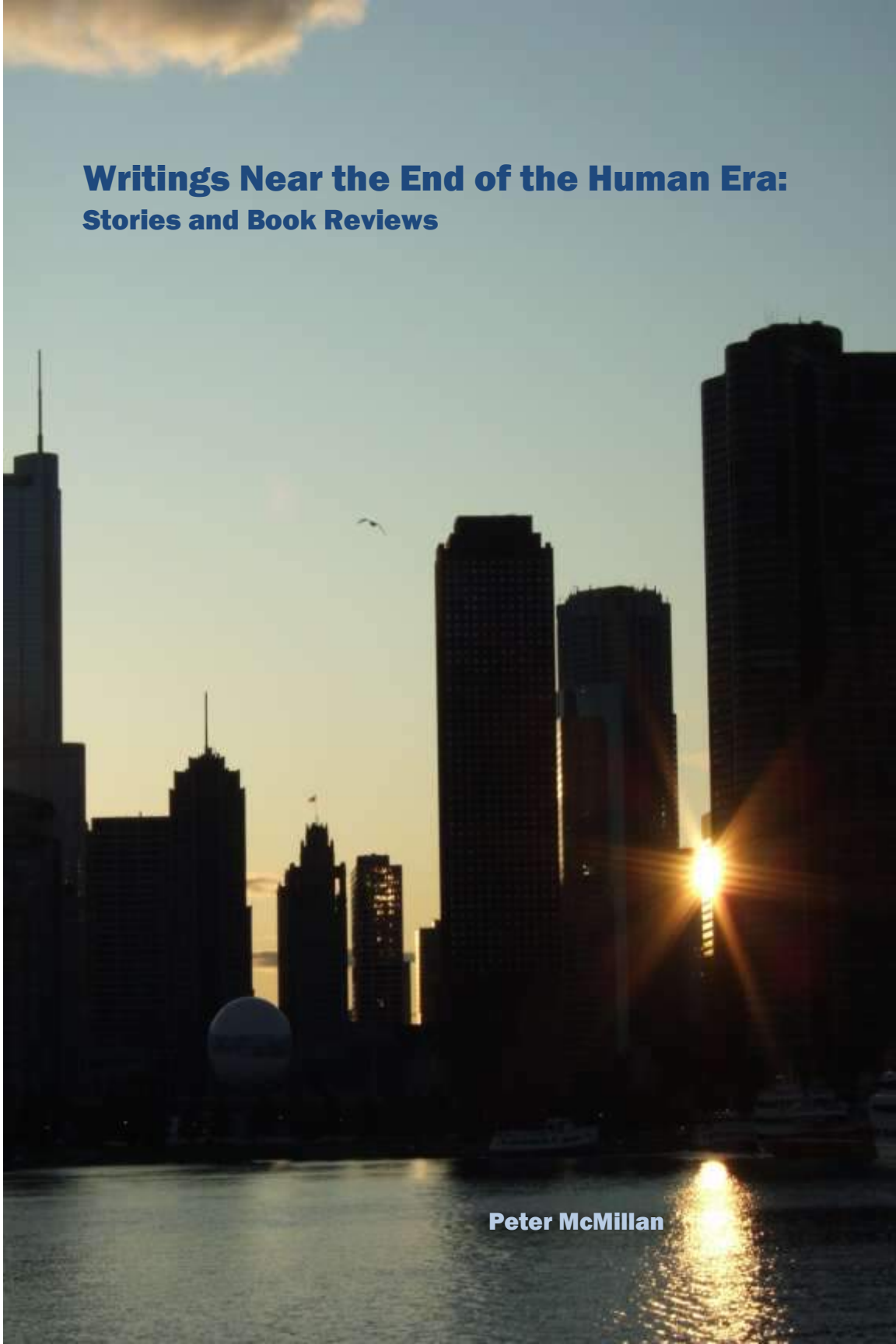
Writings Near the End of the Human Era:
Stories and Book Reviews



Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction (2012) by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction 2 (2013) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 3 (2014) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 4 (2015) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 5 (2017) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction (2020) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

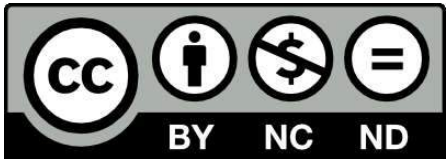
Missing Stories: An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction (2020) by Peter McMillan & Adam Mac, Maku Miran (ed.)

Collected Essays on Political Economy and Wartime Civil Liberties, 2002-2008 (2020) by Peter McMillan

Willowing Skywardly: Stories and Essays (2022) by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction: Around the Block (2022) by Peter McMillan

2023



The writings in this book are 100% GPT-free.

Peter McMillan, 2023

Cover Photograph: Peter McMillan, 2009

For a difficult species

Contents

There are two collections in this book: one of 15 short stories and one of 11 book reviews. Fiction and nonfiction don't usually get combined this way, but, in my writing at least, I think the two complement one another.

A second reason for the fiction/nonfiction merger is that joining the two gives the book a certain heft though not so much so that the reader hesitates at the upfront commitment of slogging through hundreds of pages. And a third reason is that the one part may be of interest but not the other. Political economy, for instance, is not everyone's bag. I get that.

The stories are recent, dating from the publication of *Flash! Fiction: Around the Block* in 2022 The book reviews are from some of the books I've read since January—books that I can recommend to readers interested.

Peter McMillan
Toronto
October 2023

According to this, "any instance of suspected fraud must be reported and not reporting it may lead to charges of complicity."

What if you just play dumb and if you're ever asked, you can claim that these acts seemed to be standard business practices? It's gotta be highly unlikely that you'd ever be singled out and questioned given the number of people who know as much as you do.

Do others have similar concerns? This isn't something you can talk about. Word gets around. People would get suspicious if you asked a lot of questions. Wouldn't it be a kicker if you ended up being the one targeted for investigation?

If there's really something going on, then somebody (or bodies) must know a heck of a lot more about it than you do. Just let it go.

On the other hand, this is very suspicious ... and I'd have to be brain dead to not see that. What if an investigation were to turn up something criminal? Or, what if nobody says anything and there's no investigation and yet something criminal is allowed to proceed as if sanctioned by those of us who knew ... knew enough to initiate an investigation?

Would that be the responsible thing to do? I can only answer for myself, but am I so sure I'd feel comfortable turning a blind eye? The sleep of the just?

Twenty years ago, a Fortune 500 that I worked for was found guilty of falsifying sales figures to prop up share prices long enough for insiders to sell off before investors discovered what was actually happening with revenue. The 35-day month it was known as, and the CEO was sentenced to 10 years in prison for fraud.

The people I work with now are public sector, and they have haven't been this close to exposed fraud. In fact, many seem to think that fraud is something that happens out there in a world they don't understand and a world they presume to be fundamentally unethical and in need of external supervision, unlike their own. What they don't get is their own hypocrisy. Wouldn't it serve them right to be exposed in their own backyards ... with them being 'complicit?'

Then again, this would be an internal investigation. There's no requirement to involve the police. It would take a media leak to get that to happen, and how many pensioners-in-waiting would take that risk?

But maybe it's because I'm just a gig worker that I have a responsibility that others don't. That sounds queer, but it's kinda like game theory in economics where each party calculates their risks and opportunities and acts accordingly. For grand, here for 40 years, the risks are very high and there aren't any obvious benefits to going whistleblower. Think of the stress ... at that time of life when Freedom 67 is just around the corner.

I, however, have very little to lose—just a gig job though not a bad one and not so easy to replace as one might think. But what about the chance to stick it to them? I mean, really, gig jobs—is that the best they can offer? This might shake them up ... make them a little nervous, give them ulcers. Wouldn't that be poetic justice for these hypocrites feeding from the public trough with nobody around to monitor them? 'Who watches the watchers' kinda thing.

So, it's vengeance, is it? Not really so idealistic after all? You can't fool yourself, you know. Others might—just might—think that you're a starry-eyed idealist, quixotic and naive and just plain not fully grown up. But you'd know differently. Think you could convince yourself otherwise?

Well, it would be meaningful in a way to take on the Establishment—win or lose. But I'm really too old to be doing that kinda stuff. I have to think about stress, mental health and all that kinda shit, too. This would be a time- and energy-sucking process ... nothing rolls out efficiently here. I do know that!

So, what do you do, hero? Are you a little more afraid now that you've thought it over?

Probability of changing behaviour in a place like this—asymptotically approaching zero.

Probability of increased anxiety and depression—high and rising.

Chances that you'll look back with pleasure at 'doing the right thing,' 'taking on the system,' 'sticking it to the man?'

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"Tell me, is there a way to undercut the power of my rebellious lords in the countryside?"

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty. There is such a way. It is a new wisdom from a faraway land, and while it is still young and underdeveloped in Your Imperial Majesty's realm, it holds great promise."

"Who can tell me more about this new wisdom from afar?"

"There is one, Your Imperial Majesty, who articulates the political philosophy I speak of."

"Bring him to me. I wish to question him."

"Begging Your Imperial Majesty's pardon, this person is a 'she.'"

"A woman? How could a woman come to be in the possession of such powerful knowledge? Is this a ploy by our enemies? A tragic equine?"

"Again, begging Your Imperial Majesty's forbearance, this does not appear to be part of a foreign plot—a Trojan Horse, to which Your Imperial Majesty perceptively alludes."

"Does not 'appear' you say. How can you be so sure? More to the point, how can you convince me?"

"Your reservations testify to your wisdom and perspicacity—just two of the imperial attributes that serve you well, Your Imperial Majesty. In this case, the woman is a scholar and as such is not welcome in

any of the courts of the empires to the east or west. She lives in exile in your empire under your benevolent protection."

"How is it possible that such a one can enjoy the privilege of my protection without my knowledge?"

"I arranged it, Your Imperial Majesty, thinking that one day this person could be useful to us."

"Are there others, situated as this one is, under my protection without my cognizance and do they pose a threat to my rule?"

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty, there are others, but be assured that each is carefully monitored to ensure that none of their communications are private, even though none are 'detained' in any manner that would suggest that we regard them as dangerous. These intellectuals enjoy freedoms that they could never imagine in their home worlds. They have no complaints here. We make sure of that."

"Have any attempted any subterfuge?"

"Yes, of course, Your Imperial Majesty. And those have been carefully and surgically excised, if you will. They are no longer even memories—to any but us that is."

"I've never underestimated you, Councillor."

"Your Imperial Majesty is too kind, but please forgive if I transgress by saying that my loyalty to Your Imperial Majesty is absolute and unwavering."

"Yes, yes. Now bring me this woman. I wish to speak with her at length—in private."

"As you wish, Your Imperial Majesty. Where—?"

"In the library at the end of The Philosophers' Walk."

"Shall I disable surveillance?"

"No. But the records will be accessible only with my voice-print."

The following afternoon

"So, Professor—do you mind if I call you that?"

"No, Excellency, but I have not been a professor in two decades."

"You may call me 'Excellency,' though at court you might wish to use 'Your Imperial Majesty."

"Yes, Excellency. I beg—"

"Never mind. Do you know why I have invited you today?"

"Yes, Excellency. I was told that you wish to know more about my work."

"Yes. So, explain to me, Professor, how this political philosophy of yours can benefit my empire. Having lived here for two decades, you have made observations, no?"

"Yes, Excellency. Please do not think I am so arrogant as to think that this is 'my' philosophy. It is mine only insofar as I subscribe to it, but many, many others whom I have studied over the years deserve credit for developing and refining the knowledge and wisdom that cumulatively have produced this 'philosophy.'"

"Noted, Professor. Now, continue."

"Begging your pardon, Excellency, but in your empire political unrest ..."

"Speak frankly, Professor. I know the state of affairs and I'm advised that you, too, are not ignorant of what happens in my empire even though it is not 'common knowledge,' as the people say."

"Well, then, Excellency. The landed nobility is and has been a threat to your rule in the provinces, and if I may hazard a conjecture, this has nothing to do with you personally. It is quite simply, as I hope to explain, a natural manifestation of the limitations of centralized administration over a large land mass and a diverse population."

"Continue."

"Your authority is enhanced or diminished to the extent that the landed aristocracy determine that it is in their interest to align or distance themselves from your policies. This creates and perpetuates the conditions for political uncertainty and quiescent rebellion."

"And so, in the words of one of your compatriots of long ago, 'What is to be done?'"

"It is, in fact, more revolutionary than what he advised, and here I must refer to the history of political thought, which Your Excellency will undoubtedly recollect, as this very library and its vast collection of historical treatises provides ample testimony to your learned pursuits."

"Your assumptions are well-founded, Professor. Continue."

"Long ago, the industrial revolution brought about changes in the bases of economic power, and this, over time, translated into changing configurations of political power. Capitalism, allied with political liberalism, brought an end to the nobility's dominance, but here is where I, and others, depart from the orthodox histories. Capitalism may have required 'democratization' but that was expedient for the short-run, and scholars and critics have noted how far from ideal 'actually existing democracies' were."

"Are you a Luxemburg revisionist, then, Professor?"

"Aside from our common gender, which incidentally has nothing whatsoever to do with our philosophical views, I do acknowledge the importance of the intellectual class in her writing, though, either she wasn't clear-sighted enough, and that is improbable, or she was otherwise motivated such that she didn't allow for the ubiquitous nature of ideology in government—all too often masquerading as scientific or technical management."

"You seem overly sensitive to gender. That's unfortunate, but let's not waste time on that. Tell me in what way your views depart from Luxemburg's and whether you are sympathetic to the 'new class' theorists like Djilas, Konrad & Szelényi and Bahro, for example?"

"As I was saying, Luxemburg's revolutionary fervor overwhelmed her logical assessment of the threat of the 'dictatorship over the proletariat.' Most likely, she was mesmerized by her hopes for a different outcome, but as the critics of 'actually existing socialism' showed, the ends are the means becoming. This had the effect of nullifying a significant body of her work.

"Where I differ from these critics however is in the feasibility of the utopian goal of socialism. And even if it were feasible, I question whether it would be desirable. You see, I believe—and my studies

have borne this out—that authoritative power is essential for human organization and to pretend to the contrary would be to assume something about human nature that is fundamentally indemonstrable, viz. that the use of coercive force is not an intrinsic characteristic of human behaviour."

"So, are you offering to be my Machiavelli, and if so, how can I be certain that your machinations won't be turned against me?"

"Excellency, I would never expect to be your only advisor let alone your most trusted advisor. Your wisdom is the check on the ambition you suggest might lie in my most secret motivations—a possibility that no sagacious sovereign could ignore."

"So my Machiavelli, what advice do you have for me with regards to my fractious nobles? Your time is passing quickly. Make your point."

"Excellency, it is agreeable to me as well to conclude succinctly and to give you time to consider with your advisors—those in your court as well as those whose words are recorded in the multitudinous volumes of this athenaeum."

"Yes?"

"It is this, Excellency: capitalism is the means by which you will bring the lords to heel, but democracy—in its purer form—need not constrain you. What Luxemburg, the 'new class' theorists and others have added to our knowledge of political theory and praxis is that an intelligentsia is the *sine qua non* for effective governance—public administration in the language of the now mostly abandoned business schools that once resuscitated the declining university. What the 21st century taught us is that capitalism, not communism, can be centrally managed. This was the convergence that had not

been sensed—or at least discussed—during what we now acknowledge was the relatively stable and peaceful era of the Cold War. Build your intelligentsia—the techniques are not new in the annals of history. Education, privilege, social mobility—these are tried and true methods for recruiting your leaders of the people."

"But Professor, am I so naive that I overlook the possibility—some say probability—that the forces of leadership set free will soon venture beyond the bounds of, shall we say, my influence?"

"No, Excellency. You are not. However, even His Imperial Majesty does not get dealt a perfect hand. But again, Excellency, history has also shown—and I allude to the 20th century ideological conflict between Keynesian and Monetarist economists—that conflict can be contained and managed within the 'college of the intelligentsia,' if you will, with minimal political disturbances and practically zero revolutionary shocks."

It stopped right there and he abruptly sat upright at his desk trying to catch hold of some part of the evanescence—even if only a few sensations or images—of another fleet-footed daydream. This one was longer than most, or at least it seemed that way. Usually, there's no way to time a dream, but since he was at work and his interaction with the computer was monitored, it must have been less than a minute. Incredible! So much packed in so little time. If only he could recall something he could use to reconstruct the dream.

Fragments were all that remained—a red umbrella, an ever-growing task list, and excitement. Whatever the story was, it had been compelling. He sensed that. Up to the very end when it slipped right out of his mind's grasp. Just a red umbrella, an endless list of assignments and a sense of ... well, it almost felt like an adventure, not that he'd had many of those.

He typed a quick response to the latest email and then tossed around the idea of a red umbrella to see if it connected with anything else. Rain! There was no rain! He couldn't understand why someone—and he couldn't see who because the huge, red paraboloid swallowed the person down to their (sing.) knees. How could he forget such a queer-shaped umbrella, especially—and this was just coming back to him—since there was no rain. At least no one else was carrying an umbrella. And there were a lot of people ... in an open field that didn't seem to have any particular significance. They were gray shadows—the people—no distinguishing features. Vague silhouettes of human form.

He couldn't see himself in the dream but he knew he was the main character and that everything that happened was 'observed' by him. He couldn't recall any of the specific duties he'd been tasked with

but he 'felt' overwhelmed—he remembered this—as if submerged by a great swell of administrivia.

Another email—marked 'Urgent.' Just a routine message, so he copied and pasted a reply and sent it away. He gasped for air.

Miley, in one of the adjacent cubes, whispered loudly, "Hey, what's going on. You OK?"

"Yeah," he answered. "Just thought I'd missed a deadline. No worries." An impish emoticon appeared on his monitor, winked and disappeared.

What was that all about?

No new messages. He struggled to work his way back into the dream—a large red umbrella and a tidal surge of 'to dos.'

What the hell? There's gotta be more. What's the adventure? Was I searching for something? Going somewhere? Planning to do something? What was it? And why do I have the feeling that there is something worth remembering?

An open field, crowded with people. One large red umbrella but no rain. An impossible workload. None of that seemed particularly interesting and worth trying to recover.

Two notifications popped up: a 4:15 deadline for submitting the final review of the Kindler & Gentry proposal and a 4:45 deadline for the daily performance report. The proposal was 400-plus pages of technical gobbledygook—mostly repetitive nonsense and the whole thing could be reduced to twenty five or so pages of well-written and intelligible prose. That would be the deluge, but floods of bureaucratic waste were a recurrent motif in his dreams ... and life.

What could be the damned adventure?

Would he have to keep dreaming until another adventure dream came along? Problem was, most of the dreams vanished without leaving a hint or a thread or a trace. Nothing to follow. This one, he'd thought he'd been ready for, but now it, too, seemed to be evaporating as his mind was forced back into the myriad runnels of his work routine.

Miley has a red rain slicker, doesn't she? Says that's what people wear Down East.

Did I mention that the winters are long and cold here? And dark ... *sans* sun that is, because the white snow is illuminated from distant suns a million times over. Around Christmas, the days are sunless for a full 24 hours—a situation that would enrich the purveyors of vitamin D in anxiety-ridden and cold-averse Toronto. But then in spring and fall, there are the Northern Lights painting the starry sky brilliant, nuanced hues of green and yellow. Once you've heard some of the ancients' stories, you can spend hours looking upwards, watching and listening to the legends of the Lights—primitive, I used to think but not say. It takes imagination and most from the South don't stay here long enough to develop the skills of silent inquiry we sharpen and hone day after day. On their infrequent visits—neighbours here are often hundreds of miles away—I'm reminded by some of my more plainspoken guests how long it took me to adapt.

It was more than twenty years ago when I first arrived ... in my new permanent home nearly 4,000 kilometres from 24 Sussex. Nobody expected that I'd last this long up here—"he's too fragile, too weak, too pampered, too privileged," they said. By now most have probably forgotten ... forgotten who I am (or was) and how and why I ended up here.

That would have bothered me in the early days. But life here changes you ... imperceptibly. Glacial time, out of sync with the world. Things that were important and urgent—and there was no end of those—no longer are. And the things that were of no consequence ... now have the greatest value. Warm clothes, a steady diet with meat and vegetables, running water, electricity—powered by the sun in the short summers and elsewhen by a generator. Ironically, it's this greenhouse gas indulgence of mine—minimal in comparison to the average North American's carbon footprint—that

serviced the gleeful wit of my detractors—the cowboy oil barons and their media and economist hacks when it was reported by the CBC.

Back when, my entire life, day by day, week by week, was planned, choreographed and orchestrated. Looking back, I wonder that I even called it 'my' life. Today, in comparison, my life is of no moment to the world, but it is decidedly authentic and 'mine.' One of the elders said he'd tell me a joke after he'd got to know me better—said he had to wait for the other dimensions of my self to emerge. "Not for you ... not yet," he'd said.

The joke was one I'd heard before, but it never resonated like it does now, up here in the vast, cold, open space on the thin living skin of this planet surrounded by 'billions and billions' of worlds just across the way ... light-years off. The joke I knew as 'Wanna make God laugh?" The Inuit joke was better.

Political correctness is not a 'thing' up here. God still warrants a capital letter and the masculine pronoun is not controversial. It's as if everybody recognizes and appreciates the limits of human language even though at the top of the world every word is precious. Carefully chosen, few are spoken. They cannot capture the ineffable that surrounds and moves the soul up here.

To think back to when Pierre took me to the High Arctic and I first saw what, unbeknownst to me, would one day become my home. It must have seemed endlessly boring and foreign to a three-year-old used to the high intensity stimulation of the techno-modern urban life in the capital city. Nearly four score years later, it's only through imagination that I can relate to that 'me,' and it becomes increasingly difficult and unimportant to preserve that unbroken connection to 'me'—the 'me' from the past who so many people once loved and so many others came to hate with unparalleled intensity. The 'me'

who once hoped to establish our family as a modern political dynasty rivaling—no, surpassing—the Kennedys to the south.

C'est la vie as they say in unilingual Alberta. Now I can echo their words but without the disdain and contempt they intend. *Oui. C'est la vie, mes amis.*

So, Professor, this book that you've been reading for the past two weeks— Well, let's just hope you haven't been wasting your time ... and raising false expectations.

As I've said all along, Captain, I can't make predictions about how well I will be able to make sense of the local languages, but it's all we have to go on. The book—actually, it's just one story in the book—'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' and fewer than 6,000 words altogether—that's our primary source. Lots of secondary literature, but I'm not a scholar of 20th century Earth literature.

But you're the closest we have. The rest of us are scientists and technicians. We can tell you all about general relativity and quantum mechanics but on literature and the arts, we're commoners I'm afraid.

The first part is certainly true. I've learned quite a lot and had to relearn even more about Physics. As for the humanities, a philosopher of science, like myself, is just as out of place there as here. 'Neither fish nor fowl.' Nonetheless and despite the fact that I am predisposed towards philosophical materialism and instinctively averse to the subjective idealism of these beings, i.e., I believe in the reality of subatomic particles and black holes, I may be able to supplement the computer's translations from Tlön.

Well, here's your first message, Professor.

> Thinking, reasoning complaisant upward newly-arrived and originated beyond constellated white shining around black pulling

I'm no grammarian, Professor, but this reads like gibberish. There aren't any nouns as far as I can tell.

No, Captain. Indeed, one of the peculiarities of the languages on this planet is that there are no nouns which would correspond to what we think of as entities. Roughly, the translation would be better understood as

> We extend our greetings to our visitors from afar.

That much I think I could have figured out, Professor. What about this 'around black pulling?' Is there something else that could be meant? A black hole, for instance?

I may have misinterpreted, but I think that 'around' could also be rendered 'around in,' in which case if light is visible within or through the blackness then it couldn't be a black hole, could it? But then I can't explain 'pulling.'

So how can we be sure what they mean? There's nothing in our charts of this galaxy showing a black hole anywhere in this sector. Gravitational readings are, however, slightly higher than normal. Can you send another message to clarify?

Of course, Captain. Give me just a moment, please.... Here, transmit this message

> Sudden threatening—dangerous matter-sucking black—immobilized, powerless, unnavigable—confirm

Computer, translate and transmit.

Message transmitted. Incoming response. Message reads

> Confirmed—horizontal event-neutral imminent catastrophic expeditious navigational correctly absolutely imperative

This is not good news, Captain.

Computer, calculate the gravitational acceleration on the event horizon and calculate escape velocity. Navigation, set our course to retrace our route into this gravity well. Engineering, accelerate to escape velocity as per computer calculation.

Computer, status?

Gravitational readings returned to normal, Captain. Planet Tlön is edging closer to the event horizon. Estimated impact in 49 seconds.

Well, Professor, let's hope that your friends aren't going to be too badly treated by their new reality.

There's no way we'll ever find out, Captain.

There was nothing more we could do, Professor.

If only we had been able to communicate more effectively.

They knew they were drawing us into the path of the black hole. What they didn't know was whether we'd be able to pull them out of the path.

It must have been difficult for them to conceptualize and explain consistent with their linguistic view of the world. Such a shame. An interesting culture.

Evolutionary biology, Professor. Evidently, idealism is incompatible with the fitness required to survive out here.

Top of the class at the NASA (North Atlantic Space Agency) Academy and veteran of multiple tours throughout the galaxy, he had been selected and trained for a special military operation on a recently-settled Earth colony 100 light-years away. During the course of his highly-classified covert actions to sabotage enemy life support systems, he was injured by laser fire and was deemed no longer viable to complete his mission. Because NASA now regularly used hyperdrive technology, he arrived back on Earth only 200 years later (Earth time) ... but in the wrong place.

He was parachuted from the returning spacecraft on account of the secrecy of his mission but owing to human error was dropped in the middle of a tropical rainforest in an unexplored archipelago somewhere between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. On landing in the high canopy, he was rescued by a hitherto undiscovered indigenous jungle tribe. The most likely explanation for the community's isolation was that it was believed that there were no resources of value, e.g., energy and minerals, but then copper, nickel, platinum and gold deposits were discovered on the nearby seafloor. Since deepwater mining had become profitable due to the increasing scarcity of strategic metals and recent innovations in ocean mining technology, the area's profile had been raised. Countries and companies were again sending out teams to scour the oceans and seas across the planet.

The astronaut—still recovering from severe burns to his arms and hands—suffered two broken legs, a dislocated shoulder, and contusions on the face and head from his crash landing. Upon being brought down safely from the treetops, he was taken in and cared for by the reluctant shaman on the orders of the chief elder. The shaman was a cautious and wise man—and, actually, the oldest person in the village—but the chief elder's daughter intervened on

the helpless astronaut's behalf, and so the astronaut was treated with the utmost respect and concern during his lengthy recovery.

Over the course of the months spent living among his island hosts, the astronaut discovered that the highly-regarded skull in the shaman's possession was most likely that of the Chilean geologist whose shabby, weathered leather-bound journal had also been retained as a sacred artifact—sacred because it symbolized an evil force that had been defeated by the tribal gods. Discreetly—though not from regard to form or privacy—he read snatches of the journal when the shaman was thought to be away performing one of his frequent rites and ceremonies.

He had to read by candle light, because there was no electricity. And there was no running water. In fact, there was little to nothing to suggest that life on this planet had advanced technologically to the point that it maintained distant colonies light-years away in other galaxies.

He was careful not to disturb the order of anything he touched, and when he once spilt candle wax on the bed cover, he meticulously scraped away the wax residue. It was in the journal that he learned who had hired the geologist and what the geologist's investigations had turned up. That provided the impetus he needed to plan his next move. The shaman, meanwhile, must have known that the journal had been discovered, for it had the white man's smell.

#

The astronaut never returned to NASA, though the agency spent millions combing the waters and land over a period of several months. He was, after all, counted as one of NASA's most valuable assets and very expensive to replace. No traces of a NASA landing anywhere within a thousand-mile radius of the last beacon report

were to be found. Nor was there any evidence of indigenous human life in this remote archipelago. Such had also been the results of the Australian mining company's investigation of its Chilean geologist's disappearance four years earlier, though that recovery mission was on a much smaller scale.

However, for those who were keeping track, two-and-a-half years after the NASA spacecraft was monitored re-entering the Earth's atmosphere, an Australian-Chinese mining company established a mobile base in the island chain. The remains of the Chilean geologist were respectfully but quietly returned to the nearest Chilean consulate, but no records of his expedition were ever officially retrieved. And no first contact with the indigenous people has ever been made public.

The astronaut became the *de facto* governor of the archipelago—a sinecure really—nominally under the territorial government but answerable to Shanghai-Sydney for the profitability of the deep sea mining operations, which were now unofficially defended by a contingent from the Australian-Chinese Navy's Indo-Pacific battle fleet.

The crowds in their euphoria could not be restrained any longer. Old and young, women and men, poor and wealthy, workers and capitalists, and intellectuals and bureaucrats spilled over into the streets and were channeled through the avenues that converge on Parliament, waving the formerly-outlawed flag of the proud nation that 70 years before had disappeared from the world's maps.

The politician and self-appointed caretaker Prime Minister had just announced the defiant nation's resurrection. The people cheered. Emissaries from half the world voiced their respective countries' endorsement of the new independent democratic republic, 'rising from the ashes of history like a firebird.' Stock markets across all the time zones surged at the prospect of lucrative investment opportunities.

The titanic power to the east reacted differently. It attacked by land, air and sea within hours of the proclamation of independence. The euphoric were stunned in shock and denial. Sudden death and destruction of biblical proportions fed despair and agony, but quickly loss and grieving turned to anger, vengefulness, hatred and retaliation.

The politician's allies from across the globe rallied behind him with moral support and weapons—tiptoeing up to the line beyond which an action could be deemed a provocation and an act of war. The voices of war—"defensive war, let's be clear," they said—gazed into the future and compared the magnitude of the thousands of actual casualties with the projected millions who would be killed or wounded if the attack went unanswered and the dominoes of a bygone era did in fact fall this time. The weapons dealers—makers of weapons of large-scale destruction from the air, the ground, the sea and even space—said, "If not us, then someone else, so why not

us ... besides it's like your allies have said, 'Manageable losses in the short term for victory over evil in the long term—that is the price of peace and freedom.'" Investors concurred. Billions upon billions of dollars were raised in the cause of the phoenix—a just cause if ever there was one, it was said. A local affair had become a global conflagration with no fire brigade capable of controlling the inferno.

Early on, the politician in a one-on-one red phone conversation with his counterpart to the east had asked, "Do you enjoy hurting people?," to which the other replied, "In our world at this level, we—you and I—cannot avoid conflict, and our choices, regrettably, have unpleasant consequences on occasion. This is one such occasion where some will pay a higher price for our—yours and my—decisions. And remember, Prime Minister, we act for history not for individuals."

"Me, for the right side of history, Mr. President," responded the Prime Minister, ending the conversation and dialogue.

The leaders of two great religious institutions positioned their congregants in opposition to one another. Said one to the other, "Do you, too, enjoy hurting people as did your predecessors who left a bloody trail in their conversion of the unbelievers?" God was one, but God was divided.

The defence minister of one of the allied nations, an inexperienced member of cabinet, whispered to one of her aides during a pause in procurement discussions with several major defence contractors, "Do they enjoy hurting people?" inviting the aide to respond, "No more than the markets do, Ma'am."

Another voice—with predictable realist cynicism—prophesied candidly from a scholarly hideaway that "The allies will fight the aggressor from the east to the last soldier in the Prime Minister's

army"—a quote which will undoubtedly appear as an epigraph in one the chapters of his latest book that lies waiting in the galleys.

And that's how the world (almost) ended.

Everywhere you turn, the fog is never more than an arm's length away. It feels closer—its cold, moist breath reeking of charred wood, burning petrol, and freshly-exploded earth—and penetrates the dirty, ragged fatigues of an infantryman lost and alone in a treeless landscape in an expanding present that is neither day nor night. The past ... is hidden or forgotten; the future, inaccessible. Exiled in a frozen moment devoid of expectations and remembrances. An eternal limbo between life and death.

Bodies, whole and dismembered, litter the floor of what might have been a forest perhaps long ago enjoyed on family picnics or lovers' trysts. Now, deserted of life—the kingdoms of flora and fauna thoroughly routed and annihilated. Only the sound of your own breathing and the pulse of blood not yet stopped, though all around all has ceased.

From behind—but which direction is that now that you've turned in circles over and over to espy any movement, a light, a smell, a sound. You feel something that you think you should be hearing. Boots marching in voiceless rhythm ... coming from where and headed where? The enemy? Claiming this waste land that bears no resemblance to anything of value or anything worth fighting for .... or dying for. Reinforcements to "take up our quarrel with the foe"—more fodder for the voracious fog that consumes men? Nothing visible. No vibrations in the watery air, but a strong sense of an orderly and regimented movement of bodies.

The presentiment comes no closer and recedes no further, but continues as if thousands, tens of thousands, are making their way somewhere ... to a new battle? But where? And whose are they? Theirs or ours?

The damp cold is numbing, the hunger of countless days confounds rational thought. the loneliness of being in this abysmal place—nowhere—and this time—an endless present—gnaws at the soul.

But who are 'they,' and who, for that matter, are 'we?' And why are 'we' here? And yet, why is no one here? There persists, however, a chilling sense of a moving mass inexorably making its way to its next deployment. But where? Is this the destination towards which they're headed? This graveyard of dreams and hopes and love and belonging. Don't they know where they're going? Don't they understand that this is the end of the line? Don't they feel that they're being swallowed in this great gray meaninglessness?

Who sends them? Would they go of their own free will? Or, are they automatons, brainwashed and emptied of all individuality and will, reduced to monochromatic formlessness like their surroundings? Or, do they have a gun to their heads ... in a more literal sense?

Why do they keep coming? Don't they recognize their destiny all around them—the soulless carcasses of a generation, maybe two, lying about unburied and unmourned? Who will be left to remember? To commemorate? To honour? A myth! Another delusion. The mendacity and our gullibility know no limits. The pattern of deception and trust recurs under our very noses, right in front of our eyes, within our hearing, fooling us, tripping us up, slipping past our defenses again and again.

Be still boots! Damn you! Stop! Oh, how my head hurts!

The vast maw of the fog gorges on the never ending train of human flesh and the human sacrifice, willing or compelled, submits. There is no god (or god is as good as dead), but is there no man as well? Is this parade towards death the final act of a once-proud species?

Sunk to the muddy bottom of this boundless fog, the human husks set to form a fossil record of self-extermination.

Is this for my sake? Why am I cursed to witness this? Who am I to be delivered this message? I'm no leader, no representative. Just one among billions. But ... am I to be the last one? Must I be the last one?

Those damn boots. Their thudding batters my skull without pause. Will they never come to an end? Why won't they stop and let me sleep? Is it their torture to march in perpetuity to their own ashen doom, tormented with the foreknowledge of what awaits?

Release?

As if such a thing as hope exists in these cold, murky depths.

So, there's a new tradition that's migrated up from the South and it may very well change the way we celebrate Labour Day in the Great White North. It promises to be more popular than the prohibition against wearing white shoes after International Workers' Day so as not to be gauche and look prolish. It may however run a close second to the celebration of the post-Labour Day start of school, which many parents pine for during the long days of summer.

This new tradition involves a papier-mâché piñata, a handful of popular distillations of the writings of F.W. Nietzsche, and your choice of favourite boss to hate ... and everyone has at least one of those. They're fairly ubiquitous among our race—the human race. You can find them at work, of course, but they're also at home to greet you at the end of the workday. They can be found in schools and universities and even in places of deity worship. However, for Labour Day, one should try to limit the search to the workplace, otherwise the theme and purpose of the holiday may be missed and that's precisely what the new ritual has been introduced to counter. Too many people have come to accept the holiday (and who wouldn't) but fail to appreciate its significance. At the risk of appearing to show favouritism, the new attitude might be considered roughly equivalent to the move to 'Keep Christ in Christmas.'

The dance of the piñata boss will revivify the holiday and re-align it with its true roots. Every working man and working woman will feel rejuvenated and empowered at the climax of the dance, which represents the symbolic victory over the tyrannical boss.

And why is that, you ask? It is because the employers' will to power (dominating and domineering) will be shattered, the employer superman's transcendence of moral obligation will be brought crashing to the ground in fragments to be consumed by the work-

ers, and the workers' *amor fati* (herd-like resignation) will be turned to violent retribution—symbolically, naturally. And while the boss will rise up again, there will be reserved in our calendars this one day of the year when the scales of universal justice will balance.

It is not essential, and not advised, that the piñata boss be a faithful rendering of the intended. The point to be made is more abstract and therefore more all-inclusive than could be made by creating a singular likeness in effigy or by affixing names.

There's every reason to believe that the new custom will catch on ... and quickly. Children love candy and sweets, and adults crave the cathartic feeling of destroying an adversary and bully. What's not to enjoy? And it's fun for the whole family. There's also educational value for the young, which can't be replicated in any other socially normalized activity. An activity that synthesizes the varied human experiences of another culture, the wisdom and folly of philosophy, and the ever-present boss figure.

I've already picked out mine through the year 2051 and attached a codicil to my will in the event that I predecease my list.

Of course, there are organic alternatives such as the one below, an instinctive ritual that has been observed at various times and places around the world:

> She was dead, finally. All of us went to make sure. We still couldn't believe it. We skipped the memorial service and went straight to the cemetery ... and waited. With steely eyes, jaws and fists clenched, we watched every last piece of dirt drop to fill in the hole, as if every speck of dirt was needed to hold the coffin in place. ('The Boss,' 2013)

She came to lying on the floor of what, from the steady hum, appeared to be an engine room. But this was no submarine engine room like any she'd ever seen. All the surfaces were flat and white—all but the floor, which was OSHA orange. Everything was clean and new smelling. The room was open and circular ... and empty. There was no crew, no machinery. The spanner she noticed in her left hand was as out of place as she felt.

"Hello?" Getting no response, she repeated the greeting several more times with increasing volume and ... irritation.

Confused and disoriented, she laid the wrench carefully on the floor with enough presence of mind that she might still be inside a submarine and then rose, turning slowly to take in the blank panorama encircling her. The wall was uniformly flat and seamless, devoid of any markings or features to indicate a passage or interface with the outside. A few steps to the wall—she'd calculated the room's radius to be about six feet—and then counterclockwise along the bare white wall, she could feel no discontinuity in texture or temperature.

Pausing, her back to the wall, she slid into a sitting position and waited for something to happen, to change—the lighting (which left no shadows), the white noise, the smell of newness. Nothing.

Her watch had stopped—no explanation for that—her only sense of time from the cadence of her breathing. She'd been a sailor assigned to the engine room of a nuclear-armed submarine. She clearly remembered DEFCON 1, the Barents Sea, and the locked-on SLBMs. But none of that appeared in any way connected to here and now.

Under the circumstances immediately preceding her arrival in this room, she considered the likelihood that she was a prisoner of war. Accordingly, she decided to provide her name, rank, date of birth and serial number citing her Article 17 obligations under the Third Geneva Convention.

It was cold, and worse than menacing, indifferent—the room was. She'd been displaced from all that was familiar—*Ha! breakout of nuclear war familiar*. But this was unfamiliar in a very different way. In this world she had a strong sense of not belonging or being irrelevant. Nobody and nothing to interact with, to confirm her existence.

Staring at the walls for she had no idea how long, she believed that she saw the walls move as if the room were breathing. That triggered a childhood memory—the mythical story of Jonah—and in the absence of any stimuli beyond her mind, she let the story play out, enduring the vile and disgusting sensation of being belched out of the belly of a sea monster in a thick mucous muck littered with mostly unrecognizable marine detritus.

Stream of consciousness thoughts continued to parade randomly through her mind—an afternoon in late fall in Victoria Park with her partner, the stack of newly-signed papers that meant she was Navy, the Christmas her family spent snowed in at the airport, the last words she heard from another human voice, "Oh God,"—until involuntarily she fell asleep ... then woke up ... then fell asleep again.

Curled up in a ball, her back to the wall, for how long? The whiteness grew blinding and dizzying. The hum continued unbroken but seemingly at a higher pitch and volume. The orangeness below grounded her, but not enough that she could stand up without the support of the wall. She forced herself to walk—palming the wall as she circled. In the centre of the room lay the wrench, handle to-

wards her. It occurred to her that if she could mark the wall, she could have some sense of time. Digging deep in her pockets, she pulled out a black Sharpie. With a fleeting surge of excitement, she marked one spot on the white wall, then followed the wall around to the spot on the opposite side and marked it. Then, she marked a half-way point between and used that to finish sectioning the room into quadrants. Once done, she started marching in circles, counting the number of rounds. After reaching 500, she slid back down on the floor and caught her breath. That reminded her to practice the controlled breathing technique she'd learned in basic training. Breathe in deeply, then exhale. Breathe in, then out. Pay attention and follow the rhythm.

She began to get a better sense of time when her stomach started growling, but that wouldn't last. She could go without eating for more than a week if necessary, but without water—probably just a few days. That meant she couldn't waste any, so she searched her clothes for a container—anything. The Sharpie cap was all she could come up with. That would be too inefficient, she decided, so she ripped the sleeves off her olive-coloured T-shirt and kept the rags on standby.

She started to obsess. Knowing that she couldn't hold it indefinitely and fearing that she might go in her sleep, she forced herself to go. It worked but now she had to summon all the reason and nerve that she could to squeeze the drops into her mouth. She cried, but not for long—a waste. She was back under control. She completed another set of 500 circuits—enough to get tired and sleepy—and then enjoyed some rest on the hard floor that was becoming more comfortable lying on than sitting or standing on.

When she next awoke, she wondered whether she was involved in an endurance test. You heard about these things, and she knew that submariners had to have exceptional ability and skills honed to

remain sane over long periods at sea—below the surface. This thought was reassuring, and she pulled herself up to complete another 500 circles. As she walked she tasked herself with reviewing the final hours before she found herself in this room.

There had been no conversations just prior. They had been commands relayed person to person. Stealth mode. Everyone knew what to do. They'd all been drilled, and the ones who made it on this ship and lasted had to be more than just competent. There's no margin for error on an underwater ship ... at war.

Five hundred more laps, which she estimated to be roughly three-and-a-half miles distance and an hour in duration. This was her fifth circumambulation, and she'd tried to make herself sleep after each, but she had no way no of guessing how long she slept in between and whether it was the same amount each time. A crucial indicator was that she didn't yet show signs of dehydration. She hadn't become light-headed or foggy-brained, and that was in part attributable to the mental exercises she forced on herself—repeating her Article 17 obligations, recalling song lyrics and poetry (which she spoke aloud—harmless information if overheard), counting and doing mental arithmetic, outlining the ship's various protocols, placing the names of people and places with their images, and anything else she could do to distract herself from spiralling down into helpless resignation.

When she opened her eyes again, something had changed—whether it was a modification of her perception or an adjustment in the 'real world' she couldn't say. But the wrench, which had been at the centre, kind of like the tiny hands of a orange-faced clock, was slightly off the floor. She closed her eyes and looked again, turned her head away and looked back. The wrench was suspended in air. An hallucination? If so, this could be the beginning of her dehydration symptoms.

As she stood up and stretched, she felt lighter. That could be explained by the absence of food and drink. But still, it was not like anything she'd experienced. She'd heard astronauts talk about weightlessness in space, but she wasn't floating around the room. She just felt lighter. She took up her rounds again, and as her walked she noticed a sort of spring in her step that hadn't been there before. She walked over to the wrench and was able to insert her hand between it and the floor. If this was an illusion, it was a good one.

How could that be? Deep under the ocean's surface, gravity would be infinitesimally stronger not weaker. But ... She shuddered at the thought, but she had to face it. She could be moving out of or already out of the earth's atmosphere, in which this was a very different kind of ship. She brushed these thoughts aside as delusional and kept walking, repeating her Article 17 identification every so often, mindful not to lose her count.

Upon finishing what she now referred to as her orbit (around the wrench), she was tired again and getting hungrier and thirstier. The wrench was still floating out in the centre, and she was having difficulty writing it off as her imagination. If it were really true and if the force of gravity had changed, then .... Anxiety and excitement were replacing her awareness of the body's cravings. What if—?

Couldn't sleep, couldn't even rest. Tantalizing but torturous. Rescue or execution was on the other side of this wall, and the wall couldn't be relied upon to protect her indefinitely. Strange that now she should consider the wall to offer protection.

Walking again, but the springiness in her step had given way to a lethargy and sluggishness and the articulation of her ambulatory joints was clumsy and painful. Her head ached with an acuteness

like never before. Couldn't hold the sides of her head between her hands to alleviate the pain because her arms had grown too heavy.

The physical, mental and emotional strains of her imprisonment—for she was now convinced that she was a prisoner of war though she didn't know who her captors were and whether they were even human—was reaching critical levels. Dehydration had set in and she knew there wasn't much more time. Maybe not even enough to find out what had happened to her.

She collapsed, bouncing her head heavily on the solid orange ground, and lay there ... still.

———

This is not the end; stay tuned.

Ziggy, long accustomed to being consulted deferentially by the world's potentates, summoned Daddy Warbucks, the trillionaire industrialist heavily invested in large weapons research and development, to their (sing.) estate in _____. The term 'estate' was no longer fitting as this wasn't simply a grand and enormous property somewhere in the United States or Germany or China or even on the dark side of the moon. It was a dimension and not one of the four where most of us live and die. In that dimension, our scientists and philosophers couldn't tell us how the laws of physics lie (lay). Only the 99th percentile of Earth's one-percenters had access, and while scientists and philosophers might serve, membership would be unthinkable.

Zeitgeist, Ziggy to Daddy Warbucks and his confrères, had been around since creation, and because they (Ziggy) had connections with the most influential, they possessed an unrivalled knowledge of human history. Of course, Ziggy was never acknowledged as 'real' and only the conspiracy theorists—'crackpots' is the synonym most often used to discredit such people *prima facie*—among the bulk and mass of us ever suspected their existence.

The situation the world found itself in at the time was a prolonged era of peace with a general level of comfort if not prosperity. No historians and no published histories had ever told of such a time, and the youngest generations among us were too young to remember and couldn't even imagine the scale of violence and death caused by the 21st-century nuclear wars.

That would change if Daddy Warbucks could persuade Ziggy to go along with his revolutionary idea of creative destruction by means of 'just wars.' Of course, these were not novel ideas. Creative destruction—the demolition of the old economy to make way for a

new economy—had circulated with the writings of J.A. Schumpeter in the middle of the 20th century, and *iustum bellum* had been nurtured in the human bosom back to the Indian subcontinent, China and Egypt before it became officially recognized in Europe as a fundamental aspect of international law, in part owing to the influence of ideas such as those of the Dutch legal theorist, Hugo Grotius, who was responding to the bloody and protracted Christian wars of the mid-17th century.

The wars of the early 21st century had been a boon for business and not just for arms manufacturers. The complete economic rebuilding of countries created a gold-rush climate for entrepreneurs and investors. Fortunes were made, many of today's 99th percentile of the one-percenters tracing their family wealth to the massive reconstruction efforts. In Europe and East Asia, these efforts exceeded the scale of the post-World War II Marshall Plan. Such wasn't the case in Latin America or Africa ... and it never had been.

Ziggy had been there, and had played a significant role in orchestrating wars and their aftermath. A somewhat surprising fact given that today Ziggy is credited with the 'peace and prosperity' years. Warbucks knew this. It was family business, and Ziggy was a very old friend of the family.

Now, Warbucks, whose 13-figure asset hoard had not seen double-digit growth in decades, had to seek Ziggy's assistance to recover from this financial stagnation. Warbucks thought the time was right. Ziggy, who was not a particularly stable character, had very fickle moods, and Warbucks thought that they (Ziggy) might be looking for something to shake things up. Family history had demonstrated that there was nothing like an extended calm to facilitate the stirring of the anxious soul of Ziggy.

And so the meet happened ... in some exclusive dimension. Ziggy was quite receptive, having grown bored with the tedium of peace and well-being, so they didn't require much persuasion. Daddy Warbucks judged Ziggy correctly as had his forebears.

Within the year, broadcasts of imminent war were circulating around the world. National and civilizational loyalties surged ... political conflicts heated up. Weapons research, development and procurement proceeded apace. Frenzied calls were loud and plenty for 'just wars,' righteous wars, wars for civilization against barbarism. Ziggy had mastered their arts of persuasion over millennia, and a relatively brief calm hadn't altered their skillfulness.

Within two years, millions had died from all the divers causes associated with the warfare of *homo sapiens*—not just the bullets and bombs but starvation, the diseases (many thought long vanquished), the anguish and the exterminations (also thought finally subdued).

Shortly after the 'destruction' phase, global markets came alive with a fury and fullness not seen in generations. Massive piles of wealth were accumulated. New aristocratic genealogies were founded and the established were further embellished. This was the new order ... resurrected ... yet again. The 'creative' phase was in full swing.

Daddy Warbucks, along with his confederates, were invited to a once-in-an-age celebratory function at Ziggy's, and naturally, Ziggy was the star of the event and the object of universal praise ... in Ziggy's private dimension, that is.

We spoke over the phone at first, but over the years the phone conversations were replaced by emails. We hadn't all been together since college and that was a long time ago. I was the first one to 65, so it was my suggestion that we have a reunion ... before it was too late. Everyone agreed, but scheduling was the problem. Always had been. We decided on Chicago. It was at the center of our various North American locations.

We stayed at the Silversmith. It had reasonable rates—our rooms were at the back of the hotel to avoid the street noise—and it was near all the places we wanted to visit. James and I had never been to Chicago. On the second night of our weekend together, we had dinner at one of the tony restaurants on Lakeshore—a beautiful view of Lake Michigan and the city skyscape. Over the course of the evening as we reminisced about our lives to this point with the boost of alcohol to loosen the tongues—though I didn't drink—the conversation predictably turned philosophical. Mid-February and the weather was brutal. What a different conversation we might have had in an outdoor cafe on a sunny, summer day.

As was the custom when we were in school, we first selected a topic. As seniors, we felt entitled to share our wisdom, and ultimately we decided to take turns rendering a story—fictional or real—about what else, wisdom itself. Since most of our generation feel as though we've attained it, it's not difficult for us to expound upon our familiarity with the subject.

Adam began.

"My story is about one of the last patients I saw.

"She had witnessed a grisly murder on a Greyhound bus. It had been more than 15 years earlier, but she still seemed traumatized. The first 10 minutes she stared vacantly into the distance, occasionally meeting my eyes, but it was a soulless, empty look and I could have been a brick wall and it wouldn't have mattered.

"As she related the details, she maintained a steady, even tone—didn't cry, didn't scream, didn't show any emotion. I wondered how many times she'd gone through the horror—the vision of blood spurting from the neck, the stickiness of fresh blood on the floor and seats of the bus, the feel of blood spattering on her face, the sound of the heavy knife plunging time after time into the flesh. She told it all as if she were in a trance.

I let her continue without interruption, saving my questions for when she was ready."

The parole board let him out. Said he was remorseful and had served out his punishment.

"That was my cue. I felt she wanted to talk with me now."

And how did that make you feel?

Like I was just a slab of meat.

What do you mean?

No feelings, no value.

You felt victimized, and you don't think anyone cared. Is that what you mean?

I WAS victimized, and so was everyone else on that bus that day. We all saw and heard what went on. To free a monster like that ....

"Her voice was more animated, and she looked at me and now saw me in front of her asking her these questions."

You think he's still a threat?

Yes. Maybe not to you, but you don't ride Greyhound buses, do you? And the judge, so smug and self-righteous, he doesn't live among the people that do these crimes. If he did, he might not be so high and mighty.

You don't feel that justice was done?

Do you? I mean if it were your brother or father or friend or just another f___in human being who was butchered like that, right in front of your very eyes.... He cut out the heart and ate it. Think about that for a minute. Let it sink in. Picture him chewing the raw meat, the sound of him chomping on it, blood dripping down his chin, his hands lobster red. And then he plucked out the eyes—just stabbed into the sockets and pulled them out—and swallowed them whole. Does that mean anything? Can you see them disappear in his mouth and then slide down his throat?

Do you feel unsafe now that he has been released?

He knows who I am.

Have you considered going into a witness protection program?

You think it's that easy?

Could your family join you?

You know my parents are in a nursing home, don't you?

I'm sorry.

You're sorry?

I mean—

I know what you mean. You're just like the judge, brushing it off, because for you it's not personal. It's just a job. Pays pretty good I imagine. But how do you sleep?

I can understand your anger, and I apologize if it seems I'm down-playing this—

No, I don't think you do. You can't truly understand what you don't feel. God forgive me, but you wouldn't understand me unless you were me.

Can we go back—

No, Doctor, we can't go back. We're done here. I need some time and space to get myself back together. It's not easy getting strung out like this ... over and over. For what purpose?

We can continue another day—

Maybe. But I can't say when that will be.

"With that she got up and left. She was remarkably calm given the pain and anger and fear she must have been experiencing. Her gait as she walked to the door was steady and unhurried, but it was resolute. There was no fumbling with the doorknob and she closed

the door gently. I heard her say good-bye to the receptionist, and she was gone.

"I never saw her again, and her file was never requested.

"I continued my practice for another year and a half, but I couldn't go beyond that. I came to realize that the woman from the Greyhound bus had profoundly affected me. My behaviour with subsequent patients was less professional and more empathetic than I ever thought was appropriate for someone in my field. She'd been so right when she said, 'You can't truly understand what you don't feel.' The anger and frustration she felt towards the justice system I began to believe was fully justified. Who are we—judges and psychiatrists—to believe that our knowledge and wisdom is beyond scrutiny ... when we don't even feel? And if we have stopped feeling, are we really still human or even humane?"

———

"That's a gruesome beginning, Adam. Sounds like it's been preying on you for quite awhile though," I said.

"It has. I took the bus here. First time I've ever taken an inter-city bus. All the way from Thunder Bay—following the same route as in my story. I finally summoned up the courage to do what I'd meant to do years ago—have a look for myself at the other side. It turned out very differently for me. Everyone I saw seemed harmless, and most were quite pleasant. I sat in the very back to push the experience to the limit. At the back of the bus, I was among an extended Somali family on their way from Winnipeg to Toronto. What they said among themselves was unintelligible to me—English is not just my first language, it' my only one. But they were willing to speak English with me and not too badly at that. They were excited about starting over, and it was contagious. I considered myself to be the

beneficiary of dumb luck, and I became sad thinking that the bus riders in my story had not been so lucky."

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"That's two stories, Adam," said James. "But we'll overlook it, because the second one made the first one easier to stomach, so to speak. Besides, your replay of the doctor-patient conversation was amazing. You agree Charlie?"

"I absolutely do. The conversation, the way you managed the voices, really drew me in, and trust me, I was trying to get some distance.... James, if you're ready, would you go next? I'm still a bit unnerved."

"Sure," answered James. "I have an old reliable story that I've pieced together and rendered in different versions over the years."

"It starts in a small town in the Deep South. Not only did everyone know everyone else—in their race—they also knew you back one or two generations. That tended to fix people in categories that couldn't be easily changed. Naturally, some of the younger generation never returned after the military or college, and the ones who weren't born here usually didn't last very long. It was uphill all the way for them. It wasn't the kind of town you'd run away to in order to escape ... something or someone. This was a place you'd most likely run away from.

"It was an era when everything 'out there' seemed upside down, at least according to what the three networks showed on TV. Some of 'out there' seeped in though. We fought integration in the schools and we fought for God and country. Some of the foreign music made it in—mostly when the parents weren't listening. Otherwise, it was high school football on Friday night, college football on Saturday, Pro football on Sunday, and church on Sunday—Sunday

nights were optional. I remember hearing that on Sunday, July 20th in 1969, there weren't more than seven at the evening service.

"We had a new preacher, who'd just come back from Japan. He wasn't military, though he had been at Tokyo Bay with MacArthur but in one of the lesser-known vessels. This time, he and his family were returning from Japan where he'd been a foreign missionary not more than 50 miles from where the Nagasaki atomic bomb exploded. Years later in my post-grad studies, I discovered the incongruence between killing people then later trying to save them. But in our town, at that time WWII movies with Japanese bad guys were still popular, so nothing seemed wrong with sending the missionaries in after the soldiers.

"Actually, it was quite an education for most of us when we learned about the Japan of today (back then). Some of the ladies dressed in kimonos during foreign missions fundraising season, and many of them tried cooking some of the more common dishes. Oyako Donburi was a favorite, and soy sauce caught on like wildfire. Nori was an acquired taste—picked up by very few. We got our first in-person look at Japanese folding screens, woodblock prints and vases—all of this too delicate for young families with children like ours.

"It only occurred to me later that there was never any mention of segregation in Japanese churches. Looking back it now seems so odd that segregation in our churches persisted (and persists) long after court-ordered school integration. At the time, no one gave it the least thought, but now I can't for the life of me explain it.

"I got to know the Reverend's family pretty well. I was interested in dating the oldest daughter, but I had to put up with Canasta, Hearts and Pit. Boy, were they competitive and particularly spirited when playing that commodity trading game. As for dates, they were al-

ways chaperoned. There were two younger kids. One of them was always our backseat minder. There were five of them in all—children. Not unusual for the times and especially for men of the (Protestant) cloth who seemed to take comfort in knowing they'd always have a congregation in the pews. Much to the Reverend's chagrin the three oldest, all girls, were not a passive audience, fairly thoroughly dishing out criticism at Sunday dinner (lunch), which I observed first hand on a couple of occasions. The old Reverend—to a 16-year-old he was old—was never perturbed by a little friendly advice from what he jokingly referred to as the 'peanut gallery,' though it wouldn't have occurred to me to share an insightful comment or two of my own. It just wasn't done.

"I got a different perspective from my own parents. They liked the Reverend and his family. Liked them a lot. But there was an image problem. You see the Reverend was wont to invite people from the lower class—and yes, social standing was very important in this little town. We even had our own country club, which he declined to join. To the contrary, he was known to pick people up for church service and take them home afterwards. At first, people thought it was for show, but he stuck to it. Even his daughter, my girl friend, was embarrassed to admit that the girls would insist the windows be rolled down to air out the car after Sunday morning services. Something else that she didn't like about her father's work was that he regularly visited the local jail. She told him point blank that it was dangerous. He didn't stop.

"I was sorry to see them leave. I think everyone knew the reason but no one spoke about it. He had heart issues and had one of the early pacemakers of the day. My parents figured that he'd been an insurance risk for the foreign mission board and that he and his family had been returned stateside for that reason. I guess our church fathers were ultimately persuaded by the same logic.

"Despite my fond memories of him and his family, I'm afraid that today he'd be written off as neo-colonial and racist."

———

"That was a great story, James, but did you go 'woke' on us at end," asked Adam.

"Well, I'm not as uncompromising as I once was. I know that sounds peculiar, but for me the certainties of the past get a little shaky as the world changes, not that I've become 'woke,' as you call it, but just that I can appreciate the co-existence of conflicting narratives. Life's not always so simple. It seems to me that there's a perpetual dialectic in history."

"And you get the final word, James. Now, since we allowed Adam two stories, you deserve to have a story and a commentary," I said.

"Your turn Charlie," said Adam.

"I've got a story about someone I've known since 6th grade—all of 53 years ago. Put that way, it sounds like a different era ... and I guess it was. Just like yours, James.

"As a 12-year-old boy, he wasn't remarkable in any way as far as I could tell. But then we didn't have much contact. Boys were shy at that age. Also, I was in the advanced class, what they called A1 back then, and he was in the A2 class. Since we didn't have classes together, it was only because we had a couple of friends in common and our junior high school had fewer than 400 students that I knew of him at all. That sounds patronizing, I know, and as an educator I should be able to choose my words better.

"It was only much later when our paths crossed again and I got to know the man I'm going to talk about. He and I were among the 50

percent or so of high school graduates who stuck around or came back after finishing military service or college. The rest, well, they left in search of more than our small mid-America town could provide. We stayed behind for a variety of reasons. For example, some were very community-oriented and committed to the generations before. That was me. One of the very, very few declared white Democrats in town.

"Anyway, the man—let's call him Randy was a fireman when I first met him. There was a gas explosion in our neighborhood, and since it was just a two-minute walk from the high school where I taught, I was there in a flash. You see my father was a shut-in. That was a term we used to refer to folks who couldn't get out and about anymore.

"My father was alright—shaken but physically unharmed. It was a house two doors down where a contractor hit a gas line. No one was home, thank God, because there was literally no home after the explosion.

"Randy was one of the firemen putting out the fire. Afterwards, he came over to a group of us who were standing around—still in shock—and checked to make sure we and our loved ones were OK. By this point, it was known that there were no fatalities and no serious injuries; otherwise, I imagine we would have been approached individually for obvious reasons. He was just trying to reassure us.

"I liked his manner. He was good with people and he'd clearly had some experience speaking with victims and witnesses of traumatic events. He recognized me first, but when he introduced himself, I remembered. He'd been much different back in junior high school—kind of scrawny and easy to miss. He wasn't particularly good-looking—not what some girls today would call 'eye candy.' I re-

called that by high school he had bulked up and though still small had become a pretty good football player. I think he was a corner safety or ... well, it was one of those defensive backfield positions. I never really cared for the sport. It seemed like pointless aggression, and I don't buy the idea that it's a safety valve.

"From that point on we called each other by name when we met at the grocery store, bank or gas station. We never dated though. I don't think he went to church. At least, I never saw him in ours. Several years later I had his daughter in my class, and I got to know the family a little better. And, of course, the grapevine was a prolific source of information—some true, some not—confirming that small town stereotype.

"It was from gossip that I learned of Randy's own tragic past. I vaguely remembered some of it, but since much of what I'd learned could be fact-checked against historical news reports, I researched the stories about what had happened twenty years before.

"A 15-year-old girl was burned to death in an abandoned house on the outskirts of a rural community 20 miles to the northeast. There were never any charges laid and no motive was ever discovered. From the rumors I heard, wild stories were cooked up about Satanic ritual sacrifices, drug dealing-prostitution rings, and even the old standby, a simple-minded Black man who didn't perform well when interrogated by law enforcement.

"This young girl had been Randy's girl friend, and by all accounts—here based entirely on the grapevine—they were quite an item, a Romeo and Juliet whose families didn't circulate in the same social set. Yes, even small towns have social worlds, some quite exclusive. She was white, and he wasn't. Let's call her 'Juliet.'

"I tried to imagine how a 15- or 16-year-old, with all the usual emotional adjustments going on during adolescence, would have handled such a horrific happening. I taught young people this age and felt I was still in touch with the difficulties of growing up, and I remembered quite well how I had felt growing up in a small town aware of a much bigger more exciting world out there.

"The connection between Randy's past and present came to me immediately. It was as if he was still trying to do everything he could to save his girlfriend, 'Juliet.' But that was pure speculation and I'm sure I wasn't the first to think it. I didn't encourage the rumor.

"Years later Randy suffered severe burns over his entire body while working the scene of a chemical explosion at one of the fertilizer plants. He was in the hospital for weeks, and I visited him several times. His wife was always there beside him. She told me how much their daughter had enjoyed my classes, and it was my pleasure to be able to tell them what a determined and resourceful student she was. His wife, let's call her Betty, nodded in agreement and said, 'Just like her father.' Through the bandages, you couldn't see his face, but his eyes lit up.

"At the end of that visit, Betty invited me for coffee in the cafeteria. We chatted for a few minutes, and I wasn't sure why she had wanted to speak to me privately. Then, it came. She told me what she'd learned from 25 years of marriage. Randy was in an eternal battle with fire. He'd become a fireman in the first place because of what happened to "Juliet," and that dedication never wavered. It wasn't that he was fixated on losing his teenage love; it was more. He saw his own daughter in every fire he fought. It was his passion—really an obsession she believed—that drove him to protect the vulnerable. He never put it in quite the same words, but she knew. The recurrent nightmares, never fully divulged, of a quarter century had told her.

"Randy recovered and was promoted to Fire Chief—the youngest on record. It was the only way to keep him out of the fires, and by this time, as Betty added, he realized that he could still fight the fires by protecting the men and women firefighters who had taken over from him."

———

"You've gone sentimental on us, Charlie," said Adam with a big wink.

"Well, I thought this one was the better one for tonight."

"Fair enough," said James. "Six o'clock is gonna come early tomorrow. I need some shut-eye. The intensity of these stories and the feelings they've brought out have exhausted me."

"Let's adjourn, then," I added. "Whose turn is to pick up the bill?"

Silence.

"Mine I guess."

"Do you remember the time you kissed me?"

The room was completely dark ... and now it was completely quiet as well.

"Who said that? Was that you Michele?"

"Michele's not here. She went to the washroom just before the power went out."

Maybe Norbert knows. Norbert?

No response.

"How appropriate is this, Norbert? Twenty-five years in the back office and just as you're leaving, we still can't find you."

"That's a mean-spirited comment. Mark, that WAS you, wasn't it?"

"Course it was! Mark, you can be such a jerk."

"Just teasing, Sung Ja. Norbert's always had a good sense of humour, right Norbert?"

"So, what I wanna know is who said Norbert kissed her. It was definitely a woman's voice ... but somehow unfamiliar."

What makes you think it was Norbert?

Just assumed. His party and everything. Why else would you ask a question like that?

"I think it was Nancy. She did have a thing for old Norbert. Isn't that right, Nancy?"

"Not Norbert. I was talking to someone else."

"Oh, really! Who could that be I wonder?"

"Hmmm. Shouldn't be too hard to figure out. There couldn't be more than 15 people here, half men, half women."

"That didn't come out quite right, did it? You're not REALLY transphobic are you, Anil?"

"This is Anil. I didn't say that. It was someone else."

"You'd think after all these years working together we'd know one another's voices. Anil, I think I know your voice for sure."

"It wasn't Anil."

"Who's that? How do you know?"

"Because it was me, and I'm not Anil."

"Who are you?"

"After all these years, you still can't tell us apart, can you David?"

"Cut it out! Let's get some service here. Waitress! Waitress! Bring us some candles."

"Our server was a man, David."
.

"Yeah, why are we still in the dark. They gotta have candles or something. Flashlights! Where are the flashlights?"

"On your phone, stupid! Here look."

A sudden white light on Robert's face, blinded him momentarily.

"Damn you! Point that thing to the ceiling. Don't you have any common sense?"

Another flashlight is turned on ... and pointed to the ceiling. Then another and another until the table is fully lighted by the reflected light from above.

"Hey, where's that waiter?"

"The waiter? He's over behind the bar. What I wanna know is where the hell is Norbert."

"Norbert?"

Suddenly the lights come on, and the flashlights blink out one by one.

"Norbert? We're waiting. Where are you?"

"Has anyone see Norbert?"

"He's not here. Maybe he stepped out for a smoke."

"I don't think so. He stopped smoking years ago.."

"Now that I think about it, I don't recall seeing Norbert even before the lights went out."

"Me neither."

"Come to think of it. I do remember thinking that it would be just like Norbert to be late for his own retirement party."

"Ask the waiter."

"Waiter?"

"Yes ma'am?"

"Did you see a tall skinny, freckle-faced man—late 50s—wearing a yellow Doonesbury t-shirt?"

"Yes ma'am?"

"Where is he?"

"Oh, I thought you saw him. He arrived late. I was about to seat him at the head of the table as you requested, but when no one seemed to notice him, he turned to me and asked a favour. Slipped me a Benjamin. Said it was a joke and that everyone would get a kick out of it. Since you booked the entire restaurant tonight, I didn't see any reason not to go along. A strange party favour, but I've seen stranger."

"You mean—"

"I knew I felt a subway train passing."

"Guess nobody thought to go upstairs to see if the whole city was dark. Never would have expected Norbert to—"

"NORBERT ... walked out on US?"

"How could he? Didn't he appreciate how much trouble we went to? I mean, he wasn't the most likeable guy."

"Yeah, and still, we all showed up."

"Just like always."

"Where does he get off skippin out on us like that?"

"Arrogant ass____!"

"You know he WAS ... arrogant, I mean. In his own way, I think he looked on us with contempt."

"Contempt! From that cretinous cipher? You gotta be kidding?"

"Forget Norbert. I wanna know who you kissed, Nancy? It wasn't me, I know that."

"And it never will be."

"Let's order. I'm starving."

"Good idea."

"How about starting off with drinks?"

"Better idea! I could use one after the day I had. Got reamed out over the Atlas account. Some new guy—"

"End of quarter! What the hell kind of timing is that?"

"And THEN the guest of honour is a no show."

"Not a classy way to leave, I'll tell you that."

"Damn straight!"

The drinks arrive.

"To US, then."

"Hear, hear."

"Cheers!"

"Salud!"

"Skål!"

"Bottoms up!"

"Where's all this stuff going?"

"See that chute over there?"

"You mean they're gonna trash all this?"

"That's what they said. Everything's gotta go. The whole library."

"Some of them books go way back. Gotta be a lot of history here. Why throw it all away?"

"Don't need it no more. It's a new age. Ministry has to 're-invent itself.' Gotta leave the past in the past."

"That's nuts! So, all the money—tax money from mooks like us—it took to write them books is gonna go straight to the dump?"

"At least they're not incinerating the lot. 'Bad optics,' I heard. Ministry of Education burning books—wouldn't look good."

"Musta cost a fortune to pay people to write this stuff. I hear the salaries here are six figures."

"That's what everybody says. You know, my old dad told me to get a government job like this. Told me, 'Son, you'd never have to work another day in your life.' That's what he said."

"Yeah, but you couldn't do a job where all you do is stand around—"

"Mostly sit around and talk about working but never actually do anything."

"And if you do do something, like write one of them books, it gets chucked out the window one day."

"You read the papers. They don't need folks to write stuff no more. Computers are gonna do that. They say it'll be a whole lot cheaper ... and just as good. Lotsa white collar folks'll be looking for work then."

"Yeah, I've read about that. That's why I'm telling my kids to get a trade. Not like their old man—a real trade. Work with your hands. Plumber, electrician, carpenter. It'll take a lot longer for the robots to replace guys like that."

"Think so? What about robot factories? My car was assembled by machines. You've seen my car. It's not exactly new."

"I hope you're wrong. Otherwise, you know what? I wouldna had kids."

"That may be coming."

"I'm afraid THAT'LL be up to my kids ... or grandkids. Not much of an inheritance is it?"

"Hey, break's over. Let's get back to it. Floor's gotta be completely empty by five. Overnight crew's starting construction tonight."

"I think I'll take one of them books. Look! This one's from 1867. Still in good condition. Like it's never been opened."

"Keep it as a souvenir."

"Might be worth something someday. You think?"

A sporadic flurry of white flutters in the wind currents high above the concrete and asphalt, disappearing around corners of the myriad gray office buildings. From below, they could be taken for snowflakes, larger than usual, and so, visible against the gray cloud cover and the gray walls of this typical gray winter morning.

The trail of white flecks leads back to a 24-storey, windowless facade, where from an unseen crack, paper, it seems, is slipped through to the outside world. This is 'The Castle,' the unflattering nickname of the building housing the Ministry.

Unbeknownst to the pedestrians hurrying from the subway and buses to their offices, someone is releasing page after page of printed matter in the only way possible. These pages have been salvaged from the library that is being evacuated to make office space for the Ministry's restructuring, re-engineering and re-orientation plan.

All library materials (books, journals, reports, memoranda, correspondence) have been designated obsolete and historically irrelevant, hence the Ministry's decision to bypass archival protocols.

How do we know this? It was once a matter of public record. There was a brief phone conversation between someone inside and someone outside. The persons have never been publicly identified, despite the existence of archived call records that were subpoenaed by a 'concerned' news media outlet. The suit was dropped when the news organization was acquired and absorbed into the Ministry's vast communications department. According to one source, the not so public offices of the department are physically located beneath the three-level underground parking garage. This

is also the Ministry's information hub. It is here that information is classified, secured and vetted for release and employees are likewise classified, monitored and evaluated for fitness.

The snow flurry lasts only 15 minutes, and afterwards, groundskeepers are dispatched to the surrounding blocks to gather any loose paper on streets, sidewalks and in alleyways. There's not a trace of evidence—the public space is as clean as if it were in Singapore.

And at the other end of the line—silence.

This was not the Ministry of old. A former Ministry staffer once told me, off the record, that 'back in the day' she used to watch episodes of *Yes, Minister* in the director's office. She said, in a Humphrey-like paraphrase of Margaret Thatcher that "it accurately depicts the incorrigible chaos of entrenched bureaucracy that keeps us free from the shackles of centralized and authoritarian rule."

That, I thought, was a peculiarly British twist on the 'deep state' obsession of American populists, many of whom favour the authoritative hand of an 'elected' CEO to control the administrative machinery of state—much like today's Ministry.

In *The Code of Capital: How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality* (2019), Katharina Pistor, Professor of Comparative Law at Columbia Law School, explains how the law—state law and private law—establish, protect and increase wealth. The 'code of capital' is the body of laws underpinning and enabling wealth creation by means of assets (physical and monetized stores of value). State law is passed by legislatures and adjudicated in the courtroom, while private law is created in private law offices. State law can be thought of as a set of general rules which are fleshed out in greater detail by private lawyers representing their clients' interests by crafting 'rules' to fill in the interstices of legislative and judicial law.

In the book's title, 'code' refers to a collection of legal rules as in the "voluminous books that compile legal rules ... such as the French and German civil and commercial codes." For the author, capital is more than just one of the two primary factors (inputs) of production described in economics textbooks. In other words, capital is not simply the set of familiar tangible assets of plant, equipment, inventory and buildings.

> [While] economists and accountants have clung to the notion that capital is a physical input, one of the two factors of production ... capital has never been about a thing, but always about its legal coding; never just about output and input, but always about the ability to capture and monetize expected return.

And so in this book, the code of capital concerns the legal rules that recognize an asset as having value and thus constituting wealth and facilitate the creation and accumulation of more wealth. Contemporary examples of wealth are presented and discussed, e.g., asset-backed securities and their derivatives, such as the mortgage-backed securities that contributed to the 2008 global financial

crisis and the emergence of cryptocurrencies as stores of value and potential means of exchange. Coding capital is synonymous with creating the legal rules for contracts, property rights, collateral, trusts, corporations, bankruptcy and most of all enforcement by means of an unrivalled authority of the state through the courts and policing. It is crucial for the legal code to be effective that it be "backed and enforced by a state."

> Max Weber explained the power of law by invoking the state's monopoly over the means of coercion. Through its courts, bailiffs, and police forces, states enforce not only their own commands, but also private property rights and the binding commitments private parties make to one another.

In the introductory chapter, the author outlines the main themes of the book,

> Capital is coded in law, and, more specifically, in institutions of private law, including property, collateral, trust, corporate, bankruptcy law, and contract law. These are the legal modules that bestow critical legal attributes on the select assets that give them a comparative advantage over others in creating new and protecting old wealth. Once properly coded, capital assets enjoy priority and durability, are convertible into cash, or legal tender, and, critically, these attributes will be enforced *against the world*, thereby attaining universality."

With respect to global capitalism,

> [C]apital's global mobility is a function of a legal support structure that is ultimately backed by states. Many states have committed themselves under their own domestic law, or in international treaties, to recognize the priority rights that were created under foreign law. They regularly enforce

> foreign law in their own courts and lend their coercive powers to executing the rulings of foreign courts or arbitration tribunals."

The author goes so far as to maintain that the existence of capitalism depends entirely on the "coercive powers of states."

But the relationship between the state and capitalism is symbiotic. What does the state get in return? According to the author,

> The fate of governments in democracies in particular has been tied ever more closely to their governments' ability to produce growth. Growth rates, and the rise of stock markets, not the distribution of wealth or indices of human development, have become the standard measures for adjudicating success or failure of elected governments—in itself an indicator of the enormous cognitive sway capital has over polities.

Thus, the legitimacy of the liberal state (as opposed to the monarchial or dictatorial state) derives from the general economic well-being of the citizenry, prosperity being the promise of capitalism, though not necessarily, or even desirably, in the equal distribution of economic outcomes.

Furthermore, the author provides analytical support for the argument that it is laws—and these not limited to the laws passed by governments but extending also to the private laws created in the legal space left empty by public law—that enable the creation of wealth. That is, it is laws that that are the foundation for the forces of supply and demand—the market-balancing invisible hand—that establish and protect ownership of the inputs and products, i.e., wealth. There is no natural law that directs endowments of wealth. That allocation is man-made. Not only is the initial distribution of

wealth dependent on human rules, but the accumulation of wealth is also dependent not on natural law but the laws of human society.

The foundational analysis thus provides the means for a genealogical account of the origins of wealth and wealth inequality—a variation on Nietzsche's genealogy of morals adapted to the economics of wealth—for both start somewhen and not owing to some cosmic destiny that is fortuitous for some but not all. How does wealth get created in the first place? And once created, how is wealth maintained over generations? This is where the coding of capital figures in, as it explains how the human inclination to be better off than others—the impulse for hierarchy—establishes the rules that favour the generation, persistence and increase of wealth inequality over time.

Economists do a fine job papering over the flawed origins and self-sustaining practices of wealth. Reflecting on this reviewer's distant university major and subsequent readings in economics and political economy, it has become apparent that there is much that economics has in common with human religions. Both cloak human mendacity in respectable garb, and both sanction the exercise of power to promote self-serving behaviour, to perpetrate violence (physical, emotional and economic) and to manage the social herd intellectually and economically.

For the author, law is very much about the exercise of power—how it is created and used to dominate and subjugate citizens domestically as well as the citizens and entrepreneurs/investors globally. The metaphor of war—as the ultimate exercise of domination—is a key leitmotif in the book, wherein economic and legal 'warfare' is described as having supplanted military conflict. At various turns in the book, one may be reminded of the Monty Python pirate skit, *The Crimson Permanent Assurance*, and its satirical take on hostile corporate takeovers. Pistor speaks of the global empire of capital

wherein troop strength and armaments are less important than the authority of the law, "and its most powerful battle cry is 'but it is legal.'" Here the reader may recall Dickens' fictional recounting of *Jarndyce v Jarndyce,* a complicated estate case in the English chancery court system of *Bleak House*, which may be regarded as legal combat or a Kafaesque absurdism—two sides of a bad coin. Continuing the metaphor of power and war and extending it to empire, the author repeatedly reminds the reader that the legal system of English common law and New York State law "dominate the world of global capital"—as centres of the empire of the code of capital.

With respect to indigenous property rights, Pistor cites the 2007 Mayan court victory on land-use rights in Belize and then observes that "[t]he Maya won a battle [in the courts] but were unable to win the war against their own government." Then revisiting US-Native American legal relations, she draws attention to the discovery doctrine to characterize America's Manifest Destiny as

> One of the greatest "conquests by law" had been achieved by altering the cause for recognizing a superior right: discovery and improvement extinguished first in time claims. Discovery and improvement became the winning arguments for settlers who had bet all along that aggressive capture would give them title eventually.

Similar references are made to the "battle over land enclosures in England in the sixteenth century" during which ordinary citizens fought to protect the openness of the common lands from the appropriation of the landed gentry. And then the author brings the reader up to date in the 21st century with a brief discussion of the 2017 *Eli Lilly v. Canada* patent law decision by a NAFTA tribunal that recognized that "Canada won the battle; [though] it is not yet clear who will win the war and have the final say in *making* property rights: sovereign states or private agents." The author also notes

the trend towards copyrights and patents—temporary state-protected monopolies—being extended indefinitely into the future by means of supplementary patents and copyright extensions. For now, in *Eli Lilly*, the extension of a monopoly patent was found to be limited across international legal jurisdictions. Here the reviewer's short fiction, 'The Marketplace for English,' published in *theNewerYork* in 2014—a now defunct experimental lit e-magazine not to be confused with the illustrious *The New Yorker*—depicting a bizarre situation where commerce and copyrights have extended their domain into the realm of everyday language provides some comic relief.

The significance of the war theme is part of an overall pessimism that the author has about the prospects for the future of re-coding capital so that the great disparities in wealth can be ameliorated and so that the economic value of a relatively stable and predictable marketplace requiring the cooperative participation of the masses of law-abiding and productive citizens can be factored into the accounting ledger of entrepreneurs and investors. In other words, the investment climate itself is a precondition for successful commerce, and the maintenance of that climate is a social good which should be recognized as worthy of earning a reward in the same way the entrepreneurs/investors rationalize their rewards for risk-taking.

The author's parting words, resonating with Nietzschean overtones of the will to power and the struggle—not for survival, but for superiority—offer little consolation though.

> The second trajectory may, sadly, already be under way, as illustrated by the rampant attacks on independent judiciaries and the free press, not only in relatively young democracies, such as Poland or Hungary, but in countries with a long tradition of democracy and the rule of law, such the United Kingdom and the United States. If these trends

> continue, naked power will once more gain sway over legal ordering, as it has done over most of human history—and we will all be worse off for it.

At this point, one might be roused by memories of the asymmetric application of debtor law—formerly imprisonment (well illustrated in Dicken's fictional description of the Marshalsea debtor prison in *Little Dorrit*) and modern day bank foreclosures and asset liquidation for the defaulting individual contrasted with the asset shielding coded in private bankruptcy law to protect the personal wealth of entrepreneurs/investors in limited liability corporations and the government bailouts that intervene to prevent the 'catastrophic' failure of 'too big to fail' banks and most recently automobile manufacturers during the 2008 financial crisis.

The book is not an easy read but it is a worthwhile read to better understand, from an analytical perspective, how and why economic inequality is an intrinsic part of the allegedly *laissez-faire* economic system of capitalism, 'allegedly' because state interventions are fundamental to the creation of the preconditions for capitalism and equally importantly the sustainment of the capitalist system. To assist the lay reader, despite the risk of boring some, the author provides multiple recapitulations of the book's main line of arguments over the course of the book.

A useful introduction to some of the ideas in this book can be found in *The New York Times' Ezra Klein Show* interview with Katharina Pistor on January 13, 2023. The audio and audio transcript are available at https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/13/podcasts/ transcript-ezra-klein-podcast-katharina-pistor.html.

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Cat Country by Lao She (the pen name for Shu Qingchun*)* was published in China in 1932 and is considered to be among the earliest examples of Chinese science fiction, although it is radically different from such contemporary Chinese science fiction masterpieces as Liu Cixin's *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy. When reading *Cat Country*, *Gulliver's Travel's* immediately comes to mind. This shouldn't be surprising as Lao had taught at the University of London for six years and became familiar with English literature before returning to the maelstrom of political uncertainty in China in 1930. As a genre, dystopian (not utopian) satire would be the more appropriate classification for this novel. The fact that Lao sets the stage by having spaceship crash land on Mars is incidental to his having placed his protagonist (the lone survivor) in a Lilliputian world.

As a satire, there is much history that lies beneath the surface of an otherwise simple tale and figures symbolically in the narrative. Lao lived most of his life during China's Century of Humiliation which dates back to the opening of China to Western trade (most notably opium) in the mid-19th century and up to the end of the civil war in 1949 that brought Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to power over a re-united China. Lao, only an infant at the time, learned from his mother about the death of his father during the Boxer Rebellion in 1901. The anti-foreigner revolt was crushed by the combined armed forces of the Eight-Nation Alliance of Germany, Japan, Russia, Britain, France, US, Italy and Austria-Hungary. Lao was a sympathizer with the May 4th Movement which sprung from the Versailles Treaty in which the Allied Europe awarded Germany's China territories to China's long-time rival, Japan—an ignominious result given that the Chinese had been allies. Although he was in England at the time, Lao was certainly knowledgeable about the civil war between the CCP and the KMT

(Nationalist Kuomintang) which escalated in the late 1920s just ahead of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931. This is the backstory to Lao's fierce criticism of the Chinese character, the weakness and duplicity of China's leaders, and the foreign exploitation of a weak and divided post-imperial China.

What is striking for the modern reader is how well the satire carries over to the China of the late 1950s and 1960s. Lao's indictments against an earlier China could easily apply to the years of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, so *Cat Country* is more than just a period piece. Although Lao had not been officially pilloried by the CCP, the Hundred Flowers Movement that induced intellectuals to write and speak openly quickly ended with purges, and in Lao's case none were more personal than the attack early in the Cultural Revolution by an inflamed horde of teenage girl Red Guards who beat him and other authors and shamed them publicly in what at the time were called 'struggle sessions.' It was the very next day following the Red Guard attack that Lao, according to the official version, committed suicide by drowning.

There is nothing attractive about the China allegorically represented by the Martian world, Cat Country, described in Lao's novel. The author relentlessly criticizes nearly every aspect of the China he returned to, from the character of the Chinese people to their leadership and institutional failures, and he does so with very little of the levity he was reputed to have demonstrated in some of his other literary writings as seen in the following

> Everywhere one looked, one found suspicion, pettiness, selfishness and neglect. You couldn’t find an ounce of honesty, magnanimity, integrity or generosity in the entire society.

Before proceeding further into Lao's characterization of the Cat People, two other biographical details add some insight to the

theme of the foreigner in the novel. Lao, born in Beijing, was of the Manchu minority who were far outnumbered by the predominately Han population. Although the Qing rulers were themselves of Manchu origin, Lao nevertheless was not mainstream Chinese. A second detail is that Lao converted to Christianity in the early 1920s despite the facts that his father had died fighting the foreigners and that during the Rebellion, Christian missionaries were also the foreign enemy. As Lao was an ethnic minority and committed to a foreign creed, whose objectives were to Westernize, modernize and spiritually improve the backwards nation of China, Lao was arguably well positioned to think of himself as different from and therefore less vulnerable to his own thoroughgoing critique of the Chinese people. These differences notwithstanding, Lao was still Chinese and as such he couldn't help but have felt the humiliation of being regarded as inferior to the "foreign devils" his mother spoke of when he was young. Remembering the stories of how his own father had been killed by the Western foreigners, it had to pain him to have the character Scorpion, the collaborator, excuse the protagonist, Mr. Earth, for unintentionally scaring two Cat People to death by matter-of-factly stating the obvious reality in Cat Country where

> With you, a foreigner, it’s easier yet.... Kill anyone you please and no one will dare say anything. In any case, Cat Country law doesn’t apply to foreigners."

Unrelentingly, Lao portrayed the Cat People—stand-ins for the Chinese population—as greedy and opportunistic (e.g., stealing bricks from the Ambassador's wife's house which had just collapsed from the deluge of an epic rainstorm killing many inside), constantly fighting among themselves, unaccustomed to "helping in anything that might be beneficial to someone else, even if that help only cost them a few words," religious in their observance of social status and the social hierarchy, and in general, "a mass of people who are so docile, stupid, pitiful, poor, easily satisfied and even happy." This

happiness was in large part attributable to the ubiquitous narcotic from the leaves of the prized reverie tree, a narcotic like opium and not unlike the soma in Huxley's *Brave New World* also published in 1932.

Nevertheless, later Lao's protagonist/astronaut/foreigner/narrator/ Mr. Earth says

> Of course, having come from a peaceful and happy China, I was inclined towards optimism and somehow or other felt there was still some hope for Cat Country.

The irony here is about as humorous Lao gets, the author seemingly unable to subdue the anger, frustration, and anguish he felt when writing this book. Over the course of the story, his protagonist alternates between despair and hope for Cat Country ... with despair ultimately winning out, hence the dystopian nature of the satire.

Mr. Earth catalogues the institutional and leadership failures of Cat Country. At one point—actually, he does this at many points in the story—he sinks into hopelessness, declaring with dark humour that

> Perhaps the god who had made the Cat People intended them as a joke. They had schools, but no education; politicians, but no government; people, but no personal integrity; faces, but no concept of face. One had to admit that their god had gone a little too far with his little joke.

As he relates the history of Cat Country to his Earth visitor, Young Scorpion (one of three guides—each named Scorpion and representing a different generation) illustrates their peculiar philosophy of education, whereby

> [W]e decided on a thoroughgoing innovation: anyone who went to school would be counted as a university graduate

> on the first day of classes. Actually, this was the best of all possible systems for Cat Country. You see, statistically we have the highest number of university graduates of any country on Mars.

But for the children—often the unwanted and neglected consequences of *that* (a wry euphemism for recreational copulation) obtained through concubinage and 'free love'—who knew no better and had no reason to know better than their elders

> [They] were the happiest one could imagine. They were dirty; in fact, they were absolutely filthy, filthy past all possible description. They were thin, foul-smelling and ugly. Some had noses missing; others had eyes gone; and the heads of still others were covered with boils and scabs. And yet . . . they all seemed extremely happy!

In describing the children of Cat Country, Lao echoes many of the same criticisms present in Dickens, whose *oeuvre* he knew and admired. And thus, concluded Lao's protagonist, the young the children of the Cat People—the next generation—were looked after, revealing "an index of the society and the state" and propagating continuity in the living standards and character development of the Cat society. And those standards were in open display in Cat City, the capital, where housing was crowded and cramped with "no ventilation, no light, nothing but flies, foul air, and filth" such that "[a] contagious disease like cholera or scarlet fever could sweep [the] entire city clean of all traces of life within a single week!"

Naturally, Mr. Earth observed during his brief stay on Mars that the same qualities of wise and educated leadership were in evidence in the Cat People's understanding (or lack thereof) of industry—agriculture, in their case—and economics. And so, the colossal failure of Mao's Great Leap Forward was unwittingly presaged, a point

that undoubtedly would not have gone unnoticed by readers three decades later during the Cultural Revolution when such a critique would have been fatal ... for the author. The catastrophic famine and doomed backyard steel industrialization were sensitive topics—as in not to be discussed—in Mao's China, and the punishment for violating 'state secrets' was severe.

Near the end of the book, Mr. Earth and his guide, Young Scorpion, come upon a Cat soldier retreating in the face of the enemy. Young Scorpion is the jaded son of Scorpion the reverie forest land baron and the grandson of Old Scorpion the master strategist of Cat Country, and because he symbolizes the ruling class, the soldier is on a mission to kill him, reasoning as follows:

- "Every time there's a revolution, we common folk just lose something else."
- "They never paid any attention to whether our stomachs were empty or not."
- "The ruling group couldn't come up with any way of solving our economic problems."
- "In having us go to war against the foreigners, they tried to kill us."

Mr. Earth, himself, was perplexed that Old Scorpion and the other leaders had staged a civil war and not prepared for the imminent foreign invasion, but he was livid on witnessing the leaders racing to surrender to the foreign army in order to secure the best official positions in their service.

And yet "on the very brink of death, [the Cat People] still didn't understand the need for cooperation." Indeed, the last two prisoners "continued their struggle until they had bitten each other to death. In this way, the Cat People themselves completed their own destruction."

At the end, now alone, Mr. Earth no longer had a society to investigate, a society to despair over or hold out hope for. The civilization of the Cat People on Mars had been terminated ... with the cooperation of the victims. This had been foreshadowed many times. For instance, on entering Cat City for the first time, Mr. Earth remarked that "this civilization will soon perish!" And so it did.

The author adds his final touch of irony and unforgiving humour by having his protagonist declare that he looked forward to returning to his 'own great, glorious free China' ... on a French spaceship no less.

While this is a dystopian satire with no apparent contribution to human progress, presumably the author was of the opinion that there is a valid role for criticism to legitimize dissent even when no immediate solution is at hand or on the horizon. For, first, the problem has to be acknowledged, and that seems to be the author's purpose in doggedly browbeating the Chinese people by means of his scathing satire of the Cat People. He could plausibly be understood as intending to raise the social consciousness of a people by having them recognize and repent from their errors (sins) and then choose a real social transformation (salvation).

In *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (2023), Martin Wolf, chief economics commentator of the *Financial Times*, warns that the 'difficult marriage' between a democratic political system and a capitalist economic system is in danger in the 21st century. Although both democracy and capitalism have in common the importance of individual initiative, the 'marriage' is difficult in that for democracy there is value to the social dimension, while under pure *laissez-faire* capitalism there is not. Wolf argues that because of the contrary objectives in the social sphere, there is an inherent tension between these political and the economic systems. And, it is this tension that accounts for the relatively rare occurrence of democratic capitalism in human history.

> Above all, the survival of liberal democracy depends on the separation of control over economic resources from political power. Being hugely rich must be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for holding political power; and similarly, in a competitive market economy holding political power must be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for acquiring wealth. Just expressing it this way indicates how fragile such a system has to be.

Not only has autocratic government predominated in the past, but it is again in the ascendancy, even in the West, long thought to be the bastion of political and economic freedom. And so the central message of Wolfe's latest book is that what may for many appear to be a permanent standard of political economic organization is in fact vulnerable and reversible, thus requiring immediate attention and reform to prevent a collapse into the dark ages of despotism.

Wolf's views expressed nearly 20 years ago in *Why Globalization Works* (2004) have remained consistent in terms of his emphatic belief in the significance of the strong correlation between econom-

ic liberalism (and therefore economic growth) and political democracy. Despite reservations, Wolf's 2004 book presents a strong defense of globalization, linking economic integration with both increasing economic growth (prosperity) and increasing democracy (freedom). The first premise of this 'conservative' defense of globalization is that prosperity can be expanded, and poverty thereby reduced, by increasing the size of the economic pie rather than redistributing (re-slicing) the existing economic pie. And the second premise is that expanding economic prosperity tends to promote expanding political rights and freedoms. In *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, published a generation later, the author holds to the first premise, but expresses some doubt with respect to the second premise owing to China's remarkable economic growth within an autocratic political system and the fact that the authoritarian governments are on the rise in 2023 relative to 2004.

Throughout the book, Wolf references the multitude of challenges to the system of liberal (i.e., limited or constrained) government and market capitalism, each of which poses challenges for the future of democratic capitalism and which collectively presage a dangerous road ahead. The Trump presidency and the attempted coup after the 2020 presidential election threatened to undermine the world's paramount liberal democracy, and the fragility of America's democratic institutions puts them at risk. The global financial crisis of 2008 exacerbated the already polarizing secular trend to greater economic inequality within the high income countries, and America has already proceeded well down the path towards plutocratic governance. China's creation of a powerful economic system of state capitalism challenges the long-held assumption that democratic institutions are a precondition for capitalism, opening the door for other autocratic-leaning nation-states to pursue a different path toward capitalist growth as in most of the BRICS countries (Russia, China, Brazil, and India), Turkey, the Philippines, and even Poland and Hungary in the EU. And then there is the Russia-Ukraine War,

which marks a previously unimaginable retrogression from post-WWII European peace and stability to an earlier time of horrific and violent wars of nation-state aggression. Once again the words of the 17th century Dutch jurist, Hugo Grotius, writing about the Thirty Years' War, in *On the Law of War and Peace*, ring true for Europe—"Throughout the Christian world I have seen a lawlessness in warfare that even barbarian races would think shameful."

Wolf's conclusion from the above-mentioned hazards is that the crisis of democratic capitalism reveals the delicate balance of political and economic liberty, which cannot be assumed to mark an end-point—an ultimate and inevitable stage of human social organization—the 'end of history' as we were informed after the collapse of the Soviet Empire. On balance though, Wolf seems optimistic that humanity can overcome the 21st century crisis of democratic capitalism. He turns to the Western tradition of political philosophy—Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Popper—for guidance away from authoritarian rule and towards circumscribed majoritarian rule. He absolutely idolizes Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a great leader in moving the US towards a more inclusive society consistent with Aristotle's judgment that it is the great middle of the polity that must first be supported in order for it to give its assent which is critical for legitimacy and endurance. While Plato opposed rule by wealthy elites, his views on democracy left much to be desired as shown by the Austrian philosopher, Karl Popper, whose views on piecemeal social change favour reform over revolution and are clarified by his method of discovery through falsification. For Popper, eliminating error is the best that can be done given that no amount of confirmation can ever 'prove' an inductive conclusion. The piecemeal approach is picturesquely captured by fellow Austrian Otto Neurath's metaphor of sailors repairing their vessel at sea. The excess of Hobbes' Leviathan—'despotic Leviathans'—as in the former USSR and modern China, must be shackled, in other words, liberalism—defined as limited government where the rule of law ob-

tains universally—is requisite for democracy, but at the same time Leviathan must be capable of maintaining the political and economic order unlike the 'paper Leviathans' of South American countries like Argentina. And, of course, in terms of economic policy, the interventionist school of thought represented by Keynesianism is, for Wolfe, consistent with the tenuous equilibrium between democracy and capitalism unlike the eccentric individualism of the Chicago School and its faculty, among whom Milton Friedman is the most admired and best recognized.

Nevertheless, Wolf is decidedly pessimistic at moments, for example when considering the possible return of Trump or a Trump-like plutocratic demagogue. He is, however, not as pessimistic as Katarina Pistor in her concluding remarks in *The Code of Capital*, in which humanity's incorrigible and indomitable will to power can never be subdued.

> The second trajectory may, sadly, already be under way, as illustrated by the rampant attacks on independent judiciaries and the free press, not only in relatively young democracies, such as Poland or Hungary, but in countries with a long tradition of democracy and the rule of law, such the United Kingdom and the United States. If these trends continue, naked power will once more gain sway over legal ordering, as it has done over most of human history—and we will all be worse off for it.

Without referring to Pistor, Wolf does acknowledge a substantial part of her thesis that the economic value of a stable and predictable marketplace and the cooperative participation of law-abiding and productive citizens—all of which are social goods comprising a favourable investment climate—should be acknowledged to be worthy of earnings in the same way the entrepreneurs/investors rationalization of their rewards for risk-taking is commonly accepted. For example, market capitalism, he states "started in countries

that supplied enough of the basic preconditions for such a revolution: stable property rights; a commitment to scientific and technical progress." And later, he adds that "[c]orporations (and so also their shareholders) benefit from the range of goods [or preconditions]—security, legal systems, infrastructure, educated workforces, and political and social stability—provided by the world's most important liberal democracies." It is in part the refusal to acknowledge the economic value of social goods in accumulating fortunes that jeopardizes the legitimacy of highly asymmetric capitalist societies.

Yet Wolf returns to his optimistic outlook, concluding his book with various programs for mitigating the perils and improving the resiliency of democratic capitalism. Generally speaking, Wolf calls out the inequities of existing capitalist societies and advocates reforms that in European countries might not appear radical but which in the US would be regarded as an incarnation of the menace of socialism—an unholy economic doctrine in the minds of so many Americans. Wolf's sympathy with FDR-like social democracy would be beyond anathema to Republicans, Libertarians, and even some moderate Democrats in the US, but Wolf asserts that the very credibility of democratic capitalism is at stake. Economic fairness must be advanced in order to win back the confidence of those in the vast middle who feel that only a resolute and powerful CEO type can restore the prosperity—the American dream—that has slipped or is slipping away in part due to the anticompetitive business practices of foreign firms and states unleashed by contemporary globalization.

In the same vein, Wolf regards plutocracy as an enemy within that must be dealt with by eliminating the privileges of the few, and here he seems to be in agreement with Pistor in calling into question those legal arrangements that code special protection for limited liability corporations/partnerships and their shareholders, special tax treatment that allows some incomes to be taxed at lower capital

gains rates, and bailouts for reckless and greedy companies, especially in the financial sector, that crash but claim to be "too big to fail" and thus get bailed out by the state at the expense of taxpayers and to the detriment of social programs. With regard to the latter, the moral hazard the international community finds unacceptable in countries like Argentina is somehow different from the moral hazard that encourages American banks to assume high-risk portfolios to maximize investment returns in the knowledge that in a financial crisis, preventing their failure will be a top priority for government. There is no will to permit high-risk greed and misgovernance to be subjected to the market's punishment, because banking failures threaten to precipitate a collapse of the whole system bringing ruin on the masses and the malefactors alike.

For Wolf, economics prevails over politics meaning that the body politic will forego democratic institutions and values before it will sacrifice material well-being. Echoing his views from *Why Globalization Works*, Wolf summarized the situation thusly: "The world's stable liberal democracies have prosperous market economies, while the prosperous market economies are almost all liberal democracies." But the new angle in *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* is that "China might ultimately become a far more significant exception to the rule that rich market economies are also liberal democracies." If China can do it, then other countries, including the US, can do it—or so it will be claimed. And that adds significantly to the tension between democracy and capitalism already felt by the excluded middle who are not beneficiaries of the privileges afforded by what Pistor calls "the code of capital."

According to Quinn Slobodian in *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (2018), what connects empire (the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and European, specifically, Austrian neoliberalism is the supranational economism of capitalism. In other words, the greatest public good the state can contribute is the framework, preconditions, and laws that enable the free trade of goods and services and the free movement of capital within and across political borders. Social justice not only doesn't figure in but constitutes a threat to free and open commerce. Slobodian's timeframe, 1918 - 1995, begins with the demise of the age of European empire (though the British Empire remained) at the conclusion of the First World War and the creation of the World Trade Organization, the evolutionary endpoint of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which became part of the new international order after World War II. For neoliberals, the link between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the World Trade Organization was supranational management of the conditions required to elevate economic interdependence above the level of fractious politics of and among sovereign nation-states.

In his biographical-cum-historical account of the origins of neoliberalism—occasionally footnoted to distraction—Slobodian uncovers the ancestry of neoliberalism as a body of economic thought and political action and follows its development, primarily in Europe, over the course of seven and a half decades through the 20th century. Early neoliberalism grew out of the Austrian School of Economics, a heterodox tradition of conservative (as opposed to progressive) economic thought. Among its leading exponents were the Austrians, Friedrich August von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Gottfried von Haberler, the German economist, Wilhelm Röpke, and the British economist, Lord Lionel Robbins. Milton Friedman,

perhaps the most recognized and celebrated neoliberal for North American audiences was generations later. At least some of these names will be familiar as will their strong advocacy for free market economics (free trade, competitive markets, property rights and capital mobility) and against the social justice aspects of European-style socialism and Anglo-American Keynesianism.

While there have been differences of opinion among neoliberals in the past and present, the genealogy of present-day neoliberalism is clear. In a 2004, article, 'Can Bankers Govern Better?,' this reviewer described contemporary neoliberalism thusly:

> Neoliberal economic policy is characterized by strong laissez-faire instincts, especially where government intervention tends to raise the operating costs of business and industry, and by supply-side incentives, and particularly those designed to maximize profitability. The logic behind structural reforms (e.g., in labour markets and in social programs), free trade in goods, services and capital (the inputs and outputs of global production systems) and competition policy that exempts intellectual property rights and economy-of-scale mergers is to reduce producer costs, to increase efficiencies, to stimulate investment and, in the long run, to increase employment and incomes—supply-side economics updated for 21st century globalization. This is the economic policy regime found the world over in government, academia and business. Even more fundamental to the neoliberal economist is the positivist belief that economics can be scientific and value-neutral with respect to policy, hence the authoritative and objective aura of the monetarist pointing the way to the best of all possible worlds. Nowhere is this more evident than in the neoliberal mantra that monetary policy is too important to leave to the discretion of politicians—democracy being only marginally inconvenienced in the greater interest of efficient economic policy.

Austrian neoliberals viewed competition (antitrust) policy much more favourably than the Chicago School (of neoliberalism) where legal theorists such as Richard Posner, whose views continue to influence judges and justices in US antitrust cases, argued the rather counterintuitive point that highly-concentrated markets may lead to greater consumer benefits than markets where no firm has a dominant market presence. More generally, there is a striking divergence regarding political sovereignty between past and present, as the Austrian view rejects economic nationalism, which is manifested in the economic sovereignty of the state and tends to prioritize national political agendas at the expense of the global economy. This is completely at odds with the Chicago School for whom the role of a market-dominant national champion is warranted as a defense against unfair foreign competition, as has been illustrated in the sharp disagreements between the US and the EU over competition (antitrust) policy, particularly in the technology sector. The case of Microsoft from the turn of the century is particularly instructive. The EU, too, has its national champions in industry, e.g., Airbus, the global rival of Boeing.

In the first paragraph of his introduction to *Globalists*, Slobodian directs attention to the broad appeal of contemporary neoliberalism, going so far as to include former US President Bill Clinton (Democratic Party) and former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party). That former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan—a self-described "lifelong libertarian Republican"—is also included should be no surprise.

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Considering Slobodian's profound philosophical differences with neoliberalism, he appears to be mostly fair in recounting their intellectual history. Though while even descriptions cannot be value neutral, Slobodian appears to concentrate on reporting as opposed to editorializing. The facts he selects will not satisfy everyone, nor is

the reader likely to change their political/economic views. What this book will do is reinforce pre-existing opinions about contentious theories and policies in European and North American political economy.

Slobodian's narrative is a multi-dimensional history of ideas disaggregated into various orders—a world of walls, a world of numbers, a world of federations, a world of rights, a world of races, a world of constitutions, a world of signals, and a world of people—to illustrate "[w]hat neoliberals pioneered in the 1930s was the idea of thinking in orders, seeing the question of liberalism versus socialism as one that required a total-system perspective." In other words, methodologies ranging from Marxist class exploitation to probabilistic econometric forecasting represented aspects only of a complete representation of the economy. Furthermore, Slobodian suggests that the neoliberal approach has a greater affinity with the emerging discipline of International Relations and its global approach rather than with the quantitative, empirical methodology of mainstream economics.

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Of particular interest in Slobodian's historical narrative are the implications for democratic capitalism, the fallacy of *laissez-faire* political economy, and the limits of economics as a science. Regarding the first, the history of neoliberal thought shows that democracy can be an important social stabilizer but only up to a point, a conclusion validated by the Vienna riots of 1927. The worker uprising occurred just months after the groundbreaking World Economic Conference—a precursor to the GATT, sponsored by the International Chamber of Commerce and the League of Nations, the two leading institutional champions of global free trade at the time.

> The confrontation with mass democracy was also at the heart of the century for neoliberals. On the one hand, they embraced democracy for providing a means of peaceful change and a space for evolutionary discovery beneficial to the system at large—thus proving mistaken those who describe neoliberals as opposed to democracy as such. On the other hand, democracy bore the seed of destruction for the totality. Reflecting on the challenges to the liberal order posed by the demands of a politically mobilized working class, Röpke observed in 1942 that "a nation may beget its own barbarian invaders."

And then later in the book referring to the Seattle protests against the WTO in 1999, Slobodian writes

> Many critics have noted that the turn to an authoritarian solution always seems close at hand, with Hayek and Friedman's visits to Augusto Pinochet's Chile being exhibit A. Referring to Pinochet, Hayek said he would "prefer a liberal dictator to a democratic government lacking liberalism" and that "it is possible for a dictator to govern in a liberal way"—while qualifying that this should be only a "temporary transitional arrangement." Hayek's statements recalled both Röpke's discussion of "dictatorial democracy" in 1940 and Mises's point in 1927 that Italian "fascism and similar movements aiming at the establishment of dictatorships are full of the best intentions and that their intervention has, for the moment, saved European civilization. The merit that Fascism has thereby won for itself will live on eternally in history." Following the logic of the lesser evil, the suppression of a disruptive force from the left periodically made support for dictators thinkable for some neoliberals. Mises wrote in 1922, "Our whole civilization rests on the fact that men have always succeeded in beating off the attack of the re-distributors."

Though Slobodian's book ends before the present age when illiberalism is again on the rise, the fact that the book was published in 2018 lends support to the idea that he intended for his genealogy not only to extend backwards to the age of European empires and proto-democracy in the early 20th century but also up through the early 21st century. For recent examples of European writers arguing that democratic capitalism is under siege, see Wolfgang Merkel's 'Is Capitalism Compatible with Democracy?' (2014), Wolfgang Streeck's *How Will Capitalism End?: Essays on a Failing System* (2016), Katharina Pistor's *Code of Capital: How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality* (2019) and Martin Wolf's *Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (2023).

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Secondly, and also highly interesting, is the importance that Austrian economic thought places on non-economic factors, in particular the legal framework. Unlike typical Anglo-American *laissez-faire* capitalism, the Austrians expected the state to play a significant—not in the redistribution of wealth—but in establishing the preconditions for free market capitalism. Slobodian believes that this perspective derives from the neoliberal's favourable view of the relationship between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its nation-states, a form of double government in which the disparate political and cultural spheres of the empire's multicultural population were managed by the nation-states, while economic unity and openness for the whole was underwritten by the empire itself. In many respects, the European Union—which as a result of Brexit excludes the UK—could be considered a descendant of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, comprising as it does sovereign states circumscribed by the Union's economic framework of competition, fiscal, and monetary policies.

> The narrative offered here is a fairly contained story, presented largely through biography, about three generations of thinkers, from the Mises Circle in 1920s Vienna to the in-

> ternational economic lawyers of Geneva who helped theorize the WTO in the 1980s. Its focus is on the specific notion of a double government form designed to encase the respective fields of dominium [the rule of property] and imperium [the rule of states]. It finds the intellectual origins of neoliberal globalism in the reordering of the world that came at the end of empire and finds the historical roots of paradigms of international economic law and neoliberal constitutionalism more often covered by political scientists and sociologists than historians. Looking at the century from Geneva (rather than Chicago, Washington, or London), we see a strand of thought that held that, in order to survive, the world economy needed laws that limited the autonomy of nations. We see a version of neoliberalism where the core value is not the freedom of the individual but the interdependence of the whole.

Noted is the very different context of Austrian economic thought given the history of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—small, interdependent nation-states administered in a common economic zone—in contrast to British and American economic thought, the latter developed at the respective centres of relatively self-contained political economic systems. The economic nationalism of autarky was for Austrians a dangerous threat to global free markets, threatening as it did to make the economic world subservient to the political world. Moreover, for the Austrians, the impetus to self-determination at the end of the two World Wars posed "[t]he challenge for neoliberals was how to accommodate the reality of nationalism with the ongoing requirement of a supranational economic order." The rapid multiplication of nation-states, each with its separate political and economic agenda, complicated the already difficult task of establishing and maintaining a global economic order over and above sovereign nation-states jealous of their political independence.

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Thirdly, it is immensely interesting to note the Austrian neoliberal turn away from the statistical and econometric modeling and forecasting, reflecting a philosophical predisposition to see the world of economic phenomena as fundamentally too complex to know in its entirety and thus to predict with any detailed accuracy. This thesis of 'unknowability' of economic phenomena is consistent with the skeptical view within the Vienna Circle (e.g., Sir Karl Popper's falsificationism) which delimits that part of the empirical world we can talk about meaningfully. For Austrian neoliberals, all that can be known are the broad outlines of the necessary and sufficient preconditions required for the emergence and maintenance of free market economies. Moreover, the business cycle forecasting that caught on among neoliberals during the 1920s and 1930s faded as they witnessed the New Deal and Keynesian responses to the Great Depression and recalled the central planning of wartime capitalism during World War I when

> Foreign-owned property was seized, command economies replaced market supply and demand, centralized regimes of rationing and resource allocation displaced the price mechanism, and national governments and planning boards demolished the walls of corporate secrecy, intruded into private accounts and affairs of business to gather data about production and distribution, and created what some called “war socialism....

The expanded social planning of the new welfare state and the experience of "war socialism" did not augur well for economic freedom as the intrusive state violated the reserved space of a free market economy. Even today though, on both sides of the Atlantic, state aid (government subsidies) and weak competition (antitrust) policy demonstrate that economic nationalism is an ever-present menace to the Austrian neoliberal conception of a world of free and open markets. Even the post-World War II Bretton Woods institutions of the IMF and the World Bank, part of the international legal

framework to extend free markets to the Third World (referred to as Global South since the end of the Cold War), are part of the Washington Consensus whose third and arguably dominant member is the US Department of the Treasury. This arrangement, in the Austrian view, has effectively kept international financial governance under the influence of the forces of economic nationalism.

Like Streeck, Merkel, Wolf, and Pistor, Slobodian delivers a sobering message on the prospects for the future of 'golden age' of twinned democracy and capitalism just three decades since Francis Fukuyama's famous proclamation that with the fall of Soviet communism, the 'end of history' had been reached. Democratic capitalism had proven to be the highest form of political economic organization in human history—a provocative thesis then and now. Now, the pendulum has swung, and alarms are sounding that in the future, capitalism may prosper quite well in less than democratic societies—even under outright autocratic regimes—such that what Wolf calls the "difficult marriage" of democracy and capitalism, always fragile owing to the inherent tension between the social and the individual, may yet be dissolved.

But a world of non-democratic states may not provide any more favourable global outcome for the hopes of the Austrian neoliberal, as economic nationalism will be no less an impediment than it has been in the past. A global economic order where the politics of economic outcomes is subordinated does not appear likely, and this is perhaps where the methodologies of International Relations and Austrian neoliberalism converge. What is to be organized and understood about globalism may be beyond the ken of the quantitative analysis and prediction, i.e., science. The economism advanced by Austrian neoliberals may gain traction in individual countries, but global economic arrangements will likely continue to be a function of great power politics.

Quinn Slobodian is a Canadian historian of modern European and international history who is at present the Marion Butler McLean Associate Professor of the History of Ideas at Wellesley College. He co-edits *Contemporary European History* and co-directs the History and Political Economy Project. In his latest book, *Crack-Up Capitalism* (2023), Slobodian continues the broad theme of *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (2018), which is to expose the ongoing existential threat of the pervasive ethos of the market to democratic political systems. In *Globalists*, Slobodian reports a detailed biographical history of selected prominent neoliberal thinkers dating back to the end of continental European empires post-World War I in order to weave a narrative of the evolution of neoliberal economic thought. *Crack-Up Capitalism* focuses on libertarianism, an extreme form of neoliberalism, and gives significant space to anarcho-capitalism, a radical vision of libertarianism, where *laissez-faire* is irrelevant because there is no longer to be a state.

In *Globalists*, Slobodian speaks of social justice being intentionally left out of the political economy of neoliberals dating back to the Austrian School and its apologists, notably Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich August von Hayek. It is a given that there is no room for social justice to creep back into the ideas and practices of those Slobodian labels as market radicals "who dream of a world without democracy"—an ideal even for mainstream neoliberals, e.g., Milton Friedman and others from or sympathetic to the Chicago School, the archrival of everything Keynesian in North America. The principal tenet of neoliberalism is that the highest goal of social organization is economic freedom. Political freedom is a legitimate social goal as long as it facilitates commerce and does not conflict

with or impede economic freedom. Life, liberty and *property* as Locke wrote in tumultuous 17th century England.

Market radicals are indeed 'radical' arriving at the extreme conclusion that the state is no longer necessary in theory—a bizarre point of agreement with Marx albeit for different reasons—because the state politicizes decision-making (i.e., makes it accessible from the masses below) and interferes with the efficient ordering produced by market forces. For this radical camp, even creating and maintaining the preconditions for markets—grudgingly accepted by neoliberals—are no longer acknowledged to be essential state functions. For the anarcho-capitalist, the laws of capitalism are so fundamental to human nature that they can develop organically. What is required is that they be given the space (strategic geographical location), time (open-ended), and freedom (non-intervention by the state) to germinate. In other words, the state would spin off, say, a special economic zone with a host of exemptions for tariffs, labour laws, environmental laws, etc. Theoretically, a zone could mature into a sovereign corporate entity unencumbered by the inefficiencies of democratic conflict and freed to be governed by the priorities of profitability and wealth accumulation.

What is different in Slobodian's account is his presentation of the challenge to democratic capitalism coming not only from illiberal capitalist nation-states (China in particular as it offers an increasingly viable alternative to the Western model of democratic capitalism) but also from special economic zones:

> [T]he modern world is pockmarked, perforated, tattered and jagged, ripped up and pinpricked. Inside the containers of nations are unusual legal spaces, anomalous territories, and peculiar jurisdictions. There are city-states, havens, enclaves, free ports, high-tech parks, duty-free districts, and innovation hubs. The world of nations is riddled with zones.

It is within these zones that the neoliberal experiment can more easily be controlled. State regulation of markets and intervention to mitigate the effects of market failure can be limited to a greater degree in special economic zones than in the state economy as a whole. Breaking with purist *laissez-faire* political economy, opportunities for state aid, in the form of subsidies, tax incentives, and preferential market access can continue to be solicited to underwrite the competitive positions of a state's zones.

Crack-Up Capitalism is an enlightening read for those who may think that globalization and international relations are just about the interaction of nation-states. The world is vastly more complicated than that, and Slobodian, to demonstrate the point, illustrates with in-depth coverage of the 'microworlds' of Hong Kong, Singapore, London (Canary Wharf), South Africa (the Bantustan of Ciskei), Liechtenstein, Somalia, Dubai, and Honduras.

Slobodian believes that democratic capitalism is being hollowed out from the inside as much as nation-states are reverting to illiberal political systems. This is part of his central thesis—the crack-up or fragmentation of the capitalist state into myriad special economic zones where economic freedom flies its flag of allegiance.

However, after describing special economic zones and the danger they represent for democracy, Slobodian returns to the state reminding the reader that it is states that create and can dismantle zones. "No matter the rhetoric, zones are tools of the state, not liberation from it." Then, more generally, Slobodian acknowledges that

> Good capitalists know the real game is capturing the existing state, not going through the hassle of creating a new one. Thiel [Peter Thiel, venture capitalist] seemed to agree that a world of one thousand new state contracts was preferable to one of a thousand nations.

Slobodian's closing does not appear to be particularly optimistic as he reviews the rise China's autocratic state capitalism and its growing imperialist ambitions (an inversion of its 'century of humiliation') rivaling those of the US:

> By the 2010s, it was also creating zones far from its own territory. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, China funded infrastructure stretching from its own borders through chains of zones, reaching out to Turkey, Kenya, and beyond.... China follows well-worn tracks, retracing the network of coaling stations and free ports that upheld the British Empire in the nineteenth century.

Nor is Slobodian sanguine about the future of the US, observing that the US is becoming a nation-state version of a special economic zone, arguably the ultimate prize for neoliberals:

> [T]he United States itself looks more like a zone all the time. In 2022, it edged out Switzerland, Singapore, and the Cayman Islands to take the top spot in an index of financial secrecy, crowned as the best place in the world to illegally hide or launder assets. Its own status as a democracy has been called into question. It was briefly downgraded by a well-respected index to a so-called anocracy, a system mixing features of democratic and autocratic rule. Soon, Americans may no longer need to go elsewhere to realize the perfect zone.

Like Wolfgang Streeck (*How Will Capitalism End?: Essays on a Failing System*, 2016), Wolfgang Merkel ('Is Capitalism Compatible with Democracy?, 2014), Martin Wolf (*The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism,* 2023), and Katharina Pistor (*The Code of Capital: How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality*, 2019*),* Slobodian exposes the adversarial challenge of contemporary anti-democratic thought not to suggest shrinking back or giving in to resignation but to support pro-democracy forces in an complex ideological struggle that is

not dialectical (the synthesis and progression of ideas are not guaranteed), does not fit the simplistic formula of former US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes' metaphor of the marketplace of ideas, and, as history seems to have confirmed, does not render a permanent verdict in the history of human thought.

By now the 'end of history' has become fiction. For Pistor, nation-states are continually faced with

> A choice not only between democracy and autocracy, parliamentarian and presidential systems, constitutional powers or the voting system; it is also a choice about creating and allocating wealth, and this includes the legal tools for coding [i.e., creating the legal framework for] capital.

For those opposed to the political economy of neoliberalism and its offshoots, what is fundamental to that choice is how economic and political freedoms are to be re-balanced so that democracy does not disappear from 'democratic capitalism.'

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Charles Brooking's 1744 painting of HMS *Wager* in extremis, based on Bulkeley's published journal, via Wikimedia Commons

> Above fifty feet long and ten feet wide, it was a boat of some sort—though it looked as if it had been patched together from scraps of wood and cloth and then battered into oblivion. Its sails were shredded, its boom shattered. Seawater seeped through the hull and a stench emanated from within. The bystanders, edging closer, heard unnerving sounds: thirty men were crammed onboard, their bodies almost wasted to the bone. Their clothes had largely disintegrated. Their faces were enveloped in hair, tangled and salted like seaweed.

Thus did the H.M.S. *Wager's* castaways appear to the townspeople in the Brazilian port of Rio Grande on January 28, 1742. The *Wager*, a British man-of-war, had been shipwrecked off the coast of Patagonia in May 1741, and this was the main body of survivors. Led by John Bulkeley, the ship's gunner, these men—what was left of the 81 who had set sail for Brazil from the Pacific coast of southern Chile—had traveled nearly 3,000 miles "through menacing gales and tidal waves, through ice storms and earthquakes" to make their way back to England. And that was not the end of their travails as they faced court-martial on returning home.

Grann's most recent book, *The Wager: A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny and Murder* (2023), is an excellent piece of storytelling and a much more entertaining read than Rear Admiral C.H. Layman's *The Wager Disaster: Mayhem, Mutiny and Murder in the South Seas* (2015), which is a documentary. Yet, Philip Mountbatten, in his foreword to Layman's book, comments:

> [But] what a tale! Told largely in the words of the participants themselves ... reveal[ing] a drama of misfortune, unimaginable hardship, super-human endurance, mixed with extremes in human behaviour, both heroic and despicable, and a small boat journey of epic proportions.

Grann might dispute the objectivity of the Admiral's non-narrative account insofar as the facts underlying his own editorializing do provide a more fulsome account of the *Wager*'s adventures. For example, unlike Layman, Grann refers to Commodore Anson's continuation of the squadron's journey after the *Wager* was lost rounding Cape Horn to illustrate the marked contrast in leadership and mission success between Commodore Anson and Captain Cheap and their respective ships, the *Centurion* and the *Wager*.

Grann also mentions the punishment of the mutineers on the H.M.S. *Bounty* in 1789 to highlight the extremely unusual outcome

of the court-martial in the *Wager* case. No charges of mutiny were filed, and none were laid though mutiny could not have been more "conspicuous." That no court-martial or other punishments were meted out to the *Wager's* mutineers suggests that a double standard was in play. This might have been owing in part to Bulkeley's maritime journal—thorough and detailed, as early on he expected it to be put before the Lords of the Admiralty—and the publicity the *Wager* story commanded in what Grann describes as a period of an increasingly open British press.

As for the motives of Cheap, Anson and the British Admiralty, Grann does not hesitate to say that egoism and autocracy were inherent in the very structure of the Royal Navy and that elitist chauvinism was at the very foundation of the British Empire's colonial and trade policies and practices. (Here it might be worth noting that David Grann is an American.) Referring to the London of the day, Grann asserts that "[it] was the pulsing heart of an island empire built on the toll of seamen and slavery and colonialism." Significant responsibility for the high death toll—"Of the nearly two thousand men who had set sail, more than thirteen hundred had perished"—is laid at the feet of the senior officers and those they served, an attitude captured half a century later during the Napoleonic wars by the term 'cannon fodder.' Furthermore, in economic terms, Anson's expedition had not been a success: "though Anson had returned with some 400,000 pounds' worth of booty [Spanish treasure], the war had cost taxpayers 43 million pounds." A protracted court-martial, publicized in the London papers would not likely have been a public relations coup for the Empire.

While Grann's narrative offers compelling reading—the book is a page-turner—of equal or greater value is the author's political commentary—the focus of this review.

Throughout the book, Grann maintains the thesis that the *Wager* disaster was symptom of a sick empire. He takes on the rigid hierarchy at sea: “As on land, there was a premium on real estate, and where you lay your head marked your place in the pecking order.” On the lowest deck were the young midshipmen, one of whom was the 16-year-old John Byron, grandfather of Lord Byron, the poet, and each was “allowed a space no wider than twenty-one inches in which to sling their hammocks,” though “this was still a glorious seven inches more room than was allotted to ordinary seamen—though less than what officers had in their private berths.”

He also details the horrors of the Royal Navy’s recruiting: “Armed gangs were dispatched to press seafaring men into service—in effect, kidnapping them.” Still, Anson’s squadron was short of men, so the government sent 143 marines to support the anticipated land invasions and assist in ship duties, but “they were such raw recruits that they had never set foot on a ship and didn’t even know how to fire a weapon.” Then, the government forced 500 invalid veterans from the Royal Hospital, men who were “old, lame, or infirm in ye service of the Crowne.” A sizable number of crew members were unwilling sailors, but they were the necessary and expendable mass dispatched to the seven seas to extend and hold together Britain’s maritime empire. And then, in contrast to the oft-cited U.S. Marine code of conduct in battle to never leave a Marine behind, abandonment of seamen was all too common among the *Wager’s* officers and crew—both under Captain Cheap and Bulkeley, the de facto captain of the Speedwell, the only surviving boat of the *Wager*, which brought the castaways to Brazil. Only in the case of the marooning of Captain Cheap—the decisive act of mutiny—did serious concerns about consequences arise but these were primarily legal in nature.

Referring to the absolute authority invested in the captain of a ship and the limits at sea of English law hard won from the monarchy

during the tumultuous 17th century, Grann describes a different Britain *sans* Bill of Rights.

> At sea, beyond the reach of any government, [the captain] had enormous authority. "The captain had to be father and confessor, judge and jury, to his men," one historian wrote. "He had more power over them than the King—for the King could not order a man to be flogged. He could and did order them into battle and thus had the power of life and death over everyone on board."

And this unquestioned authority during the Age of Sail when combined with the hubris of men looking to their own legends and the gross deficiencies in contemporaneous navigational charts and technology (e.g., instruments to accurately measure longitude or how far east or west a ship was from a known underwater reef of rocks) led to many maritime disasters. For example, in 1707, inaccurate maps, the absence of instruments for measuring longitude and the exaggerated self-confidence of Admiral Cloudesley Shovell in the 'familiar' waters of England contributed heavily towards one of the worst British naval disasters in history. Just off the Cornish coast, a fleet of His Majesty's ships returning from war in the Mediterranean smashed into the notorious rocks of the Scilly Isles during a vicious storm, sinking four warships and killing more than 1,300 men, with some estimates as high as 2,000 dead.

In 1741, Britain staged a two-pronged attack on Spain's South American colonial holdings during the War of Jenkins' Ear, a conflict that later merged into the imperial War of the Austrian Succession. The main attack was concentrated on the Spanish coastal city of Cartagena by a massive fleet of 186 British ships, which to that point in time was "the largest amphibious assault in history." A much smaller operation was staged in the Southern Hemisphere. Commodore Anson's squadron of five warships was given secret orders to attack Spanish forces in the Pacific and con-

fiscate gold shipments passing from South America to the Philippines. Grann writing about the timing of the squadron's southern passage around Cape Horn states that

> summer was not actually the safest time to round the Horn from east to west. Though in May and the winter months of June and July, the air temperature is colder and there is less light, the winds are tempered and sometimes blow from the east, making it easier to sail toward the Pacific.

Delays in outfitting the ships and raising the crew put the squadron off schedule from the beginning. The plan had been to sail around the fearsome Cape of Horn during the optimal weather season, such as it was at that far end of the world where the currents from the Atlantic and Pacific crashed together, with "waves of frightening magnitude … [t]hese 'Cape Horn rollers' [could] dwarf a ninety-foot mast." Owing to the postponements, Anson's ships met the ferocious winds and waves of Drake Passage, and it was there—at the southern tip of South America—that the foul weather scattered the ships separating the *Wager* from the rest of the squadron.

> Because the far-southern seas are the only waters that flow uninterrupted around the globe, they gather enormous power, with waves building over as much as thirteen thousand miles, accumulating strength as they roll through one ocean after another. When they arrive, at last, at Cape Horn, they are squeezed into a narrowing corridor between the southernmost American headlands and the northernmost part of the Antarctic Peninsula. This funnel, known as the Drake Passage, makes the torrent even more pulverizing. The currents are not only the longest-running on earth but also the strongest…. And then there are the winds. Consistently whipping eastward from the Pacific, where no lands obstruct them, they frequently accelerate to hurricane force, and can reach two hundred miles per hour.

The *Wager* never rejoined the squadron, but it nevertheless sailed on in determined hopes of a reunion—its captain, Cheap, refusing to abandon his first commission as ship's captain for personal reasons (if he "prevailed, he would become a hero, his feats celebrated in the yarns and ballads of seamen") as well as because the *Wager* was carrying the bulk of the squadron's armaments. The *Wager* ultimately succumbed to the relentless storms and wrecked off the southwest coast of Chile in the aptly named Golfo de Penas (Gulf of Pain). The *Centurion*, the flagship under the command of Commodore Anson, eventually found itself alone in the South Pacific, and it too resumed its mission notwithstanding the long odds against it. In the Philippines, the *Centurion* engaged the Spanish gold ship, *Our Lady of Covadonga*, conveying its treasure from South America to Asia in a fierce sea battle and emerged victorious and in possession of the Spanish treasure, which it duly brought home to England after completing its circumnavigation of the globe.

The reader is left to speculate what might have happened if the squadron had crossed Drake's Passage during June or July and whether a more judicious commander would have been less generous with the lives of his officers and sailors.

Notwithstanding the perils of the sea—foul weather, enemy ships, scurvy ("there were so many corpses, and so few hands to assist, that the bodies often had to be heaved overboard unceremoniously … 'Without a grave, unknelled, uncoffined, and unknown" as Lord Byron put it)—mutiny is a high crime on the high seas. Under the British Articles of War, ""No person in or belonging to the fleet shall utter any words of sedition or mutiny…upon pain of death." And there was historical precedent from the Spanish Navy as well as the British Navy.

> St. Julian [a harbor on the southern coast of Argentina] was not just a place of desolation; it also stood, in the eyes of Cheap and his men, as a grisly memorial to the toll that

> a long, claustrophobic voyage could wreak upon a ship's company. When Magellan anchored there, on Easter Day in 1520, several of his increasingly resentful men tried to overthrow him, and he had to quash a mutiny. On a tiny island in the harbor, he ordered one of the rebels beheaded—his body quartered and hung from a gibbet for everyone to see.
>
> Fifty-eight years later, when Francis Drake paused at St. Julian during his round-the-world voyage, he also suspected a simmering plot, and accused one of his men, Thomas Doughty, of treason…. Doughty pleaded to be brought back to England for a proper trial, but Drake responded that he had no need for "crafty lawyers," adding, "Neither care I for the laws." At the same execution site that Magellan had used, Doughty was decapitated with an axe. Drake ordered that the head, still pouring blood, be held up before his men, and cried out, "Lo! This is the end of traitors!"

All knew the severity of the punishment for mutiny, which explains why Bulkeley, often referred to as a 'sea lawyer' for his knowledge of the 'laws of the sea,' laboured with unflagging resolve to document with meticulous care the events of the *Wager's* voyage and in particular the behaviour of Cheap who from the start had shown himself to be a questionable leader. Bulkeley's journal, published after his return to England, was an influential and damning indictment all the way up the chain of command. And it is not unlikely that the Board of the Admiralty factored that into its calculations in deciding not to prosecute the mutineers. In fact, Grann adds that "C. H. Layman, a British rear admiral and an authority on the *Wager* case, later concluded there was 'an uncomfortable whiff of justification' in the Admiralty's decision not to prosecute a conspicuous mutiny."

Returning to Grann's critique of imperial Britain, the book's epigraph contains a passage from *The Lord of the Flies*—"Maybe

there is a beast…. Maybe it's only us"—which suggests that Grann, despite his social criticism, was somewhat ambivalent about human nature itself. After all, the tale of the *Wager* was not entirely summed up as a class struggle between the officers and crew. There was abundant disharmony among the sailors, too. And as for motives, the lure of Spanish treasure—the goal of Anson's squadron having been to intercept and raid a Spanish ship carrying gold from Cartagena to the Philippines—tempted many a seaman to sign up, unsurprisingly, as a common seaman could expect this act of imperial piracy to net "some twenty years' worth of wages"—a paltry amount relative to Commodore Anson's take of "the equivalent today of $20 million." As for the ultimate crime of murder, though Captain Cheap could have been so charged in the death of Midshipman Henry Cozens, that was not the only murder. During the anarchy that ensued after the shipwreck, violence and murder occurred among men who had trusted one another with their lives during their dangerous sea voyage thus far.

> Faced with starvation and freezing temperatures, they built an outpost and tried to re-create naval order. But as their situation deteriorated, the Wager's officers and crew—those supposed apostles of the Enlightenment—descended into a Hobbesian state of depravity. There were warring factions and marauders and abandonments and murders. A few of the men succumbed to cannibalism.

One is left wondering just how the quote from *The Lord of the Flies* squares with the author's social critique of the 18th century British Empire and the Royal Navy. Would he be maintaining something along the lines of the historian, Lord Ashton, who asserted that "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely?" What room is left for a middle ground between the tyranny of the all-powerful sea captain and the anarchy of a shipwrecked crew of cold and hungry men? Perhaps, the relatively well-led flight of the Wager Island 'mutineers' led by Bulkeley, described at length by

the author, through the dangerous shallows and narrows of the stormy Strait of Magellan to the Atlantic and then up the coast to Brazil and safety? But doubtless those abandoned on the Speedwell's difficult passage home would not agree, e.g., Midshipman Morris, one of the eight men put ashore to gather provisions and then left on the uninhabited Atlantic Patagonian coast south of Buenos Aires, on returning to England, called the desertion "the greatest act of cruelty."

Finally, to the question of whether what these men did was mutinous. The decision of 81 men, nearly naked, frozen and starving, choosing to follow the ship's gunner—who was not even a commissioned British naval officer—on a dangerous trip that might eventually lead home to England rather than a captain who no longer had a ship to command but nonetheless intended recommencing his mission of finding and reuniting with Anson's squadron somewhere off the unruly waters of Pacific Patagonia by means of a craft of dubious seaworthiness and with the very real risk of encountering well-armed, well-fed and well-clothed Spanish soldiers. Why but for glory, riches and empire?

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Though originally published in 2013, the English translation of *Waste Tide* came out only in 2019. Of interest for this review is not the work as narrative science fiction but its value as a relevant contemporary social critique. And in China, writers must be careful, much as were writers from the USSR and the East Bloc during the Cold War. This would especially be the case for Chen who still lives and writes in China.

Science fiction has often served as a platform for social criticism, and such is the case in present-day China where the genre has recently come to the attention of the English-speaking world. Chinese authors may have to write the occasional socialist realism piece to satisfy the party officials as for example in Liu Cixin's short sci-fi story 'Fire in the Earth'—a gripping piece about the harsh world of futuristic coal mining in China—in order to get passed more politically sensitive works like *Ball Lightning*, which explores the dark dealings between scientists and state officials in developing advanced weapons of war.

Silicon Isle is the setting of this novel. It is the fictional equivalent of the real world town of Guiyu in the Shantou Special Economic Zone, which in turn is within the globalization 'hothouse' of Guangdong Province that surrounds Hong Kong. Silicon Isle, so named because of the e-waste processed there, is the destination for consumer electronic waste, principally originating from the U.S. TerraGreen Recycling is an American company, marketing itself as an environmentally responsible corporation. But no one on Silicon Isle is fooled. Scott Brandle, an employee and self-described economic hit man, knows what's what, of course. Environmental science is still science in the service of global business, but in the case of e-waste processing, science returns to its more familiar role

of contributing to national security, which makes e-waste recycling a bankable investment.

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> The secret was rare earth metals, nonrenewable resources more precious than gold. They were like the witch's magical dust in fairy tales: a small amount was enough to greatly improve the tactical value of ordinary materials and bring about astounding leaps in military technology, allowing the possessor to hold on to an overwhelming advantage on the modern battlefield.

Because the extraction of these metals is extremely costly and hazardous, the lure of high profits is inadequate to generate the desired level of investment if processing is carried out in the U.S. The solution—ages old—is to export the e-waste to countries predisposed to attract foreign investment to reward their privileged classes and demonstrate a modicum of benevolence towards the unemployed. So, fully-laden container ships transport tons of consumer e-waste across the Pacific to Silicon Isle to be processed in a special economic zone where the absence of government regulation reduces labour and environmental costs and attracts global capital meanwhile boosting foreign investment and increasing employment in China. "WIN, WIN, WIN." No matter the financial and human costs absorbed by the 'waste people.'

On introducing the reader to Silicon Isle, Chen appeals to a Western audience with a quote from Dante's *Inferno*, Canto III, wherein the inscription on the archway at the entrance to Hell reads

> Through me you pass into the city of woe:
> Through me you pass into eternal pain:
> Through me among the people lost for aye....
> All hope abandon, ye who enter here.

But there are two Silicon Isles. One is the world of BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Bentley, Porsche and Maserati. The other is hellish. A 'waste child' is entertained by a discarded prosthetic arm that uses its fingers to crawl among the rubbish ... for as long as the battery lasts. A world of silicon debris ... dangerous and deadly, but the only one known by the these children.

A small child sitting among cables and e-waste in Guiyu, China © Greenpeace / Natalie Behring

Metal chassis, broken displays, circuit boards, plastic components, and wires, some dismantled and some awaiting processing, were scattered everywhere like piles of manure, with laborers, all of them migrants from elsewhere in China, flitting between the piles like flies. The workers sifted through the piles and picked out valuable pieces to be placed into the ovens or acid baths for additional decomposition to extract copper and tin, as well as gold, platinum, and other precious metals. What was left over was either

> incinerated or scattered on the ground, creating even more trash. No one wore any protective gear.

Waste Tide rips back the veil to show the perpetuation of China's legacy of shame from the Century of Humiliation (roughly mid-1800s to mid-1900s), during which foreigners, aided and abetted by China's government, exploited China's land and people. This is well illustrated in Lao She's *Cat Country*, published in 1933, a classic in Chinese dystopian science fiction that reads like Swiftian satire to Western eyes. In the novel, foreigners exploit a China that does not fight back, mirroring the real world of the Eight-Nation Alliance of Germany, Japan, Russia, Britain, France, US, Italy and Austria-Hungary during the Boxer Rebellion, which militarily obtained economic concessions from China. These concessions presaged the re-opening of China to special economic zones created by Deng Xiaoping in the post-Mao era. In *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy* (2023), historian Quinn Slobodian writes that

> From their beginnings in the late 1970s, the SEZs [special economic zones] multiplied from southern anomalies to further experiments up the coast, until they spread across the entire country.
>
> In 1990, Friedman said that the right model for Eastern Europe after state socialism was not the United States, Great Britain, or Sweden. It was Hong Kong. Capitalism did not need democracy to work, and the path to success led through the zone.

And so, while the ascendance of China to great power status is bemoaned in the West, for many Chinese, the humiliation continues. Our leaders in North America, business and political, don't talk about special economic zones or the Century of Humiliation in which the West was complicit. But they might if special economic

zones are one day located in America (or Canada) and Chinese (and other foreign) firms are allowed to operate free from government regulation—the *laissez-faire* pass. It could happen for international capital regards borders as barriers to economic growth and profit. For market radicals whose neoliberal origins are traced back to the Austrian School of economic thought by Quinn Slobodian in *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (2018), government exists solely to create the conditions for commerce—investment and trade—and everything else, in particular anything to do with social justice, is to be sorted out by the efficient and self-regulating market.

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Returning to the idea that *Waste Tide's* significance lay in its contribution to identifying sources of social injustice, how is it that the following passed the Chinese censors?

> Welcome to the “Compound Eyes” system of Shantou, which connected hundreds of thousands of cameras and image-recognition artificial intelligence. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, the system kept under surveillance the city’s every street, every corner, every expression on every person, searching for signs of crime or acts of terrorism and protecting the lives and properties of the inhabitants.
>
> The offices in the skyscrapers were lit bright as day. The giant eye zoomed in and observed a hundred thousand faces staring at computer monitors through closed-circuit cameras; their tension, anxiety, anticipation, confusion, satisfaction, suspicion, jealousy, anger refreshed rapidly while their glasses reflected the data jumping across their screens. Their looks were empty but deep, without thought of the relationship between their lives and values, yearning for change but also afraid of it. They gazed at their screens the way they gazed at each other, and they hated their

> screens the way they hated each other. They all possessed the same bored, apathetic face.

Clearly, this is a reference to China's surveillance state, and it is anything but fawning. And that's not the end of it. When Chen takes on the cruelty of animal testing (the torture of Eva the chimpanzee is reminiscent of Edward Taub's experiments on the Silver Springs macaque monkeys), technology diffusion sponsored by greed, wide and widening income and wealth inequality, the swelling global waste tide of discarded consumer products and packaging, and the superficiality of the ever-expanding *nouveau riche* who don't think or care about how wealth gets created, he can be taken as talking as much about China as the U.S. (or Canada). Among the cast of characters, the two principal villains demonstrate the sinister collaboration between the foreigner (Scott Brandle, the economic hit man) and the native son (Luo Jincheng, the Chinese clan boss), though each is conflicted by his own passing moments of moral conscience. Predictably, one of the protagonists, Mimi, is a 'waste girl' and surprisingly the other, Chen Kaizong, is an ABC (American-born Chinese).

But to appease the Party and get the novel published in China, 'waste tide' can be easily understood to be something foreign, invasive, and harmful. And that could implicate America, because America, to many around the world and not just in China, see the American face behind horrific scientific experiments on people and animals, in the race to develop technology to dominate global affairs through military and economic superiority, and in the unsated greed that fuels the capitalist machine as it creates then destroys in order to create again, always for the benefit of the Global North. In other words, there is plenty to meet the approval of the Party, so that China need not face itself in the mirror when it can see plainly outside its window to the east.

For an American or Canadian, what would be the value of reading this book? Simple. It's about seeing ourselves as we are seen, so that hopefully we will want to change the image not just for the benefit of the rest of the world but also for those of us who are not satisfied with the hypocrisy of perpetuating our own domestic versions of the Global South.

Published in 2018, Tooze's 700-page exposition of the first crisis of global capitalism in the 21st century promotes the idea that while the 2008 global financial crisis revealed the shortcomings of *laissez-faire* capitalism, it also demonstrated that state intervention saved the world from a 2nd Great Depression. Both are striking conclusions. Yet the neoliberal ideology that self-regulating markets govern better lives on. And millions suffered home foreclosures, unemployment, and poverty even as the banks were bailed out and the 'money men' grew ever wealthier. This, despite it being their recklessness and greed that precipitated the crisis in the first place. Sophisticated financial engineering by means of endless rounds of securitization—essentially creating money out of thin air—this was the 21st century's alchemy of magical wealth.

In the chapter entitled 'Bailouts,' Tooze writes that the neoliberal mantra of *laissez-faire* was out and state capitalism was in. He quotes Martin Wolf, the well-respected economics commentator of the *Financial Times* as asserting that March 14, 2008 was “the day the dream of global free-market capitalism died.” That was beginning—the day the US Government facilitated J.P. Morgan's rescue acquisition of the investment bank Bear Stearns.

> The ferocity of the financial crisis in 2008 was met with a mobilization of state action without precedent in the history of capitalism. Never before outside wartime had states intervened on such a scale and with such speed. It was a devastating blow to the complacent belief in the great moderation, a shocking overturning of prevailing laissez-faire ideology. To mobilize trillions of dollars on the credit of the taxpayer to save banks from the consequences of their own folly and greed violated maxims of fairness and good government. But given the risk of contagion, how could states not act? Having done so, however, how could

> they ever go back to the idea that markets were efficient, self-regulating and best left to their own devices?

The crucial intervention by government in response to the 2008 crisis thoroughly contradicted the neoliberal fiction of fully-automated rule-based economic stabilization policy for which Milton Friedman, North America's premier monetarist economist, deserves considerable credit for popularizing. (For a humorous account of the discretionary/rules-based monetary policy approaches, see 'Milt, Mo and the Money Machine' in my *Flash! Fiction 3.*)

> The events of 2008 massively confirmed the suspicion raised by America's selective interventions in the emerging market crises of the 1990s and following the dot-com crisis of the early 2000s.... The foundations of the modern monetary system are irreducibly political.

For Friedman, this previous point would have provided the basis for his assertion that real world markets don't operate optimally because political interference disturbs the economy's natural tendency to reach equilibrium. For neoliberals, it is a curious thing that sometimes state aid is socially acceptable and sometimes not. If it targets the poorer classes, it's often written off as public waste and evidence of personal failure, and if it benefits foreign firms it's mercantilism and considered patently 'unfair.' However, if a domestic corporation, its executives and shareholders are the beneficiaries, then it's perfectly rational and in tune with the way the world should work. Tax incentives to lure businesses to move; court decisions to allow anticompetitive mergers and permit monopolistic market behaviour; offshore tax havens to avoid income taxes;' bailouts to rescue feckless and rapacious corporations; 'forever patents' intended to ensure long-term monopoly rents from innovations; revolving government contracts for dependent corporations and industries—all are part of a system intended to bypass competition in favour of asymmetrical wealth accumulation. In the words of Peter Thiel, billionaire venture capitalist, "Competition is for losers."

The severity of the economic collapse of 2008 was remarkable in its scope and its "extraordinary global synchronization." It may have been made in America, but it rapidly spread across the globe like no other.

> Of the 104 countries for which the World Trade Organization collects data, every single one experienced a fall in both imports and exports between the second half of 2008 and the first half of 2009. Every country and every type of traded goods, without exception, experienced a decline....
>
> [O]f the sixty countries that supply the IMF with quarterly GDP statistics, fifty-two registered a contraction in the second quarter of 2009. Not since records began had there been such a massive synchronized recession. Tens of millions of people were thrown into unemployment.
>
> Precisely how many people lost their jobs across the global economy depends on our guess as to joblessness among China's giant migrant workforce. But reasonable estimates range between 27 million and something closer to 40 million unemployed worldwide.

However, according to Tooze, it could have been worse had the US Treasury and the Fed not stepped up to prevent the global financial crisis from developing into a full-scale global depression—something the 1930s Fed had failed to do with the result that the Great Depression lasted from the 1929 stock market crash until the massive government spending of World War II.

> In its own terms, as a capitalist stabilization effort, the response patched together by the US Treasury and the Fed was remarkably successful. Its aim was to restore the viability of the banks. It not only did that but also provided massive liquidity and monetary stimulus to the entire dollar-based financial system, to Europe and the emerging markets beyond.

> [A]cting in the enlightened self-interest of the US financial system ... the Fed, without public consultation of any kind, made itself into a lender of last resort for the world. When the music in the private money markets stopped, the Fed took up the tune, providing a stopgap of liquidity that, all told, ran into trillions of dollars and was tailored to the needs of banks in the United States, Europe and Asia. It was historically unprecedented, spectacular in scale and almost entirely unheralded.

But the Treasury and the Fed didn't save the world alone.

> In 2009, for the first time in the modern era, it was the movement of the Chinese economy that carried the entire world economy. Together with the huge liquidity stimulus delivered by the US Federal Reserve, China's combined fiscal and financial stimulus was the main force counteracting the global crisis. Though they were not coordinated policies, they made real the vision of a G2: China and America leading the world.

But the recovery was far from even ... either within countries or across international boundaries. In the midst of the crisis, while those at the bottom were feeling the effects immediately, those arguably most responsible for the crisis were—in the cruelest of ironies—reaping the benefits of the rescue.

> In Britain ... RBS [Royal Bank of Scotland], a now majority state-owned bank ... announced in February 2009 that it intended to honor £1 billion in bonus contracts. In the United States the figures were far larger. In the 2008 bonus season, after suffering tens of billions in losses, Wall Street paid out $18.4 billion to its top staff.... [T]he investment banks weren't conventional public companies. They were partnerships run primarily for the benefit of their managerial elite and they expected to be paid, whatever happened. In the 2008 bonus season Merrill Lynch alone was responsible for $4–5 billion in payments.... [AIG]

> closed its fourth quarter of 2008 with a loss of $61.7 billion, the largest in US corporate history. Nevertheless, on March 16, 2009, the company announced that its Financial Products division, which had been at the heart of the toxic spill, would be awarding $165 million in bonuses, a figure that might rise to as much as $450 million.

Concomitantly, income and wealth inequality in the US was on the rise. In 2013, Emmanuel Saez and Thomas Piketty calculated "that of the growth generated by the economic recovery since 2009, 95 percent had been monopolized by the top 1 percent." And then, among those regarded as saviours,

> After the events of 2008–2009 and the spectacularly lop-sided bailouts, could anyone seriously doubt whom government was for? At the level of personnel, the revolving door that connected the Treasury, the Fed and the top banks continued to spin at a steady pace. By 2014 both Bernanke [Fed Chairman, 2006-2014] and Geithner [President, NY Fed, 2003-2009 and Treasury Secretary, 2009-2013] were on their way from public service to well-upholstered positions in finance. Geithner went to the well-connected investment bank Warburg Pincus. Bernanke advises the Citadel hedge fund and chaired an advisory board for the giant PIMCO bond fund, owned by Allianz of Germany, which also included as its members Jean-Claude Trichet [President, European Central Bank, 2003-2011) and Gordon Brown [Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1997-2007, and British Prime Minister, 2007-2010] as well as Anne-Marie Slaughter [State Department, 2009-2011] of the Obama foreign policy team.

Tooze draws three significant (and contested) conclusions from his research:

- First, markets are inherently unstable, which is not just a Keynesian notion but has long figured prominently in the

20th century literature of business cycle fluctuations and forms the basis for the research program at the well-known National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), the official recession-dating body in the US.

- Second, the state is necessary to provide market regulation and to manage economic stabilization through the crests and troughs of economic activity.

- Third, within the nexus between the public and private sectors, there are power brokers and experts whose enlightened self-interest is capable of bringing about collaboration during a crisis. Earlier in the book though, Tooze points to the failure of enlightened self-interest in the case of the 2003 Iraq War, and this weakens the evidence that such instances of "feral financial capitalism" that led to the 2008 crisis can be safely left in the hands of those in power.

With respect to governance in the third conclusion, Tooze reflects on the host of obstacles that emerge to frustrate crisis resolution. Referring to the US crisis (originating from the toxic asset heap of high-risk mortgage-backed securities) and the subsequent European crisis, Tooze writes

> Whereas the US crisis involved overextended banks and mortgage borrowers impelled by greed and financial excess, the eurozone crisis would revolve around quintessentially European themes of public finance and national sovereignty. It would pit Greeks against Germans and reawaken memories of World War II. Both crisis narratives play to type: mercenary Americans, squabbling European nationalisms.

Can good governance always be counted on to come to the rescue given the ubiquitous nature of greed in human affairs and the observed regularity of boom-and-bust economic cycles? And what are

the limits of the 'greater good' in international political economy given the incorrigibility of nationalism, particularly in the case of Germany whose economy is the elephant in the EU as Tooze goes to some length to demonstrate with his history of the eurozone crisis. And how do crisis interventions that perpetuate economic inequality within countries, e.g., the US, and among countries, e.g., the Global North and the Global South or in Europe, between the northern European countries, led by Germany, and the PIIGS (the high-unemployment eurozone members Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain for whom the watchword was 'austerity' not 'stimulus.')?

And what if good governance gives way to illiberal leaders like Trump who have great appeal during economic hard times? Post-2008 it was obvious that the bailouts were for the 'too big [i.e., important] to fail' while austerity was the program for the rest—the age-old dogma that wealth must trickle down from the top if there is to be prosperity below. In a predictable twist, Trump tapped into the vast resentment against the privileged class of government and business insiders, and then once in power repeated the same self-serving script. And what confidence can we have that the big picture thinking of government and corporate leaders and their experts and apologists, even in so-called democracies—in between elections—won't 'rationally' sacrifice ordinary citizens like pawns in various gambits? Tooze repeatedly argues that mass mortgage foreclosures, high and protracted unemployment, poverty and war come back to political economy not the 'scientific' discipline of economics.

In other words, 'who gets what' is a political question not a technical question as Tooze quotes from a *New York Times* opinion piece penned by the Nobel laureate economist Paul Krugman after the 2012 presidential election:

> What do the pre- and postcrisis consensuses have in common? ... Both were economically destructive: Deregulation helped make the crisis possible, and the premature turn to fiscal austerity has done more than anything else to hobble recovery. Both consensuses, however, corresponded to the interests and prejudices of an economic elite whose political influence had surged along with its wealth …. Some pundits [might wish to] depoliticize our economic discourse, to make it technocratic and nonpartisan. But that's a pipe dream. Even on what may look like purely technocratic issues, class and inequality end up shaping—and distorting—the debate."

Finally, with respect to economics and war, Tooze devotes an entire chapter—'"F*** the EU: The Ukraine Crisis'—to develop the argument that the EU (and the US) 'sleepwalked' into the 2014 Ukrainian Crisis—the Russian annexation of Crimea. And it is this notion of 'sleepwalking' into a crisis that provides the segue to a comparison between 1914 and 2008 with which the book ends. Hardly a sanguine assessment of our near future from 2018.

This book, first published in 2005, was introduced to me as science fiction, a genre that I've only really become interested in my later years. I was looking for a new author. Having only recently read a number of Liu Cixin's recently translated science fiction, my expectations were pretty high. It didn't have to be hard sci-fi. In fact a short story by Ursula Le Guin, 'The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas' was just about right. But I wanted something a bit longer, and after some searching stumbled onto Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. I was intrigued by this brief description in *Esquire*:

> [T]his literary masterpiece seamlessly blends tones and genres to superb effect. Blending Gothic romance, sci-fi dystopia, and coming-of-age novel, *Never Let Me Go* finds a cloistered group of boarding school students questioning not only their purpose, but their very existence. These students are conditioned from a young age to fulfill a very special destiny, a function so bleak and shocking the reader can’t help but recoil in despair.

That was enough to get me started in the novel, and once there, I found it unputdownable.

As it turned out, Le Guin's short story had set the stage for this type of sci-fi novel. In 'Omelas,' Le Guin reworks an idea she attributes to William James, the American philosopher, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, the great Russian novelist. The gist of her story is captured in her synopsis which appears near the end of the story:

> They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children,

> the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

Never Let Me Go works out the details of a similar theme. The novel is the journal of Kathy H., a carer in her 12th year of service—an unusually long commitment. The journal covers Kathy's residence at Hailsham, a sort of boarding school for students. Hailsham—its buildings, grounds and people—were their entire world. There is no mention of family or friends outside the grounds of Hailsham. The students are called that, but they are very 'special' students as their guardians (teachers) tell them over and over.

Beyond the events and people of Hailsham, the journal records Kathy's work as a carer—a position for which she and her fellows have been prepared—a palliative caregiver for those recovering from organ donations all of whom are former 'students' like herself. Her journal is for others who will follow—so that they will understand, too.

As the narrator, Kathy is the one we rely on for a true and faithful account, and she makes a real effort to sort through her past and "order all these old memories" and "get straight all the things that happened." (Some of the extended quotes, notably in Chapter 22, should perhaps be thought of as reconstructed paraphrases.) Nevertheless, she herself acknowledges her own occasional misinterpretations of events and mischaracterization of people and is careful to correct her mistaken assessments—years later sometimes—after receiving a fuller picture from others involved. One pivotal event whose significance she only comes to understand late in the novel is the time when she is slow dancing, a pillow held close to her breast, to her 'song,' 'Never Let Me Go', and catches Madame, one of the guardians, crying as she looks in and listens through the partially opened door. It is in Chapter 22 that many of

the questions deferred from earlier on are answered, and they are answered at length by two of the principal Hailsham guardians, Miss Emily, a kind of head mistress, and Madame, the taciturn French or Belgian woman in the grey suit, known to students as the one who periodically visits Hailsham to collect the students' best artwork—creative work that affirms the 'soul.'

Without giving away too much, the reader finally learns the secrets that Kathy herself learns—what it is that makes the students 'special' and what makes Hailsham, in particular, very special and how the students and Hailsham, respectively, are connected to the world outside. The reader will have been sensing something unexplained, and always just below the surface, in what appears to be an ordinary English boarding school experience. It is the reader's page-turning to get underneath the simple storyline that gradually at first and then all of sudden exposes the ominous truth—perhaps too abruptly and completely as if Ishiguro was in a rush to tie things up and conclude the novel.

There are a couple of important themes the reader might want to bear in mind while reading the novel. The theme of segregation is perhaps the most obvious. Why are the students so completely segregated? And how do they cope with the fact that they are 'in isolation?' How does segregation reflect a larger world of hierarchies of human value? How is superiority communicated in such a hierarchical world?

A second important theme is that of one's mission or purpose, and the Hailsham guardians and the carers give us two very different examples of the 'causes' that people take up and the reasons why. Here, there is room for the reader to debate the big questions of existence, one of the most important being 'is any of this worthwhile?' Alternatively, is a 'cause' not a way to escape the

punishment—so well described in Dante's antechamber to Hell—reserved for those who chose to live a passive acquiescent life?

This brief review has tried to avoid spoiling the plot and the story, and hopefully readers will find out for themselves the answers that develop throughout the journal.

Ishiguro writes with great lucidity and, in this reviewer's opinion, he successfully captures the voice of Kathy—it being no mean feat adopting the perspective of another ... and across gender lines. The principal characters, especially the three friends—Kathy, Ruth and Tom—are substantial and well developed over the course of Kathy's journal, and Ishiguro's employment of use of the flashbacks and deferrals one would expect to find in a journal is managed to great effect so that the reader never loses the narrative thread, and the suspense is allowed to continue to build. This is not stream of consciousness writing inaccessible to a privileged few. It is also definitely science fiction with very sobering insights about what it means to be human, and it does so with extraordinary empathy.

Originally written in 2018 (in Danish), *The Employees* was first translated for an English-speaking audience in 2020. It is science fiction. It is very short—about 140 pages. Ravn credits Ursula Le Guin for the unorthodox presentation—a series of statements collected from employees during a very strange, but not too difficult to imagine, performance appraisal set in a high-tech world of space-flight and human-humanoid worker coopetition. 'Not too difficult to imagine' because we, have no inconsiderable experience with corporate performance management. With what in the economist language of human resources is essentially asset management, where the asset is human capital—all those skills and all that knowledge that give us workplace value, regardless whether it's as a frontline service worker or a back office analyst, blue collar or white collar, a permanent employee or a gig worker.

While the book is a short read, it is not necessarily a quick read. It is quite abstract much like the art inspired it. Yet it is because of this abstract quality that the text is open for the reader to interpret in terms of their lived life. Ravn credits Lea Gulddittе Hestelund for the installations and sculptures "without which this book would not exist." Photographs of artifacts from Hestelund's work shown at the 2108 Copenhagen exhibition, 'Consumed Future Spewed up as Present,' to which Ravn refers, are available online. See https://artviewer.org/lea-gulddittе-hestelund-at-overgaden.

While the abstract art of sculpture, painting and writing are not for everyone—it is not my preference or area of expertise, and this was, for me, a somewhat difficult read—the novel 'feels' very real and authentic. Part of what makes the novel a not-so-easy-to-read story is that it requires active participation from the reader to instantiate the abstractions. Unlike the political economy texts I have

reviewed, the language and imagery in this fiction describes sensory perceptions and affects with the intention of eliciting more than just an intellectual response. The performance appraisal is a familiar process, and it is generally understood to be essentially an economic assessment (for wage/salary adjustments and promotions). However, it is also recognized that it misses a great part of who we were as human beings, and this is something that the novel taps into.

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In the Foreword, we have this concise synopsis of the book prepared by the 'committee:'

> The following statements were collected over a period of 18 months, during which time the committee interviewed the employees with a view to gaining insight into how they related to the objects and the rooms in which they were placed. It was our wish by means of these unprejudiced recordings to gain knowledge of local work-flows and to investigate possible impacts of the objects, as well as the ways those impacts, or perhaps relationships, might give rise to permanent deviations in the individual employee, and moreover to assess to what degree they might be said to precipitate reduction or enhancement of performance, task-related understanding and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, thereby illuminating their specific consequences for production.

This is corporate speak that could be expected from the *Harvard Business Review*, and it contrasts sharply with the style of the employee statements. The employees are not identified other than by number (e.g., Cadet 04, a humanoid, and Cadet 08, a human), but it is not always obvious which employees are human and which are synthetic. There are also large gaps in the 'committee's' human resources dossier and this suggests that some of the employment statements are missing ... for reasons unexplained.

We know very little about the 'committee.' We don't even know its formal title or the name and nature of the organization that it represents. The Foreword and the eight italicized paragraphs at the end of the final statement, Statement 179, are the only direct communications from the 'committee.' What we do know about this mysterious board is that it is responsible for directing employee work and production (of what, we don't know) and that it has the ultimate authority over the lives (existence) of all employees—human and humanoid. We also know from the 'committee' report at the novel's conclusion that:

> [T]he committee itself was composed of bio-material, though with a down-loadable interface, and therefore capable of being regenerated—in other words humanoid rather than human as the crew had been informed (the decision that the committee should appear to be human was taken on the basis of research showing that human and humanoid employees alike have a tendency to react more positively to the organisation’s human representatives).

The committee was tasked with studying human and humanoid interactions with one another and with the various space objects ('foreign' or 'alien' objects that are not understood but are thought possibly to be a form of existence if not life) that have been collected as artifacts from New Discovery, a hitherto unexplored planet. The reason for the study is to determine whether these interactions have been conducive to greater or lesser productivity. Again, the nature of the work remains vague and undefined.

What we read in the employee statements encompasses the personal reflections and often very private thoughts of the employees—human and humanoid. For example, in Statement 10, a human employee questions their (sing.) own category (human or humanoid): "I don’t know if I’m human anymore. Am I human? Does it say in your files what I am?"

And then in Statement 018, a humanoid employee imagines evolving into a human entity—something more than just a replica—and to join the community of humanity:

> The dreams are something you've given me so that I'll always feel longing and never say, never think a harsh word about you, my gods. All I want is to be assimilated into a collective, human community where someone plaits my hair with flowers and white curtains sway in a warm breeze; where every morning I wake up and drink a chilled glass of iced tea, drive a car across a continent, kick the dirt, fill my nostrils with the air of the desert and move in with someone, get married, bake cookies, push a pram, learn to play an instrument, dance a waltz.

And then in Statement 019, another humanoid (presumably a different one) asserts boldly in apparent defiance of the 'committee:'

> You made me, you gave me language, and now I see your failings and deficiencies. I see your inadequate plans.

Yet another humanoid, in Statement 022, proclaims the desire to be equal with humans, in effect, promoted:

> I need to train my cognitive flexibility if I'm to be in the crew on an equal footing with those who were born. Is this a human problem? If so, I'd like to keep it.

In Statement 030, we're not quite sure of the category of the speaker who says: "It's hard for me to understand that the objects in the rooms haven't got feelings, even though you've told me this is the case." But whether it is carbon- or silicon-based, this employee appears to have the capacity for empathy.

There is an incommensurability between the human and humanoid employees, which far exceeds the cultural incompatibilities among

humans along gender, racial, religious or class lines. This can lead to antagonism but it does not imply hostility. But there remains a fundamental difference between the two categories as characterized by a humanoid in the following extended quote from Statement 031:

> I've never not been employed. I was made for work. I never had a childhood either, though I've tried to imagine one. My human coworker sometimes talks about not wanting to work, and then he'll say something quite odd and rather silly. What is it he says, now? There's more to a person than the work they do, or A person is more than just their work? Something like that. But what else could a person be? Where would your food come from? Who would keep you company? How would you get by without work and without your coworkers? Would you be left standing in a cupboard? I like him, this human coworker of mine, his interface is impressive. I'm stronger than him, and have more endurance, but sometimes he'll get an idea that means we can do our job in less than the designated time. He's got an incredible knack for streamlining, from which I gladly learn. I've become a lot better myself at seeing how a workflow can be adjusted so that the task at hand can be completed more efficiently. This has surprised me rather a lot, because I've never known such improvements in my performance without an update being involved. Whenever we save time, I'm ready to move on to the next task straight away, but my coworker always says, Now let's sit for a bit. I'm not sure what he means by this, but I sit down with him all the same, sensing that I might offend him otherwise and jeopardise our excellent working relationship. Perhaps it's an old custom from before my time? It's not possible for me to continue our work on my own, so I hope you'll be kind enough to overlook the matter, and anyway it's only about 15 minutes a day at the most that we sit for a bit. He tells me about the bridge and the woods near his childhood home, about the stream that flowed under the

> bridge, how they used to swim there, and a lot of other things from the place he calls Earth. He's shown me a stream that runs down in the valley. Obviously I can't leave the ship, but he's pointed it out to me from the panorama room. The stream glitters, and it runs like a silvery thought through the landscape. He put his hand on my shoulder. It was warm. A human hand. He said: 'You've lots to learn, my boy.' An odd thing to say, seeing as how I was made a man from the start.

And so it goes through the various employee statements that are taken and evaluated by the 'committee' on board the Six-Thousand Ship as it orbits the newly-discovered planet, far from Homebase. On board the ship are alliances—of varying degrees of reliability and stability—that create the kind of unpredictability one could encounter in an ordinary terrestrial workplace. It is the sci-fi element of the transhuman and the conflict between humans and humanoids that adds a whole different level of complexity to the relations among crew members. And these complicated relations among employees is further heightened by the relations between crew members and the alien artifacts which are too poorly understood to be definitively classified. As one human employee puts it in Statement 046, "It's a dangerous thing for an organisation not to be sure which of the objects in its custody may be considered to be living."

At a simplistic level, there is obviously the labour versus management dynamic looming large in the galactic background. And in the context of a diverse workforce that now includes humanoids, there are the expected differences. Among both humans and humanoids, there are those who would collaborate, there are dissenters, and there are those who even contemplate changing their category. In Statement 047, we have a human who longs to be an object:

> Everything has to travel so far to come into existence. I thought these rooms would be a safe place for me. I wasn't

> well on Earth. I didn't like living in such close proximity to so many people. Notice the old hides on the benches, we're the only ones who've got that kind. The animals they're from are extinct now. Every time I try to make a safe place for myself somewhere, I find death to be there.... [I]n secret I go up to the objects in the rooms, the materials in the rooms, I lie down close beside them, put my arms around them, put my cheek to the orange floor, the pink, gleaming marble. I'd like to be one of them, less lonely, less human.

Fundamental to Ravn's story is the question, 'What does it mean to be human?' in a universe where line between humans and humanoids blurs and where a truly incomprehensible alien entity is first-contacted. Indeed, there are humanoids who want to become human and humans who want addons to enhance their existence. And there are humanoids who appear more humane than some of the humans, and of course, humans whose lives appear to be programmed. There are even crew members who imagine themselves being one of the alien objects.

Without disclosing the ending, it is worth mentioning that all of the statements by the ship's crew build to a climax at which point much is disclosed about the mission, including the determination that it could be "deemed a success when taking into account that the collected empirical data has proved to be highly valuable." Some part(s) of the ending may or may not have been anticipated. One thing is for certain. This is not a utopian future that Ravn has presented. It is thoroughgoing dystopian science fiction.

Despite the fundamentally disturbing nature of the story, what I find encouraging in it, and in dystopian sci-fi in general, is that while it portrays a future that *could be,* it does not end in resignation but hints that the future *could be otherwise*.

Wolfram Eilenberger's *Visionaries*, published in 2023, is an historical biography of four highly-regarded European philosophers—Hannah Arendt, Simone Beauvoir, Ayn Rand and Simone Weil—from 1933-1943. The book is a continuation of Eilenberger's 2020 *Time of the Magicians* in which he examines the lives and views of four other prominent European philosophers—Ludwig Wittgenstein, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger—from 1919-1929. For Eilenberger, these two tumultuous decades in Europe birthed some of the most influential European philosophy of the 20th century, and from each he selected four representatives of the era whose philosophical interests very much reflected the times.

In *The Time of the Magicians* (2020), Eilenberger sets the backdrop as the dogma-shattering revolutions in physics and the post-World War I fragmentation of empire and emergent expansion of nationalism and alternative political systems. For Eilenberger, it was the radical changes in the 'real world' and in the physical theories of the 'real world' of 1920s Germany that provided the catalyst for radical changes in the methods and roles of post-Kantian German philosophy in the modern world. In *The Visionaries*, the principal theme is that of the free individual versus the omnipotent state. The carnage of World War I was still a recent memory, and by the early 1930s there were ominous signs of further wars—according to Eilenberger, the Spanish Civil War of the late 1930s was "a laboratory of future cruelty"—some domestic and some foreign. Internally, the scope and reach of the modern state was expanding on both sides of the Atlantic. Stalin's terror was in full swing; Hitler had just been acclaimed by a defeated Germany; and the US was experimenting with socialism as an emergency response to the enduring Great Depression. Externally, the Treaty of Versailles had not put an end to European military conflict. Nations were rearming.

Eilenberger rotates through his selected spokespersons as he moves chronologically from 1933 to 1943. Each thinker is presented and permitted to present herself to the reader in extended quotations that appear throughout. As a brief introduction: Arendt is of fame for her writings on totalitarianism (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*) and her coverage of the Adolf Eichmann trial for *The New Yorker*. Simone Beauvoir, though recognized in her own right, is introduced and spoken of often in reference to her long-time companion, Jean-Paul Sartre. Ayn Rand, formerly Alisa Rosenbaum of Leningrad, is best known for her libertarian political and economic views, and of course her novels— *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*—through which she communicates her views to a broader audience. Simone Weil is perhaps best known for her political activism (in the French Resistance and on the Republican side in Spain) in opposition to the two great totalitarian threats in interwar Europe—Hitler and Stalin.

Hannah Arendt was arrested by the Nazis in 1933 for conducting research into antisemitism. This was years before the infamous Krystallnacht, but to those paying attention, the future was becoming clear. She escaped to France, was stripped of her German citizenship making her 'stateless' and was arrested by the Vichy government. Eilenberger refers to the "French mass phenomenon of the 'stateless person.'" Eventually, Arendt made her way to the US. Having been a 'stateless person,' the contradiction in human rights proclamations was obvious: "the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them." It was natural then that Arendt became a champion of what Eilenberger calls "the most fundamental of all rights—the right to have rights at all."

Disagreements over fundamental rights set Arendt against the Zionist establishment. Referring to the Zionist program to deny rights to Arabs, Eilenberger writes that

> she described as absurd the idea that a majority (Arabs) within a democratic Jewish Commonwealth should be granted only minority rights. Equally illusory was the idea of a supposedly sovereign nation-state that had to remain permanently dependent on another protective state [Britain] for its existence and its ability to flourish.

Though informed by idealism, Arendt understood *realpolitik* well enough. According to Eilenberger's reading of Arendt, she believed that

> the route they had decided on would make peaceful cohabitation with the Palestinian Arabs impossible in the long term and further inflame the growing pan-Arabic anti-Semitism in the immediate neighboring countries.

For Arendt, it would be far better to have a federation—having in mind the federal system in her new home in America.

> National conflicts can only be resolved in such a federation because the insoluble majority-minority problem has ceased to exist. . . . In this union, no individual has dominion over another, and all states together govern the country."

Eilenberger adds that "Arendt imagined just such a federal solution—either part of a notional European federation of states or the British Commonwealth—as the ideal solution for a future Palestine." (Yugoslavia did not exist at the time, but presumably its federal system post-World War II could theoretically have met her standards, and its civil wars since the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the federation could have been anticipated.) However, her "form of

Jewish patriotism with a cosmopolitan intent made her a lone voice in New York's concrete desert." Eilenberger ascribes "Kantian global citizenship" to Arendt's mature political philosophy, and that in a world of rising nationalism was unpopular.

Being cosmopolitan did not silence Arendt from confronting the Holocaust and the conviction that "since the outbreak of the war and even before, a conspiracy of silence has covered the sufferings and the losses of the Jewish people." This message she delivered in lectures as early as the spring of 1943, just months after the World Jewish Congress began to report Nazi mass murders. But Arendt was no fatalist. In fact, at one point she advocated for an international army of Jewish people to fight against the Nazis. And, in a letter addressing the mysticism of her friend, the Judaist Gershom Scholem, she writes

> To speak of the mystical course which, in the great cataclysm now stirring the Jewish people more deeply perhaps than in the entire history of Exile, destiny may still have in store for us—and I for one believe that there is such a course—is the task of prophets, not of professors.... But what we ought not to forget is the fact that in the last instance it is up to man to decide upon his political fate.

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Simone Beauvoir was largely unaffected by a world preparing for war and genocide.

> Beauvoir's descriptions of their time in Germany [six months in 1933 while Sartre was studying in Berlin] are impressive examples of how uncomplicatedly remarkable philosophical alertness can go hand in hand with almost complete blindness to political realities.

Eilenberger notes that "[t]he real-world consequences of Hitler's accession to power go largely unmentioned in Beauvoir's records."

Indeed, her attention was focused elsewhere. Eilenberger characterizes her as a solipsist with no regard for the Other, unless the Other was Sartre. Eilenberger links Beauvoir to an extreme form of subjectivism discussed by Descartes but ultimately rejected.

> [I] glance out of the window at people walking along the street. Using the customary expression, I say that I "see" them. But what do I actually see apart from hats and coats, which could be covering automata.

Eilenberger maintains that

> This is literally the attitude that Beauvoir and Sartre, a couple intellectually very much on the same wavelength, shared in the cafés of Rouen, Le Havre, and Paris. Other people do not really exist for them as people. The two of them are the only beings who truly feel. The rest of humanity serves solely as a backdrop to stimulate their own thought games.

To further illustrate Beauvoir's philosophy by contrasting with another's—in this case Simone Weil's—Eilenberger relates the anecdotal story of the first meeting between the two. In her own words, Beauvoir writes

> [A] great famine had broken out in China, and I was told that when she heard the news she had wept: these tears compelled my respect much more than her gifts as a philosopher. I envied her having a heart that could beat right across the world. I managed to get near her one day. I don't know how the conversation got started; she declared in no uncertain tones that only one thing mattered in the world: the revolution which would feed all the starving peo-

> ple of the earth. I retorted, no less peremptorily, that the problem was not to make men happy, but to find the reason for their existence. She looked me up and down: “It’s easy to see you’ve never been hungry,” she snapped. Our relations ended right there.

But by 1941, Beauvoir had been 'emancipated' from her extreme subjectivism as Eilenberger observes. In her war diary, she writes

> No man is an island. Instead, the true precondition of my freedom lies in the freedom of the other consciousness—indeed, if the idea is consistently thought through, in the free acknowledgment of all other consciousnesses. Politically, this leads to the demand for a liberation struggle for all under the banner of mutual existential emancipation—each for the sake of their own freedom: freedom and socialism.

Having struggled to negotiate something of a synthesis of Hegel's *Weltgeist* and Heidegger's *Dasein*, she disavows her prior skepticism with regard to the Other and embraces being active in the world along with others.

> Metaphysical solidarity that I newly discovered, I, who was a solipsist, I understand what was wanting in our antihumanism. . . . There is no other reality than human reality—all values are founded on it. And that “towards which it transcends itself” is what has always moved us and orients the destiny of each one of us.

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Ayn Rand had seen collectivism up close. Her family, relatively wealthy, had been expropriated by the Bolsheviks. While on a tourist visa in the US in 1926, she defected. Unlike the earlier Beauvoir,

Rand understood perfectly well "how closely interwoven her own life had always been with the surrounding political and economic conditions." And in Rand's view, "Hitler's and Stalin's lust for blood followed a single logic, which was that of a violent state subjugation of each individual human being in the name of an ideally exalted collective." But the collective was not only a threat in the Soviet Union, Germany, the Italian fascist state but also in the US, ushered in by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whom she came to loathe as the incarnation of the totalitarian threat on this side of the Atlantic. Rand's nightmare for her new country was "a democratically accepted dictatorship having at its head an individual with a gift for manipulating the masses."

Philosophically, Rand found a kinship with the elitism of Friedrich Nietzsche and the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *Revolt of the Masses* were of particularly intense interest to Rand. But it was Nietzsche who was the greater influence. With Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, she shared "[a] distinct hatred of religion; undisguised elitism; a rejection of any idea of the necessity of suffering." It wasn't simply that Rand objected to the supreme leadership in Moscow, Berlin, Rome, Paris and Washington. It was just as much the docility and stupidity of the masses. Both the autocrats and the masses conspired towards the subjection of the individual to unfreedom. University educated in the USSR, Rand had to have been familiar with Dostoevky's famous chapter in *The Brothers Karamazov*, wherein the Grand Inquisitor informs his prisoner, Jesus, that the people don't want his 'freedom' they want the Church's direction. Although Rand was irreligious, the message would have resonated.

The following anecdotal account of a conversation Rand had with David O. Selzhick's executive assistant goes a long way towards explaining Rand's contempt for the goals of the masses ... in America.

> One day Rand asked her very directly what she considered her actual goal in life. The woman ... didn't have to think for long: If nobody owned an automobile, she didn't want one either. If some people owned one automobile and others had none, she wanted one too. If some people owned two automobiles and others only one, she wanted two. She was also keen that people should know she had more than they did.

Rand couldn't believe that in a free society people could choose enslavement to the goals and valuations of others. That was the 'docility and stupidity' that she believed she could free others from. Despite, or perhaps because of, her elitism, it was important that she persuade others to accept her view of the world, and so like Zarathustra, she came down from the mountain. Once among the masses, she turned to fiction and film (she had studied cinematography in the USSR) to educate them. And in her optimism that rallied with her success in publishing and film, she comfortably closed *The Fountainhead* with a jury acquittal of her protagonist, the architect Howard Roark. Message received ... in the world of fiction anyway.

It is interesting that Eilenberger included details of two of Rand's cross-country trips, because their juxtaposition discloses that Rand was not immune to her own critique of American status seeking. The first trip mentioned was after Rand's initial failure in Hollywood, when she and her husband drove an old pickup truck to the East. It was on this trip that she "caught a glimpse of another America: that of impoverished towns, the indigent farmers, the deepest, blackest poverty, and, not least, a ramshackle infrastructure." In Virginia, the couple—nearly broke—wrecked their truck and had to continue to New York by Greyhound bus. In the second mentioned trip, on returning to Hollywood with a deal to make a motion picture of her bestselling *Fountainhead* novel, she and Frank "first took the luxury train to Chicago, with real steak in the restaurant car, at a time of

rationing." Eilenberger adds that this was "[s]o very close to the ideal, at least for this one moment."

Among the more controversial aspects of Rand's legacy in America is the influence of her libertarian views on in politics and economics. The following extended quote from Eilenberger succinctly connects her concept of freedom with a familiar political and economic agenda—the one critiqued by Quinn Slobodian in *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (2018) and *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy* (2023).

> [T]he only thing that makes mutual freedom truly possible and guarantees it is a consistently assumed attitude of "metaphysical independence," not something like "metaphysical solidarity." [In contrast to Simone Beauvoir.] The only truly nonviolent way of making contact with the Other and acknowledging them unreservedly as an equally free human being is in a contract—like a good deal. My word is my bond. Take it or leave it. And live with the consequences. But the most socially flexible way of achieving goals of exchange is clearly economic: through monetary transactions. And the only economic way to make a truly nonviolent exchange between individuals in this sense is absolute laissez-faire capitalism. Finally, the only legitimate system of government in this sense is a democracy that is both as direct as possible and as limited in its interventions as possible.

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Simone Weil was perhaps the most idealistic of the four philosophers, but she was perfectly knowledgeable and wise to the totalitarian nature of the 'communist' regime in the USSR as well as the dictatorship in Germany. She rejected the dictatorship *over* the

proletariat, which made socialism in practice a tyranny instead of a liberation from capitalism. Eilenberger sums up her assessment well.

> The new total Hitler- and Stalin-style systems tend in their outward economic form to state capitalism, and in their internal construction to a repressive surveillance state, with the help of a primarily self-serving class of functionaries as well as increasingly advanced surveillance technologies.

Eilenberger notes that Weil's letters from 1933 indicate that she had a good enough understanding of what was going on in the Soviet Union, including the genocidal Holodomor.

By 1934 as she was preparing her philosophical testament, "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Freedom and Social Oppression," she was convinced that another world war was looming as was the ascendancy of totalitarian government.

> It seems fairly clear that contemporary humanity tends pretty well everywhere toward a totalitarian form of social organization—to use the term . . . the national-socialists have made fashionable—that is to say, toward a system in which the State power comes to exercise sovereign sway in all spheres, even, indeed above all, in that of thought. Russia presents us with an almost perfect example of such a system, for the greater misfortune of the Russian people . . . but it seems inevitable that all of them will approach it more or less in the course of the coming years.

Like Arendt, she was clear-eyed about the direction in which Europe was headed, but she maintained a strong idealistic streak. Though from a wealthy family, she put herself in situations where she could experience the real history as it was unfolding. She joined the French Resistance and even participated briefly in the

Spanish Civil War. Weil even worked in a factory for six months, motivated by her ethical standards but just as much by the desire to

> experience firsthand the oppression that she sought to remedy as a thinker. Out from the ivory tower of theory, into the everyday suffering of the workers! Neither Marx nor Engels, Trotsky nor Stalin had ever really experienced a factory from inside.

Not surprisingly, she was a failure in her factory job, but she had friends who ensured that she was looked after during her 'experiment,' a protective charge which was repeated during her 1937 deployment during the Spanish Civil War, where she also suffered misadventures and had to be sent back to safety for everyone's sake.

Back at the writing desk, where she was more impactful on behalf of her cause, she penned an essay—"Let’s Not Start the Trojan War Again”—in which she compares the 10-year massacre of Greeks and Trojans to 1930s Europe.

> For our contemporaries the role of Helen is played by words with capital letters. If we grasp one of these words, all swollen with blood and tears, and squeeze it, we find it is empty. . . . This is illustrated by all the words of our political and social vocabulary: nation, security, capitalism, communism, fascism.

And so for the pacifist Weil, it looked to be another meaningless war not unlike Europe's recent 'Trojan War'—variously called the 'Great War' or 'War to End all Wars.'

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Looking back at the book's full title, it seems difficult to understand what 'power' philosophy exercised in Europe during the dark times of the interwar years. Only in hindsight can we appreciate the philosophers' wisdom, but to what avail has this percolated into the *Zeitgeist* of subsequent generations, including the third decade of the 21st century. Europe has another hot war in progress—not so long after the Balkan wars—and warmongering on both sides of the Pacific threatens to open up a war on the Eastern Front. Meanwhile, autocratic government appears to be a global trend even among countries that have experienced greater or lesser periods of democracy.

This short book includes a bit of fiction and a bit of nonfiction. There are 15 short stories of the flash fiction variety, though some run longer than the typical flash story. In addition, there are 11 book reviews.

While the stories have been much more enjoyable to write, the book reviews are important to me, particularly those related to works on political economy, a subject that I've been interested in since college—two score years ago. They called it economics then and still do, but I prefer 'political economy' because politics is inseparable from economics.

Both genres include pieces that relate to the title of this collection—*Writings Near the End of the Human Era*. Not that I happen to believe or know or predict that the end of the world is imminent. It's more that there's a hint that the human race is on the cusp of a revolution that may shatter our view of ourselves and our limits as humans on Earth as well as within the universe (for lack of a better word). To speak in the 1st person is misleading though, because it isn't likely that I'll be around to find out.

About the Author

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