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Portugal Rises, Britain Sinks

“Portugal Dared to Cast Aside Austerity. It's Having a Major Revival.

“At a time of mounting uncertainty in Europe, the country has defied critics who insisted on austerity as the answer to the Continent's economic and financial crisis...

“Portugal took a daring stand: In 2015, it cast aside the harshest austerity measures its European creditors had imposed, igniting a virtuous cycle that put its economy back on a path to growth. The country reversed cuts to wages, pensions and social security, and offered incentives to businesses...

“At a time of mounting uncertainty in Europe, Portugal has defied critics who have insisted on austerity as the answer to the Continent's economic and financial crisis. While countries from Greece to Ireland — and for a stretch, Portugal itself — toed the line, Lisbon resisted, helping to stoke a revival that drove economic growth last year to its highest level in a decade...

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“Voters ushered Mr. Costa, a center-left leader, into power in late 2015 after he promised to reverse cuts to their income, which the previous government had approved to reduce Portugal's high deficit under the terms of an international bailout of 78 billion euros, or \$90 billion. Mr. Costa formed an unusual alliance with Communist and radical-left parties, which had been shut out of power since the end

of Portugal's dictatorship in 1974. They united with the goal of beating back some of the toughest aspects of austerity, while balancing the books to meet eurozone rules.”¹

But in Britain, we are tied to a failed orthodoxy. And most of the Parliamentary Labour Party is a ‘Timid Tendency’, unwilling to undo the damage.

“Millions of families ‘worse off’ than 15 years ago

“Millions of ‘just about managing’ families are no better off today than those in 2003, new research from the Resolution Foundation indicates.

“The remarkable income stagnation for so many reveals that the economy has been failing to generate income for people over many years despite record levels of people in work.

“In 2003, households on the lower half of incomes typically earned £14,900.

“In 2016/17 that figure had fallen to £14,800, the research shows.

“Both figures are adjusted for inflation and housing costs.

“There are over eight million low and middle-income households, just under half of which have children.”²

The Tories Are Revolting

“It may be hard to believe, in the midst of a benefit sanctions regime that sees one in five universal credit applications turned down, and a ‘hostile environment’ that directly led to the Windrush scandal, but most of the current Conservative government also stood at the 2010 general election with a campaign that centred on something called the ‘big society’. The idea was that the state, massive and overblown as it apparently was after years of Labour profligacy, was taking up too much space in people’s lives. Move the government out of the way and communities would step in to fill the gaps, giving it some of that old British blitz spirit, reinvigorating civil society along the way.

“As with many Tory policies, this was based on the fantasies of people whose only interaction with the realities of the private rental market was checking the yields on their property portfolios. It’s a philosophy that contains a toxic mix of soft-focus nostalgia for a time that never was, and quasi-religious moralising that sees poverty not as a scourge to be eradicated but a tool for disciplining society’s undeserving into better behaviour.

“Predictably, this experiment in social engineering did not reveal a hidden population of people with the time and money to spare who had just been held back by the stifling provision of basic public services. The gaps left by the slash-and-burn policies of the Cameron-era coalition were filled not by an army of cheerful local volunteers, but by predators who saw other people’s vulnerability as an opportunity for profit.”³

But was it even a sincere belief? It was a good way to get votes from authentic conservatives. But Thatcher’s elevation was part of a take-over of the historic Tory party by Neo-Liberals. Ideologues committed to mindless change and not sharing the traditional Tory notion that the rich need to be curbed in the National Interest. And bad at conserving anything.

“One of the hidden conflicts Brexit has exposed is the contradiction between what Conservatives claim to stand for – something called conservatism – and what they really represent. Everything conservatism is supposed to defend – tradition, continuity, community, national character, the physical fabric of the nation – is ripped apart by the demands of capital, whose permanent revolution the Conservative party assists and accelerates.

“The contradictions run throughout conservative Britain. As a young man, I was amazed to see the burghers of middle England look the other way as their beautiful market towns were turned into car parks and the glorious countryside that surrounded them into chemical deserts. They claimed to love a national character exemplified by independent butchers, bakers and greengrocers, but shopped at Tesco. They didn’t blink while our national institutions – universities, schools, the BBC, the NHS, the rule of law – were vitiated by corporate interests. As a road-building programme driven by the demands of construction companies ripped through ancient monuments and nature reserves, they did nothing, leaving hippies and anarchists to defend our national heritage.”⁴

They’ve done for Traditional Values, what Oedipus did for Family Values.

Heatwave – Oilmen Innocent Even Though Clearly Guilty

“A federal judge on Monday threw out a closely watched lawsuit brought by two California cities against fossil fuel companies over the costs of dealing with climate change. The decision is a stinging defeat for the plaintiffs, San Francisco and Oakland, and raises warning flags for other local governments around the United States that have filed similar suits, including New York City.

“The judge, William Alsup of Federal District Court in San Francisco, acknowledged the science of global warming and the great risks to the planet, as did the oil and gas companies being sued. But in his ruling, Judge Alsup said the courts were not the proper place to deal with such global issues, and he rejected the legal theory put forth by the cities.

“‘The problem deserves a solution on a more vast scale than can be supplied by a district judge or jury in a public nuisance case,’ Judge Alsup wrote in a 16-page opinion.”⁵

Judges in the USA are noted for barging in when the law is hazy, *when it suits them*. They would not let off a drug pusher on the grounds that drugs are a much wider problem. And broad civil actions have often succeeded without any specific law. But here, unsurprisingly, a judge chooses to give immunity to rich polluters with excellent political connections.

That happened in late June, just as the big heat-wave was getting going. In Britain, it has been the worst in the four decades since 1976. But the way things are going, we will almost certainly get another one much sooner than four decades in the future.

“The heatwave searing northern Europe was made more than twice as likely by climate change, according to a rapid assessment by scientists.

“The result is preliminary but they say the signal of climate change is ‘unambiguous’. Scientists have long predicted that global warming is ramping up the number and intensity of heatwaves, with events even worse than current one set to strike every other year by the 2040s.”⁶

Of course weather is complex. Flash floods have happened as the heatwave breaks. And earlier, Japan was hit hard:

“The heaviest rainfall Japan has seen in decades has caused widespread flooding and landslides – a frequent hazard for people living in mountainous areas – with reports of cars being swept away by floodwater and people taking refuge on the roofs of their inundated homes...

“More than 70 people have died and dozens are missing as torrential rain hammered parts of Japan for a third day on Sunday [8th July].”⁷

Earlier this year, someone had asked ‘*If the world is getting hotter, how can we have snow in Spring.*’⁸ The confusion exists because scientists are not spin-doctors and concentrate on finding truths. Global warming is a fact, but it does not mean the world always gets warm everywhere. Every model of Climate Change showed local areas of cooling amidst a general warming. And anyone who bothered to check would find that unseasonal cold weather was caused by the warm Arctic jogging the Jet Stream.

The same thing that has caused the heatwave.

Or do an analogy. There are reports of rising prices. But someone shows the price of apples has fallen, so it is all a left-wing conspiracy. Or ‘*how can prices be rising, if eggs are cheaper?*’

Reality is complex. But Climate Change and a general trend to hotter climates is a confirmed reality.

And there are other similar cases still pending. Judges love to show off by overturning the views of other judges, so there is hope.

Young People Think It’s Their World, Their Society

“Rebellions of young people have been recorded for decades, bucking trends and breaking the rules before entering the world of being a boring grown-up.

“But a new generation is coming through and truly shocking society.

“How? By becoming more sensible.

“For example, a survey conducted by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service showed teenagers are becoming less likely to have sex, preferring to spend time with their families and having romantic relationships online.”⁹

A triumph for Establishment values? Not really. This new generation is also finding its own form of radicalism in many countries. Corbyn in Britain. More diffuse radicalism in the USA:

“While the effort to find and run insurgent candidates arose from the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016, the handful of young people who launched this movement struck out entirely on their own. They had no resources and no political standing. Neither Sanders nor any others in the old guard were prepared to support them or endorse the candidates they found.

“In a way, this tiny group, Brand New Congress, which evolved into the Justice Democrats, marginalised itself. It wanted nothing to do with a traditional left it saw as being obsessed with positioning. It wanted to escape the shadow of people who seemed stuck in the 1980s, who didn’t take environmental issues seriously or understand the need to challenge structural racism and gender inequality, or to reach millennials trapped in terrible housing and miserable non-jobs. They were mocked, ignored and dismissed as well-intentioned but hopeless idealists. One of them told me how he was literally patted on the head by an older Democrat.”¹⁰

They are not wrong to think the older generations got many things wrong. Quite possibly unaware of how much we got *right*: the shift to a much more open and tolerant society that happened before they were born, and might *not* have happened without Baby Boomer rebelliousness.

One example: last two or three generations in the Anglosphere find it hard to believe that it was once rare and controversial for couples to try living together before marriage.

The degree to which past radicalism succeeded in the face of bitter Establishment hostility is played down by the current Establishment, for obvious reasons.¹¹

But mistakes were certainly made. And it was too much a *personal* liberation, with social matters neglected. With the useful role of State Power neglected.

In the 1960s, young people rebelled against the comfortable consensus that the West had created for itself after World War Two. Justly rebelled, because the limits on sex were unreasonable. And because life often wasn’t comfortable outside of the West, with a brutal and unjust war in Vietnam a major issue.

In the 1970s, the Establishment were ready to concede a lot. The radicals missed their opportunity on economic matters by unreasonable hostility to the state. Many things were possible in the 1970s, as well as or possibly even instead of the assertion of personal freedom of choice. In Britain, not only did Labour try to cement in place the power of the Trade Unions: the *Tories* under Heath were ready to do this after Heath lost his big confrontation in the miners in the Three-Day Week.¹² Workers Control was on offer, with a half-forgotten Bullock Report.¹³

The Hard Left was flatly against it: they thought it would delay the ‘inevitable’ collapse of capitalism.

One stark and tragic example: Arthur Scargill rejected any notion of the Miner’s Union taking over Coal Mining’ He insisted on preserving a conventional capitalist-type management for what had long been a nationalised industry. Left in place the people who were later on to flatten him, his people and everything he valued.

Part of the price would have been Incomes Policy. Barbara Castle had the right idea with proposal called *In Place of Strife*.¹⁴ The law would have been brought much more fully into Trade Union matters, with the requirement to call a ballot before a strike was held. It was rejected by most Trade Unions and by the Hard Left. Unending strife was believed to be liberating.

It wasn’t liberating.

All through the disorderly 1970s, Libertarianism was spreading and generating a formidable New Right. Right-wing anarchism, which behind the scenes was happy to drop limits on sex and throw out traditional politeness. Refused to take a stand on racism, either to defend it or to seriously oppose it, so it could tap into the White-Racist vote without appearing racist. It also had the ambition to dismantle the successful Mixed Economy system that was even then winning the Cold War.¹⁵

Luckily for the New Right, not much had happened before the Soviet collapse seemed to vindicate New Right ideas. Reagan was functionally Keynesian, running up debts to cover state spending – but he did it for military matters, including the still-unrealised Space Defence System (Star Wars). After the

Soviet crash, it was suggested that he'd *intentionally* pushed the Soviets into overspending, which is moot. But it was massive government spending that let the USA pull out of its crisis, though all justified in terms of New Right ideology. The ideal would be Small Government, including Small Military – but with the Dreadful Soviet Threat, a Large Military was needed for now.

When the Dreadful Soviet Threat suddenly ended, they lost little time before inventing the Dreadful Threat of Saddam Hussein. Suddenly demonised an ally to whom they had sold vast quantities of weapons, and whom they had rescued when his aggressive war against Iran went wrong. Whose frequent use of poison gas against rebellious Kurds was ignored by almost everyone, with George Galloway one of the few exceptions.

The Dreadful Threat of Saddam Hussein was held to persist even after his defeat and humiliation. He was only finished off after the attack on the Two Towers in New York highlighted the Dreadful Islamist Threat. And then after pro-Western elements in Ukraine had been encouraged to ally with Ukrainian fascists and illegally install a viciously anti-Russian government, echoes of the Dreadful Soviet Threat were used to raise up a Dreadful Russian Threat.

The Soviet Union *did* genuinely hope to impose its system on the rest of the world: but from the 1970s it was increasingly unpopular, unsuccessful and unlikely to achieve this. Post-Soviet Russia has no such ambition: merely the normal concerns of any other nation-state. In Ukraine, anyone who believes the Establishment story about Russian aggression should read *Was President Yanukovych impeached?*¹⁶ and *Ukraine – Kiev's Five-Day War Machine*.¹⁷)

It wasn't just military spending. New Right ideology bumped up against economic reality. For all of recorded history, it's been true that taxes are part of civilisation. The more civilised, the higher the total tax bill. Taxes have *not* fallen and the state has *not* shrunk. What's happened is that Public Service has been replaced by a worm-bucket of privatised functions competing for profit and doing a bad job. And a superior more-than-millionaire class has been allowed to evade most tax, meaning that the rest of society has to bear an unfair share of the unavoidable burden.

The New Right also ignored the ideology and spent their way out of a crisis during the half-forgotten crash of 1987.¹⁸ And in Britain, the law was brought much more fully into Trade Union matters, with the requirement to call a ballot before a strike was held. Presented as fairness and democracy, but in fact heavily rigged against the working class.

Workers who thought they were doing fine without a Trade Union failed to realise that they were protected by *other people* being in a Trade Union and protecting the general interest. Many of them still fail to realise it, supposing that worse conditions are some mysterious accident, rather than due to more overall power for the bosses.

The 1980s also saw a standstill in income growth for the working mainstream in the USA. This is much worse than anything that has happened in Britain, though we have also suffered. The more-than-millionaire class must have believed the glib nonsense of the Libertarians and thought it would all work out somehow. It has not worked out, and Trump's election reflects the general breakdown of the consensus.

Trump relies mostly on aging white bigots, who are a dying breed. The young people mostly want something different and much more radical. And unlike earlier generations, accept that it is *their* society. They it is potentially *their* state machine to enforce or permit whatever they think should be enforced or permitted.

Values have shifted, and go on shifting. And one core value, the supposed liberation of having your own car, is getting less and less popular. More and more people are ready to live without them if public transport is good.¹⁹ And are increasingly aware that our current 'Age of Petrol' is creating Climate Change that the young will have to live with.

'Lewisham East By-Election

I missed the chance at the time to comment in my regular *Newsnotes* on June's by-election in Lewisham East: space is limited. Now having more time, and unlimited space on my website, I think it worth putting the facts on record.

The headline news was that Labour's majority had been cut. But that's misleading.

Turnout fell massively in what everyone knew to be a safe Labour seat. Total votes were 22,056, as against 47,201 in 2017 and 42,923 in 2015.

The total Labour vote was only one-third of the 2017 total. Just under half of the 2015 total. (11,033, 32,072 and 23,907.)

The Tory vote was *also* one-third of its norm from 2017 and 2015. (3,161, 10,859 and 9,574.)

The Liberal Democracy vote recovered from previous lows. (5,404, 2,086 and 2,455.)

In this constituency, UKIP only got over 1000 votes in 2015. They are now marginal. Or were in June: perhaps things have changed since then.

The Greens also only did well in 2015.

In the 2017 General Election, the main issue was accepting or rejecting Labour's turn to Corbyn. Labour supporters, many who'd not have voted Labour before now, turned out and endorsed Corbyn.

In June 2018, voting Liberal-Democrat was the obvious way to vote against Britain leaving the European Union. Their low totals in 2015 and 2017 were probably caused by bad memories of the Tory-Liberal coalition. Their 2018 success was a lower share of the vote than they got in 2010. (28.2 and 11,750 votes, as against 24.6 in 2018.)²⁰

The by-election was caused by MP Heidi Alexander moving to be Sadiq Khan's deputy mayor for transport in London. She had a long-standing reputation: a Councillor and Deputy Mayor of Lewisham before becoming an MP. She probably had a strong personal vote.

It also cannot have helped that the new MP, Janet Daby, is non-white. "Daby's parents were Windrush migrants from Guyana and Jamaica... She was brought up on a council estate where, as a child, racist thugs pelted her windows with eggs three nights in a row."²¹

But overall, racists are a dying breed. Active and vicious because they know that the covert racists of the Centre-Right have abandoned them in favour of a selfish but multi-racial Globalisation.

Artificial Intelligence' – it is Automated Officiousness

"A self-driving car operated by Uber that killed a pedestrian allegedly detected her as she crossed the road but 'chose' not to alter its course.

"A software function meant that the woman was categorised as a false positive to be ignored, according to an internal investigation. Company insiders said that Elaine Herzberg, 49, and her bicycle were acknowledged by the car's sensors but then dismissed, much as a floating paper bag would have been.

"The semi-autonomous Volvo SUV drove into Ms Herzberg as she crossed the road in Tempe, Arizona, on the evening of March 18 and she died in hospital that night. She was the first person to be killed by a driverless vehicle."²²

"More than a second before a self-driving car operated by Uber struck and killed a pedestrian in March, the vehicle's computer system determined it needed to brake to avoid a crash. But a built-in emergency braking system had been disabled while the car was in autonomous mode to ensure a smoother ride, according to the preliminary report of federal regulators investigating the crash...

"The safety board said the Uber car's computer system spotted 49-year-old Elaine Herzberg pushing a bicycle across a road at night in Tempe, Ariz., six seconds before impact. The system classified Ms. Herzberg, who was not in a crosswalk, first as an unrecognized object, then as another vehicle and finally as a bicycle. But it did not slow down before barreling into her at 39 miles per hour. The car's software system is not designed to alert the driver of an object in the road."²³

That's the weakness of so-called 'Expert Systems'. Some have become almost incomprehensible to their makers. Or they apply known rules in unexpected ways: making errors that even a stupid human would never ever make.

It can also happen comically, rather than tragically:

"Amazon Alexa heard and sent private chat.

"A couple in Portland, Oregon joked that their Amazon Alexa might be listening in to their private conversations.

“The joke came to an abrupt end when they discovered a conversation was indeed recorded by Alexa - and then sent to an apparently random person in their contact list.”²⁴

It was a totally harmless conversation, which the recipient at once told them about. But having spent most of my working life programming computers for ordinary commercial purposes, I’m staggered that anyone should trust a machine that much. But it seems many do:

“Amazon Alexa is a virtual assistant developed by Amazon... It is capable of voice interaction, music playback, making to-do lists, setting alarms, streaming podcasts, playing audiobooks, and providing weather, traffic, sports, and other real-time information, such as news. Alexa can also control several smart devices using itself as a home automation system.”²⁵

If I were designing such a system, I’d set it to respond only to code phrases like [Issue Command]. I’d not trust people to remember to reliably say [End Command], so I’d have it assume it is just one command – or ask if this is not clear. The system might even do something like the ‘aye aye’ that subordinates use to reply to commands in the navy, or the Roger / Wilco system for air traffic control. Both systems prevent a remark being mistaken for a command, or vice versa.

More generally, the systems *should* be called Automated Officiousness, though this would not sell well. They are like the worst of rule-bound bureaucrats: obediently following rules with great precision, but lacking the elusive human quality of Common Sense.

The point about intelligence is that it puts facts into context with other facts. So if you saw a headline saying, ‘*Teresa May to sing at pop festival*’, a human familiar with British politics would be puzzled. Would perhaps decide that this was someone with the same name as the British Prime Minister, but otherwise very different.

They might also notice my imagined headline said ‘Teresa’: the Tory leader is ‘*Theresa*’, both valid variants of the name. That’s the sort of detail that computers are brilliant at spotting. With a little programming they can also maybe help if a human uses the wrong name, but it’s hard to get such systems to do its job without missing some. Without also making links that a human would find absurd.

For absurd links, the satirical magazine *Private Eye* has a regular column called Malgorithms. This shows highly unsuitable adverts being placed next to news stories that must have had similar key words:

“*Guardian headline*: ‘All lives matter’ rally was always racist—and this weekend’s Trump rally proved it’

“*The ad*: ‘Brilliant cleaning for whites and colours’ by Daz.

“*Yahoo News headline*: ‘Business drivers risking safety by not taking breaks’

“*The ad*: ‘Brilliant funeral insurance sweeping the UK’.”²⁶

Humans make mistakes of a different sort. When a sentence has two possible meanings, we may get hold of the wrong one. One instance: the magazine *New Scientist* reported a case where a small girl saw a sign in a market saying ‘*Watch Batteries Changed*’ and asked, ‘*wouldn’t that be very boring, Daddy?*’

From my own childhood, I heard my parents talking about a scandal involving Charlie Chaplin having sexual relations with an under-age teenage girl. At the time I’d not have cared, except that it was referred to as ‘*abducting a minor*’, the standard term for those below the Age of Consent. I heard it as ‘*abducting a miner*’, and that definitely did puzzle me.

Real life is full of comic coincidences. I’ve done an entire collection of them on Flickr as *Humour as Natural Selection*,²⁷ along with computer errors etc. The title is because I also mean it as an illustration of how the random recombination of separate items can occasionally produce something that you’d have thought would have needed an act of creation.

Computers can create, but randomly and without having any notion of when they have done so. You ‘train’ them by rewarding the answers that a human considers to be correct. In one early case, they tried to train a computer to spot tanks in woodland territory – militarily very useful. They ‘trained’ it on two sets of photographs, one with tanks and without. It seemed to have learned, but then was hopeless when given new photos. Checking, they found that the two sets had been taken on different days and it was sunny on one of them. That was what the system had learned.

A computer might notice all of the alternative meanings of a phrase like ‘*Watch Batteries Changed*’. But could they recognise which was likely to be meant? Or which was improbable? When they have systems that can spot such things without specific programming, that will be Artificial Intelligence. I’d expect it to come eventually, but not soon.

I also suspect that the recent panic about ‘killer machines’ is unjustified. The military work with them, and are the most likely victims of systems that could kill without a human approving. Drones have been brilliantly automated for military use, but always with a human choosing to use lethal force, or not. And I’d expect things to stay that way. For if genuine Artificial Intelligence did emerge, who would trust them with guns?

With regard to the much more valid panic about millions of good middle-class jobs being automated out of existence, that indeed *could* happen. But only if voters are silly enough to go on electing political parties that put commercial profit above human need.

Gay Cakes

“In 2014 Gareth Lee, an LGBT activist, asked Ashers bakery in Belfast to make a cake decorated with images of the Sesame Street puppets Bert and Ernie, together with the slogan: “Support gay marriage”. Ashers declined the order as the message ran contrary to the owners’ Christian beliefs.

“The Equality Commission, to whom Lee took his case, sued Ashers for discrimination. The courts found the bakery to have unlawfully discriminated against Lee on grounds of sexual orientation and religious belief or political opinion. Last week, the supreme court heard Ashers’ appeal against that decision. It’s not expected to deliver its verdict for a few months.

“At the heart of the case are two issues that have got muddled. The first is that of discrimination against an individual by virtue of his sexuality or religious or political beliefs. The second is the freedom to express one’s beliefs. Such freedom must necessarily include also the right not to express a view with which with one disagrees.

“Although I strongly disagree with Ashers’ opposition to marriage equality,’ the veteran LGBT and human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell has observed, ‘in a free society neither they nor anyone else should be compelled to facilitate a political idea that they oppose.’ He is right.” (*Guardian*, May 6th)²⁸

That had always been my feeling. If the bakery had refused to sell them existing cakes, that would have been discrimination. But it is not reasonable to ask people to participate in thing they disagree with.

No one would suggest that disapproving relatives should be compelled to attend a Gay Wedding. So how is the Gay Cake issue different?

From Russia, Improbably

Moscow supposedly orders its agents to kill a defector and his daughter, using a method that would rule out ordinary criminals and would point suspicion towards them.

But the agents are too inefficient to actually kill anyone.

And rather than dumping left-overs in a river in a sack along with a brick to keep it down forever, they carelessly leave poison disguised as perfume. Which might be a clever way to smuggle it, indeed. But if you abandon such a bottle, then you risk further unwelcome publicity by killing someone you have no quarrel with.

Back in March, while we were still waiting for the authorities to come up with a coherent story of the attack on the Skirpals, I was already suspicious. I wrote an on-line article called *Nerve Gas Attack – the Phantom Menace*,²⁹ pointing out that thousands of competent chemists could have copied the experimental Russian nerve gas that was used. That chemists in Iran had done that, but fully reported to the *Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons* and just so the menace could be better understood.

The facts were clear. But the bulk of British MPs were determined to stir up a panic against Putin. They took no notice of ‘off-message facts’.³⁰

We are still waiting for a coherent account. But then in late June, two people with no connection to Russia were also poisoned,³¹ with one later dying. Supposedly from careless left-over nerve-gas.

This is even less plausible than the first attack. Professional killers supposedly left vital evidence lying around for strangers to find. Evidence that might be enough to convict them, from DNA traces or whatever. Even though most people know that Forensic Science can do remarkable things, they are utterly careless about covering their tracks after attempted murder!

It's enough to make a cat laugh.

Back in March, I said "some particular faction among the vast diversity of anti-Putin Russians are the best suspects". I still say that.

Paid traitor Sergei Skripal was not keeping a low profile:

"The aging Russian spy had been a free man for only a few years when he turned up in Prague for a secret meeting with his former adversaries. He looked ill, but acted jovial, drinking with his Czech hosts and joking that his doctor had prescribed whiskey for high blood pressure.

"Then he got down to business, rattling off information about Russian spycraft and the activities of former colleagues that might give the Czechs an edge over their foes."³²

A lot of former spies went Freelance after the Soviet collapse. Some of them must be among the one-in-twenty Russians who bitterly resent the harsh things Putin did when he replaced Yeltsin. The things he did to stop Russia from sliding into the same chaos and misery that afflicts Ukraine: but they'd not see it so. The West tells them it was not so. And the more the world fails to go as they wished and expected, the more resentful and hate-filled they would be. And probably not fond of Britain, which has done business with Putin's Russia despite the rhetoric.

Meantime the British government spreads panic over Russia. But as of mid-August, it has carefully avoided any forum where its still-obscure story might be critically questioned.

Planned Addictions

"The gambling industry is increasingly using artificial intelligence to predict consumer habits and personalise promotions to keep gamblers hooked, industry insiders have revealed.

"Current and former gambling industry employees have described how people's betting habits are scrutinised and modelled to manipulate their future behaviour."

Even if you never gamble, they are still after you. Or after your money, rather, not worrying about the damage their greed may do to you.

"Social media companies are deliberately addicting users to their products for financial gain, Silicon Valley insiders have told the BBC's Panorama programme.

"It's as if they're taking behavioural cocaine and just sprinkling it all over your interface and that's the thing that keeps you like coming back and back and back', said former Mozilla and Jawbone employee Aza Raskin.

"Behind every screen on your phone, there are generally like literally a thousand engineers that have worked on this thing to try to make it maximally addicting' he added."

And maybe taking a Libertarian view – if you get hurt, you must be inferior and deserve it. The malice of some Libertarians is amazing, as is their dishonesty. They heroize Ayn Rand, actually a lady born Jewish with the name Alisa Rosenbaum. Who succeeded in Hollywood before becoming an author and then cult-leader, and must have known that she was seeking approval from an audience that was deeply suspicious of Jews. People who had done nothing about Hitler until Hitler declared war on them after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.

Why Hitler did this is mysterious. A firm believer in White Racism, his desire to conquer Poland got him into a war with the British Empire, at that time the world's strongest upholder of White Racism. But nothing compelled him to go to war with the USA, another major prop of White Racism and only pushed in the direction of Multiracialism by being compelled to fight a war against Fascism and in alliance with the Soviet Union. Roosevelt was making life hard for him by giving war supplies to Britain, but Congress limited what he could do. Hitler got arrogant and failed to realise the cost of forcing the USA to be an outright enemy.

Ayn Rand herself never once mentioned the tragedies that had befallen Jews. Instead she expressed extreme dislike of the New Deal system that had made the USA much safer for all minorities. That gave secure jobs and a happy bland life in the suburbs to the people who were later dumb enough to listen to her and Ronald Reagan.

Her best-known work, *Atlas Shrugged*, is an improbably fantasy. Published in the 1950s, it reflects a mind that has barely moved on from the 1920s and 1930s. Trains dominate transport, automobiles are marginal and aircraft are the toys of the rich. She wrote this at a time when the automobile was putting train companies out of business and when a rich minority were already using aircraft for regular travel. She ignores all this, and supposed that New Deal methods would bring poverty when in fact they had brought the fastest growth the USA ever had. And the core of the plot is highly-paid executives moving to live as ordinary small-town residents. Living much more simply, but in her vision they are hugely happy *because they no longer need to pay taxes*.

In real life, they remain enormously rich. And thanks to Ayn Rand and Reagan, they have widened the gap between themselves and those they manage:

“In 1965 the ratio of CEO to worker pay was 20 to one; that figure had risen to 58 to one by 1989 and peaked in 2000 when CEOs earned 344 times the wage of their average worker.

“CEO pay dipped in the early 2000s and during the last recession, but has been rising rapidly since 2009...

“The chief executives of America’s top 350 companies earned 312 times more than their workers on average last year.”

They also pay much less tax than ordinary people. Have got yet another free gift from Trump, and the impoverished mainstream people who elected him are still enthusiasts for him.

What do the ‘Top People’ think of those they dominate? Probably solid contempt, and outrage at any suggestion that the wealth should be shared. Ayn Rand has this: an entire train-load of people get suffocated because of bad management. And she gleefully describes how all of them were unworthy of life:

“The man in Seat 5, Car No. 7, was a worker who believed that he had a ‘right’ to a job, whether his employer wanted him or not.

“The woman in Roomette 6, Car No. 8, was a lecturer who believed that, as a consumer, she had a ‘right’ to transportation, whether the railroad people wished to provide it or not.”³³

Currently, rights still exist, but get subverted. Corporations intentionally hook their customers, and it is all legal:

“For the technology companies, of course, dependency has been at the core of product design. These companies knowingly used many techniques from cognitive science to drive and hold our attention. That’s not entirely negative. The point of any product design is to make it easy to use. But with soft drinks, cigarettes, and gambling, for example, there is some acknowledgement of the negative impacts. Perhaps more responsibility should live with the inventors of these devices and apps who need to make design changes to help people live more healthfully with their tech.”³⁴

But decades of anti-state propaganda have left people averse to saying that the state has a right and a duty to *impose* good behaviour when corporations refuse to be nice. Even though they always find a new dodge after one dodge has been exposed, almost all critics want it to be voluntary.

It is a curious fact that small business people and peasants never have been able to generate a political movement that would really look after their interests. Fascism came closest, but was ruined in most countries by its foolish glamorisation of war and ambition to go to war. And the New Right was very rapidly captured by the rich, if indeed it was ever independent of them.

China Rising

The Western media are refusing to call China’s system ‘successful socialism’. But are increasingly admitting that it is not capitalism. Or at least something different from the ‘Free Market’ capitalism that Thatcher and Reagan pushed us into:

“Both [US] parties and most economists accepted Beijing’s ‘innovation mercantilism’...

“After World War II, the American foreign-policy establishment was caught up in an intense debate: ‘Who lost China?’ Someone had to be blamed for Mao’s takeover. Today we are hearing the stirrings of a new debate: ‘Who lost China a second time?’ China is marching toward global technological leadership and increasingly challenges the United States both economically and militarily in what Michael Lind has termed Cold War II. Who was responsible for letting this happen?

“At one level, China lost China. As Michael Pillsbury writes in *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, China has had a strategy to supplant the United States as the dominant military and economic power since 1949. Now China seeks not just economic growth but technological leadership. President Xi Jinping himself has stated that China wants to be ‘master of its own technologies.’ Indeed, China seeks not only mastery but global dominance in a wide array of advanced-technology products including artificial intelligence, computers, electric vehicles, jet airplanes, machine tools, pharmaceuticals, robots, and semiconductors...

“These administrations didn’t act alone. They were cheered on by the stifling groupthink of the Washington trade and economics establishment, which, almost without exception, refused even to consider the possibility that Chinese economic and trade policies might pose a threat to the United States. The Washington elite-consensus view was and is that trade is always good (even one-sided free trade in which the other side is mercantilist); that while trade might hurt individual workers, it can’t hurt the overall economy; and that there is no difference between challenging foreign mercantilism and naked protectionism.

“Coupled with this rigid adherence to a strict free-trade ideology came the argument that China simply could not succeed with a state-run economy. Wasn’t it obvious? The Chinese leadership had clearly never bothered to read Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*.³⁵

Myself, I have read Adam Smith in great detail. And found that his belief that Free Markets produced the best results was a mere belief, in no way supported by the mass of detail included in the book. I explained this at length in a book published in 2000, the only existing left-wing criticism of Adam Smith available in English.³⁶ And got ignored, sadly, even though the core of my arguments are now on-line as well.³⁷

China after Mao allowed private capitalism, but insisted that the state is competent to regulate it when it sees fit. That was in fact how Mao started out in 1949: he only got more radical later. Got more radical when the USA remained bitterly hostile, doing all it could until the late 1960s to destroy People’s China. Recognising the exiled regime on Taiwan as the real China, which would have been a nice front for an invasion if the USA had ever felt strong enough. I suspect such plans did once exist, and are long overdue to be leaked by someone. Regardless, it was only after learning painfully that a much smaller war in Vietnam was unwinnable that Nixon decided that peace with China made sense.

It’s been said that only Nixon could have gone to China: he had no enemies to the right of him that he need take seriously. But it’s also likely that only Mao could have received him and could have wound down decades of hostility. Admitted that World Revolution would not happen any time soon, and left his supporters confused and vulnerable. Weakened after Lin Biao was purged, causing further confusion among those who had sincerely believed in the Cultural Revolution. Opening the way for Deng’s massive shift after Mao’s death.

Deng probably didn’t see his policies as a break with Mao or Marxism. Just an adjustment to the new circumstances of a less hostile USA, and a return to Mao’s older and more correct ideas. And Orthodox Marxism, rather than Mao’s experiments that always something of his early anarchist beliefs.

Regardless, China remains officially socialist and Marxist. And since the 1980s has been the world’s most successful economic system:

“Warren Buffett, known as the ‘god of stocks’ in China, speaks highly of the country’s economic growth and is optimistic about its future.

“‘What they’ve done in the last 50 or 60 years is a total economic miracle. I never would’ve thought it could’ve happened,’ Buffett told Yahoo Finance’s Andy Serwer in Omaha earlier this year. ‘What I do know is they have found a secret sauce for themselves, just like we found the secret sauce a couple centuries ago.’

“Buffett says ‘countries will do it differently,’ referring to the fundamental differences between China and the U.S. politically and economically. China’s state capitalism emphasizes economic growth and social stability, with tight control over domestic politics and information. Since the economic reform in 1978, China has grown at a staggering pace of 9.5% per year and has become the world’s second largest economy. In the past five years, China’s GDP growth has slowed down but still achieved an increase of 6.9% last year, dwarfing America’s 2.3% increase.”³⁸

I’ve noticed that people have mostly stopped calling it Capitalism. Will not quite admit that China has developed its own form of Moderate Socialism, and that it works. But feel the need to give it some name that distinguishes it from what the New Right claim as Inevitable.

Distinct from what the New Right will not admit to be a failing system, never truly recovered from its big crash in 2008.

The USA seeks excuses for its own decline. It would dump its problems on the rest of the world – not just China. Europe, best placed to resist, is currently being feeble. Other nations are more determined:

“There are good reasons for China – and other economies – to resist the pressure to conform to a mold imposed on them by US export lobbies. After all, China’s phenomenal globalization success is due as much to the regime’s unorthodox and creative industrial policies as it is to economic liberalization. Selective protection, credit subsidies, state-owned enterprises, domestic-content rules, and technology-transfer requirements have all played a role in making China the manufacturing powerhouse that it is. China’s current strategy, the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative, aims to build on these achievements to catapult the country to advanced-economy status.

“The fact that many of China’s policies violate WTO rules is plain enough. But those who derisively call China a ‘trade cheat’ should ponder whether China would have been able to diversify its economy and grow as rapidly if it had become a member of the WTO before 2001, or if it had slavishly applied WTO rules since then. The irony is that many of these same commentators do not hesitate to point to China as the poster boy of globalization’s upside – conveniently forgetting on those occasions the degree to which China has flouted the global economy’s contemporary rules.

“China plays the globalization game by what we might call Bretton Woods rules, after the much more permissive regime that governed the world economy in the early postwar period. As a Chinese official once explained to me, the strategy is to open the window but place a screen on it. They get the fresh air (foreign investment and technology) while keeping out the harmful elements (volatile capital flows and disruptive imports).

“In fact, China’s practices are not much different from what all advanced countries have done historically when they were catching up with others. One of the main US complaints against China is that the Chinese systematically violate intellectual property rights in order to steal technological secrets. But in the nineteenth century, the US was in the same position in relation to the technological leader of the time, Britain, as China is today vis-à-vis the US. And the US had as much regard for British industrialists’ trade secrets as China has today for American intellectual property rights.”³⁹

As I’d said well before reading the above article, China under Deng adapted to the successful Mixed Economy system that the West invented in the 1940s and foolishly moved away from in the 1980s.⁴⁰

The Dirty War in Iraq

I was flatly against the Iraq War before it happened, writing *Reflections on the Start of the Iraq War* in the confidence it would nothing like what was promised.⁴¹

At that time, many people believed that ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ were real. And others believed that a conquered Iraq could be a capitalist-parliamentary utopia.

Instant Democracy – Just Add Firepower!

Now all sorts of people are saying that the vision was not just false, but phoney. Such as senior oil executive Gary Vogler:

“April 24 marks the 15th anniversary of my initial entry into Baghdad as the senior oil advisor to retired Lieutenant General Jay Garner, our US government civilian leader in Iraq. It was the beginning of my six plus years in Iraq working on the oil sector and denying the allegation that the Iraq war had an oil agenda. I can no longer refute such an allegation...

“The one large pump station that pumped oil through the Syrian export pipeline was destroyed early in the war. It was the only intentional oil infrastructure target. Secretary Rumsfeld announced to the NY Times the day after the pump station destruction that it was destroyed to punish Syria for helping Saddam smuggle oil outside of the United Nation’s oil for food program. Such explanation made no sense.

“The attack on the pump station punished the future government of Iraq much more than Syria. Iraq lost an export channel and a \$50 million pump station. Syria only lost the toll fees from any export barrels that Iraq would export through the pipeline in the future. Iraq incurred more than 95% of the punishment. This had all been discussed during our prewar planning and that is why the written policy approved by the cabinet stated as it did. So why did Wolfowitz reverse it? It made no sense to me until I started doing some serious research in the last few years while writing my book...

“I risked my life for seventy-five months in Iraq working for what I thought were noble reasons. The more I learned the more I realized that there was an oil agenda and I was just an unknowing participant.

“The oil agenda I discovered and experienced was to supply Iraq oil to Israel...

“*The Guardian*, a London newspaper, quoted a retired CIA agent just after the Syria pipeline attack. ‘It has long been a dream of a powerful section of the people now driving the Bush administration and the war in Iraq to safeguard Israel’s energy supply. Rebuilding the old Kirkuk to Haifa pipeline would transform economic power in the region, cutting out Syria and solving Israel’s energy crisis at a stroke’...

“Scooter Libby was Vice President Dick Cheney’s chief of staff in Washington...

“Libby was Marc Rich’s lawyer for many years while Rich made \$billions moving Iranian crude oil through a secret pipeline through Israel.

“The pipeline carried oil from the Red Sea Israeli port of Eilat to the Mediterranean port of Ashkelon. This secret pipeline was constructed in 1970 and Marc Rich transported Iranian oil through this pipeline for over 20 years, until the mid-1990s...

“In July 2003, the Iraqis started attacking oil pipelines. This led to severe shortages of gasoline and diesel for the population...

“Iraqis were reading in the Baghdad Arabic press that the Americans were shipping their oil to Israel through a pipeline to Haifa...

“Oil ministry insiders began attacking their own pipelines after reading the Iraqi press. Chalabi convinced the neocons to give up on their primary plan of opening a pipeline to Haifa in 2003. He executed an alternative plan to get oil to Israel. He ordered the reversal of our CPA policy of not selling oil to brokers. The timing of the Chalabi order was very opportune because both Phil Carroll and I were out of the country. Phil and I endorsed the policy of not selling to brokers in order to minimize the risk of corruption.”⁴²

Myself, I think the failed scheme to get oil for Israel was marginal: one of many ideas. Other projects were much bigger and brought billions of profit to US companies intertwined with the people who pushed for war. And the larger aim of a more friendly Arab world was an utter failure.

Wrecking the USA

The rise of a rich Overclass to dominance from the 1980s has hurt the country. The sort of thing that has happened in many other countries, but not previously in the USA. The early run of Presidents from the rich gentry helped produce a coherent and peaceful state, whereas Spanish-speakers ignored the ideals of Simon Bolivar and produced a collection of weak states that had wars with each other. The corrupt Robber Barons of the Gilded Age after the US Civil War did at least cause a rise in general wealth.

Wrecked the vision of the USA as a land of independent small farmers and crafts people, but offered another vision that people could live with.

The 1940s to 1960s were maybe the US optimum.

The crisis of the 1970s were used by Ronald Reagan to turn the society into something much worse. Tapped into nostalgia for the failed dream of a land of independent small farmers and crafts people, but moved the country in exactly the opposite direction. Made it even more a country of gigantic corporations intertwined with the state machine. And a country that can ignore its own population, because it can import cheap skilled labour from the rest of the world. Has treated ordinary US citizens as detritus, unless they have the luck to rise into the Overclass:

“I’ve written a lot about Kansas as the vanguard of trickle-down economics. Former Kansas Governor Sam Brownback’s ‘real live experiment’ of extreme tax cuts and corporate deregulation as a lever to create economic growth was a catastrophic failure.

“Kansas’s schools are falling apart and the situation in the state has gotten so bad that Republicans are actually raising taxes to pay for essential government services. Kansans are pleading with the rest of the country not to follow their lead, because they know from experience that ‘the trickle-down experiment doesn’t work.’

“It’s important to note, though, that Kansas wasn’t the only state engaged in a trickle-down experiment. Now Oklahoma is in the news because its trickle-down experiment has similarly collapsed and the bill has come due.”⁴³

But an out-of-date political system has made things worse:

“In contrast to the PR systems widespread in Europe, the American political system is designed to render voters unequal. It also rejects the seminal principle of democracy, with majority rule occurring only randomly. In addition, it is corrupt (pay-to-play) by judicial fiat and plagued by fake news exploited by the Republican Party and Russians alike.

“Adding to this dark picture is the undemocratic 18th century American electoral system – judged by political scientists with the Electoral Integrity Project to be the least responsive system among all rich democracies – of lower quality even than election systems in Barbados, Brazil, Croatia, Mongolia, Rwanda, South Africa or Tunisia.”⁴⁴

Rather than fix this, the USA has stuck with a system that the rich can control by enormous donations to politicians they approve of. Big Business pays out a lot, and gets value for money:

“In the 1970s, however, a new idea took hold: Size was not a problem so long as prices remained low. Bigness could even be good, because it promoted efficiency and thus lower prices. The legal scholar Robert Bork was the most influential advocate for this view, and it soon guided the Supreme Court, the Reagan administration and pretty much every administration since.

“But the theory has two huge flaws, as a new generation of scholars, like Lina Khan, is emphasizing. One, prices are not a broad enough measure of well-being. Wages, innovation and political power matter as well. If prices stay low but wages don’t grow — which is, roughly, what’s happened in recent decades — consumers aren’t better off. Two, regulators have focused on short-term prices, sometimes ignoring what can happen after a company drives out its rivals.”⁴⁵

Robert Bork served as the Solicitor General under Nixon. In the ‘Saturday Night Massacre’ of October 1973, Bork became Acting Attorney General after his two superiors in the Justice Department resigned rather than fire Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, who was investigating the Watergate scandal.⁴⁶

Reagan promoted him, and in 1987 nominated Bork to the Supreme Court. That was too much even in US politics, and he failed. But the Supreme Court, which has always twisted the law in absurd ways, is now securely under right-wing control.

They have also harmed education, a major source of long-term wealth:

“The federal government, as an old line puts it, is basically an insurance company with an army: nondefense spending is dominated by Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. State and local governments, however, are basically school districts with police departments. Education accounts for

more than half the state and local work force; protective services like police and fire departments account for much of the rest.

“So what happens when hard-line conservatives take over a state, as they did in much of the country after the 2010 Tea Party wave? They almost invariably push through big tax cuts. Usually these tax cuts are sold with the promise that lower taxes will provide a huge boost to the state economy.

“This promise is, however, never — and I mean never — fulfilled; the right’s continuing belief in the magical payoff from tax cuts represents the triumph of ideology over overwhelming negative evidence.

“What tax cuts do, instead, is sharply reduce revenue, wreaking havoc with state finances. For a great majority of states are required by law to balance their budgets. This means that when tax receipts plunge, the conservatives running many states can’t do what Trump and his allies in Congress are doing at the federal level — simply let the budget deficit balloon. Instead, they have to cut spending.

“And given the centrality of education to state and local budgets, that puts schoolteachers in the cross hairs...

“These ideologues really believed that they could usher in a low-tax, small-government, libertarian utopia.

“Predictably, they couldn’t. For a while they were able to evade some of the consequences of their failure by pushing the costs off onto public sector employees, especially schoolteachers. But that strategy has reached its limits. Now what?

“Well, some Republicans have actually proved willing to learn from experience, reverse tax cuts and restore education funding. But all too many are responding [badly]: Instead of admitting, even implicitly, that they were wrong, they’re lashing out, in increasingly unhinged ways, at the victims of their policies.”⁴⁷

Ordinary people suffer without recognising what’s wrong:

“The fading American dream may be behind rise in US suicides.

“Shrinking life chances plus lack of a social safety net may have left middle-aged Americans more vulnerable to suicide than peers in other rich nations.

“Sobering statistics published earlier this month show that the annual rate of suicide in the US has risen by almost 28 per cent between 1999 and 2016.

“A number of explanations have been put forward, including the 2008 economic crash, the upsurge in addiction to opioid painkillers and the migration of manufacturing jobs to other countries. But none alone explains why the suicide rate is rising so fast in the US as it falls in other rich countries. Is something uniquely American at work?

“Figures from the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) show the country’s rate of suicide was 15.6 per 100,000 population in 2016, up from 12.2 in 1999. Of all the states, Montana fares worst, with a rate of 29.2 per 100,000. The global average rate in 2016 was 10.6, according to the World Health Organization.

“For comparison, the rate for the UK in 2016 was 8.9 per 100,000, down from 9.1 in 2000, according to the latest WHO data. And although rates are much higher in Russia, at 31 per 100,000 in 2016, this is a dramatic fall from 52.6 in 2000. Clearly, the US is something of an outlier.

“Globalisation and automation, which are driving job losses in the US, may partly be to blame, but the same pressures have affected all Western economies without a similar increase in the suicide rate...

“One of the key drivers could be the American dream itself – the idea that you can work hard and climb out of poverty. A growing mismatch between the life expectations this brings and the increasingly bleak reality for many US citizens could lead to hardship.

“This may be particularly felt by middle-aged white Americans, who have the highest suicide rates and the steepest rises. The American dream is deeply ingrained, but it no longer seems to be true for working class, middle-aged people, says Phillips. ‘I think this disjuncture between norms, expectations and reality is one important factor behind the increase.’

“This group is also more likely to be negatively affected by divorce, lower education levels and economic inequality. Among US adults over 50, the divorce rate has doubled since the 1990s, says Phillips. In 1999, suicide rates for middle-aged people with a high-school diploma or less were 1.7 times greater than those with a college degree. By 2013, this difference in risk had risen to 2.4 times greater.”⁴⁸

California Dreaming

A lot of the folly began in California, and may be ending there. Many things in the USA have been tried first in California and then spread eastwards.

There’s an interesting new book, *State Of Resistance: What California’s Dizzying Descent and Remarkable Resurgence Mean for America’s Future*, by Manuel Pastor:

“Pastor sets out his story in three acts — rise, fall, recovery — each of which offers surprising insights for readers outside the state (and many inside as well). In describing the post-World War II years of expansion, which took place under governors of both parties, he emphasizes how heavily they involved public spending and investment — roads, schools, parks, both advanced research universities and numerous community colleges — and how much they shared a goal of preparing the state for new arrivals and future citizens. ‘California in the 1950s and 1960s was precisely the sort of demonstration project for an active government that many conservatives seem to fear at a national level,’ he writes. ‘The real secret to California’s once and future success was exactly its agreement on a social compact in which the public and private sectors worked to create paths upward for both those who were in the state and those who were to come.’

“The unhappy decline that constituted the second act was, in Pastor’s view, an uncannily precise preview of the economic, social and political discontents that now embitter our national politics. Deindustrialization hit California as hard in the 1980s as it hit any place in the Midwest. (Forty percent of the lost American manufacturing jobs in the early 1990s were in this one state.) Ethnic change was much more rapid. Pastor points out that between 1970 and 1990, the share of California’s population that was foreign-born rose from 9 percent to 22 percent. This was distinctly different from the rest of the country, where the foreign-born share rose in the same period from around 4 percent to just over 6 percent, and it led to what Pastor calls the ‘racial generation gap.’ That is, a politically and economically powerful older generation, mainly white, resisted paying taxes to build schools and parks for a younger generation that was mainly nonwhite.”⁴⁹

There is still so much that is good in the USA: one must hope they bounce back from their present errors. And do so with a recognition that they have a lot more to learn from the rest of the world than they once supposed. And a lot less to teach or try to impose.

Snippets

The Right to Troll?

“The Labour MP Jess Phillips was bombarded with more than 600 rape threats in a single night, she has revealed, as she called for online trolls to no longer be allowed anonymity.

“Phillips said she is constantly the object of vicious abuse online, with the police having issued harassment orders against two people. She has concluded from her experience that parliament needs to force people to make their identities available to the likes of Facebook and Twitter – even if they are still able to remain anonymous to the general public...

“Social networks should have access to real identities to flush out abusers...

“I don’t think people should be allowed to be completely anonymous online any more. I don’t mind if people appear anonymous online for all sorts of really reasonable reasons.’

“Phillips cited the example of a teacher in her constituency who wanted to speak out against government cuts in schools. ‘They want to be anonymous, but they wouldn’t mind not being anonymous to the provider and tell Facebook or Twitter who they are. But, to the public, they want to appear anonymous.’”⁵⁰

I've long felt that Web users should need to have an On-Line Passport, which would be obligatory for all large sites. But I'd not trust the 'providers': profit-driven companies who can be careless or even malicious. I'd have it held by a 'Human Protection Agency', to look after those who need protection. Such as people criticising their employers, who are often left exposed.

Bitcoin is a Crook's Best Friend

"The Russian spies used some of the Bitcoins to pay for the registration of a website, dcleaks.com, where they would later post emails that had been stolen from Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. When the operatives needed a computer server to host the dcleaks site, they paid for that with Bitcoins as well...

"The indictment provided one of the clearest illustrations to date of the inner workings of the Russian operation that carried out the hacking of the Democratic Party and other targets. It also showed how cryptocurrencies — and the anonymity they provide — have become both a tool and a challenge for intelligence agencies in the battles between nation states."⁵¹

Bitcoin also turns pollution directly into money, cutting out the middleman of useful production. New bitcoins are created using complex maths that eat up processor time, wasting energy and generating heat. The complexity is needed to stop an unofficial currency immediately being invaded by fraudsters and made worthless.

In terms of real human wealth, it is *all* worthless.

Shame in Ukraine

Ukraine could have been a highly successful country. And might one day be just that: but not while run by a mix of Libertarians and home-grown Fascists.

Not while the mostly-Russian regions in an artificial entity created by Lenin and Stalin are alienated from the government in Kiev by bungling bigots.

But if you don't know what you're doing, find someone to blame:

"Beginning in April, Ukrainian nationalist groups that were given free rein four years ago to fight the Russian military incursion have taken instead to attacking the softer targets of Roma camps, saying they are 'cleaning' Ukraine's cities."⁵²

Dumping competitive politics on a fragmented political territory with no useful parliamentary tradition was stupid. Bound to blow up, or else stabilise with functional One-Party Rule.

Russia stabilised with functional One-Party Rule. A place where Putin and his party repeatedly win fairly clean elections, with the restored Russian Communists the main opposition. With pro-Western parties an absurd fringe. A place where politics isn't any dirtier than it is in the USA, or many Western allies. It has the weakness of being too much centred on Putin, and might fall into chaos without him. But for now, it works.

Ukraine is a disaster with occasional humour.

My own conscience is clean on the matter: I advised them against it, though I don't supposed anyone listened. But I was amused by someone showing how a real-life fight in the Ukrainian parliament could be converted into Renaissance Art.⁵³

Poor Little Croatia?

During the 2018 FIFA World Cup, England did better than expected. And Croatia did better still, actually reaching the final.

The British media hoped in vain for trouble in Russia. And Croatia was approved of.

No one mentioned the awkward little detail that there was a pro-Nazi Croatia from 1941 to 1945. Or that it was popular with Croats, who had mostly been against the Serbian anti-German stand that had got Yugoslavia invaded by Germany.

Or that those Croats carried out mass killings of pacified Serbian populations, as well as killing Jews and Gypsies. And did this without much pressure from Nazi Germany, whereas other allies resisted. Bulgaria saved its own Jews, though it deported Jews to the Death Camps from new territories it occupied as a German ally.⁵⁴

In the 1990s and ever since, the West has covered up the awkward truth that the new Croatia freely identified with pro-Nazi Croatia. Its first President, Franjo Tudjman, was listed as a Denialist by Deborah Lipstadt in her book *Denying the Holocaust* – the same book that right-winger David Irving famously failed to get a libel judgement against.

Tudjman conveniently died in 1999, avoiding likely indictment as a war criminal.⁵⁵ If he drank tea with someone he should not have trusted, it never came to light. Or not that I've heard: his death seems generally accepted as natural.

Having ethnically cleansed its Serbs, Croatia has settled down as a normal European state. An inconvenient past is covered up, with Western help.

White Helmets, Black Hearts?

Before the war in Syria started, I tried advising some of Syria's pro-Western militants to accept the open elections that Assad Junior was offering. That war would not be good for them. But I don't think any of them listened.

During the war, Hillary Clinton and others were keen to create the same fragmented chaos that has existed in Libya after the West ratted on him. After they ignored an agreement whereby Gaddafi gave up his more dangerous interventions and sought co-existence. In the case of Syria, I noticed that evidence to justify Western intervention kept popping up from obscure sources, with an outfit called the White Helmets often involved.

With Assad saved by Russia, most of those who listened to Western advice are being dumped. They are not counted as part of the White Race, and they are no longer useful.

But not the White Helmets:

“Those militants included some very valuable specimens — members of the ‘Syrian civil defense’, or, as they are more simply known, ‘the White Helmets.’ If they were taken prisoner, that would be a serious problem for the US and its allies, since the members of that organization might have a lot to say once they were in front of the cameras. And the damage caused by their statements would be far worse than the fallout over the admissions made by Hassan Diab — the boy the ‘helmets’ named as a victim of a chemical attack in Douma, who admitted that the attack had been staged for the photographers. And it would be so much worse, simply because the White Helmets — or at least their leaders — knew so much more.”⁵⁶

Panic? In Public, My Face Is Recognisable!

For most of human history, people were known to their neighbours. Cities created anonymous crowds. But technology is changing this, with computers able to identify people seen in CCTV cameras. And liberals are panicking.

It can be mis-used, of course. And is very imperfect:

“Amazon's controversial face recognition software, called Rekognition, misidentified more than two dozen members of Congress as people arrested for crimes. The false identifications were made when the ACLU of Northern California tasked Rekognition with matching photos of all 535 members of Congress against 25,000 publicly available mugshot photos. The test cost the ACLU just \$12.33 to perform.

“In total, Rekognition misidentified 28 members of Congress, listing them as a ‘match’ for someone in the mugshot photos. 11 of the misidentified members of Congress were people of color, a highly alarming disparity. Tests have shown that face recognition is routinely less accurate on darker

skinned people and women. For Congress as a whole, the error rate was only five percent, but for non-white members of Congress, the error rate was 39 percent.”⁵⁷

To me, that merely means that humans must always check what the computer thinks it has found. And will soon learn that the system is very imperfect indeed.

The main purpose of the software is to catch criminals. I suppose it could be used to monitor people who’ve done nothing wrong. But a simple law against using it that way should solve the problem.

Tolerance – Not Unlimited

“Tolerance is not a moral absolute; it is a peace treaty. Tolerance is a social norm because it allows different people to live side-by-side without being at each other’s throats. It means that we accept that people may be different from us, in their customs, in their behavior, in their dress, in their sex lives, and that if this doesn’t directly affect our lives, it is none of our business. But the model of a peace treaty differs from the model of a moral precept in one simple way: the protection of a peace treaty only extends to those willing to abide by its terms. It is an agreement to live in peace, not an agreement to be peaceful no matter the conduct of others. A peace treaty is not a suicide pact.”⁵⁸

Undue Tolerance for the Overclass

I’ve talked many times about the Overclass. The more-than-millionaire class that have increased their power and incomes with the rise of New Right politics in the 1980s. And who have grabbed wealth from the rest of us, without giving anything back.

But people are slow to learn:

“Squeezing the top 1% ought to be the most natural thing in the world for politicians seeking to please the masses. Yet, with few exceptions, today’s populist insurgents are more concerned with immigration and sovereignty than with the top rate of income tax. This disconnect may be more than an oddity. It may be a sign of the corrupting influence of inequality on democracy.”⁵⁹

That article missed the amazing fact that huge numbers of ordinary people promote themselves to the elite in their own minds. Defend a fantasy of what they’d like to be, rather than what they actually are. One survey found that **nineteen per cent** of US citizens thought they were in the richest 1%, while a further 20% thought they would get there eventually.⁶⁰

Saying ‘more-than-millionaire class’ may help. People should know that they are not millionaires and are never likely to be, except in some hopelessly devalued currency. People should work out that they will always be among the losers in an unjust system.

Hate the Many, Not the Few

“A few writers have tried to play down the idea of the 1 percent for a different reason: They say it’s making us miss the real story of class and inequality in America. Last year, a Brookings Institution scholar named Richard Reeves published a book titled *Dream Hoarders*, in which he argues that America’s upper-middle class is rigging the economy in its own favor. Our national focus on the very rich, he suggests, is blinding us to the reality of how well-off soccer moms and dads in places like Arlington, Virginia, are killing the American dream for everyone but their own kids. ‘Too often, the rhetoric of inequality points to a ‘top 1 percent’ problem, as if the ‘bottom’ 99 percent is in a similarly dire situation,’ he writes. ‘This obsession with the upper class allows the upper middle class to convince ourselves we are in the same boat as the rest of America; but it is not true.’

“This week, the *Atlantic* [magazine] published a long feature more or less rehashing most of *Dream Hoarders*’ arguments. In ‘The 9.9 Percent Is the New American Aristocracy,’ writer Matthew Stewart argues that aside from a small sliver of true plutocrats who can actually afford to buy an election or two, the top 10 percent of wealthiest Americans are all essentially part of the same highly educated and

privileged group—the ‘meritocratic class’—which has ‘mastered the old trick of consolidating wealth and passing privilege along at the expense of other people’s children.’

“Reeves and Stewart are both attempting to give us a new shorthand for who is ruining the economy. Instead of the 1 percent, they would like us to talk about the dream hoarders, or the 9.9 percent. But in the end, both authors fail by lumping together large groups of Americans who haven’t really benefited equally from our winner-take-all economy. As a result, their stories about how the country has changed, and who has gained, just don’t track.”⁶¹

I’ve been calling them the Next Nine. They have not been directly suffering, but they are not big winners either. Lose with the strain and degradation of the less fortunate 90%. And may also be open to arguments based on morality.

Foiled R Us

“More than 30,000 Toys R Us workers are helping the brand through its liquidation process, and on top of not having a job once Toys R Us shuts for good, they also won’t receive any severance. These workers are now rallying for the failed toy company to pay them severance in a petition that already has more than 50,000 signatures...

“Companies go out of business all the time, especially today. What makes the story behind Toys R Us so bewildering ... is that the companies that bought Toys R Us were able to nab huge profits even as the company went up in flames. Bain Capital, KKR, and Vornado have reportedly scored \$470 million off Toys R Us.

“On top of that, five executives were allowed to split an \$8.2 million bonus, and Toys R Us CEO David Brandon got a \$2.8 million bonus. These payouts are cemented into executive contract from the get-go. But according to the New York Post, Brandon and his fellow Toys R Us executives get to leave the sinking ship early next week with their giant wads of cash while retail employees ... will continue to see out the gloomy end of Toys R Us.”⁶²

Needing Good Jobs

“Let’s consider a real job or a good job – the type of job the whole world wants – as at least 30 hours per week of consistent work with a paycheck from an employer. Based on this definition, 1.4 billion out of the world’s roughly 5 billion adults have a good job.

“So who are the other 3.6 billion? About 1 billion people are self-employed; about 300 million work part time and do not want full-time work; about 400 million work part time but want full-time work; 260 million are unemployed; and the rest are out of the workforce. Not all of the self-employed are hopelessly unemployed, but we can conservatively estimate that at least half of them are.

“Those 500 million added to the 400 million part-time workers who want full-time work and the unemployed total roughly 1 billion people who are truly unemployed. That figure of about 1 billion, which is just shy of one-third of the entire world’s adult workforce of 3.3 billion, would put global unemployment closer to 33% than to the 5.6% that the ILO estimates.”⁶³

The West had this up to the 1980s. And damaged it by electing politicians who attacked it in the name of Freedom.

Feed the Rich, Crush the Ordinary

“Fledgling businesses and self-employed workers with fluctuating incomes risk being ‘crushed’ by unrealistic rules imposed by universal credit, a cross-party group of MPs has warned.

“They say entrepreneurs who fail to meet an arbitrary ‘minimum income’ level from their business after just one year will be stripped of benefits support and, in some cases, will be forced to give up their enterprise and find other work.

“In addition, people whose income changes from month to month because they work in seasonal occupations such as farming or tourism could miss out on thousands of pounds because of the way their universal credit is calculated.

“The MPs on the Commons work and pensions committee said universal credit was ‘designed with little regard for the reality of self-employed work’, and that most new businesses will need longer than a year to become viable.”⁶⁴

I don’t see it as an accident. It fits the New Right outlook that only those who succeed without state aid are worthy of success.

For themselves, they will give special exemption. But since this comes from a delusion, they don’t see the need to keep ordinary people attached to their cause.

Sadly, they have been able to neglect the interests of 90% of the population and still get enough votes to stay in power.

The older generation mostly learn nothing and forget nothing. But they also die, and are replaced by more hopeful young people.

I myself am 67, and so probably near the end of my own life. If I live another ten years, I figure I will be doing well. But while still fond of being alive, I see death in due season as a necessary part of being human.

Korea

“The North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, has pledged to shutter a nuclear test site and invite foreign experts and journalists to witness the decommissioning in May as he prepares to meet Donald Trump as early as next month.

“Kim also said there was no need for the North to maintain a nuclear arsenal if a peace treaty is formalised and relations with the US improve, according to South Korea’s presidential office.

“‘Once we start talking, the United States will know that I am not a person to launch nuclear weapons at South Korea, the Pacific or the United States,’ Kim was quoted as saying by ... a spokesman for the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in.

“‘If we maintain frequent meetings and build trust with the United States and receive promises for an end to the war and a non-aggression treaty, then why would we need to live in difficulty by keeping our nuclear weapons?’

“Kim made the comments during meeting with Moon on Friday, where the two leaders signed a declaration calling for a ‘nuclear-free Korean peninsula’. Kim earlier said the North would halt nuclear and missile tests, but this was the first mention of inviting foreign observers.”⁶⁵

It seems he is willing to risk living without nuclear weapons. Of course China could defend him. May have put pressure on him.

There could be a deal whereby China takes charge of North Korea’s nuclear assets, with the option to return them if China feels the US has not kept its side of the bargain.

Or something like what was done to disarm the IRA.

Windrush Scandal

“The Home Office was repeatedly warned that Windrush generation residents had been wrongly classified as being in the country illegally as long ago as 2013, according to immigration advice experts.

“After Capita was awarded a Home Office contract in 2012 to help target around 174,000 migrants who had overstayed their visas, pro bono legal advisers said they began to be contacted by older, Caribbean-born individuals concerned that they were receiving text messages and letters advising them to leave the country. The advisers contacted the Home Office to tell them this group had been wrongly targeted.”⁶⁶

All part of keeping masses of ordinary people attached to parties that act against their interests.

Lukewarm on Israel

“Poll after poll shows Americans sharply divided on seemingly every issue, from climate change and immigration to international trade and alliances. This lack of common ground raises the specter of a country that will sharply yo-yo every time the government changes hands, exacerbating instability and division.

“Support for Israel has not been spared this trend in American life. As the following graph shows, Israel has become a partisan issue rather than a matter of consensus. In the 1980s and ’90s, Democrats and Republicans supported Israel in nearly equal measure. In the 21st century, they divided. Now, 79 percent of Republicans sympathize with Israel, compared to just 27 percent of Democrats.”⁶⁷

I’d explain it by Israel being much more obviously the last expression of European Imperialism from the 1990s, when it kept on taking more land from the Arabs of the West Bank. When it found ways to avoid its promise to create a genuinely independent Palestine.

Unlike Britain, I’ve not hear anyone trying to explain this away as a sudden outbreak of anti-Semitism. It would be trickier over there, since most Jews support the Democrats. And the Left Democrats are led by Bernie Sanders. Sanders came closer than any Jew before him to being US President. Would have almost certainly have defeated Trump, had not the Democratic establishment fiddled the process to chose Hilary Clinton. And could still be the official candidate on 2020.

Sanders opposed the Gulf War, and has been ready to criticise Israel.

British Soldiers Off-Limits?

“Cabinet ministers have raised concerns over plans to introduce a new body that would investigate unsolved killings from the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

“Introducing a new ‘Historical Investigations Unit’ was a major part of the 2014 Stormont House agreement.

“It was agreed then to create a new independent body to deal with killings where there had been no prosecutions.

“But several ministers told colleagues on Tuesday that the proposal was unacceptable in its current form.

“In what has been described as a ‘spat’, Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson is understood to have raised concerns that military veterans might not have enough protections under the proposed system.”⁶⁸

Protection from what?

There has all along been suspicions of illegal killings.

It would have been much better to have ‘Truth and Reconciliation’ on the South African model. But the Tories decided to wriggle out of the original fair settlement, as far as they could. And now seek further evasion.

British Shopping Fading.

“The budget retailer Poundworld faces an uncertain future after falling into administration. Chains including House of Fraser, Marks and Spencer and Mothercare, have announced they are closing branches. But what kinds of shops and leisure outlets are increasing and declining most across Britain?

“If you want to get a haircut or shave, go for a workout, drink a coffee or eat a pizza (either at home or in a restaurant), times are good.

“Outlets offering these services are among the fastest-growing consumer premises in Britain, according to a survey by the Local Data Company.

“But pubs, banks, travel agents, post offices and newsagents are becoming more of a rarity.”⁶⁹

That’s from the BBC. For me, the biggest need is *people* living in city centres, which can become eerily empty when the retail outlets have closed. A product of ‘liberation’ for landlords, who go for whatever pays the most rent.

The article was written in June. House of Fraser has become a more complex story. One which I may deal with in future.

China Curbs Overpaid Stars

“Chinese authorities are capping the salaries of celebrities, blaming the entertainment industry for encouraging ‘money worship’ and ‘distorting social values’.

“The salaries of on-screen performers should be capped at 40% of the total production costs, according to a joint notice from five government agencies including China’s tax authority, the television and film regulator, and the propaganda department. Leading actors should receive no more than 70% of total wages for the cast, according to the announcement, published in Xinhua.”⁷⁰

As I said earlier, People’s China has never ceased to be Marxist. You don’t need to be a Marxist to object to absurd salaries for the ‘top people’, of course. But Marxism gives you the confidence to actually enforce such wishes. People from other backgrounds mostly wobble and achieve nothing.

I also earlier mentioned addiction. Celebrity-worship is a kind of addiction. It should not be encouraged. Nor is it good for the celebrities to feed the egos of what are mostly unstable characters. To let them overspend and then work themselves to death, as happened with poor Michael Jackson.

Chinese Super-Cities

“Restraining pell-mell urbanisation may sound like a good thing, but it worries the government’s economists, since bigger cities are associated with higher productivity and faster economic growth. Hence a new plan to remake the country’s map. The idea is to foster the rise of mammoth urban clusters, anchored around giant hubs and containing dozens of smaller, but by no means small, nearby cities. The plan calls for 19 clusters in all, which would account for nine-tenths of economic activity. China would, in effect, condense into a country of super-regions. Three are already well on track: the Pearl River Delta, next to Hong Kong; the Yangzi River Delta, which surrounds Shanghai; and Jingjinji, centred on Beijing...

“China’s government has long resisted the emergence of true megacities. It aims to prevent the population of its two biggest cities, Beijing and Shanghai, from exceeding 23m and 25m, respectively, in 2035—little bigger than they are today. City clusters are a workaround. In the jargon of urban planners, they represent ‘borrowed size’: cities can, in principle, have the benefits of agglomeration with fewer of the downsides such as congestion. Alain Bertaud of New York University says that, if integrated well, China’s city clusters could, thanks to their size, achieve levels of productivity never seen in other countries.”⁷¹

Chinese Beliefs

“Last week, Xi convened a Politburo study session to celebrate the tract by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, which portends the collapse of capitalism and the eventual triumph of socialism.

“Studying the work serves the purpose of ‘strengthening faith in Marxism’ and ‘enhancing the party’s ability to use Marxist principles to solve the problems facing contemporary China,’ Xi told members of the party’s ruling body.

“In China, Marxism is enshrined as a ‘guiding ideology’ in the constitutions of both the party and the state.

“In universities, an ‘introduction to the basic principles of Marxism’ is a mandatory course all students must pass to graduate. Most universities also have a school dedicated to Marxist teachings.

“Chen Xi, head of the party’s Organisation Department which oversees personnel decisions, lamented in November that some officials had lost faith in communism and considered it an ‘entirely unreal mirage’.

“Some don’t believe in Marx and Lenin but believe in ghosts and gods,’ he wrote in party mouthpiece People’s Daily. Some officials, he went on to complain, had lost faith in socialism and instead looked to Western concepts of the separation of power and multi-party systems as their ideal.”⁷²

This is from the *South China Morning Post*. And overlooks the fact that a *formal* statement of disbelief is very different from purging yourself of a whole body of doctrine that you have chosen to learn or been required to learn.

Atheists raised in a religious family keep a lot of the same habits of thinking, markedly different depending on whether it was Roman Catholic, Moderate Protestant or Extremist Protestant.

Marxism trains the mind in seeing how the modern world actually works. Once trained, you can then adapt for the bits that were not entirely true, or perhaps out of date.

People who have a phase of being Marxist don’t then lose the habit of seeing the world as an interconnected whole, changeable, and basically governed by known material forces. Most of the world’s more formidable anti-Communists have been members or sympathisers at some time. Even Ayn Rand must have got a dose from the years she spent in Soviet Russia, which is perhaps why she could sound wise and brilliant to conventional right-wingers.

A lot of people genuinely can’t see the world as a Big Picture. Or work out that their own particular way of life is only natural *for them* and may seem strange to those from other backgrounds.

A hazy notion that maybe God or Fate or Destiny will take care of big problems like Climate Change and Gun Violence is widespread in the USA, and is contributing to its decline.

Treating capitalism as something other than the End of History has proved to be wise. Since the 1980s, much of the West has been damaging itself with a quest to be ‘Perfect Capitalists’. China after Mao adapted pragmatically to what worked – a Mixed Economy system that included much that was familiar to Marxists.

The quest by Stalin and Mao to end capitalism altogether turned out to be premature – but they were more successful than is generally recognised. Western ‘experts’ avoid giving overall figures, since no way could these be twisted to avoid showing massive overall success. Instead the harshness of the transition from Failed State to Superpower is emphasised, along with genuine errors that were a small part of the overall process. Such biased data is then used to claim that Marxism failed and that nothing other than capitalism is possible. This has mostly persuaded people.

But not in China.

British Divorce Laws Out of Date

“A woman who wants to divorce her husband on the grounds she is unhappy has lost her Supreme Court appeal.

“Tini Owens, 68, from Worcestershire, wanted the court to grant her a divorce from her husband of 40 years Hugh, who is refusing the split.

“The Supreme Court unanimously rejected the appeal, meaning she must remain married until 2020.

“Mrs Owens’ solicitor said she was ‘devastated’ by the decision and ‘cannot move forward with her life’.

“Under the current law in England and Wales, unless people can prove their marriage has broken down due to adultery, unreasonable behaviour or desertion, the only way to obtain a divorce without a spouse’s consent is to live apart for five years.

“Following the ruling, the Ministry of Justice said: ‘The current system of divorce creates unnecessary antagonism in an already difficult situation.

“‘We are already looking closely at possible reforms to the system.’”⁷³

“Of the 114,000 divorce cases filed in England and Wales in 2016, more than 99 percent were uncontested, the court wrote in its ruling. And of those that were initially contested, only a small fraction — 17 cases in all — went all the way to a final family court hearing.

“So there may be few cases to follow the precedent of *Owens v. Owens*, but it does show how much has changed since 1973. As the court noted, what is reasonable in a marriage might be viewed quite differently now than it was 45 years ago.

“Multiple courts have heard the case along the way, and even as they ruled against Ms. Owens, they appealed to Britain’s elected leaders to modernize the divorce law.”⁷⁴

I suspect that the legal system set it up to make publicity. It seems to me obvious the woman had no case and should have been told so

Or maybe was told so and decided to fight anyway, for the sake of future women in the same situation.

Paris 1968

May 2018 saw brief memories of the amazing events 50 years earlier, in which a few students almost overturned French politics. Most comments have been trivia, but not all:

“Consciously Marxist in its politics, the May rebellion was dramatic but not the only insurrectionary moment of 1968. In February communist guerrillas invaded the American embassy in Saigon. In April the assassination of Martin Luther King provoked riots across America. In August, anti-Vietnam war protests led to pitched battles outside the Chicago Democratic convention, and the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia to suppress the Prague spring.

“How odd, then, to be told that the most enduring legacy of 1968 was not the radicalism of the student and anti-war movement, but the neoliberalism of the 1980s. Yet this idea is becoming increasingly prevalent, and not just on the right. The 60s revolutionary Régis Debray claims that 1968 let loose the ultra-capitalism of the 80s and 90s. From the British left, Anthony Barnett argues (in his Brexit book *The Lure of Greatness*) that 1968 led to a renewal not of socialism, but of capitalism. In a Guardian article on the V&A museum’s 2016 exhibition about the late-60s counterculture, Polly Toynbee lamented that ‘out of all this revolution against ‘the system’ came a ‘me’ individualism that grew into neoliberalism’.”⁷⁵

Much what I’d been saying for years. To some of us a very obvious conclusion. But still not what most left-wingers think.

It also mattered that the Hard Left had a viewpoint of ‘*don’t take yes for an answer*’. Was hostile to moderate reform, from a false belief that there would soon be another May 1968.

Myself, I kept hoping longer than was reasonable. But also saw the merits of moderate reforms. Workers Control and a version of Incomes Policy favourable to solid Working Class that existed at the time.

The alternative was Personal Liberation. Which was real and valuable, but sometimes selfish. And went along with malignant New Right economics.

Protecting Women

“India is the world’s most dangerous country for women due to the high risk of sexual violence and being forced into slave labour, according to a poll of global experts.

“Afghanistan and Syria ranked second and third in a Thomson Reuters Foundation survey of 548 experts on women’s issues, followed by Somalia and Saudi Arabia.

“The only western nation in the top 10 was the US, which ranked joint third when respondents were asked where women were most at risk of sexual violence, harassment and being coerced into sex.”

China is one of the safest, and it’s also a place where rapists are often executed.

A place where an authoritarian party decided to root out traditional injustice and inequality.⁷⁶ And partly succeeded, whereas they lasted better in the mild and tolerant politics of India.

Inequality and Investment

“Wages grew and wage inequality fell in most EU countries in 2015. Germany is not one of the countries where wages rose most but it did have the largest reduction in wage inequality. Our analysis shows that the German minimum wage policy introduced in 2015 significantly lifted the wages of the lowest-paid employees, particularly the lower-skilled, younger ones or those working in services.”⁷⁷

State regulation doesn't always work well. But it works often enough to justify it.

The rich and rich corporations have enough power to seriously limit other people's freedom, given a free hand. Most of us have no legal way to limit the freedom of our fellow humans. But businesses do. Ordinary people need to band together as a state machine, to protect themselves.

Excessive mistrust of the state led to bad politics in the 1980s and ever since. The result was *not* faster growth, but only a bigger slice for the rich of the same cake..

There is a nice video version of the World Inequality Report 2018, showing how inequality gets worse, and how the USA is the worst model. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcVBM-6DQrg&feature=youtu.be>, well worth watching.

And often riches come accidentally, or are missed accidentally:

“In 1994, Jeff Bezos held 60 meetings with family members, friends and potential investors in an attempt to persuade them to invest \$50,000 (£35,000) in his revolutionary idea to create an online bookshop. He failed to convince 38 of them, and 24 years later some of them still cannot bring themselves to talk about what life might have been like if they had taken a punt on Bezos and this ‘Amazon thing’ that the then 30-year-old hedge fund manager wouldn't shut up about.”⁷⁸

Lebanon Changes

Back in May, politics in Lebanon shifted dramatically:

“The pro-Syrian, pro-Iranian team in Lebanon, known as the March 8 Alliance, has just grabbed control of the Lebanese Parliament, winning 67 out of 128-seats.

“In landmark elections held on Sunday, the first time in almost a decade, all of Hezbollah's main allies made it into the chamber of deputies, dealing a heavy blow to the Saudi-backed Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri.”⁷⁹

The March 8 Alliance is a coalition including Christian and Druze parties, with Hezbollah being mostly Shia.

But coalitions are tricky things. Currently it is all being negotiated about.

Unjust Rules

“When you are in Somaliland, there is never any question that you are in a real country. After all, the place has all the trappings of countryhood. When I arrived at the airport, a customs officer in a Somaliland uniform checked my Somaliland visa, issued by the Somaliland consulate in Washington DC. At the airport, there was a Somaliland flag. During my visit, I paid Somaliland shillings to drivers of cabs with Somaliland plates who took me to the offices of ministers of the Somaliland government.

“But, according to the US Department of State, the United Nations, the African Union and every other government on Earth, I was not in Somaliland, a poor but stable and mostly functional country on the Horn of Africa. I was in Somalia.

“Even among unrecognised states, Somaliland is a special case – it is both completely independent and politically entirely isolated. Unlike South Sudan before its independence, Somaliland's claim for statehood is based not on a redrawing of colonial borders, but an attempt to re-establish them. Unlike Taiwan, it is shackled not to a richer, more powerful country, but a poorer, weaker one. Unlike Palestine, its quest for independence is not a popular cause for activists around the world.”⁸⁰

The general rule has been not to allow existing states to break up. The USA has had the power to override it. Did it for South Sudan, which had friends among Afro-Americans, even though it then descended into chaos.

The USA showed no interest in creating a better system when it had the power to do so. It abused that power.

Failed Cosmopolitanism

“Instead of the global capitalist utopia predicted in the halcyon 1990s by those who proclaimed an end to history, the US is presently ruled by an oafish heir who enriches his family as he dismantles the ‘liberal international order’ that was supposed to govern a peaceful, prosperous and united world. While Soros recognised earlier than most the limits of hypercapitalism, his class position made him unable to advocate the root-and-branch reforms necessary to bring about the world he desires. The system that allows George Soros to accrue the wealth that he has done has proven to be one in which cosmopolitanism will never find a stable home.”⁸¹

Real cosmopolitanism would have needed a World State. Not something Soros favoured.

“In spite of the obsession with Soros, there has been surprisingly little interest in what he actually thinks. Yet unlike most of the members of the billionaire class, who speak in platitudes and remain withdrawn from serious engagement with civic life, Soros is an intellectual. And the person who emerges from his books and many articles is not an out-of-touch plutocrat, but a provocative and consistent thinker committed to pushing the world in a cosmopolitan direction in which racism, income inequality, American empire, and the alienations of contemporary capitalism would be things of the past”.

I’ve read some of his many books, and was disappointed by how shallow his thinking actually was. Beyond noting that *something* is wrong, he sees little. He flatly rejects the only solution that might actually work – a reassertion of the virtues of the Mixed Economy system that ran from the 1940s to 1970s. He always insists that on no account must its values be restored. And then has no other meaningful answer.

Stress

“Three in four Britons have been so stressed at least once over the last year that they have felt overwhelmed or unable to cope, according to the biggest survey into the impact of stress.

“Stress can be so damaging to wellbeing that one in three people have been left feeling suicidal, and one in six have self-harmed as a direct result, the findings show...

“Young adults are the age group most vulnerable to stress. Overall, 83% of 18 to 24-year-olds said they had been left overwhelmed or unable to cope, more than the 74% average and far more than the prevalence among those aged 55 or over (65%). Similarly, above average numbers of young adults had felt suicidal (39%), or self-harmed (29%), because of stress.”⁸²

Up until the 1980s, it was accepted that the state could and should protect people. We now see what we are missing.

Close Votes Save Mrs May

Will Brexit negotiations fail? Maybe.

What counts for now is Mrs May’s survival of several close votes in Parliament.

I suspect that a number of MPs in both parties are voting tactically. Not showing too much enthusiasm for her Soft Brexit, or for Labour going against party policy. But making sure she does not lose any critical votes, which would probably lead to a General Election.

But then how will it work out eventually?

Support for a second Referendum is growing.

As are the chances it would go for Remain. Leaving Britain secure, but much less able to disrupt the Union’s continuing progress.

Tom Wolfe: The False Stuff

The man died in May, aged 88.⁸³ I have now got round to publishing my view of him.

The Right Stuff was entertaining. But accurate? It heroizes Chuck Yeager, who was an impressive individual, but who rejected Wolfe's view of him.

Years back, I did a study, *Does the 'Right Stuff' exist?*⁸⁴ I decided it did not, and stand by that. I found that his very readable account of the early days of jet aircraft and rocket-planes was less than the whole truth:

“There's a lot [Wolfe] is not frank about, including the nature of Pancho Barnes's little outfit. You might suppose it was a restaurant plus aeronautical fan club: but Yeager's wife explains:

“Pancho called a spade a spade. Her bar was little more than a desert whorehouse. She knew it and so did I. She respected me because, unlike a lot of other wives, I never made a fuss about my husband going there... Pancho was amoral, with the foulest mouth imaginable.”

Wolfe was typical of the USA after its 1960s rebelliousness. Fascinated by sex and unable to deal with it frankly.

Then there is *Bonfire of the Vanities*, which twists probabilities to have a poor little rich white males being persecuted. Much like the racist 'All Lives Matter' counter to the USA's *Black Lives Matter* campaign. Because while anybody might suffer, it is blatant that racial minorities are the main victims. Wolfe cleverly diverts this and makes his black characters seem worthless.

Supposedly realistic, it opens with a millionaire yuppie who does not have a mobile phone.

Out of all of the anti-social types of Fancy Finance that exist, he chooses to criticise the bond market. Complaining that this is not where the money is initially raised, which is true but irrelevant. The whole point about bonds in finance is that they are freely tradeable. And where this happens, it is very reasonable to have trusted specialists who can sell them at the right price.

Given the man's aggressive sneering at so many of the best things in life, I feel justified in being hostile to someone recently dead. Ignore civilised standards, and you will not benefit from them.

May see your own society fall apart. He died in time to miss what is increasingly happening.

Websites

I do regular *Newsnotes*, going back many years. Available at <http://labouraffairsmagazine.com/past-issues/> and <https://longrevolution.wordpress.com/newsnotes-historic/>.

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