. Closer to Canberra, China has intensified maritime activities in the South Pacific islands. It has even signed a pact with the strategically located Solomon islands. Such actions have fuelled insecurity in Tokyo and Canberra.

On the economic front, new realities have emerged. After the economic liberalization in the Deng Xiaoping era, China grew rapidly. Given the gigantic Chinese market, most Asian countries wanted to prosper from the China story. Trade increased exponentially.

China-Japan trade grew dramatically as well. In 2021, China was Japan's biggest trade partner and the trade volume crossed \$370 billion. China-Australia trade grew too and reached \$245 billion in 2020. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, the country began to weaponize trade and bully its trading partners into submission. When Australia called for an independent probe into the origins of the COVID-19 virus, Beijing responded with a range of strict trade reprisals against Australian imports. Naturally, this made policymakers in Tokyo and Canberra cautious. They are attempting to change their trading patterns and rely less on China.

Strange Bedfellows

A century ago, Australia feared "economic infiltration" and racial takeover by the Japanese. In 1901, Australia implemented its White Australia Policy to exclude non-white immigrants and keep Australia a European nation. In World War II, both Japan and Australia were locked in a bitter conflict in Papua New Guinea. Mutual suspicion ran high and bilateral relations reached the nadir. In those years, Australia increasingly looked towards the US and Western Europe for identity, inspiration and security. It did not want much to do with its

near abroad full of ragtag Asians. Much of Asia, especially Japan, saw Australia as a genocidal white outpost in their neighborhood.

In the 1950s and 1960s, mutual suspicion decreased. Both Japan and Australia were worried about a rising Indonesia. They shared concerns about Indonesian strongman Sukarno who was one of the founding fathers of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). As American allies, Japan and Australia were naturally concerned about Sukarno's nationalist assertions and NAM.

As a result, Intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia slowly grew. This was accompanied by a commerce treaty signed in 1957 between Tokyo and Canberra. Gradually, closer economic ties decreased historic suspicions. Japan became Australia's largest trading partner from the late 1960s onwards to 2007 when China replaced it. Additionally, Japan and Australia were also part of the American security architecture in the region. The US-led hub and spoke system contained the communists in the region during the Cold War.

Unpacking the Updated JSDC

As pointed out earlier, the new JSDC signed by Tokyo and Canberra comes at a time of rising Chinese ambition. Xi's China seeks to extend its sphere of influence in Asia. Beijing's rising influence comes at the cost of regional powers who do not subscribe to the Chinese worldview. They are anxious and want to oppose China. As a result, Asia is profoundly fractured.

In this new geopolitical scenario, the JSDC makes sense. It builds local capacity to counter China. Japan and Australia do not entirely have to rely on the US to maintain peace and stability in the region. Both countries are deepening their military partnership. They are increasing interoperability, intelligence sharing, military

exercises and defense activities on each other's territories,

The two powers further seek to build on the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) signed in January 2022. Besides Australia, the US is the only country with which Japan has signed the RAA. Japan also has an Acquisition and Cross-servicing Agreement (ACSA) with Australia. This agreement allows reciprocal provision of supplies and services between their defense forces. They are also collaborating in space, cyber and regional capacity building.

The JSDC marks a shift in traditional Japanese reluctance to act proactively on military matters. In the last few decades, Japan punched under its weight in military issues. This was primarily due to its war-renouncing constitution. The updated JSDC reflects the internal debate in Japan over the role of its military and the country's role in the world. Various Japanese strategists have called for revising Japan's National Security Strategy. They are pushing for Japan to take an active regional role. Moreover, policymakers in Canberra are also stepping on the gas. Australia is on a shopping spree for military technologies from nuclear-powered submarines to unmanned aircraft and hypersonic missiles.

The JSDC's focus on intelligence cooperation is significant because both Japan and Australia have formidable geospatial capabilities in electronic eavesdropping and high-tech satellites. Experts believe that such intelligence cooperation will also provide a template for Japan to deepen intelligence cooperation with like-minded partners.

Secure Economics and Regional Dynamics

Japan and Australia now recognize that economics is closely tied to security. In this new deglobalizing world, words like friendshoring and secure supply chains have come into play. OPEC+

has cut oil production despite repeated US requests and sided with Russia. The US and the UK first supplied vaccines to their own populations before giving them to Europe or Asia. China used personal protective equipment for its people during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, Tokyo and Canberra want to set up a secure economic relationship in what the Pentagon calls a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world.

The Russia-Ukraine War has hit Japan hard. The country imports most of its energy. Supplies from Russia's Sakhalin-2 project have stopped and Japan faces an energy shortage. Rising energy prices have increased its expenses and increased input costs for its products. Therefore, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has made energy resilience a priority. In this context, Australia is a reliable and valuable energy supplier to Japan. Already, Canberra is Tokyo's biggest supplier of LNG and coal. Both countries seek to deepen this relationship.

Both countries have further announced an Australia-Japan critical minerals partnership. These minerals include rare earths that are crucial in clean energy technologies like solar panels, electric vehicles and batteries. These could well be the oil of the future. Japan as a leader in many of these technologies and Australia as an exporter of minerals might have a win-win long term relationship on the cards.

The US also figures prominently in the updated JDSC. Japan and Australia have asked Washington to fill in the gaps for sustainable infrastructure needs. This is part of the role the Quad — the US, Japan, India, and Australia — seeks to play in countering China's Belt and Road Initiative.

To counter China, Japan and Australia also support ASEAN's centrality in the Indo-Pacific. They have also reiterated their desire to implement the 2050 Strategy for Blue Pacific Continent

through the Pacific Islands Forum. This initiative seeks to develop cooperation with Pacific Island countries in critical infrastructure, disaster recovery, and maritime security. This is a multilateral play to counter the Big Brother model that China follows and provide assistance for smaller countries from medium-sized powers they trust. Japan and Australia share concerns about Myanmar and North Korea as well.

In the new world order that is emerging, regional powers are assuming more importance. The US is tired after two decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. It cannot write a blank check for Indo-Pacific security and single-handedly take on China. Therefore, the US is leaning on allies to step up. This makes the updated JDSC important. In the words of Professor Haruko Satoh of Osaka University, "Strengthening the Japan-Australia partnership is crucial for the US-led hub and spokes security system in Asia."

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Brazil's New President and Hope for a Democratic Revival

Helder Ferreira do Vale
December 04, 2022

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.

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 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 behindBolsonaro, 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 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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Is the Reckless Swiss National Bank Endangering Its Independence?

Alex Gloy
December 11, 2022

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.

On 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 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 der SNB 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.

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 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

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.

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 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 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 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

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.

[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 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 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
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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.

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?

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 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.

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 Saxena 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 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.

***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.

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