

IN PRAISE OF DOUBT



- A blogger's year

Ronald Young

2016

*Deafened by commends, examined
for his fitness to fight by bearded doctors,
Inspected by resplendent creatures with golden insignia,
Admonished by solemn clerics who throw at him a book written by God Himself
Instructed by impatient schoolmasters, stands the poor man and is told
that the world is the best of worlds and that the hole
in the roof of his hovel was planned
by God in person
Truly he finds it hard
to doubt the world*

*There are the thoughtless who never doubt
Their digestion is splendid, their judgement infallible
They don't believe in the facts,
They believe only in themselves
When it comes to the point
the facts must go by the board. Their patience with themselves
is boundless. To arguments
they listen with the ear of a police spy.*

*The thoughtless who never doubt
meet the thoughtful who never act
They doubt, not in order to come to a decision but
to avoid a decision. Their heads
they use only for shaking. With anxious faces
they warn the crews
of sinking ships that water is dangerous...*

*You who are a leader
of men, do not forget
that you are that because you doubted other leaders
So allow the led
their right to doubt*

Brecht's "In Praise of doubt" (1933 ?)

CONTENTS

Preface

Introduction

Late 2014 posts

2015 posts

Just Words - a sceptic's glossary

About the author

About the photographs

Publications

Preface

Academia, politics and free-lance consultancy has given me the freedom for 40 years to "[do it my way](#)" - and to write and publish in a fairly carefree manner. This book reflects a life (and perhaps attitude) shaped by the good fortune I've had -

- to work from an early age (26) with an unusually wide range of people (professionals, politicians, community activists - and a much smaller number of academics) who shared an aspiration to improve social conditions;
- To have had a job in a Polytechnic (and planning school) in the 1970s and first half of the 1980s which gave me the licence to talk and write about the issues relating to this work
- to have achieved a position of influence which helped develop a more inclusive style of government in the West of Scotland for 20 years
- to reengineer myself as a consultant, working and living for 25 years in central Europe and Central Asia - in the pursuit of what the turgid academic literature has come to call "good governance"
- all the while trying - through wide reading and writing - to try to make sense of what the masthead on my blog calls our "social endeavours", ie efforts to make the world a better place...

For me a post written 4-5 years ago is every bit as good as (perhaps better than)



yesterday's - but the construction of blogs permits only the most recent posts to be shown. A book format, on the other hand, requires that we begin.....at the beginning ... It also challenges the author to reflect more critically on the coherence of his thinking than an anonymous post.....

It was only in 2014 that I started to publish annual collections of

these posts - part of a stand against the ephemerality which besmirches our lives - the earlier versions can [be accessed here](#).

This volume is different, however, in that I started to think of it taking form as a book in the summer. This proved to be a useful discipline - as indeed I had found when developing the two E-books about cultural aspects of [Romania](#); and [The Independence Argument - home thoughts from abroad](#). It makes you reread the posts and question where they're going - if not indeed the entire purpose; perhaps that's why their frequency declined over the summer and autumn months...

And I also started to give more thought to the "visuals" - the artefacts which head about half of the posts.....particularly those from Central Asia in which I spent 7 years....I've become a bit of a collector in this latest phase of my life - not just of paintings but, as I [discovered some years ago](#), of small artefacts . As the blog purports to represent the "brain activity" of a not untypical North-West European man born during the war, I felt that some cultural references were critical to the endeavour.....

.....based on posts?

Notwithstanding the purists who require a book to have a structure of (maximum 12 or so) chapters, I rather like the format of a blogpost of some 700 words (at most a couple of pages). Management guru [Charles Handy](#) famously said that he had learned to put his thoughts in 450 words as a result of the "Thought for the Day" BBC programme to which he was a great contributor.

Perhaps my father's hand is evident in the format and discipline of the blogpost - he was a Presbyterian Minister who would, every Saturday evening, take himself off to his study to anguish over his weekly sermon which he would duly deliver from the pulpit the next morning.....Arguably indeed the dedication given these past 6 years to the blog is a form of "giving of account" or justification of one's life!!



I have grown to appreciate the discipline involved in marshalling one's thoughts around a theme (in my father's case it was a biblical quotation).

It also has echoes of my favourite literary format - the essay as practised by such people as [Francis Bacon](#), [Charles Lamb](#), Michel Montaigne, [William Hazlitt](#), George Orwell, Clive James or Julian Barnes.....although I didn't appreciate that the literary canon [distinguishes various forms of essay](#) and that "personal essay" is the more precise term for the type I like.

According to Phillip Lopate - in his superb introduction to [The Art of the Personal Essay](#)

The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue -- a friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship. (xxiii)

The personal essayist must above all be a reliable narrator; we must trust his or her core of sincerity. We must also feel secure that the essayist has done a fair amount of introspective homework already, is grounded in reality, and is trying to give us the maximum understanding and intelligence of which he or she is capable. . . .

How the world comes at another person, the irritations, jubilation's, aches and pains, humorous flashes -- these are the classic building materials of the personal essay. We learn the rhythm by which the essayist receives, digests, and spits out the world, and we learn the shape of his or her privacy. (xxiv-xxv)

I've used last year's experience of turning the posts about Romania and the Scottish Independence Referendum into E-books to good effect this year - with three new E-books - about

[The Global Crisis;](#)

[Crafting Effective Public Management;](#) and

[Introducing the Bulgarian Realists - updated edition](#)

And why should you read it?

My claim for the reader's attention is simply expressed -

- experience in a variety of sectors (and countries) - normally closely manned with "gatekeepers"
- the compulsion (now almost 50 years old), to record what I felt were the lessons of each experience in short papers

- Long and extensive reading
- A "voice" which has been honed by the necessity of speaking clearly to audiences of different nationalities and class
- intensive trawling of the internet for wide range of writing
- notes kept of the most important of those readings
- shared in hyperlinks with readers



I confess somewhere to an aversion to those writers (so many!) who try to pretend they have a unique perspective on an issue and whose discordant babble make the world such a difficult place to understand.

I look instead for work which, as google puts it, builds on the shoulders of others.....my role in a team is that of the [resource person](#)....who finds

and shares material....

I believe in people coming together at a local level to work for the common benefit - principles enshrined in communitarianism (about which I do have some reservations). I spent a lot of time supporting the work of social enterprise in low-income communities. None of this went down all that well with the technocrats or even members) of my political party - and the national politicians to whose books I contributed (eg Gordon Brown) soon changed their tune when they had a taste of power.

But, above all, I am a passionate sceptic - or sceptical pluralist - which is the reason for my adding the terms which form the glossary at the end - Just Words?

Introduction



"How can I know what I think until I read what I write?"

Henry James

One of the timeless bits of advice to those about to communicate is -

- Tell people what you are about to say
- Say it
- Tell them what you have just said

The Preface has introduced the author - and tried to justify the format of a book based on blogposts or mini-essays.

The purpose of the Introduction is to cast an eye over the nature of blogging and the advantages it brings to both blogger and society; and then, very briefly, to identify the key themes which have cropped up during the 15 months of the book's scope....

This is a book of reflections from a blog - "[Balkan and Carpathian Musings](#)" - which was started 6 years ago when the end of my last full-time project gave me the time for more reflection about some of the big themes which have engaged my life and work.

I've been a nomad for 25 years but am now based in Bulgaria and Romania - the posts started in my mountain house in the Carpathians and continue in Bucharest and Sofia.....

The word "blog" has become so ubiquitous a term that we tend to have forgotten its etymology - "web log". An eloquent essay [Why I blog](#) surveys the world of blogging and gives this account of the second term -

A ship's log owes its name to a small wooden board, often weighted with lead, that was for centuries attached to a line and thrown over the stern. The weight of the log would keep it in the same place in the water, like a provisional anchor, while the ship moved away. By measuring

the length of line used up in a set period of time, mariners could calculate the speed of their journey (the rope itself was marked by equidistant "knots" for easy measurement). As a ship's voyage progressed, the course came to be marked down in a book that was called a log.

In journeys at sea that took place before radio or radar or satellites or sonar, these logs were an indispensable source for recording what actually happened. They helped navigators surmise where they were and how far they had travelled and how much longer they had to stay at sea. They provided accountability to a ship's owners and traders. They were designed to be as immune to faking as possible. Away from land, there was usually no reliable corroboration of events apart from the crew's own account in the middle of an expanse of blue and grey and green; and in long journeys, memories always blur and facts disperse. A log provided as accurate an account as could be gleaned in real time.

It continues -

As you read a log, you have the curious sense of moving backward in time as you move forward in pages—the opposite of a book. As you piece together a narrative that was never intended as one, it seems—and is—more truthful. Logs, in this sense, were a form of human self-correction. They amended for hindsight, for the ways in which human beings order and tidy and construct the story of their lives as they look back on them. Logs require a letting-go of narrative because they do not allow for a knowledge of the ending. So they have plot as well as dramatic irony—the reader will know the ending before the writer did.

How Blogging improves your Life

Of course, blogging is seen by many as a bit narcissistic- a reflection of the "selfie" age we live in...But there are blogs...and blogs....Self-indulgent "look at me!" ones and blobs of erudite text which few can understand.....And it can get you into trouble One academic blogger, famously, found himself out of work as a result of his blogging (in the early days) and wrote to tell the tale - in [A Blogger's Manifesto](#)

I would like to hope that readers come to my site looking for some originality - be it the *diversity of the topics (and experiences)* the posts deal with; *the thematic summaries* (eg on memoirs or mountain villages); *the range of the references* in the hyperlinks; the glimpses of *rarely seen painting traditions* and, who knows, perhaps even the *celebration of good writing*.

One writer offers no less than [15 justifications for why people should blog](#). I would go with nine -

1. You'll become a **better thinker**. Because the process of writing includes recording thoughts on paper, the blogging process makes you question what you thought you knew. You will delve deeper into the matters of your life and the worldview that shapes them.

2. You'll become a **better writer**. - once, that is, you start to reread your material or get feedback which shows your text was ambiguous...

3. You'll live a **more intentional life**. Once you start writing about your life and the thoughts that shape it, you'll begin thinking more intentionally about who you are, who you are becoming, and whether you like what you see or not. And that just may be reason enough to get started.

4. You'll develop an **eye for meaningful things**. By necessity, blogging requires a filter. It's simply not possible to write about every event, every thought, and every happening in your life. Instead, blogging is a never-ending process of choosing to articulate the most meaningful events and the most important thoughts. This process of choice helps you develop an eye for meaningful things.

5. It'll lead to **healthier life habits** (although my partner doesn't agree!)/. Blogging requires time, devotion, commitment, and discipline. And just to be clear, those are all good things to embrace - they will help you get the most out of your days and life.

6. You'll **inspire others**. Blogging not only changes your life, it also changes the life of the reader. And because blogs are free for the audience and open to the public, on many levels, it is an act of giving. It is a selfless act of service to invest your time, energy, and worldview into a piece of writing and then offer it free to anybody who wants to read it. Others will find inspiration in your writing... and that's a wonderful feeling.

7. You'll become **more well-rounded in your mindset**. After all, blogging is an exercise in give-and-take. One of the greatest differences between blogging and traditional publishing is the opportunity for readers to offer input. As the blog's writer, you introduce a topic that you feel is significant and meaningful. You take time to lay out a subject in the minds of your readers and offer your thoughts on the topic. Then, the readers get to respond. And often times, their responses in the comment section challenge us to take a new, fresh look at the very topic we thought was so important in the first place.

8. It'll serve as a personal journal. It trains our minds to track life and articulate the changes we are experiencing. Your blog becomes a **digital record of your life** that is saved "in the cloud." As a result, it can never be lost, stolen, or destroyed in a fire.

9. You'll become **more confident**. Blogging will help you discover more confidence in your life. You will quickly realize that you do live an important life with a unique view and have something to offer others.

That puts it rather well - although I would amplify the first point by emphasising the sharpened critical faculty regular blogging also brings to the reading of what

others write. Henry James was spot on when he (apparently) said - "How can I know what I think until I read what I write?" You thought you knew something but, when you read back your own first effort at explanation, you immediately have questions - both of substance and style.

But this also conveys itself very quickly to changes in the way that you read *other people's* material - you learn more and faster from a critical dialogue (even with yourself) than from passive reading.....That's why they say that the best way to learn about a subject is to (try to) write a book about it (rather than reading several books). It sounds paradoxical (as well as presumptuous) but it's actually true - and the reason is simple.

One of its greatest advantages

Your attempt at writing quickly gives you the questions with which you **interrogate** the books. If you simply read, you will forget. Another blogger - [Duncan Green](#) - makes the important point that -

regular blogging builds up a handy, time-saving archive. I've been blogging daily since 2008. OK, that's a little excessive, but what that means is that essentially I have a download of my brain activity over the last 7 years - almost every book and papers I've read, conversations and debates.

Whenever anyone wants to consult me, I have a set of links I can send (which saves huge amounts of time). And raw material for the next presentation, paper or book.

Green is spot on about the help a blog like mine offers in finding old material...you just type in the keyword and the relevant post with its quotes and hyperlinks generally appears immediately - a record of your (and others') brain activity that particular morning. I also have a file of more than 100 pages for each year with raw text and thousands of hyperlinks which didn't make it to the blog.....an amazing archive of months of brain activity which, of course, needs a bit more time to access.....

But both he and the list of justifications underestimate the significance of the blog's facility to archive and find hyperlinks. Very little of what I download do I actually read - although it is there in carefully labelled folders. But one of the world's great frustrations for people like me is remembering you've downloaded a paper but not knowing which folder it's in...that's where the blog archives are priceless.....

In what sense is it different from other blogs?

Mine is a blog which eschews the never-ending news cycle or the partiality of disciplinary lens and disputes and focuses rather on "wicked issues" and on books. In that respect, it is unlike most blogs.

Readers of blogs expect them to be frequently updated and will soon stop visiting sites which remain static.....as mine did for a month toward the end of the year.....Although critics of the net say that hyperlinking tends to encourage partisan reading, I have a folder with the sites of some 200 other bloggers whom I [rarely access](#) - the main reason being the **predictability** of what they say.... For me, one of the nicest things you can say about someone is that "they are never boring" (a wife once paid me that compliment)

A brief overview of what to expect

It may seem odd to start this book of a year's blogging in October and run it for 15 months - but only for people who have not heard of "a baker's dozen" - the addition of an additional freebie to an expected 12 (none of the definitions I read of this phrase explain why on earth medieval bakers should be offering people 12 loaves!).

Readers are eased gradually into the swing of things by the initial musings on reading and writing. Several rather pessimistic pieces then follow before a more proactive spirit starts to prevail... then a series of reflections about the consultant's life.

January starts with conversations and confessions and marks the Charlie Hebdo murders with an overview of satire. February sees the start of a series of heavy posts about extractive societies which reach a crescendo in March when discussions of **cooperation** (or sometimes its lack), **capitalism** and **consumerism** loom large. As do musings about **democracy** and about lessons from **organisational reform** - whether in the "developed" or "developing" worlds (such loaded terms).

The book's more than 100 mini-essays also cover other topics -

- The use (and misuse) of **words** is clearly a bee I have in my bonnet....
- **Change, development, management, consultancy** and **social science** are favourite subjects - the last four generally with lots of derogatory remarks!
- As you would expect from a blog about the Balkans and Carpathians, events in **Bulgaria** and **Romania** get mentions.
- As does **Europe's continuing crisis** - although not as frequently as you might expect

- It is, however, **books, paintings** (even sculptures), **encounters** and **good writing** which are celebrated most - as is a (rare) visit from one of my daughters.....
- Musings about **cultural identities** show my increasing interest in that subject - and explain why travelogues are one of my favourite genres of reading
- **Loss** has been a frequent theme - whether of lives, elections or livelihoods. Familiar (and unfamiliar) faces have departed the scene and screen.
- I also muse about **intellectual trends** and **Memoirs** - with, it seems, increasing frequency

A friend suggested that it might be useful to say something about the subjects I seem to have avoided.....an interesting question.....

This year's posts have certainly been fairly silent on a subject which received a lot of attention last year - the question of Scottish Independence. That seemed to have been resolved in September 2014 by the result of the referendum (see [The Independence Argument - home thoughts from abroad](#)) but the issue was rekindled in May this year when the Nationalist party [took all but 3 of Scotland's 59 seats](#) in the UK Parliament.....

But the question of British exit from the EU was probably the Elephant in the room.....

The blog has a facility to tell me (and readers) the posts which have attracted the most traffic - and allows me to offer this data by either the past week, past month or "all time".....Every now and then I change the timeframe of the "most popular posts". Although it doesn't give me an automatic account of the most popular posts of the past 12 months, my patient research can reveal that the following are (currently) the most popular -

- Lion of Prose - 210 views in less than a week!
- "[Busts I admire](#)" (!!!) - 165 views in the 6 months since it appeared.....
- Yes to Yustina Wines - 150 views in a week
- "[Fatalism - democracy's default position?](#)" - 135 ditto
- Moral Outrage - 125
- "[Anticipating post-modernism](#)" - 100
- "[Have the Kleptomaniacs and Liars Won?](#)" 80 clicks in a year

December 2015

List of Late 2014 posts

Original Voices

Style

Key reading

Are we going to Hell?

Cooperation

Have the Kleptomaniacs and Liars won??

European Hubris

Things Look up in Romania

Psycho-analysing a Nation

EU Credit

Time to Get off the Fence

Honouring the Past

Cities in Despair

Getting to Denmark

Is Denmark actually worth getting to?

The Missionary Position

Where are the Reflective Consultants Hiding?

Intellectual Autobiographies

Desperately Seeking....Satire

Nostalgia

Original Voices

I am a great reader - and fairly prolific scribbler. Indeed at one point, my secretary in the 1980s called me "[paperback writer](#)" in an allusion to the Beatles song. And I have indeed tried my hand at various times with (self-published) little books - the first written in the 1970s around 30 or so questions about a new system of local government (for community activists); the second ("Puzzling Development") a more autobiographical piece drafted for more therapeutic purposes to help me make sense of my life; and the last - [In Transit](#) - a collection of papers I put together to give to people I was working with in central Europe and Asia. Call it a calling card.....



Every now and then I try to pull my thoughts and experience together - for example in a paper such as [The Search for the Holy Grail - some reflections on 40 years of trying to make government and its systems work for people](#) but I lose patience too quickly and move on to other things - leaving this one unfinished. A presentation at a prestigious Conference, however, does wonders for concentration and I therefore had more success in 2011 with this paper about the deficiencies of the capacity-building work in ex-communist countries - [The Long Game - not the log-frame](#)

Most academic and bureaucratic writing is so lifeless....it seems designed to cast a disinfectant over our living souls and kill the bugs of creativity and insight... I have been exceptionally lucky since 1970 - in holding first political positions (and then consultancy roles) which allowed me to observe the processes of government at first hand; and then being allowed the freedom to reflect quite openly about this to those who cared to read such reflections...

I have always found two collections of essays particularly inspiring - those of the development writer [Robert Chambers](#) and those of [Roger Harrison](#) - the organizational development consultant.

Both produced collections whose essays were preceded with detailed notes explaining the conditions in which the essay was drafted and indicating how the writer had adjusted his thinking.....

And this morning, I stumbled across another name we should honour for the quality and openness of his mind - and writing. [Neil Postman](#) died in 2003 but I still remember him for his critique of television - "*Amusing Ourselves to Death*". It was actually [a tribute I came across](#)

I sense a dwindling number of people in the academic world who are unclassifiable. Neil Postman, who died in 2003 was one, and now we can say he will always be one. Such figures—with reputation but no real discipline—have a tendency to make people think. Postman had that. He was expert in nothing. Therefore nothing was off limits. Therefore one's mind was always at risk, from a joke, a headline, an idea, a person walking through the door. The only way to respond to such strange conditions was with ready humor. And humor would bring you more ideas.

Now what discipline, what department is that? Everyone who knew Postman—and I include perhaps a hundred thousand who only heard him speak—knew him first through humor, which was the reflection in person of the satire in most of his books, each of which is a pamphlet, an essay between covers: "The Disappearance of Childhood" (1982) was satire about the infantilization in American culture. "Amusing Ourselves to Death" (1985) was [satire about entertainment](#) and what it was doing to us. "Technopoly" (1993) was satire on the "surrender of culture to technology."

In these days of grey specialisation, such qualities deserve celebration!

His, of course, was not the only voice to warn against the new technology....

The activist with the wonderful name of [Jerry Mander](#) had wowed us a few years earlier with [Four Arguments of Getting Rid of Television](#) and I was delighted to see, during this morning's surfing, that he is still going strong - with [The Capitalism Papers](#) (2012) which got a [nice review in Dissident Voice](#)

Update - see [the Different Faces of Power](#) post from August 2015

Wednesday, October 8, 2014

Writing Style

It's rather a coincidence that the Nobel Prize for Literature is announced the very day I wanted to complete a post about the question which has been exercising me these last few days - namely what makes for good writing.

I have been editing about 20 of the pieces I have written and put on the old website in the past 5 years - and discovered a short paper I had done for some students (at the Central Asian University in Bishkek) on how to write a paper.

Of course, that's not quite the same thing as writing a novel! But some of the same questions about standards and power seem to apply. What exactly are the qualifications of the panel for deciding who will gain this prestigious (and generous) award? And what precise criteria do they use? I'm generally fairly bewildered [by the awards](#) - although I'm not a great fan of novels. But I do like quality writing and have to say that I have read only 3 of the Nobel prize-winners of the last 10 years - Pamuk, Vargas Llosa and Coetze. Few of the other 7 seem all that deserving.....

Anyway, for the past week, I have been doing three other things

- Writing a 1-2 page "blurb" for the 15 Papers or Essays (which are on average 60 pages long)
- Writing a slightly longer intro to the 8 E-books which will be on the new website in a week or so
- Re-formatting all of the material

This has involved recollecting the circumstances which brought this writing into being - and reflecting on my writing style and structure. So I'm now hooked on a major rewrite of the paper on writing reports - which is directed at officials and students facing a stropky boss or supervisor and interested in the process of creation.

Normally I sit with the laptop and let the keys do the thinking. As the phrases and sentences appear on the screen, I find myself asking question and am led into some unexpected but fruitful fields. Just as happens when I'm doing a presentation to a group and ask them initially to give me some questions..... In both cases, ideas appear which I hadn't previously thought of...

But this time, I found myself operating even more creatively - some months ago I had bought a very large artist's sketchpad which can stand on the floor like an easel. With a fine felt pen (preferably a Faber-Castell 1475!!) I now just scribble phrases in large script and then tear the page off and leave on the floor like a post-it note....

Alternating between this and the laptop has proved to be quite effective....



By a further coincidence, I was reminded of Steven Pinker's recently published book - [The Sense of Style - the thinking person's guide to good writing](#) - which asks -

Why is so much writing so bad? Why is it so hard to understand a government form, or an academic article or the instructions for setting up a wireless home network?

The most popular explanation is that opaque prose is a deliberate choice. Bureaucrats insist on gibberish to cover their anatomy. Plaid-clad tech writers get their revenge on the jocks who kicked sand in their faces and the

girls who turned them down for dates. Pseudo-intellectuals spout obscure verbiage to hide the fact that they have nothing to say, hoping to bamboozle their audiences with highfalutin gobbledygook. But the bamboozlement theory makes it too easy to demonize other people while letting ourselves off the hook. In explaining any human shortcoming, the first tool I reach for is Hanlon's Razor:

Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.

The kind of stupidity I have in mind has nothing to do with ignorance or low IQ; in fact, it's often the brightest and best informed who suffer the most from it.

I once attended a lecture on biology addressed to a large general audience at a conference on technology, entertainment and design. The lecture was also being filmed for distribution over the Internet to millions of other laypeople. The speaker was an eminent biologist who had been invited to explain his recent breakthrough in the structure of DNA. He launched into a jargon-packed technical presentation that was geared to his fellow molecular biologists, and it was immediately apparent to everyone in the room that none of them understood a word and he was wasting their time. Apparent to everyone, that is, except the eminent biologist. When the host interrupted and asked him to explain the work more clearly, he seemed genuinely surprised and not a little annoyed. This is the kind of stupidity I am talking about.

The "curse of knowledge" is the single best explanation of why good people write bad prose. It simply doesn't occur to the writer that her readers don't know what she knows—that they haven't mastered the argot of her guild, can't divine the missing steps that seem too obvious to mention, have no way to

visualize a scene that to her is as clear as day. And so the writer doesn't bother to explain the jargon, or spell out the logic, or supply the necessary detail.....

This is good stuff and what follows echoes exactly what my own draft said all these years ago -

How can we lift the curse of knowledge? The traditional advice—always remember the reader over your shoulder—is not as effective as you might think. None of us has the power to see everyone else's private thoughts, so just trying harder to put yourself in someone else's shoes doesn't make you much more accurate in figuring out what that person knows. But it's a start. So for what it's worth: Hey, I'm talking to you. Your readers know a lot less about your subject than you think, and unless you keep track of what you know that they don't, you are guaranteed to confuse them.

A better way to exorcise the curse of knowledge is to close the loop, as the engineers say, and get a feedback signal from the world of readers—that is, show a draft to some people who are similar to your intended audience and find out whether they can follow it. Social psychologists have found that we are overconfident, sometimes to the point of delusion, about our ability to infer what other people think, even the people who are closest to us. Only when we ask those people do we discover that what's obvious to us isn't obvious to them.

The other way to escape the curse of knowledge is to show a draft to yourself, ideally after enough time has passed that the text is no longer familiar. If you are like me you will find yourself thinking, "What did I mean by that?" or "How does this follow?" or, all too often, "Who wrote this crap?" The form in which thoughts occur to a writer is rarely the same as the form in which they can be absorbed by a reader. Advice on writing is not so much advice on how to write as on how to revise.

Steven Pinker is an eminent psychologist and has a [good interview on the book in the current Slate Magazine](#) - as well as [this presentation](#).

My only quibble is with his title - there are a lot of style books out there but I don't think that's what he's actually talking about. He seems rather to be addressing the more crucial issue of how we structure our thinking and present it so clearly that the reader or listener understands and is actually motivated to do something with the insights.....

My own [Just Words - a glossary and bibliography for the fight against the pretensions and perversities of power](#) looks at more than 100 words and phrases used by officials, politicians, consultants and academics in the course of government reform which have this effect and offers some definitions which at least will get us thinking more critically about our vocabulary - if not actually taking political actions.

And the [Plain English website](#) is the other source I would recommend. It contains their short but very useful manual; a list of alternative words; and lists of all the organisations which have received their awards.

Thursday, October 9, 2014

Key Reading

We don't need anyone these days to tell us that we're in a mess. Nor to explain why. Libraries are groaning with books on globalization, deregulation, privatization, debt, greed, corruption, pollution, austerity, migration.

I'm reminded of a wave of books in the 1970s which were early harbingers of this sense of crisis - *The Seventh Enemy* (1978) was a typical example. It described the 7 main threats to human survival as

the population explosion, food shortage, scarcity of natural resources, pollution, nuclear energy, uncontrolled technology - and human nature.

The author's experience of government and international institutions convinces him that the most dangerous was the moral blindness of people and the inertia of political institutions.

A lot has happened in the subsequent 46 years - new pressing issues have been identified -but who would gainsay his identification of the "seventh" enemy? These days, there would probably be a majority in favour of stringing up a few bankers, politicians and economists - "pour encourager le autres" - were it not illegal...

If, however, the problem has been defined, diagnosed and satisfactorily explained - why do we remain so confused and divided if not, in many cases, apathetic about the action we should be taking?

Over the years, I've read and collected books and articles to help me identify the sort of agenda and actions which might unite a fair-minded majority.

Like many people, I've clicked, skimmed and saved - but rarely gone back to read thoroughly. The folders in which they have collected have had various names - such as "urgent reading" or "what is to be done" - but rarely accessed. Occasionally I remember one and blog about it.

Only now with a new website have I the incentive to attempt a more serious trawl, a more sustained read and more systematic search for a common agenda.

I've started to upload a couple of dozen of "key readings" - most reasonably well-known names but a few outliers....one of which is "[From Chaos to Change](#) - entering a new era" - a remarkable, detailed manifesto for change written by a Dutch veteran of earlier struggles, [Joost van Steenis](#), who is one of only a few activists to have taken and time and trouble to write not one but several detailed manifestos. It can be downloaded in its entirety from the site.

I've made a casual reference to the new website on which I've been working feverishly over the past few weeks. It is actually now up and running - but not quite officially open to visitors. You can, however, peek in - its name is [Mapping the Common Ground - ways of thinking about the crisis](#) This post is actually the text of the introduction to what I was going to call "the library" but I may now entitle "Readings for social change" - which will probably be one of two separate libraries, the other being "Readings for organisational change"?

Tuesday, October 14, 2014

Are we going to Hell?

In a couple of weeks it will be 25 years since the Berlin Wall fell.

Celebrations, I suspect, will be mooted. How far we have fallen since those heady days - when so many intellectuals and politicians were celebrating not only the defeat of communism but "[the end of history](#)"

There was always a significant minority of people who dissented from this Panglossian view and tried to remind us of the cyclical nature of things; and to warn of the arrogance, indeed hubris, involved in our assumptions about "progress" - what [John Gray called recently "melioristic liberalism"](#)

Whatever their position on the political spectrum, almost all of those who govern us hold to some version of the melioristic liberalism that is the west's default creed, which teaches that human civilisation is advancing - however falteringly - to a point at which the worst forms of human destructiveness can be left behind. According to this view, evil, if any such thing exists, is not an inbuilt human flaw, but a product of defective social institutions, which can over time be permanently improved.....

Gray's is one of four articles in the past week from different parts of the world (and standpoints) which argue that western civilisation is doomed. An Indian - [Pankaj Mishra](#)- gives [the most measured analysis](#) - summoning names such as [Alexander Herzen](#), [Reinhold Niebuhr](#), and Raymond Aron to the discussion

The most violent century in human history, it was hardly the best advertisement for the "bland fanatics of western civilisation", as Niebuhr called them at the height of the cold war, "who regard the highly contingent achievements of our culture as the final form and norm of human existence". Niebuhr was critiquing a fundamentalist creed that has coloured our view of the world for more than a century: that western institutions of the nation-state and liberal democracy will be gradually generalised around the world, and that the aspiring middle classes created by industrial capitalism will bring about accountable, representative and stable governments - that every society, in short, is destined to evolve just as the west did.

Critics of this teleological view, which defines "progress" exclusively as development along western lines, have long perceived its absolutist nature. Secular liberalism, the Russian thinker Alexander Herzen cautioned as early as 1862, "is the final religion, though its church is not of the other world but of this". But it has had many presumptive popes and encyclicals: from the 19th-century dream of a westernised world long championed by the Economist, in which capital, goods, jobs and people freely circulate, to Henry Luce's proclamation of an "American century" of free trade, and "modernisation theory" - the attempt by American cold warriors to seduce the postcolonial world away from communist-style revolution and into the gradualist alternative of consumer capitalism and democracy.

The collapse of communist regimes in 1989 further emboldened Niebuhr's bland fanatics. The old Marxist teleology was retrofitted rather than discarded in [Francis Fukuyama's](#) influential end-of-history thesis, and cruder theories about the inevitable march to worldwide prosperity and stability were vended by such Panglosses of globalisation as [Thomas Friedman](#). Arguing that people privileged enough to consume McDonald's burgers don't go to war with each other, the New York Times columnist was not alone in mixing old-fangled Eurocentrism with American can-doism, a doctrine that grew from America's uninterrupted good fortune and unchallenged power in the century before September 2001.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 briefly disrupted celebrations of a world globalised by capital and consumption. But the shock to naive minds only further entrenched in them the intellectual habits of the cold war - thinking through binary oppositions of "free" and "unfree" worlds - and redoubled an old delusion: liberal democracy, conceived by modernisation theorists as the inevitable preference of the beneficiaries of capitalism, could now be implanted by force in recalcitrant societies. Invocations of a new "long struggle" against "Islamofascism"



aroused many superannuated cold warriors who missed the ideological certainties of battling communism. Intellectual narcissism survived, and was often deepened by, the realisation that economic power had begun to shift from the west. The Chinese, who had "got capitalism", were, after all, now "downloading western apps", according to [Niall Ferguson](#). As late as 2008, Fareed Zakaria declared in his much-cited book, [The Post-American World](#), that "the rise of the rest is a consequence of American ideas and actions" and that "the world is going America's way", with countries "becoming more open, market-friendly and democratic".

One event after another in recent months has cruelly exposed such facile narratives. China, though market-friendly, looks further from democracy than before. The experiment with free-market capitalism in Russia has entrenched a kleptocratic regime with a messianic belief in Russian supremacism.

Authoritarian leaders, anti-democratic backlashes and rightwing extremism define the politics of even such ostensibly democratic countries as India, Israel, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Turkey. The atrocities of this summer in particular have plunged political and media elites in the west into stunned bewilderment and some truly desperate cliches. The extraordinary hegemonic power of their ideas had helped them escape radical examination when the world could still be presented as going America's way. But their preferred image of the west - the idealised one in which they sought to remake the rest of the world - has been consistently challenged by many critics, left or right, in the west as well as the east.

John Gray's article picks up the argument -

It's in the Middle East, however, that the prevailing liberal worldview has proved most consistently misguided. At bottom, it may be western leaders' inability to think outside this melioristic creed that accounts for their failure to learn from experience. After more than a decade of intensive bombing, backed up by massive ground force, the Taliban continue to control much of Afghanistan and appear to be regaining ground as the American-led mission is run down. Libya - through which a beaming David Cameron processed in triumph only three years ago, after the use of western air power to help topple Gaddafi - is now an anarchic hell-hole that no western leader could safely visit.

One might think such experiences would be enough to deter governments from further exercises in regime change. But our leaders cannot admit the narrow limits of their power. They cannot accept that by removing one kind of evil they may succeed only in bringing about another - anarchy instead of tyranny, Islamist popular theocracy instead of secular dictatorship. They need a narrative of continuing advance if they are

to preserve their sense of being able to act meaningfully in the world, so they are driven again and again to re-enact their past failures.....

Der Spiegel then weighs in with a long piece about [the economic aspects of the crisis](#)

But it is John Michael Greer's weekly blogpost which really puts the boot in on the intellectual naivety which has been assaulting our ears and eyes since the middle of the last century. Greer has been too easily cast as an "apocalypticist" but has written some profound books for which [his latest post is a good taster](#). To many, the scenarios he paints about the next century may seem far-fetched - but few people would have predicted from the optimism which greeted the dawn of the 20th century that it would have gone so badly. Why do we think we are any different?

Friday, October 24, 2014

Cooperation

I moved this week from the attic flat I had in central Sofia to a somewhat larger one just down from General Dondukov Bvd and off Vasil Levski - but another "period" piece, this one from the early 1930s and the building (housing a café which is the haunt of the locals and 3 flats) still owned by the family whose grandfather built it.

Then, on Sunday, a snowy drive through Bulgaria to Bucharest for car servicing and, Wednesday, to the mountain house which had, amazingly, seen no snow.

In Bucharest I got back into Leonard Woolf's spell-binding 5-volume auto-biography - following this time his discovery and mapping of the British cooperative movement 100 years ago - and the powerful role played in its educational system by working class women.

It brought back memories of the Cooperative Society in my home town of Greenock in the 1960s - basically the complex of shops, funeral parlour and insurance which was the staple of working class life for so many decades in the West of Scotland; and the great community spirit evident particularly amongst the women in the housing schemes I represented in the late 60s through to 1990. Women were the backbone of the tenant associations and various self-help schemes - including a famous adult education one which is described in this big study - [The Making of an Empowering Profession](#)

That, in turn, got us talking about the absence of such a spirit in 20th century Romania; its decline in the UK; but its continued strength elsewhere.

I remember the Head of the European Delegation in Romania in 1993 handing out to those of us who were working here as consultants summaries of Robert Putnam's new book which traced the differences in the performance of Italian Regional authorities to the habits of centuries. This was a warning that Western "best practice" might have some problems in this part of the world. Putnam's work spawned an incredible academic literature which is summarised in papers such as ["Social Capital in CEEC - a critical assessment and literature review"](#) (CEU 2009) and ["The deficit of cooperative attitudes and trust in post-communism"](#) (2013)

Catherine Murray's 2006 paper "[Social capital and cooperation in CEEC - toward an analytical framework](#)" is, with its various diagrams, probably the most helpful introduction to the issue

There was a (very) brief moment in the early 90s when cooperatives were talked about - at least in some places - as one of the models which might be relevant for the central European economies but market "triumphalism" swept all away....killing an opportunity which has been taken in other countries as well set out in this short paper "[Cooperative Enterprise Development after 30 years of destructive neo-liberalism](#)"

[The Resilience of the Cooperative Model](#) is well described in the paper in the link; in "[Coops - pathways to development](#)" and also on the website of the [European Research Institute for cooperative and social enterprise](#) - for example [in this paper](#)

Friday, October 31, 2014

Have the Kleptomaniacs and Liars really won?

Readers will have noticed a darker tone to the (infrequent) posts of the past few weeks. This could reflect the time of year - but there is every reason for people to feel a bit apocalyptic at this point in the 21st Century.

[Dave Pollard](#) is a Canadian of my generation who writes wisely about our epoch - and caught our social ills well recently with this post about [thirteen trends in social behaviour](#) which, [he](#) suggests, epitomise our times and a slow collapse in our "civilisation"

Here are the shifts I am seeing more tangibly that would seem to epitomize early collapse:

1. **Corporations have given up the pretence of being ethical.** At first, a decade or two ago, many corporations tried to convince the public they were really concerned about social and environmental issues. Then they discovered that whitewashing, greenwashing, and lies in their advertising and PR were more effective and cheaper. Now they don't even bother to lie. They just say they are forced to do what they do because their mandate is to maximize profits. Now they settle their malfeasance out of court because it's cheaper than obeying the law, and hush it up with gag orders, whistle-blower prosecutions and threats of costly and protracted litigation against anyone who dares challenge their illegal activities. Now they buy their politicians openly. Instead of them serving us, as they were designed to do, it is now us against them. Now it is illegal for citizens to film animal cruelty atrocities in factory farms and slaughterhouses, but not illegal for corporations to commit those atrocities.

2. **Politicians have given up the pretence of being representative.** Speeches no longer talk about "the people" or a better society or collective interest, but solely about response to intangible, invented or inflated dangers like "terrorism" and "illegal" immigration (but not the real dangers, since that would offend their owners). Gerrymandering, bribes, voter disenfranchisement and vote-buying are now accepted as just how the system inevitably works. Political influence and political decision-making are now totally and overtly a function of the amount of paid lobbying and money spent. The term "democracy" is now conflated with "freedom" and Orwellian use of language is openly employed to suppress public opposition, dissent and outrage.

3. **Lying has becoming rampant, overt and even socially acceptable.** The biggest and easiest lies are the lies of omission: burying corporatist and ideological legislation and pork in "omnibus" bills and "riders",

gross distortions of measures like unemployment and inflation, burying junk investments in opaque repackaged and overpriced offerings to the public, activities couched to offer perpetrators "plausible deniability", and unlisted ingredients and unlisted dangers on product packaging. Another example is lawmakers passing "popular" laws but telling regulatory staff not to enforce them or "look the other way", or starving the regulators of resources. But more egregious is the overt lying, led by the outrageous (and again Orwellian) untruths of almost all modern advertising and PR (including political campaign advertising), which we are now forced by every means possible to watch/listen to/read. And of course, just about everything done by the legal "profession" who are paid to obfuscate, threaten and lie, and the mainstream media, who are paid to report only distracting news that does not offend corporate sponsors, and to oversimplify and distort to pander to their dumbed-down audience.

4. Widespread use and acceptance of "ends justify the means" rationalizations. This is the hallmark behaviour of the Dick Cheneys and other severely psychologically damaged people who prevail disproportionately in position of power. Consequentialists rationalize that, immoral as their actions might be (or might have been), the outcome will be (or was) a desirable one, so their conduct in achieving it is moot. This argument allows them to decide to wage wars and commit other acts of violence (and almost all major recent wars and major acts of violence have been rationalized on this basis). What's worse, when the desired "ends" are not achieved (liberation of women in Afghanistan), the shifting of blame to others for the failure to achieve the ends is used to excuse both the failure to achieve the ends and for the abhorrence of the means. Probe just about any act of violence, any lie, or any illegal or immoral behaviour that someone is justifying or excusing these days, and you'll find an "ends (would have) justified the means" rationalization. It's endemic, and not only among right-wingers. And few of us have the critical thinking skills to see its dangers.

5. Human activity (litigation, security, financial "products" etc.) is focused on defending the status quo rather than producing anything of value. The reason most of us could not survive today in the radically decentralized, low-complexity societies that will take hold after civilization's collapse, is that most of us don't produce anything that peers in our community value, or ever will value. We are "managers" of useless hierarchies, paper pushers, systems people, guards, number crunchers, packagers, transporters and vendors of goods we do not know how to make, with parts we don't know the origin or makeup of. Because we intuitively "know" that this is so, we are desperate to keep civilization's crumbling systems operating. What else could we do?

6. The illusion of growth has become totally dependent on increases in oil and in debt. In a presentation here the other day, economist Nate Hagens revealed that since 2000 96% of all US GDP growth has come from more consumption of primary energy, not from increases in production or efficiency or "innovation", and that it now takes creation of \$14 of new debt (i.e. printing of currency) to produce \$1 of GDP. So when economists and politicians say they want a return to growth (to avoid a collapse of the Ponzi scheme stock and housing markets, among other reasons), what they are really saying is that they want us to burn more fossil fuels and print more money.

7. Acceptance of obscene inequality. People just shrug when they learn that the entire increase in global income and wealth since the 1970s has accrued to just 1% of the population — everyone else's real income (purchasing power) and wealth has declined (i.e. they're further into debt), in many cases precipitously. This is despite the fact that this increase in income and wealth has come at a ghastly and accelerating social, political and ecological cost. The Occupy movement tried to challenge this, but the movement is dormant.

8. Denial of reality, across the political spectrum. Most of us (except in the US and a few other backward countries) now appreciate that climate change is caused by burning fossil fuels and is dangerously accelerating. But most of us still believe, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the

contrary, that it is somehow possible to change global behaviour so radically that we reverse emissions and prevent runaway climate change, or that we're going to somehow replace most emissions with renewable energy or other "innovations". Most deny the reality that our education and health care systems are dysfunctional and unsustainable, that the Internet is a huge consumer of energy dependent on the industrial growth economy for its existence, that species extinction has already accelerated to a point unprecedented in the planet's history and threatens the stability of every ecosystem, that our political, economic and legal systems are so dysfunctional they cannot be salvaged, that industrial agriculture has already destroyed most of the soils crucial for our survival, that choosing short-term jobs over long-term economic and ecological health is disastrous, and that "sustainable growth" is an oxymoron. For those who aren't in denial, the ever-growing cognitive dissonance in the media and in public discourse is staggering.

9. **Widespread cynicism and acceptance of conspiracy theories.** Stephen Colbert wrote "Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the farthest thing from it. Because cynics don't learn anything. Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us." Cynics are, as George Carlin said, disappointed idealists. The rampant growth of cynicism reveals a similar increase in fear and disappointment. Conspiracy theories are popular because they give us someone else to blame (someone huge, mysterious and unstoppable, hence relieving us of the obligation to do anything or even to understand what is really happening), and because they feed our cynicism, and because we all want something simple to believe instead of the impossible complexity of the truth. And that desire for something simple to believe also inspires...

10. **Search for and willingness to believe in charismatic people and magical solutions.** Hardly a day goes by when I don't see another promise of a technology that will provide infinite, cheap, climate-saving energy. Judging from the number of views these articles/videos receive, they are magnets for public attention. And when we're constantly disappointed by "leaders" to promise us "hope" and change, it is not surprising that so many fall under the influence of zealous charismatic people with absurd (and discredited) but miraculous (and simple) political and economic and technological "solutions" to every problem. The world's last powerful charismatic leader, the despotic Mao, killed 80 million of his country's citizens while keeping ten times that number in thrall. Notice the charismatic tilt of many of the new leaders of the fearful Randian/Thatcherian/Reaganite right, and the leaders of many popular new age cults.

11. **Ubiquitous spying and corporatist surveillance.** I don't think I need elaborate on this, except to note that the corporate sector's use of collected intelligence and surveillance in its many forms dwarfs that of the more obvious government and military sector. The military-industrial complex is back. So far it's too incompetent to figure out how to use the data it's collecting, but they're spending an awful lot of our money working on that. Their level of anxiety is rising too — they're tuned into the general dissatisfaction and are afraid of civil insurrection upsetting their lucrative and high-maintenance apple-cart. (If only.)

12. **Self-colonization and the emergence of "apologism" and mandatory optimism.** We've seen the emergence of mandatory optimism [in the corporate world](#), and more overtly in the prerequisite for being a [TED talker](#) and other "positive thinking" movements. But now the vilification of criticism and pessimism (as distinct from cynicism) is becoming more ubiquitous. Critical thinking and doubt are dismissed out-of-hand as negativity and a "bad attitude" even in peer conversation. When internalized to the point we feel bad about feeling bad, it's an essential tool of self-colonization — the co-opting and self-censoring of our own anger, skepticism, fear, sadness, grief, and 'unpopular' beliefs in order to be socially accepted by others, and in some cases to brainwash ourselves into denial of our own feelings and beliefs that we are struggling to cope with — and reconcile with what others are saying they feel and believe (there's that cognitive dissonance again: "If I'm the only one thinking this, I must be crazy, so I'd better not talk about

it"). What all this produces is something now called "apologism" — a propensity to make excuses and minimize an event or belief or feeling because you don't want to seem "always" critical or out of step with the mainstream or peers. In its worst form it emerges as a victim-blaming defence for atrocities like assault, harassment or abuse. But in its milder form it can lead to dangerous group-think, the suppression of new and important ideas, and destructive self-blaming.

13. **Widespread anomie and the trivialization and co-opting of dissent by professional activists.** The term anomie means a disconnection between one's personal values and one's community's values. It refers to a state of 'rudderlessness' where it is difficult to find one's authentic place or engage in meaningful social interaction with most others, especially those in different demographics. In a major international study, pollster Michael Adams found it increasingly prevalent in young people, and on the rise in all age groups. Adams remarked on how Americans in particular were becoming increasingly "suspicious of and indifferent to the plight of their fellow citizens". The disengagement of the young explains why so many activist groups are dominated by older people (a new phenomenon in the last half-century). Unfortunately, the activist vacuum has allowed professional environmental groups (Greenpeace, 350 etc.) to co-opt much of the activist movement's activities, creating a constant manageable "trivial theatre of dissent" that is comfortable for many older people opposed to violence and confrontation, and comfortable for the corporations and politicians because it's controlled and unthreatening. Mainstream media like it because it's simplified, dichotomous and often specifically orchestrated for their cameras. And it creates easy, stable, well-paying jobs for mainstream environmental group spokespeople, while changing absolutely nothing.

While I believe most of these trends and emergences are complex collective responses to changing realities, and either well-intentioned or unconscious (i.e. without malicious intent), taken together they would seem to evince a broad, intuitive shift in our collective gestalt, our way of coping with the world. They reveal more than anything, I think, a giving up of the belief in fairness, justice, controllability, understandability and consensus as means of "making sense" or taking action reliably to achieve desired objectives in the current reality of how things work. They reveal both the incapacity of our now massively-overgrown, fragile and unwieldy systems to function sustainably or effectively, and the incapacity of ourselves and our broken communities to function effectively within their purview.

Coincidentally, this article points to a [change in the perception and use of the motor car](#)

Nov 10

European Hubris

It's difficult these days to be objective about the European Union - the combination of the euro crisis, austerity and the immigration set off by the 2004 widening has given so many easy targets and scapegoats.

"The European Project" went from strength to strength (with a short breather just before Delors became President in the 1980s) - until hubris set in at the start of the new millennium. The Euro was launched in 2002 with a great fanfare but, in less than a decade, has dragged the entire project into disrepute; the attempt to foist a new Convention on European Nations hit major hurdles very quickly with French and Dutch rejections of the draft in 2005. All the while, however, the European Court of Justice has been throbbing quietly in the basement, supplying the legality if not the legitimacy to the regulations drafted by the Commission with its supportive infrastructure of lobbyists and officials.

Intellectual coverage of this unique venture has been massive - with academia queuing up to [receive generous European funding](#). Did you know, for example, that there were, at the last count, 409 Jean Monnet Professorial Chairs in European Universities - funded for the initial 3 years by the EU? Four Hundred and Nine!!

The natural scepticism of journalists has been kept in place by a combination of EC press releases; editorial control of newspapers whose owners are (to a man) pro-European; and by budgets which no longer permit detached scrutiny.

I told you it was difficult to be objective!

The UK, of course, is home to "the awkward squad" which has an innate resistance to overblown rhetoric and projects. Tom Gallagher's latest book - [Europe's Path to Crisis - disintegration via monetary union](#) - is a great read in that tradition eg the 2003 blockbuster "[The Great Deception - can the European Union Survive?](#)"; the rather more philosophical [The Tainted Source](#); and the incendiary 1995 book [The Rotten Heart of Europe - the dirty war for Europe's money](#) by one of the guys behind the moves toward monetary integration (Bernard Connelly) whose detailed analysis was so explosive that he was not only sacked from the Commission but [banned from further critical writing](#) on the subject. Curiously for a book which was honoured with a Danish award for moral courage, Amazon cannot offer the book - not give any comment on it

Tom Gallagher, whom I readily admit to being a friend, is no stranger to controversy - with a fascination for the undergrowth of political activity not only in the Balkans (an early specialism) but in the Celtic fringes of Portugal (1980s) and Scotland (most recently). Romania hardly qualifies in that category but has been a fruitful harvest for his ruthless probing - initially with [Romania - theft of a nation](#), latterly with [Romania and the European Union - how the weak vanquished the strong](#) (2010)

Possibly it was that second book which gave him the idea for this latest book which is very clearly not another technical study of the eurocrisis - but rather a very political analysis (with scrupulous references) which carries an unspoken question about hubris.

His "Europe's Path to Crisis" has inspired me to try to identify the more balanced of the critical writing on Europe - particularly those which can go beyond the critique and have an alternative agenda which might be worth exploring. To reach these (rare) sites, you have to wade through not

only angry nationalist sites but also some which purport to be critical but which turn out to have European funding!

The [best guide is probably this recent one](#) from Cardiff University. I doubt, however, anyone has a realistic agenda which can satisfy both multinational interests and the frustration of European citizens.....

The recent appointment of Juncker as President of the Commission was hardly calculated to inspire confidence (not that this has ever seemed a consideration for the European political class) but recent revelations about the tax evasions which have been an [integral part of the Luxembourg system over which Juncker presided](#) for so many years so seem to be the last straw.

My surfing also threw up this interesting book on [The sociology of Europe](#) - and my mail, coincidentally, this [New Pact for Europe](#) - produced by a collection of worthy Foundations (including the Bertelsmann and Gulbenkian ones).

Great rhetoric - but little reference to the hard economic, ecological and political realities I have been writing about in recent posts (the bibliography kills the report's credibility for me).

Nov 13

[Things Look Up in Romania; and time to challenge managerialism](#)



Drive down to Sofia at the weekend - escaping the last-minute frenzy of the Presidential Election which, against all odds (not least the brazen corruption of the so-called social democrats PSD) went to [an ethnic German](#) who has ruled the city of Sibiu very competently for the past decade.

Political labels don't mean anything in Romania - the entire system has been corrupt until the judicial system started to work a couple of years ago and to jail scores of politicians...

That story deserves a wider hearing - but the Iohannis victory should be a further boost to "normalising" forces in the

country although, inevitably, there are some unsavoury elements in the alliance which supported him. The PSD candidate was the present Prime Minister who commands a strong parliamentary vote. Sadly, therefore, the scene seems set for yet more mutual aggression - with Iohannis' disarming personality being one possible saving grace....

Over the weekend I got caught up in a variety of reading material - initially the 2003 [The Scots' Crisis of Confidence](#) which I will comment on shortly.

The author, Carol Craig, has been head of the Centre for Confidence in Glasgow for some years and writes interestingly on her blog [about change issues](#) as well as directing to interesting sites such as one called [After Now](#) which contains thoughtful papers about [modernity](#) and its [sustainability](#) - as well as one on the [hidden power of paradigms](#)

She is also editor of a new series of short publications called Postcards from Scotland - one of which ("Letting Go") challenges the aggressive management style which has become the norm in the past couple of decades and gives a couple of great references - a long paper [Performance Management and workplace tyranny](#) produced by a Strathclyde Professor for the STUC - and a 2009 paper by a group of American management gurus entitled [Moonshots for Management](#) which takes strong issue with the direction of management.

Two other important papers caught my eye - [Democratic Wealth - building a citizens economy](#) - which seems to be one of the rare "alternative" manifestoes we need these days.

And something called the [Life After Europe project](#)

I'll try to make sense of these for you.....

Nov 17

The plate is one of two terra cottas I have - created by Mariana Bojerianov

Psycho-analysing a nation

The Scots have a lot to be proud of - gaining, throughout the centuries, a high reputation for intellectual, commercial and engineering endeavour - and for honest behaviour. A reputation that is global from a mix of ambition and evictions which has spilled us to the far ends of the earth.

And yet, 2003 saw the publication of a book with the title "The Scots' Crisis of Confidence" which suggests that Scots have inhibiting beliefs, attitudes and general mindset which lead to conformity. Much of the mindset arises from Scotland's Calvinist past. A [sympathetic review](#) (there were other, angry ones) suggests that these include -

- *A strong tendency to see the world in strict either/or terms, particularly worthless/damned; good/bad; right/wrong.*
- *A tendency to treat a person's mistakes or miscalculations as the result of deliberate bad faith rather than an error. This means that if anyone makes a mistake or does something judged to be wrong then they are personally accountable for it and no excuses or extenuating circumstances are permitted in defence. It also means that people's motives for action are often viewed as suspect. This is a viewpoint which leads to cynicism and blame and is one of the reasons why Scots feel overly fearful of making mistakes.*
- *An overriding tendency to believe that criticism (and blame) are helpful and lead to improvement. This means that appreciation tends to get squeezed out and the importance of motivation downplayed or forgotten about altogether.*
- *A strong injunction to 'know your place' and not get above your station. This exhortation comes from Scotland's egalitarian values but paradoxically, in a society where people do not set out in life equal all it does is reinforce class (and gender) inequality.*
- *A sense of everyone's fate being bound up with others. This clearly can have positive aspects but in a critical judgmental climate it can heighten people's fear of doing anything different for fear of being criticised or cast out. It also leads to an inadequate sense of privacy and boundaries. In England there is a prevailing notion of what people choose to do*

in their own life is their business (an Englishman's home is his castle) but in Scotland it is common for people to believe that they may have to account to others for their actions (e.g. where they live, how they spend money, educate their children etc.) or even for what they think. This, and the previous points, all contribute to the common Scots' fear of drawing attention to yourself.

- *Scottish culture is extremely masculine in character. Even the emotional, tender side of Scottish culture is the preserve of Robert Burns and the Burns cult - not women. Over the centuries Scottish women's contribution to society at large has not only been neglected, but also their lives have been particularly restricted and shaped by tight notions of 'respectability'. Since women account for over fifty per cent of the population this pressure on women to conform has led to a great restriction on Scottish potential.*
- *A strong Utopian tendency in Scottish public life where people commonly believe that we must all build the New Jerusalem - a perfectly fair, just society where money does not matter. The contrast with America is that whereas the American dream is a dream for individuals to create their own life, the Scottish dream is a dream of collective redemption for Scotland.*

This summer, the world's journalists who flocked to the country seemed to see a rather different, more buoyant, people.

My E-book [The Independence Argument - home thoughts from abroad](#) tries to give a sense of how that argument was conducted. But, in the event, only 45% of the voters chose the independence path. Does this therefore prove the point about lack of confidence?

- But in what sense do we (or have we) lack(ed) self-confidence?
- Why so many Scots have it in the 18th and 19th centuries?
- And when did we/they lose it?
- Or are the confident Scots all ex-pats?
- How might this be measured?
- Is the situation static - or changing?
- Assuming we think it's a bad thing, how might it be changed?
- What sort of measures have been adopted? When? With what support mechanisms?

These are the questions I have from reading the book...

I spent the 70s and 80s working in the political and administrative heartland of Scotland - with students, professionals, community activists and fellow-politicians and I agree with the author, Carol Craig, that "failure" (and the fear thereof) was a central reality for an unacceptable number of working class Scottish families.

"Born to Fail" was indeed the phrase some of us latched onto in 1973 in the run-up to the first election for the new Strathclyde Region (responsible for most of the municipal services for half of the Scottish population). It had been the title of a challenging report from a national Children's Charity which revealed the disproportionate number of families in the West of Scotland who suffered from the multiple handicap (indeed stigma) of unemployment, poor housing, poor health and poor educational achievement.

My own experience since 1968 as a reforming councillor had made me angry with the treatment such people got from local bureaucrats - and had demonstrated how positively people responded if given the opportunity to engage in self-help activity and social enterprise.....

The new Region made a priority of community development from 1976; developed local participative structures and special programmes which ran for 2 decades and was then absorbed into the strategy of the new Scottish Government - work which is well caught in some recent reflections - [Supporting People Power](#). But, frankly, it made little dent on the malaise - which was down (in my view) to decisions of global multinationals, governments.....and.... drug barons

And that's where I would question Carol's thesis. It's a great read - on a par (as far as historical dissection goes) with Arthur Herman's (rather more positive) [The Scottish Enlightenment - the Scots invention of the modern world](#). She's unearthed some apt quotations from writers over the centuries - as you would expect of a doctor of literature- and also gives real food for thought with her comments about Jung and Positive Psychology; tables which compare Scottish, English and Irish characteristics; and fascinating comments about how we differ on the deductive/inductive spectrum.

The introduction does make the important point that she has moved in her life from a strongly political perspective to one that tried to bring in the social and psychological elements. As she puts it on page 24 of the new edition "I simply attempt to add psychological, behavioural and cultural dimensions thus making for a richer and more complex picture". In amplification she suggests that "the thinker who has contributed most to our understanding of the dangers of "fragmentation"...is Ken Wilber...who asserts that there are two important dimensions; interior and exterior and individual and collective. These then combine to make four quadrants - psychological, behavioural, cultural and structural".

This is an important framework - even if [Wilber is now a bit discredited](#).

But the author then doesn't really deal with the 2 "collective" quadrants and therefore leaves herself open to the sort of attack she gets from radical sociologists and [Marxists](#). If I had read the book when it was first published (2003) I might well have complained that it made no reference to the efforts a lot of us were making in the 70s and 80s to deal with that sense of failure and self-confidence by developing community structures and social enterprise (not sure which quadrant that's in). [The making of an empowering profession](#) is a good record of those endeavours.....

But the fact remains that social indices in those communities which concerned us all of 40 years ago are even worse than before.....the lack of confidence therefore for me seems to be largely a class thing....although the author does make an important point about the signals returnees and their spouses pick up.....Extroverts clam up.....perhaps that's a "small-nation" syndrome?

With the benefit of the last 24 years I've had living in other countries, my main critical comment relates to the lack of comparative (eg European) references.

How cultural behaviour is shaped and changes I find increasingly fascinating - "Path dependency" is the term the academics have used for the grip tradition seems to have on the way we think and behave in our social and political activities. For example, its 25 years since the wall fell - but little seems to have changed in the political mindset of Bulgarians and Romanians - although things are definitely now on the move in Romania in the judicial system.

When I first worked in Hungary in 1994 I was very struck by what one of my (older) Hungarian team colleagues said - that their history had taught them to be disappointed in their hopes.....By what fusion of education, family circumstances and communications does a society come to develop values of hope, disappointment, fatalism? I would like to see much more discussion of such issues - and Carol Craig's book is one of the few which could help us explore this field

[EU credit](#)

This blog admits to sharing the general cynicism about the political process. All the more important therefore to recognise when positive efforts show results. Last week's astounding victory (by a 10% margin) in the [Romanian Presidential elections](#) of a quiet outsider took everyone by surprise - he was down by the same margin after the first leg of the elections - but what happened in the subsequent two weeks has given the country its first real opportunity in 25 years to change an utterly venal system.

Something seemed to snap this month for many Romanian citizens. They are used to smugness, arrogance, lying and deceit from their politicians - although the past two years have seen an increasing number of those politicians being actually tried, convicted and locked up. The Prime Minister (and Presidential candidate) Ponta epitomised their breed - having been groomed by a previous Prime Minister Adrian Nastase (2000-2004) who became in 2010 or so [one of the first politicians to be fingered](#) by a judiciary which was given its head by the terms of Romania's entry to the EU in 2007 - and specifically by the [Cooperation and Verification Mechanism](#). At its heart is the National Anti-Corruption Agency (DNA) whose officials bring the prosecutions which (tenured) judges at last are happy to uphold. (Not that this stops the Romanian Parliament from trying to [give its deputies special immunity!](#))



But blatant [attempts at vote-rigging](#) in the last few weeks proved too much for voters - and seem to have been the spur for an astonishing jump of 2 million additional people voting in the second round - more than enough to wipe out the 1.5 million lead which Ponta had in the first round.

Stunning as this victory of decency seems to have been, we need to understand that it has come about only as a result of long, hard and patient work not only of a few Romanian heroes and heroines but of a group whose reputation has become a bit more tarnished these days - namely European technocrats who - as long ago as 2004 - set in place measures to make the Romanian judicial system work. It has been a long struggle which came to a head in 2012.

Ponta had been Prime Minister for only a few weeks when, in summer 2012, he sparked off a major constitutional crisis which I covered on the blog during July of that year and summarised [in this post](#). [Tom Gallagher](#) (who has given us a couple of

books about post 1989 Romania - one of which is significantly called "[Theft of a Nation](#)") gave the best overview then

A 22-page report from the European commission says the new government, led by Ponta, has flouted the constitution, threatened judges, illegally removed officials in an arbitrary manner, and tampered with the democratic system of checks and balances in order to try to secure the impeachment of President Traian Basescu..... The crisis erupted because of the massive over-reaction by the new government of Victor Ponta to court decisions sentencing political figures, previously thought to be beyond the reach of the law, to prison terms. Romania had joined the EU (in 2007) on terms that largely suited a restricted post-communist elite that benefited from discretionary privatisations of the economy while pulling the strings in many of the key institutions of state.

A once lively independent media was mainly captured by the new power magnates. Parliament devised rules for itself that made challenges from new social forces very hard and protected its members from prosecution.

Aware that there was a real danger of Romania becoming a festering political slum within the EU, Brussels officials showed firmness in one key area, the justice sector. The Romanian elite agreed, in 2004, to Brussels having oversight of the justice system even after entry in 2007. The EU has shown consistency by insisting on a proper separation of powers and the gradual creation of a justice system not impeded from going after top politicians, businessmen, civil servants and judges who face credible charges of corruption.

For the last eight years there has been a messy power struggle between the old guard, determined to hold the line against encroachments on their power, and a small group of reformers in the justice system and the party of Democratic Liberalism that held office until April. They have mainly been sustained by President Traian Basescu, a rough-hewn and unconventional former ship captain in the Romanian merchant navy.

Basescu is hated by much of the elite because he defected from their ranks and decided to try and make his legacy the cleaning up of one of the most venal political systems in Europe. In the process, leading figures in his own party have not been spared. This led to a string of defections that explain why his most implacable enemies in the Social Liberal Union were able to return to government this spring (2012). Their original intentions had been to wait until parliamentary elections in the autumn before removing Basescu. They were predicted to produce a big win for them due to the unpopularity of tough austerity measures that Basescu had championed in 2010-11.

But panic set in with the prison sentence for Nastase. Prudence was ditched entirely when the British journal Nature published an investigation revealing that 85 pages of the new Prime Minister's thesis had simply been copy-pasted from other sources. It was decided that Basescu would have to be eliminated from the political game straight away. But that could only be accomplished by neutralising bodies like the Constitutional Court and the Ombudsman, seizing control of the official gazette so that the government could publish or suppress whatever laws and rulings it pleased, and removing the heads of the bicameral parliament in contravention of the rules for this.

President [Basescu](#) was unpopular - being associated with austerity measures and being a hyperactive loudmouth. More than 80% of those who voted in the 2012 referendum called to impeach him therefore wanted him out (although the President had called for a boycott) but it failed since only 46% of voters turned out. After this, things quietened down. [A report earlier this year](#) from The Sustainable Government Indicators project gives a detailed analysis of events since 2012.

In a few days he will stand down - and could well then face prosecution himself by virtue of his role (as Minister of Transport) in the privatisation of Romania's shipping fleet for what some people allege to have been too low a figure. As far as I am aware noone suggests that Basescu benefitted....For Romania's sake, I hope this issue does not become another scandal.....

It has taken all of 2 years for Ponta to get the "come-uppance" he so richly deserves. And for the EC to begin to deserve the Nobel prize it won a couple of years ago

Nov 24

The wood tryptich carving (with an angels' outline) was done by a Romanian friend, Bogdan....

[Portraits of cities in despair](#)

Last week I acquired some new toys - access to wi-fi here in Sofia and the software to download films.....For someone who has been able these past 25 years to evade television, this is a dangerous temptation. Oscar Wilde put it nicely for us Presbyterians when he noted, laconically, that "the best way to resist temptation is to yield to it".....

So I have been binge viewing [The Wire](#) which started in 2002; ran for ten years and is rated as the best (and most realistic) of television serials.

It is a savage portrait of a decaying American city - Baltimore to be precise - and focuses on drug wars; teamster corruption; police and education bureaucracies as they try to deal with the new management techniques; and on the politics of [the local newspaper](#). So far I've viewed some 20 episodes of the first two series - each of the 5 series is [briefly summarised in this article](#)

I find the focus on a city - and its various layers - much more gripping than the conventional one of a murder. The 2 writers are [David Simon](#) (who had written a couple of sociological studies of the situation) and a journalist - so the series has attracted a [lot of attention from academics](#) and been the subject of glowing reviews [here](#) and [here](#)

The dialogue is rich - but really does need sub-titles to help the viewer make sense of what the police and politicians - let alone the drug addicts and dealers - are actually saying.

I was briefly in Baltimore in 1987 - while a German Marshall Fellow based in Washington, Pittsburgh and Chicago (I just missed meeting Obama then working the South Shore as a community activist!) but remember being appalled by the Baltimore slums which are at the heart of The Wire's drama. Such binge-viewing brings [diminishing returns](#) - and I don't find it easy to relate to the American and black context.

By way of comparison, I therefore turned to the first couple of episodes of the 1996 UK television series - [Our Friends in the North](#) - which gives a portrait not just of a city (UK's Newcastle; [in the news today](#) for the savage cuts the city faces) but one painted in nine studies over a 32 year period. with an emphasis on the various routes for those wanting to escape from or challenge these urban wastelands and their power systems. [This paper offers a good analysis](#) of the series

So far - by virtue of the historical depth - I would rate it even higher than The Wire - and it also gives us an early sighting of Daniel Craig!

ps David Simon first came to my attention a year ago - when he wrote [this withering diatribe](#)

Nov 25

[Time to get off the fence!](#)

Just over 2 months ago, the British political class was panicked into promising further powers to the Scots - and an apparently [independent and ennobled businessman](#) was quickly wheeled into action by the British Prime Minister to deliver on those pledges -with the help of a committee nominated by the representatives of all five political parties in the Scottish Assembly.

The timetable was incredibly tight - since there is a General Election next May. Understandably there have been a lot of cynics....

But, incredibly, the report and recommendations (which carry the agreement of all parties) has now been published and [seems quite radical](#) - with all income tax from Scottish subjects, for example, to be transferred to the Scottish parliament! This is [the full report](#) - along with [initial press coverage and readers' comments](#)

This has been quite an autumn - with two of the three places I call home showing real spirit - and giving a real example to the rest of the world.

So let's have an end to people sitting on their hands - and professing cynicism.

What Romanian and Scottish voters have done in the past 3 months is, hopefully, just a beginning..... although the various "electoral springs" of the past 5 years should be a real warning about false optimism.

Those hoping to change the ruling systems and paradigms of power need to do three things

- do their homework - particularly (i) read up the history of how [others have, over the ages, challenged power](#) and its perversities and (ii) try better to understand [the nature of the present global crisis](#).....old solutions do not necessarily fit these times...
- cooperate more - it's so easy to publish a book or start a website; what counts is how we [reach out to others](#) and try to create powerful networks
- show some humility - [people are not waiting for leaders](#)!! Indeed leadership is utterly discredited.....

The comedian Russell Brand has attracted a lot of support recently for his diatribes against global capitalism - here's [an interesting assessment](#) of what he has to offer.

And about time for Bulgaria to stir itself!!!

I'm reminded of a Russian proverb - *Don't fear your enemies or friends! Fear the indifferent! Your enemies can only destroy you; your friends can only betray you - it's the indifferent who allow your enemies to destroy you and your friends to betray you!*

Nov 27

[Honouring the past](#)

I wonder if it is possible for Europeans (let alone Brits) to begin to put their head around how countries such as Bulgaria, Poland and Romania have suffered, in different ways, since 1939?? At least Poland had its various strands of resistance to be proud of.

And Romania its various emblems of modernity - visible in its architecture, inventors, writing or painting (to some of which I paid tribute earlier this year in my E-book on the country - [Mapping Romania](#)).

Indeed, as I was drafting this post, I was sent a poem from a poet - [Mariana Marin](#) - reckoned to be one of the best of modern poets and akin, in her power, to Sylvia Plath.

*I hurry toward death
without a purpose,
without a wedding gown,
without a dowry of gold.
Without myself.
Serene and bitter,
I hurry across my native land
As if tomorrow had already been.*

Needless to say - despite my love of Romanian poets such as Marin Sorescu and Ana Blandiana, I had never heard of Marin (who died in 2003).

But Bulgaria is small - with its back between the Danube and the Balkan/Rhodope mountain ranges - almost invisible.....save, that is for its tourism - at the Black Sea and skiing resorts..... But it does have some people who have the skills and energy to project the country....particularly its artistic community - to whose [early 20th century \(realist\) painters](#) I devoted a small book a couple of years ago

Earlier this year year I mentioned Ivan Daraktchiev's amazing [Bulgaria: Terra Europeansis Incognita](#) - 600 pages of superb photographs and challenging text about the history (ancient and recent) of the country. Ivan doesn't pull his punches as you will see from the next post.....

And yesterday I visited the Neron Gallery whose owner, Rumen Manov, is one of the best dealers in older Bulgarian paintings - to discover that he has just published a large 700-page celebration of some 2000 cultural artefacts and photographs from his own personal collection - in [A Fairy Tale about Bulgaria](#). The Intro puts it eloquently -

We the people of this piece stretch of land called Bulgaria are not the end of Europe, hidden somewhere in the end of the world - we are one of the oldest European civilizations. In our history there are thousands purposefully forgotten dates and events. But although quite destroyed, surviving documents speak eloquently and impartially. We Bulgarians love our ancient and beautiful land and this book is an attempt to remember the bright, timeless and eternal values.....

I wanted to do something that is not an encyclopaedia, not an album, not almanac not historical guide or reference book. It was like a seed in the ground. When he started to grow this idea in my mind I could see the colours of the book, as I started to build in time things so

hesitated that year - two, long before I finish the book, I had the idea for it. What I saw was difficult for me to explain it to people who work with me..... then they told me that such a thing is not possible.... that it's a job for an Institute not an individual. But the book is my witness to many survivors and their fathers, grandfathers -some of them departed from this world, things scattered in their markets and antiquarians.

I salute such people who, against the odds, are determined to remind locals of their heroes and traditions - however politically incorrect it may be these (stupid) days.....

Nov 28

Getting to Denmark

Readers know that, for the past 24 years, I've been involved in efforts to strengthen the effectiveness of various state institutions in such countries as Azerbaijan, Bulgaria (where I am now), Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Romania and Uzbekistan. I'm trying at the moment to edit a collection of my musings over the past 5 years about this work - to which I've given the tentative title of "Getting to Denmark" which is the rather ironic phrase used in the last couple of decades to refer to one of the basic puzzles of development - how to create stable, peaceful, prosperous, inclusive, and honest societies (like Denmark).

We owe the phrase to Francis Fukuyama - of "End of History" and [The Origins of Political Order](#) fame - although the issue is one to which thousands of experts have bent their minds and careers for more than half a century.

Fukuyama's small 2004 book "[State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century](#)" appeared at the end of a decade which had seen organisations such as The World Bank lead the charge against the very notion of the State. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, after all, had confirmed the anti-state, pro-greed philosophy which had begun to rule Britain and America during the Reagan and Thatcher years and became enshrined in the global ideology which has ruled us since - of ruthlessly transferring state assets to the private domain.

Fukuyama's focus on how state capacity could be strengthened went, therefore, against the grain of a lot of thinking - although his main interest was trying to understand what makes some states successful and others fail? To what extent, he was asking, can we transfer our knowledge about what works in one state to another?

We know what 'Denmark' looks like, and something about how the actual Denmark came into being historically.

But to what extent is that knowledge transferable to countries as far away historically and culturally from Denmark as Bulgaria, Moldova and Romania?"

To be honest, his question didn't mention Bulgaria and Romania - but, rather, Somalia. But the question remains since Bulgaria has made absolutely no progress in the last 25 years. And Romania only in the last couple of years.

Here's how a [Bulgarian friend of mine](#) put it recently..

Now, how can we talk of any improvement when from 9.0 million in 1989 the Bulgarians today number 7.5 million? An estimated 2.0 to 2.5 million people having left for good, of which about half represent the quintessential "brain drain". This exodus represents in my view a self-inflicted national genocide that the ruling Nomenklatura is collectively guilty of, and should one day be held accountable for.

How can we talk of improvement in the economic situation of a country which 20 years after 1989 has a GDP about the same size as it was then? What do we make of the facts that today:

- about one third of the population is living below the poverty line;*
- about one third is just hovering at and above it;*
- the minimum monthly salary is less than 150 euro;*
- the minimum pension is less than 140 euro, and that is just above the (official) poverty line; you might want to learn that there are about 3 million retired people in this country - obviously a large portion of them seek additional source of revenue, such as e.g. in the grey economy; the rest rely on remittance from abroad, in order not to starve, the alternative being scavenging the garbage bins;*
- the average monthly salary is less than 350 euro - if we assume that it is realistic, which it is not, being an official number as well, but it'd be too long to dwell on here;*
- before 1989, all Gypsies were working and all their kids were studying in school; today most Gypsy parents are unemployed and on state benefits (apart from those pestering the French, the Italians, Brits etc.) and - protected by idiotic EU policies - engage in theft, damage of property and all kind of other criminal activities, begging apart; and the majority of Gypsy kids boycott schooling, whatsoever;*
- before, education, medicare, social security, recreation were all free or quasi-free of charge - no more today;*
- before, there was an incredible emphasis on culture; today cultural life in Bulgaria is a 24 carats example of the perfect disaster;*
- before, there was respect for the traditional values (we are one of the oldest peoples in the world, respectively claiming one of the richest palette of traditions), unlike today when the only "value" ruling over here is the very same - first and only one - that rules America and, after being imported a while ago, in Western Europe: making money, and fast!*
- From a reasonably well economically developing - albeit under Soviet diktat - and prospering - no unemployment, no poor, no beggars, every citizen "middle class member," no illiteracy, no housing problem, surplus in food, export of manufactured goods - country then, today's "democratic" Bulgaria manifests all the characteristics of a banana republic and keeps sinking in the ranking, already a Third World member by most measures. What a remarkable accomplishment, indeed!*

In brief, the "transition" from "Communism" to "Democracy" has brought the Bulgarian state to its knees and the Bulgarian people have been impoverished as never before in the country's millennia old history. Contrary to popular belief, membership into EU has further contributed to the disaster. I have explained this in detail in my recent book "[Bulgaria, terra europeansis incognita](#)"

No wonder all independent polls today report that in 60-80% of the responses, within the relevant age groups, people consider having been better off prior to the arrival of "Democracy!" The masses being nostalgic to "Communism" is the true achievement of 20+ years under "Democracy" - that is the only real result which you could, in all fairness, take pride in contributing to, if you wish, no objections here.

Now, before you stick to me a label of Commie or another affiliation of that sort, let me inform you that, in 1982, I defected to Belgium, where I am a citizen with accomplished career of executive in the microelectronic industry, recently retired, and my Bulgarian citizenship was restored only in 1994. Moreover, in 1954 my father, a regional enterprise director in Burgas, Bulgaria, was sentenced to death by the Communist "People's Tribunal" for "economic sabotage of the young socialist republic," in a mock up of a trial designed to scare the populace into submission. In 1955, at the age of 35, he has been executed,

leaving behind a son of 7 and a daughter of 2: my mother has not been given the body, nor have we been shown his grave.

Nobody, therefore, could be better qualified as an advocate AGAINST Communism.but Communism (a single party Nomenklaturocracy) and Representative Democracy (a multi-party one) are basically the same animal, the ideology being used essentially as a tool to justify how all elites stay in power.

[My recent post](#) about the result of the Romanian Presidential elections shows that Romania has at last started to pull itself out of the vicious downward spiral. Time now to explore the reasons for these divergent paths in neighbouring countries.

This 2009 paper by Alica Mungiu Pippidi - [House of Cards - building the rule of law in ECE](#) - gives a good insight into the efforts the EU has made in the past decade to get ex-communist countries to break away from their gangster cultures. But it doesn't begin to explain the different paths these two countries have taken in the past few years.....

Nov 30

[Is Denmark actually worth getting to???](#)

I have been viewing, for the first time, the first part of the 2011 Scandinavian television series [The Bridge](#) - which follows a Danish policeman and a Swedish policewoman as they criss-cross the 8 kilometre [Oresund Bridge](#) (which links Copenhagen and Malmo) in the search of a killer mastermind.

The townscapes are stunning; but the characters and societies presented positively dystopian - and have you wondering whether Denmark (where I lived for a year - in 1990) is actually worth getting to!!

Coincidentally, today's Guardian has an interview with [the Danish star - Kim Bodnia](#)

What, the journalist asks, is the appeal of shows such as The Bridge?

"We are caught up in the darkness, the evil and the misery - we just do those best." Even though Bodnia, 48, is one of the most genial interviewees I've encountered, as he sets out this theory he sounds like a cross between Kierkegaard and Ingmar Bergman. But surely you can't be right about that. Isn't Denmark regularly voted the happiest country in Europe?

"It is, but you wouldn't guess that from our film or TV."

True - Danish film has been not just one of the most engrossing national cinemas, but unremittingly, cherisably bleak. And Bodnia in his early days as an actor was part of this Nordic noir movement: "I was always good at playing evil.....- The Swedes got there first - their dramas were always the darkest and most upsetting, and we used to love them when I was growing up in Denmark. Now us Danes have caught up."

The popularity of recent Danish and Swedish crime films, including the adaptations of Larsson's Millennium trilogy, can possibly be traced back to Ingmar Bergman's 1962 film Winter Light, which dramatised the Swede's existential crisis.....

The reason the series been so compelling is not so much to do with the whodunit, but rather the relationship between the 2 detectives. Yes there have been odd couples in crime dramas before (Morse and Lewis, Holmes and Watson, Clouseau and Cato, not to mention Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson in HBO's marvellous new series True Detective), but none so fruitful as these two. [Norén is a cop with](#)

Asperger's (even though that word never appears in the script) and so emotes very little, but solves crimes with devastating deductive skills. She takes the inversion of gender roles one step further than Sarah Lund: sure, she effectively plays the traditional male role (though she's much more rule-bound than Lund) and is equally affectless, but she confers on her male co-worker the traditional female attributes seen in detective dramas.

The Missionary Position

"Getting to Denmark" seemed an appropriate title for the collection of musings I'm trying to edit about the challenges which technocrats and academics funded by international bodies have wrestled with over the past 2 decades in ex-communist countries - particularly those of us working to try to build the capacity of state bodies there - whether central or local.

Several billions of euros have been spent on such efforts (not including the hundreds of millions spent in the last decade by Structural Funds in these countries which have employed local rather than international staff)

The musings (eventually entitled [Crafting Effective Public Management](#)) are a small selection of blogposts I've done over the past 5 years on this subject - which build on two long papers I produced a few years ago -

- "[administrative reform with Chinese and European characters](#)" (2010) - whose last section is a summary of the sort of lessons I felt I had learned about public administration reform in Western Europe
- "[The Long Game - not the logframe](#)" (2011) was a caustic paper I presented to the 2011 NISPAcee Conference (building on an earlier paper to the 2007 Conference) in which I took apart the superficiality of the assumptions EC bureaucrats seemed to be making about the prospects of its Technical Assistance programmes making any sort of dent in what I called (variously) the kleptocracy or "impervious regimes" of most ex-communist countries.



But the adrenalin released by the 50 lengths I try to swim regularly in the Rodina Hotel here made me realise that "The Missionary Position" is a better title - not only in the sense of potentially getting more hits but of its hitting the target.....

After all, what have most of us "Westerners" been doing these past 25 years (however little we may have recognised it) - if not "proselytising" (in almost evangelical fashion) for better systems of what the jargon has (significantly also since 1989) taken to calling better "governance"???

I have always had a problem with this term - which seemed to cover broadly the same issues as the discipline I had known as "public administration" - although I grant you that "governance" has given more emphasis to anti- corruption, coordination, transparency and pluralism.

Volumes have been written about the change of terms - and its significance (one of the best is [Whatever Happened to Public Administration?](#) (2004)

In 2007 I did actually use the title "*Missionaries, Mercenaries or Witch-Doctors?*" for a paper I presented to the Annual NISPAcee Conference (in Slovenia) but, until now, I hadn't made the connection between my activities since 1990 and the wider process of evangelism - let alone "colonisation". Only today did I read an article which used an anthropological approach to interpret the sort of [people who go on "missions" to "third-world" countries](#)

Most "experts" are trapped in their particular world (geographical and/or intellectual) - be it of "political science", "sociology", "economics", "management", "public administration", "europeanisation" or "development".

Each has its own distinctive networks of approval and punishment. Those of us who prowl the edges of these disciplines run the risks all renegades do - of neglect, ridicule, calumny, ostracisation...except that we were never there in the first place to be ostracised!

Dec 3 2014

Why are the reflective consultants hiding?

I referred in the last post to the tens (if not hundreds) of billions of euros spent in recent decades by international bodies on what we might call the "development industry". That translates into thousands (if not hundreds of...) individuals like myself who transit the world's air terminals and hotels working on projects designed to build organisational capacity in countries receiving technical assistance.

For almost as long as I remember, I've **written reflections on my endeavours** and published them. In this venture, I seem almost to be unique...**Robert Chambers** - a much more exalted figure than I could ever claim to be - is someone who, from his institutional base, has been able to combine practical work with theoretical reflections in the manner I aspire to. **Albert Hirschmann** is perhaps the real doyen of the genre.

This morning I was delighted to encounter a new blogsite with the wonderful name **Aidnography** with a post - **Where are the consultants hiding?** - which is the first I've seen to deal with this deficiency

Every so often I receive a short email from a senior development consultant - women and men with probably 15, often 20 or more years of paid professional employment inside the 'aid industry' - they basically started before it was even called an 'industry'! The messages are usually short, sometimes straight from 'the field' (i.e. really uncomfortable, dangerous and complex locations) and often along the lines of 'little do you/that researcher/this journalist really know about organization X or the crisis in region Y'.

But with very few exceptions, these voices rarely make into the development blogosphere, let alone find their way into virtual, classroom or policy discussions. The proverbial 'I will write a book about my

time in the industry once I have retired' approach only works for very few and even if they manage to write that book, the distance of a few years between what happened in, say, Rwanda and the publication creates a safer, but often also less relevant story.

Why are senior consultants 'hiding'? There are some more obvious reasons why senior consultants are often not very visible in public debates:

- *They tend to be very busy: they have carved out their niche and are on the go to the next assignment in 'their' country, region or area of expertise*
- *They tend to be older and may not have been socialized in the digital culture of sharing, being online and maintaining a digital presence or even a brand*
- *They actually have something to lose if public critique leads to fewer assignments for a favourite organization or they are perceived as 'difficult' (many freelance senior consultants have quasi-employment status with some of the largest bi- and multilateral organizations)*
- *They know development is a job; after decades of work, every profession, job or calling has been met with plenty of reality checks; even if you are not cynical or burned-out it is difficult to have similar discussion regularly or get excited when the latest 'participatory bottom-up community design project' turns out to be just like any other project with a budget, log-frame and quarterly reports*
- *They do not really like the academic reflection business and prefer to get an assignment 'done' rather than reflecting on an industry that may not be responsive to critique anyway (see previous point)*

On the other hand, their detailed and nuanced insights would be beneficial in many discussions on why certain organizations do what they are doing, who was resisting an idea and how difficult and political consensus building really is; they could also shed light on many realities in the field, the grey areas, the trade-offs, the secrets of the industry of how to get positive change going and how to avoid bureaucratic pitfalls etc. Or how they maintain marriages, families, well-being and gruesome travel schedules.

How do we get access to senior consultants and get them to share their wisdom, stories and experiences (if they want to...)? Traditional formats, like inviting them to (academic) conferences and workshops, usually fail or are limited to the context of one event. The IRIS [Humanitarian Affairs Think Tank](#) is an interesting approach that connects researchers and humanitarian practitioners in an academic framework with support from Save The Children. And there are probably similar projects that I am not aware of and that you are most welcome to share with me so I can add it to this post. So what other formats can we think of? Writing retreats that aim at producing a publication through a [book sprint](#) rather than going through traditional publishing channels? Or do we need more traditional, multi-sited research that works along those busy schedules and may include interviews in unusual locations, e.g. airport lounges, R&R hotels or organizational debriefings?

At this point in time, I am thinking out loud really and I am grateful for comments, suggestions and ideas!

Intellectual autobiographies

We all search for meaning in our lives - which is why I find it puzzling that intellectual biographies and histories seem so rare..... I mentioned, the other day, the recently published [Worldly Philosopher - the odyssey of Albert O Hirschmann](#)

Another book of that genre I enjoy dipping into is [Comparative European Politics - the story of a Profession](#) - which presents a portrait of a profession, through intellectual (auto)biographies of the older generation of leading scholars in the field such as Hans Daalder, Juan Linz, Richard Rose, Giovanni Sartori and Vincent Wright. The book gives a wonderful picture of intellectual endeavour in the post-war period showing how particular experiences turned them towards the study of politics when it was still a quiet field.

My uncle - Wilfrid Harrison - was actually one of the [first post-war UK Professors of Politics](#) which may partly explain the turn my life took - with the fateful decision in 1962 to switch at University from modern languages to politics and economics!

"The Story of a Profession" describes the scholarly infrastructure for international research which they developed in the post-war period and offers stories of academic careers, of achievements and of doubts, of lessons learned or imparted. One of the lesser known figures [paints here a rare landscape of life in 1940s Germany](#) - and [Richard Rose also has a vignette](#).

But patient surfing on the internet on the last 24 hours has unearthed quite a treasure trove - starting with [a great interview with political anthropology Professor Cris Shore](#) whose [work \(on the EC\)](#) I had noticed some weeks back and who turns out to be the son of a famous Labour Minister (in the 1960s Wilson Government)

That, in turn, led me to these [reflections of leading Public Admin Professor RAW Rhodes](#) - whom I had come across in the 1970s as he was starting his academic career - and to an amazing number of articles and books easily available in which he dissects and challenges the British political tradition.

One [review puts it as follows](#)

Rhodes's project is to offer an account of what he and Bevir call the 'stateless state'. This is an image of the state that focuses on the agents of the state - the civil servants, politicians and special advisors - rather than its institutional structure. The state for Rhodes is effectively the sum of their actions. But they do not have free reign: their agency is situated in various webs of relations and beliefs, which are themselves shaped and influenced by particular longstanding narratives and traditions.

Rhodes identifies three particular narratives which are highly influential:

the Westminster narrative, which are the longstanding codes of conduct around political neutrality and service to the minister which govern the behaviour of civil servants;

the managerial narrative, which has become increasingly prominent in the UK since the 1960s and in which the practices of managing, reputedly based on the private sector, according to identifiable targets and with appropriate sanctions shape conduct in the departments;



the governance narrative, in which coordination is achieved through the internal and external organisation of networks across the state and often into civil society as well.

These narratives are not necessarily complementary and often competing. The image that is produced is one of various agents reproducing the state through their constant negotiation between these received traditions and the problems and dilemmas that confront them, rather than the more familiar image of the state as powerful, hierarchical and ossified institutions wielding structural power

On my surfing I also came across a [charming tribute to another comparative political scientist](#) And an [autobiographical essay](#) by the neglected development economist Andre Gunder Frank

December 7 2014

The ceramic teapot is a lovely one I bought in Prague in 1991.....

[Desperately seeking...Satire](#)

I've talked before about [the power of satire](#). Fortuitously, this morning, I found a good example of its use. Contrast today's report from the OECD about [the "wealth gap" and the failure of the "trickle-down" theory](#) of change with this [satirical diatribe on the Daily Show](#) (which I found as a link on the discussion thread)

Until now, I wasn't a fan of John Oliver - he just didn't seem to be able to hold a candle to Jon Stewart on the show but what I've seen in the clips I've viewed so far today has changed my mind. The combination of biting comment with irreverent (and irrelevant) photoshops and sound bites is a powerful mix - as you will see in his treatment of the issue of "net neutrality" [which he effectively parses and deconstructs](#), in Orwellian fashion, as actually "f***in corporate takeover"

Satire has long been a powerful weapon against the pretensions of power - Voltaire's *Candide* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* are well-known literary examples. [Ralph Steadman](#) and [Gerard Scarfe](#) are modern caricaturists in the tradition of Hogarth; and the Liverpool poets ([Roger McGough](#), Adrian Henry) sustained the protestors of the 1960s. British people are not so familiar with the Bert [Brecht's City poems](#) or the savage anti-bourgeois paintings [of Georg Grosz](#) in the 1920s and 1930s.

A powerful satirical essay "[Democracy, Bernard? It must be stopped!](#)" was penned by the author of the Yes Minister TV series and exposes the emptiness behind the rhetoric about democracy and government. It is available only on my website....

In 1987 Management Professor Rosabeth Kanter produced "[Ten Rules for Stifling Initiative](#)" which I have often used to great effect in Central Asian training sessions.

1999 saw the appearance of The Lugano Report; on preserving capitalism in the twenty-first Century which purported to be a leaked report from shady big business but was in fact written by [Susan George](#).

Management guru Russell Ackoff's great collection of tongue-in-cheek laws of management - [Management F-Laws - how organisations really work](#) (2007) As the blurb put it - "They're truths about organizations that we might wish to deny or ignore - simple and more reliable guides to managers' everyday behaviour than the complex truths proposed by scientists, economists and philosophers". An added bonus is that British author, Sally Bibb, was asked to respond in the light of current organizational thinking. Hers is a voice from another generation, another gender and another continent. On every lefthand page is printed Ackoff and Addison's f-Law with their commentary. Opposite, you'll find Sally Bibb's reply. A short version ([13 Sins of management](#)). A typical rule is - "The more important the problem a manager asks consultants for help on, the less useful and more costly their solutions are likely to be".

Robert Greene's 48 Laws of Power may not be satire but it is a very salutary counter to the thousands of unctuous management texts which attribute benign motives to senior management.

A [spoof on the British Constitution](#) produced a few years ago is another good example of the power of satire. A [Guardian article just a couple of days ago](#) drew our attention to the apparent decline in Britain of the genre and linked to [an older piece in the LRB](#)

December 9

Nostalgia

I enjoy writing which focuses on objects - [WG Sebald's](#) use in his novels of old photos; [Edmund de Waal's focus](#) in a family history on amber miniatures; [Neil McGregor's](#) various histories built on various cultural artefacts eg [Germany - the memories of a nation](#) - whose [entire podacst can be heard here](#). It's good also to see some of the objects - on [an excellent blogsite](#)

For me, this particular approach offers a real window into how people have lived their lives in the past.



My little [book on Bulgarian Realist painters](#) (subtitled "How to get to know the Bulgarians through their paintings") lists 140 painters from the early part of the 20th century and tries, in a few lines, to capture their significance.

This wasn't easy - I first have to put the artist's name in Cyrillic script and then copy and paste on Bulgarian google - then google translate what seem to be promising entries. Then there is the problem that these give the barest facts (except long lists of exhibitions and honours which add not a jot to our understanding of the person!) And it goes without saying that most art "criticism" is gobbledygook...

What I want is a sense of the character - how they lived their lives.....the friends they had. I am, for example, very fond of the [Gregor Naidenov's aquarelles of café life](#) in Sofia in the 1930-1950s (above) - but, so far, have been unable to find out anything about the man. And I was impressed with a book on Boris Denev which included lovely black and white photographs of him with friends and in various studios and exhibitions....also a recent book on a [classic Bulgarian photographer, Stoyan Sertev](#) which not only reproduced many of the old photographs (including lovely ones of Nicola Taney) but included a CD of the quartet he led.

I wrote a couple of weeks ago about the 700 page book I had discovered here based on Rumen Manov's personal collections of old Bulgarian photos and cultural artefacts [A Fairy Tale about Bulgaria](#) which gives a wonderful sense of the history of the country.....

Earlier in the year my E-book [Mapping Romania - notes on an unfinished journey](#) used 16 different ways to try to get a handle on the country - namely travel guides; travelogues - which can be divided into the serious or the (sadly increasing number of) tongue-in-cheek type; histories - which deal with what are considered to be the key events in the shaping of a nation; novels; social and cultural histories (including jokes) - which give insights into how ordinary people lived their lives; memoirs and diaries - dealing with those who were more "distinguished"; blogs; magazines; television, films and plays; photographs; paintings and caricatures; buildings; conversations and encounters; friendships; music; food and wine



It's not easy to find books which do justice to countries - travel books do their best but are somewhat one dimensional. More serious books suffer from being written from one particular academic discipline - be it history, economics, politics. Anthropology seems to offer more eg this one I unearthed - [The anthropology of Ireland](#). And this series on the [cultural history of cities](#) is quite excellent.

So perhaps it's about time that someone gave Bulgaria/Sofia a cultural treatment. Rumen's book (which I bought at a discount yesterday - 75 euros) is a useful start - linked to the book on Stoyan Sertev; to [Sofia Enigma and Stigma](#) which contains evocative black and white photos of old, crumbling buildings in Sofia; and to the marvellous 600 page [Sofia's Mount Athos](#) which is a superb study (complete with photos and GPS coordinates) of the 46 monasteries which cluster around Sofia - many since the 14th century.

And Elisabeth Kostova's [The Historian](#).

Despite the continuing political silences about the 42 years Bulgaria spent under communism, the 20th century can still be felt in Sofia - only this week I bought a (copy of) a little 1947 litho

scene of the part of Vasil Levsky Street which has the University at the end, complete with one car and a horse and cart - part of a series dictated by Georgi Dimitrov apparently commissioned of artists then. That was the same day I came across a lovely 1935 landscape by Boris Denev - banned by the communist regime from paintings after 1944 - which had been lying in a house for several decades. It still has the typical white frame used in the 1940/1950s.

And one of my prize possessions is a 1942 journal on every page of which are several pencilled figures - clearly the work of Ilyia Beshkov, the famous caricaturist.

Dec 10

[Access to National Galleries](#)

I've been a bit snifty in the past about Sofia's National Gallery of Art - so let me take my hat off to them for their display of digital facilities. I was a bit annoyed on Thursday to be denied access to an exhibition of Nouveau Art's Nikola Rainov (for reasons of some private party) but was placated by being given the opportunity to use a smart phone to access some 200 watercolours of the past century which have not so far been available to the public - along with useful information about the painters.



This is part of a wider project of gradual digitization of the entire archive of the museum in 2015.

I managed to see the Rainov exhibition the following day - you don't often see his work. And it was accompanied by a superb small catalogue - sadly almost entirely monolingual.

Running in a neighbouring room, was another delightful small exhibition of urban life here a hundred years ago - with a charming video of an elderly lady displaying various artefacts from the period.

And my ever-ready camera was able to catch this shot of a very sharply-dressed elderly visitor to the gallery.....Lack of translation is one of two features which used to distinguish the National Gallery from the municipal one across the road - whose catalogues have been bilingual for quite some years. The second feature is pricing - the national Gallery used to charge 5 euros (now 3 - with pensioners half price). The municipal gallery was free - until last year when a nominal charge was introduced (with pensioners free).

It reminded me of one of my political colleagues in the 1970s [Janey Buchan](#) (who became an MEP in the 1979), She was a tireless advocate in the 60s of the rights of ordinary people (before the days of the Consumer Association) and was particularly strong on the importance of free entry to museums and art galleries, Thatcher put pressure on to introduce charges ([although the British Museum held out](#)) but entry was made free again in 2001 - with significant subsequent increases in visitors.

And I was glad to see that the Neil Mc Gregor, the renowned Director of the British Museum had declined an invitation to direct New York's Metropolitan Museum because it charged an entry fee.

The attitude of Sofia City Gallery is yet another proof of the superiority of municipal to central government

December 13

Bucharest's contrasts



The [Sala Radio](#) is one of Bucharest's best-kept secrets - with great acoustics and the recitals broadcast on the radio. Its Radio Chamber Orchestra kept us on our seats last night with first a Romanian composer (Toduță)'s charming piece - violin Concerto No.1 for String Orchestra. Then JS Bach : Concerto no. 1 in A minor for Violin and Orchestra, BWV 1041 F - with virtuoso soloist CRISTINA ANGHELESCU; and then a rollicking Mendelssohn : Symphony No. IV in A major, op 90 - Italian. The young conductor - Mattei POP - cut a

gangly but effective figure on the podium

Pensioners can get a 3 month season ticket for 35 euros - that's about 1 euro a performance! Little wonder they are such afficionados! And one of Bucharest's ancient trams (number 24) takes you right there (from Piate Viitoreii).

About time Bucharest's dreadful butcher mayor took time off from destroying the past and looked at the spanking new trams Sofia is adding to its fleet.....

Romania's best classic station - [Radio Muzical](#) - [is playing here now](#)

At the opposite end of experience are the Bucharest shopping malls - I thought the Sofia ones were bad but [the gargantuan Cotroceni one](#) just across the Gara de Nord area is a really aggressive slap in the face. Typically, it has no information desk or display and is a therefore a nightmare to navigate.

We had walked then bussed to see Robert Duval in the film [The Judge](#) which gives a nice portrait of small-town America and also has great performances from Robert Downey Jr and Bob Thornton. On the way home, in the heaving bodies and dark, we mistook a number 11 tram for a number 1 and had to retrack at the spaghetti junction around the equally offensive and gargantuan Carrefour. At this station, the tracks run at two levels - and, typically, there were no signs to guide us to the upper track....The journey was therefore completed with a combination of foot, bus and foot....Hats off again to Mayor (butcher) Oprescu!

The drawing is Daumier's Gargantua!

Dec 18

Nudging the politicians out??

The World Bank used to be a name to conjure with. Its keynote annual "World Development" reports blazed an ideological trail in the 90s - particularly its [infamous 1997 neo-liberal attack on the State](#) to which Japan actually issued a specially-commissioned riposte.

The Bank's 2014 World Development Report - entitled "[Mind, Society and Behaviour](#)" - is a showcase for the newer type of behavioural economics which the Bank would have us believe has replaced the discredited system of economics. A lot of people - such as those at [Real World Economics](#) - would disagree.....

The World Bank (WB) no longer seems to arouse the controversy and anger it once did - presumably because there are now so many more worthy targets such as bankers and plutocrats. Twenty years ago my bookshelves were stocked with exposes of the ecological, social and economic damage its lending policies were doing to developing countries.

Special websites and books with such names as "[50 years is enough](#)" were dedicated to the abolition of both the Bank and [the International Monetary Fund](#). "[The Washington Consensus](#)" was a phrase we angrily splattered our conversations with - denoting the intellectual homogeneity it not hegemony the Bank exercised over the economics "discipline".

Successive WB Presidents toned down the neo-liberal rhetoric and skilfully co-opted a lot of the critics - particularly the NGOs. So things are quieter now - but be under no illusions. Behind the scenes, the Bank's largesse toward the academic community ensures that economists continue to act as castrated lapdogs of prevailing power. And over in Brussels, the Economic Commission exercises the same sort of lobotomy surgery of most academics who stray into its territory....

Indeed the recent fashion for governments to "nudge" their citizens to various forms of desired behaviour makes one wonder why we bother with politics any more. They are, after all, just so much unnecessary grit in the machinery.... whose simplistic interventions really should be challenged with rather more effective systems of challenge than most parliaments can manage these submissive days.

But don't let me put you off from what seems quite a good read - the RSA link (the second above) is a serious treatment of the report.....and the Real World Economics collective continues to give us much-needed and bracing home truths eg this thoughtful piece [Challenging the current economics curriculum](#) by the Vice-Chancellor of one of Pakistan's Institutes of Development Economics

Dec 21

Expectations

As a politician from my late 20s, I quickly learned how soon public expectations turn to dust - not least because my first speeches "on the stump" (ie in the open air) warned people that I could make no promises (I would generally have to stop myself from adding "except blood and toil"!).

I found that such an honest approach paid off - and from 1968 I had an undefeated record of 8 public electoral victories and a further string of 8 consecutive successes in the contests which were held immediately after the elections by the ruling Labour party (of which I was part) to decide the key positions.

It was as such a "seasoned" politician (I love the bon viveur sense this epithet gives - as in "add some seasoning"!)

that I was initially elated and then deflated by Obama....

But I was still moved by yesterday's Presidential inauguration of Klaus Iohannis here in Bucharest - first his speech to the unrepentant parliamentarian sinners with its declaration that their stable needed cleansing...then the motorcade to the Cotroceni Palace we had passed just last week - to accept the baton from ever loquacious Basescu.

What a contrast Transylvanian Iohannis makes - with his typically slow delivery! But it was this modesty and circumspection which won him his highly unexpected victory last month and which gives many Romanians the first hope they have had for some time....

In 25 years, the Romanians have had only one brief five-year respite from the insidious poison which the plutocrats (regardless of political label) have been injecting into their veins. Iliescu - who led the palace revolution this time 25 years ago - may have been personally incorruptible but all his minions quickly took the silver; and University Professor Constantinescu simply proved unequal to the task of reform. By coincidence, the country's first post-communist Prime Minister Petr Roman was talking volubly on his mobile (in French) in the English Bookshop at midday - but I failed to identify him. Otherwise I would have approached him to remind him that some 24 years ago, he gave me an hour-long interview.....

Romanian television has these days been playing images of the uprising 25 years ago and one of the links carried a [striking 5 point contrast of life 25 years on](#) - as typified by cars, communications, television channels, churches and.... malls. Petrol, for example, was then rationed (I remember the hassle driving in 1992 the 650 kms from the border down to Bucharest)

Dec 22

Revelations

My blog occasionally refers to the welcome relief my nomadic life of the past 24 years has given from the "noise" of television and newspapers but has not so far attempted to do justice to the wonderful effect which living a solitary life in a foreign country has. You experience and see things in a different and powerfully new way....

Tim Park, for example, has from his mid 20s made his living in Italy as a translator and teacher of translation and has written a series of short pieces in the [New York Review of Books](#) about how this experience has affected his own writing

If you write a lot yourself obviously you become more curious about how certain effects can be achieved or avoided and with application over the years your sensibility is enhanced. In my case translation has been important. I came to Italy when I was twenty-five.

Living in a second language, I became more aware of how language drives and shapes thought. Translating and teaching translation forced me constantly to take texts to pieces in order to put them back together in my own tongue. I became very conscious of elements of style, if only because I felt the tension between the author's habits and my own. Translating texts together with students, I have also had the benefit of discovering all the things they saw that I didn't.

My combination of political and academic roles in the 70s and 80s had made me aware of the need to communicate more clearly - whether in words or text. When I moved in 1990 to work in ex-communist countries, the translation process made me even more aware, for example, of the jargon we use...of how context shapes and alters the meaning we give to things...of the arbitrariness or "slipperiness" of words as TS Eliot put it -

*"Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break,
under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision,
will not stay in place,
Will not stay still."*

Paul Cairney is a Scottish academic (in my field of policy analysis) whose blog is always worth reading. One of his most recent posts is a useful analysis of his thoughts on [presenting a paper in Japan through interpreters](#) which he concludes thus -

In short, if we take the idea of translation seriously, it is not just about a technical process in which words are turned into a direct equivalent in another language and you expect the audience to be informed or do the work to become informed. It is about thinking again about what we think we know, and how much of that knowledge we can share with other people.

Dec 25

Attentiveness

Good resolutions seem to have gone out of fashion - and end-of-year reflections seem to have been surrendered, vicariously, to journalists who remind us, instead, of the world's key events and do a round up, for example, of "best books of the year".

Whatever happened to the "mindfulness" about which we were being exhorted not so long ago - let alone simple "attentiveness"?

Tim Parks - to whom I referred in the last post - [asked recently what might be the most practical way](#)

he could lead his students to a greater attentiveness.....to help protect themselves from all those underlying messages that can shift one's attitude without one's being aware of it? I began to think about the way I read myself, about the activity of reading, what you put into it rather than what was simply on the page.

Try this experiment, I eventually told them: from now on always read with a pen in your hands, not beside you on the table, but actually in your hand, ready, armed. And always make three or four comments on every page, at least one critical, even aggressive. Put a question mark by everything you find suspect. Underline anything you really appreciate. Feel free to write "splendid," but also, "I don't believe a word of it." And even "bullshit."

.....it was remarkable how many students improved their performance with this simple stratagem. There is something predatory, cruel even, about a pen suspended over a text. Like a hawk over a field, it is on the lookout for something vulnerable. Then it is a pleasure to swoop and skewer the victim with the nib's sharp point.

The mere fact of holding the hand poised for action changes our attitude to the text. We are no longer passive consumers of a monologue but active participants in a dialogue. Students would report that their reading slowed down when they had a pen in their hand, but at the same time the text became more dense, more interesting, if only because a certain pleasure could now be taken in their own response to the writing when they didn't feel it was up to scratch, or worthy only of being scratched.

Shades of the "[slow books](#)" concept I have been trying to arouse interest in.....

December 27

The posts of 2015

Conversations
Will this too pass?
Je Suis Charlie
Lives worth living
Seeing cities differently
Greek tragedy
Travelling Light
Mindworks
Neglected Bulgaria
In the Mists of Bulgaria's Past
A Chance Encounter
Inclusive and Extractive Societies
Inclusive Institutions
Profiling the Art Market
Two Funerals and a Scandal
Survival in Romania
Thought for the Day
An Etzioni Resource
The "C" Word
How Governments have bought Time.....
Raymond Williams - a voice never stilled
Key Books of the Century - parts I and II
40 Billions' worth of Social Sciences??
Good Viewing in Sofia
Big Screen Time
King James' English
Kafka is alive and well
In Praise of Older (Wo)men
No Excuse for Apathy
Busts I admire
Anticipating Post-modernism
Memory's Veil
Questioning Reform
Britain at the Polls
Collapse
Spare a Thought
Unwelcoming Pleven
The Great Romanian Realist School
Making Sense of One's Life
Enough is Enough
A Call to Arms



a piece I brought back from a small workshop in Damascus

Is British Journalism Dead?
Must Labour Lose?
A Model for People Power??
In Praise of the Free Spirit
The Internet - III
Stand and Deliver
Nothing to lose but your Chain....link fences
Praising not Burying
Why are the Brits Schizophrenic?
Introduction to the Romanian Realists
Beacons of Hope
Flushing Out What's Worth Reading
Libraries and Writers
Confessions of a Financial Illiterate
German Musings
Culinary and Cultural Delights of Sofia
Hugh Stretton RIP
The Puritan Gift
German Loss of Identity?
Schuld
New Blogs
The Different Faces of Power
Tribalism of the Intellect
Challenging TINA and the "comfort zone"
Waste, Need, Courage and Imagination
The Art of the Memoir
Challenging Mortality
Intimations of Mortality
Village Life 2 generations ago
Send to me....
Our carbon democracy
How Sofia opened Robert Conquest's Eyes
Fatalism - Democracy's Default Position?
The World of Yesterday
Confession Time
When will they ever learn?
How Change Happens
What am I good at/for?
Flames in Bucharest
Despairing of the World - how artists cope
Death in Paris
Is our moral outrage selective?
Passion and Dedication
A Hard Day's Night
The Balkan Brand
A lion of prose - RIP

Forays into Bulgarian Wineries
Losing the Plot
Cultural Trails in the Lower Danube
Romania's Literary House on the Danube
55 years in a couple of pages
Memory's Rooms
In Praise of Scepticism
The Collected Edition



An Uzbek wine pitcher

Conversations



I had a dream during the night - that I was at a Conference which was discussing some sort of national reform but that the only opportunity offered for contributions "from the floor" were badly structured "group discussions" none of which gathered any momentum. And, in any event, I didn't seem to have prepared any sort of input with which I might have been able to wow the audience in a 3 minute diatribe...

It was 05.00 - so I made myself a coffee and thought about "national conversations".....Scotland, of

course, has just had one - lasting 2 years....thousands (perhaps tens of thousands) meetings to explore its future....it's a bit early to draw any lessons from the experience of the independence referendum (known as "indyref") - although [one at least has tried](#)

What of the future? First, Scotland has to be understood as more than a series of competing tribes: Yes and No, pro-independence and anti-independence, nationalist and unionist, SNP and Labour. The undercurrent of this is an attempt by partisans on each of these sides and camps to reduce every opinion down to two perspectives and a politics of two tribes. Everything revolves around the question: whose side are you on? And who do you most trust to look after Scotland? Other questions about democracy, the environment, sustainable economic growth, and how we run public services are lost in this divide, as is any real space for radical progressive politics.

One of the most positive aspects of the "indyref" was the self-education of hundreds of thousands of Scots who showed initiative, curiosity and a willingness to learn and act for themselves, rather than being spoon-fed the predictable narrow diet of official Scotland. It is this rich practice - of opening up debate and choices and refusing to accept the stale offerings of politics, media and power which have historically characterised so much of our public life - which has to be encouraged and given sustenance.

The UK as a whole faces a General Election in 4 months....in the last run-up to an election, an electoral reform movement ([The Power Inquiry](#)) failed to make any dent on the power structure. This time there is not a whisper about challenging the power structure (unless you count Russell Brand's rantings) only talk of "austerity" and "immigration".

Romania missed an opportunity to have a national conversation....the November Presidential elections were controlled by a powerful set of media oligarchs...although a Protestant did rather upset their applecart by winning!

The Bulgarian protests of 2013 did conjure up hopes of reform but became fond memories after the elections of early 2014.....

Of course I have "form" with such dialogue and discussion! In the early 70s, in my capacity as Chairman of a new Social Work authority in Scotland, I organised annual gatherings of neighbourhood groups with the local state and business class about confronting the problems of a shipbuilding town...In the 80s I did the same for the West of Scotland around the issue of urban poverty.... And, between 2006/07, I prepared a [Road Map for municipalities in Kyrgyzstan](#)

Most attempts at such dialogue can be dismissed as mere "talking shops" since they seldom cover the basic economic aspects of life - although I was part of a small group which came together to start a community banking system in the West of Scotland in the late 1980s. We started with a visit to the [Triodos Bank](#) and, some time after I had left Scotland, a venture did eventually emerge which I think is now part of the [Community Development Finance Association](#) set-up. [Developing Strathclyde Ltd](#) was also established in 1993 with similar aims.....Community enterprise is now an important element in Scotland's economic life - as can be seen in the activities of the [Social entrepreneurs network Scotland](#)

In these crisis times, it's sad that so few attempts seem to be made to bring people together for such cooperative ventures - if only for solace if not solidarity...But people seem to have little energy or confidence left - save for quick "fix-its". I referred in September to [the impossible deadline a Bulgarian project](#) was given to deliver a national strategy when something more like a ["Future Search" Conference](#) was actually needed.

All credit therefore to Open Democracy for continuing to bring important material to our notice - such as [this article on "social innovation"](#) which led me to a website [Emergence by Design](#), containing [an interesting manifesto](#) which, on study, disappoints for its failure to situate itself properly in historical context (and for its high-falutin language).

2 January

[Will this too pass?](#)

I've been busy these past few weeks editing 3 E-books all of which will hit the world in the next few weeks. I start with [Ways of Seeingthe Global Crisis](#) which - as has become the template for [my E-books](#) - has emerged from an editing and restructuring of those blogposts of the past couple of years which have touched on this (very general!) issue. What follows is taken from the book's "Inconclusion"

The table with which the small book starts identifies the various "debates" which gripped English-speaking countries at least, decade by decade, from the 1930s...through to the present. It's impressionistic - so doesn't try to bring google analytics to aid - and people may quibble with some of the references. But many who look at it will perhaps feel a shiver down their spine as they recognise how transitory many of our discussions have been. The issues don't necessarily go away - some are simply repackaged

It may cover an 80 year period but all the themes still echo in my mind since it was 1960 when I embarked on my political economy education at Glasgow University - and the key books of the

40s were still influential. Indeed the writings which had the biggest impact on me were Europeans from the start of the century - such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Robert Michels and Karl Popper. Outside the university, it was the writings of RHTawney and Tony Crosland which shaped me - and had me joining the Labour Party in 1959; becoming first an activist; then a councillor; and someone who quickly developed a rather contradictory mix of corporate management and community power principles.

I didn't know it at the time but I was at the start of an ideological upheaval of tectonic proportions as the Keynesian certainties began to crumble in the face of the Hayekian onslaught. For some reason, however, I chose to focus on regional development although the ideas of the strangely named "[public choice](#)" [theorists](#) did get to me in the early 1970s - through the pamphlets of the [Institute of Economic Affairs](#)

But it was the social engineering approach of the managerialists which eventually won the battle for my soul. I vividly remember sitting in front of the radio enthralled as [Donald Schon](#) delivered the Reith lectures in autumn 1970 under the title "Beyond the Stable State". During it he coined the phrase "dynamic conservatism" - a phenomenon which I was to study for several decades in different countries.

I read the literature on organisational change avidly - and tried to apply it wherever I went...John Stewart of the University of Birmingham's Institute of Local Government Studies was a particular inspiration... Policy Analysis - then in its early days - was an obvious attraction and I enrolled on the UK's first (postgraduate) course on the subject at the University of Strathclyde, run by Lewis Gunn which disappointed for its over-rationalistic approach - although it was there that I first came across the notion of "[framing theory](#)". I confess, however, that when I actually had in 2002 to draft a primer on policy analysis for some civil servants in Slovakia, it was the rationalistic approach I adopted rather than that contained in the [Policy Paradox](#) book by [Deborah Stone](#) which I only encountered later.



What, however, the "This too will pass" table doesn't record is the amazing change that occurred in the late 1980s in HOW we talked about these various "issues"...in short the "discursive" or "narrative turn" which post-modernist thought has given us (see Annex 2 for a short explanation of this). Although I've grown to appreciate the rich plurality of interpretations the postmodernists can present on any issue, I'm not quite ready to join their carefree, fatalistic band..."Whatever....." does

not strike me as the most helpful response to give to those anguished by the cutthroat actions of those in privileged positions.... The point I have reached is

It seems impossible to get a social or moral consensus in our societies for [the sort of rebalancing which Henry Mintzberg](#) has brilliantly argued for

- the voices are too diverse these days - as [explained by Mike Hulme](#)
- people have grown tired and cynical
- those in work have little time or energy to help them identify and act on an appropriate programme of change
- those out of work are too depressed
- although the retired generally have the time, resources and experience to be doing more than they are
- but they have lost trust in the capability or good intentions of governments
- let alone the promises of politicians
- and are confronted with too many disparate voices in the reform movement
- most of the "apocalyptists" (such as [William Greer](#) and [Dmitry Orlov](#)) who have confronted the collapse of industrial civilisation counsel a Candide-like "garden cultivation"
- And yet I still persevere in my naïve belief that governments are capable of doing more.....

Am I wrong? It's perhaps appropriate that, at this point I reach for TS Eliot -

*And what there is to conquer
by strength and submission, has already been discovered
once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
to emulate - But there is no competition -
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
and found and lost again and again; and now under conditions
that seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.
(The Four Quartets)*

8 January

The painting is one of my Alexandra Mechkuevska's - probably from the 30s or 40s

[Beshkov's country salutes Voltaire's and Daumier's in sadness for the slain journalists of Charlie H](#)

Today's sombre post is my tribute to the French journalists slaughtered so savagely in Paris this week. As they would surely have wished, it is written in celebration of the courage of all those who have sought over the ages and in all countries to use their artistic skills to mock the pretensions of the dogmatists and the powerful. But it is also written in support of the humanistic principles exemplified by writers such as Voltaire.....

Only last month I wrote a post [Desperately Seeking....Satire](#) about how much we need satire in these times and, more than two years ago, had celebrated it in a detailed post as "[the greatest art](#)

[form](#)". The posts record the artists and writers who have risked their livelihoods and lives for centuries in the pursuit of principle.

Simon Jenkins spoke for many people with [his piece in Wednesday's Guardian](#) which is reproduced (with cartoons) in this [excellent blog I came across recently](#)

In one of these serendipitous moments of which my life increasingly seems to consist, I came across, earlier this week in Sofia's open-air book market, a copy of a lovely small book about the friendship in the 1930s between Bulgaria's most famous satirist and cartoonist, [Ilyia Beshkov](#) and an émigré journalist from Hitler's Germany.

It is a powerful evocation (largely from the memory of Beshkov's widow) of that period of his life when the vendetta against his cartoons had reduced him to poverty - but how the support of friends sustained him. You can actually read [the full text of the book here](#) - although sadly not the cartoons.

I was in the middle of drafting this post when friends here in Sofia contacted me about the tribute which will take place at 18.00 this evening at the French Embassy in Sofia.

I am delighted to be in a position not only to attend but also to have the opportunity of displaying the poster-size reproductions I just happened to bring down from Bucharest of 5 [Daumier](#) cartoons - which I propose to inscribe with suitable text, mentioning Charlie Hebdo, Daumier and Beshkov.....
9 January

[Lives worth Living](#)

I've been feeling a bit guilty this morning - if that is the right word to describe my feelings on reading of the death from cancer of two figures I knew nothing about but who seemed to epitomise everything we mean by the phrase "a life worth living".

From curiosity I had punched into an ad for a book released today called "[Late Fragments](#)" which turned out to be the touching memoir of a young activist, Kate Gross, who died on Christmas Day in her early 30s and who wrote the book as a celebration of life for her family

I'd no sooner read that than I hit, completely by accident, a tribute to another (rather older) cancer victim - one [Mike Marqusee](#) - a journalist and leftist campaigner a typical example of whose writing can be read in [this article on Red Pepper](#).

[This is a good review](#) of one of his (short) books about pharmaceutical companies - which raises the question of what accounts for the huge increase in the number of deaths from cancer which "developed" countries have experienced in recent years.

Apart from the obvious explanation of tobacco, other factors relate to the rise in awareness and reporting - eg

- the increased emphasis on physical exercise and preventive health care
- the greater publicity which cancer has received
- the increased frequency of medical tests for the condition

But I am surely not alone in thinking that artificial food additives also have a lot to do with it.

At this stage, of course, I should declare an interest. It was at this time two years ago that I sought a biopsy - which revealed a medium-serious level of prostate cancer and had resort, in the summer, to a 2 month course of radiation treatment (in Germany).

That seemed to do the trick - although I do need to take a daily hormone pill. And, having read up on the subject, do also try to have daily exercise and (following the advice of a [Professor Plant](#)) good vitamin input

Our lives are all too short - Gross and Maqusee both lived rich lives which have been cut tragically short. Each, in their different way, shows what we can - and should - do with our life.

RIP

postscript

By one of these coincidences, I was this afternoon interviewed by a roving TV mike on Sofia's streets and asked how important physical exercise was to me (this after I had explained I did not speak Bulgarian). To the interviewer (and cameraman)'s obvious delight, I then extolled the virtues of the Rodina Hotel; of Bulgarian vegetables; and of daily walking and fitness routines..... En passant I mentioned my own brush with cancer.....

15 Jan

Seeing cities differently

This is the fourth flat I've had in almost 8 years in Sofia - and it's interesting what different perspectives (and indeed feelings) about the city one gets from the different micro-neighbourhoods. John Berger's phrase "[ways of seeing](#)" comes to mind.

Two were in spitting distance of one another - near the football stadium (Nikolai Pavlovitch and Khan Krum streets) - each going back to the 1920s.... Patriarch Eftemi Boulevard and [Graf Ignatiev](#) street were the backbone of the area. The very names resonate with history....[Krum](#) referring to the first Bulgarian Empire; [Ignatiev](#) to the Russian military assistance in removing the Ottoman yoke from the Bulgarians; [Pavlovitch](#) the most influential of Bulgaria's early painters.



The most modern and indeed the first was on [Lajos Kossuth](#) St, just off [Hristov Botev](#) Boulevard - next to a lovely old Bulgarian revival building which actually houses the Catholic Prelate! And the Armenian Cathedral very slowly being built.... The street names celebrate the power of ideas about independence in the 19th century....

Now I'm in a charming period flat [in the old area](#) between [Vasil Levski](#), Dondukov and Princess Maria Luise Boulevards - on the edge of the

Jewish neighbourhood which was focused on the fascinating women's market, subject [of an excellent brief here](#).

Prince Dondukov played (as Russian Governor) a key role in the drafting of the Bulgarian constitution which was famed in its time as one of the world's most liberal. "[Stefan Stambolov and the emergence of the Bulgarian nation](#)" (1993) is a rare book in the English language about those times.....

The neighbourhood has rapidly become my favourite...it's a mere 10 minute stroll up Danube St (where my flat criss-crosses with Tsar Simeon St) to the magnificent Alexander Nevski Cathedral behind whose dome Mount Vitosha dominates the skyline. And then down past the colourful Russian church and the back of what was the Palace and is now the National Gallery - with its small park area and statues. The through the little park with the jazz buskers, the National Theatre and Sofia City Gallery via Vitosha walking street, Levski Boulevard to the Rodina Hotel where I swim and keep fit.

It was four years ago (!) that I [wrote of the joys of strolling around Sofia](#) which you can experience vicariously in "A Walk in the Street of Sofia Guidebook " (Kras Plus 2002) - a marvellous bilingual history of the 6 parts of central Sofia for those who want to appreciate the city's singularity by foot. Sadly I've not so far been able to find another copy in the bookshops...but you can get a sense of the area from the album named "walk around the flat" in my [flickr account](#)

[Sofia Enigma and Stigma](#) (Enthusiast 2011) by "dandy" Ljubomir Milchev is a lovely little ode to the city which contains evocative black and white photos of old, crumbling buildings in my neighbourhood. Imagine my delight in discovering, in a nearby [magic bookshop](#) on Rakovski St, a booklet produced with great care and thought - "*Time and Beauty; art nouveau in the Bulgarian cities*" by an Italian - Vittore Collina (2014) - a real labour of love.

And it was just a couple of minutes from the Cathedral that I found on Saturday the most amazing gallery which has been lying waiting for me for 7 years - the Atelier of Bulgaria's Grand Old Man of Art, **Svetlin Roussev**...

22 Jan

[Greek tragedy](#)

At last a Minister of Finance with some integrity.....Yanis Varoufakis - to whose important "[Global Minotaur](#)" book I devoted a [blogpost almost three years ago](#) - has emerged from the chaos that is Greece as the Finance Minister of the new Syriza government. He is either a very foolish or a very courageous man!

His has been one of the clear and strong voices of economic sanity for the past few years, using [his blog](#) to great effect - giving us not only analysis but challenging recommendations. In a post earlier this month, he explains [why he decided to run](#) in these elections. He's fully aware of the ease with which honest people get corrupted (in different ways) by office and assures us that will keep a letter of resignation in his inside pocket for use whenever he "loses the commitment to speak truth

to power". The problem, of course, is that he has just become that power!! So his dialogue will have to be with his conscience!

Paul Mason - from whom sadly we do not hear much now that he has moved from radio to television - had a recent interview with him in which Varifakous promised to "[destroy the Greek oligarchy system](#)". In 2010, Varifakous wrote (with fellow political economics Professors Stuart Holland and James Galbraith - son of the famous JG) a 12 page [modest proposal](#) for resolving the European crisis.....

Klaus Kastner is a retired Austrian banker who has a very sharply-written blog called [Observing Greece](#) and gives us not only an interesting and [measured response to the Syriza victory](#) but access to [the programme on which Syriza ran](#)

We are all very rude about the Greeks - and their role in European events in the last 100 years gives us every reason to be. Their invasion of Turkey in 1919 caused massacres and massive migration treks and regional instability. Of course, Britain's elite has always had strong Hellenic prejudices and has consistently been on the sidelines cheering the bloodletters and oligarchs on.....A long article in November last year gives the detail on [Winston Churchill's role in the horrific Greek Civil War post 1944](#). My gym teacher at school was a Greek communist who was one of many forced to leave the country because of the violence. His nickname was "Wee Pat" and I still remember his stentorian voice as he would bellow to those wanting to be excused the stronger exercises "keep your vest on boy!"!!!

Those wanting to keep in touch with Greek events might usefully use the [Macropolis website](#) which started in 2013 specifically to help outsiders try to make sense of the Greek tragedy.....

Tuesday 27 Jan

update

clearly Varoufakis didn't last long. His arrogance seems to have been his undoing....

[Travelling Light](#)

Although some of my earliest political acts (after demonstrations against UK repressions in Central Africa in 1959 and the nuclear submarine base on the Clyde in the early 1960s) were about boosting consumer choice (under the influence of the irrepressible [Janey Buchan](#)) I've never actually bought into the "consumer ideology" with which my generation was, I think, the first to be gripped.....

My parents, married in the immediate pre-war period, enjoyed existential (but not material) luxury. Money was scarce - my father existed on a Scottish Presbyterian Minister's "stipend" (of less than 1000 pounds a year) although we did live rent-free in a "Manse" owned by the Church of Scotland.... Any spare cash soon disappeared into the hands of various folk who would come begging to the house.....my father was a well-known "soft-touch"....

He never owned a car - being a familiar (or "well-ken't") figure striding (and pausing to chat on or pick up paper from) the streets of the shipbuilding town in which he spent 60 years of his life.

He would earn some spare cash from tutoring - although it was never clear whether this was from necessity or love of learning.....

I grew up in the 1950s - aware of television which was, however, a real luxury. I have a memory of watching (on a neighbour's set) the 1952 Coronation for a few boring minutes before being let loose on an empty street and, a few years later (on Saturday afternoons) my friend Les Mitchell's set in neighbouring Newton St first the football results and, in 1963 the first episodes of Doctor Who! Bliss it was.....

It was 1966 or so when I acquired my first flat - with 2,000 pounds from my mum's hard-pressed savings - and [Habitat furniture](#).....In 1968 I outmatched my father's income almost at first go when I became a Lecturer at a Paisley College. The very same year I was elected to Greenock's town council and soon became a Chairman of a major committee.

In celebration I bought a second-hand Volvo saloon from a lover's father's garage..... shades of [John Updike](#). And, thereafter, a series of such cars. I acquired my first new car at the age of 47....And my first fitted kitchen a few years earlier.....

When, after leaving Scotland, I transferred the flat (and remaining mortgage payments of some 20k) to my wife, I had neither savings nor debt.....verily I was a happy man!

I have, since then, accumulated some possessions - one house (for 6000 euros) and helped my partner acquire a flat in central Bucharest for a few thousand deutschmark.....But for 25 years I have rented most of the places I have stayed in - about 20 addresses during the period.....which is more than 100k in rent - but probably balanced by the absence of any legal requirement to pay tax.....The nomadic life has meant minimal possessions.....verily I am a happy man..... although the groaning suitcases from Central Asia brought carpets, ceramics and small stuff.....and, since then, the books and paintings have been accumulating.....in four separate locations.....and in 1997 I acquired another new car (albeit a modest Daewoo Cielo) which purred happily all over North, South and Central Europe for 16 years.....

But In summer 2013, I blew it.....I not only bought a Kia Estate - it was a long-considered choice.....during which time I pondered other brands such as Skoda..... Verily I have sinned!

This is all by way of prelude to the tale of my first real consumer search a few weeks ago - for a sound system for my laptop with which to listen to classical music.....
A tale which I will tell tomorrow.....(Insallah.....)

29 Jan

Mindworks

Strange the way the mind works....the original intention behind yesterday's post was to give a simple description of the trouble I'm having deciding what sound system best fits my needs..... Instead I found myself resurrecting memories.....and sketching a way of life that will strike the present generation aswell.....weird! The idea of debt still had religious echoes in those days - the injunction "neither a borrower nor lender be" still resonates in my mind. That's why the word "sin" suddenly crops up in the post....



This led my thoughts back to a book which made such an on impression on me a few years back that I bought an additional couple of copies to ensure that I had it on hand more easily - Michael Foley's [The Age of Absurdity - why modern life makes it impossible to be happy](#) Drawing on philosophy, religion, history, psychology and neuroscience, he explores the things that modern culture is either rejecting or driving us away from:

Responsibility - *we are entitled to succeed and be happy, so someone/thing else must be to blame when we are not*

Difficulty - *we believe we deserve an easy life, and worship the effortless and anything that avoids struggle (as Foley points out, this extends even to eating oranges: sales are falling as peeling them is now seen as too demanding and just so, you know, yesterday...)*

Understanding - *a related point, as understanding requires effort, but where we once expected decision-making to involve rationality, we have moved through emotion to intuition (usually reliable) and - more worryingly - impulse (usually unreliable), a tendency that Foley sees as explaining the appeal of fundamentalism ("which sheds the burden of freedom and eliminates the struggle to establish truth and meaning and all the anxiety of doubt. There is no solution as satisfactory and reassuring as God.")*

Detachment - *we benefit from concentration, autonomy and privacy, but life demands immersion, distraction, collaboration and company; by confusing self-esteem (essentially external and concerned with our image to others) with self-respect (essentially internal and concerned with our self-image), we further fuel our sense of entitlement - and our depression, frustration and rage when we don't get what we 'deserve'*

At that point I shook myself and tried to get back to the issue in hand - should I buy a Denon or a Bose? Should it be Bluetooth?

But now I felt I needed to explain why I was needing something apparently portable when, for the first time in 25 years, I am no longer nomadic....(or at least only between 3 locations.....!) In 1990 I had left the West of Scottish and found myself "on assignments" - my "user name" indeed on most websites is "nomadron" - and what does my wicked mind then divert me into? Nothing less than memories of [Dick Barton, special agent](#) to whose radio programme I was, with many millions of others, an avid listener in the early 1950s!!!

I duly inserted the Wikipedia link but was then tempted to have a look at an [old black and white movie from the period](#). Did actors really speak and behave like that in those days???

So let's start again.....clearly music is important to me....but, until a year or so ago, I had been content with simple radio/CD players. The collection has grown - in all 3 locations I now call home... But the demise of one the simple music systems called for a replacement and a simple bit of research and the accident of one of the quality Denon music system outlets being located on one of my regular beats in Sofia had me installing it in my mountain house - to my great satisfaction....

Now my ear had a standard of comparison.....I am on the primrose path to hell.....

My education about technical options grows by leaps and bounds! The Bose branch at the Bulgaria Mall in Sofia wasn't exactly heaving with goodies - and could offer only a 2 week delivery date for most systems.....And I could listen only to the smallest - a 19x6 cm [Bluetooth Soundlink Mini](#) at 450 leva (that's 230 euros). That didn't offer the depth which the larger [Denon portable speaker](#) does at 400 leva.....

But there is another quality Bluetooth option - [SoundTouch](#) portable at 850 leva which also offer at the same price a non-portable version (ie with electricity connection). The [full Bose range is here](#)

A Technopolis branch in the same (empty and soulless) Mall offered a [Logitech 2600BT](#) with 2 subtle cones (connected obviously but with a fine small white wire looking like Lasagne) and costing (with a tiny adaptor) only 289 leva.....only problem - the guy couldn't get it to work.....And, as the review video says, they're not really portable.....and lack quality sound.....But interesting....

On balance I'm left with 3 options -

- Stick with my simple 5 year-old 50 euros Philips radio whose tones are reverberating powerfully around my flat's large sitting room as I write
- The 400 leva Denon - with as good a quality as the complex headphones with digital to analogue converter at 550 leva (let alone the 2000 leva amplifier and speaker systems with cables.....
- The as yet untested Bose SoundTouch options - cheapest of which (both portable and non-P) are 850 leva.....

Much as I am tempted to stay with my old Philips radio, it doesn't allow streaming - or audio for films from Zamunda (the Bulgarian PirateBay)!!

Choice! Choice" Or as the Germans put it - Die Qual der Wahl (The torture of choice!!)

And they say this is the "instant gratification" generation! More like "paralysis by analysis"!!

30 Jan

[Neglected Bulgaria](#)



Bulgaria - by virtue of its size and Cyrillic script - gets a raw deal on the internet. To help enlarge its profile I therefore offer this E-book of 100 pages - [Bulgarian Explorations](#) which I have drafted in the past few weeks in anticipation of one of my daughter's first visits to the country I shall run excerpts from it during February....starting with this -

The Balkans have for the past few centuries been a source of great fascination for west Europeans. For intrepid travellers from the 18th century at least, this was the furthest

extremity of the world that they could reasonably attempt....[The Debated Lands](#) by Philip Hammond (2002) looks at about 500 books written by these travellers - first at the motifs of discord, savagery, backwardness and obfuscation which characterise the 19th century British travel books about the area. "[Danubian Principalities: the frontier lands of the Christian and of the Turk](#)" (1854), for example, is written by a British engineer who found himself in the land just south of the Danube in what is now North-East Bulgaria and offers a view just 20 years before Bulgaria was liberated from the "[Turkish Yoke](#)"

There then followed a strand of writing in the late 1920s which, as Hammond puts it,

"took the romanticisation into deeper territory - with a revolt against western modernity and mass society -

From the end of the First World War until the outbreak of the Second, travellers were finding in this previously deprived corner of Europe.... " a peace, harmony, vivacity and pastoral beauty in utmost contrast to the perceived barrenness of the West, and which produced benefits for those weary of modernity that ranged from personal rejuvenation to outright revelation".

According to this alternative balkanism, violence had disappeared from the region, savagery became tamed, obfuscation turned to honesty and clarity, and the extreme backwardness that had formerly been the gauge of Balkan shortcoming was now the very measure by which it was extolled. For many travelers, any mystery that did remain around the geographical object became less the marker of a befuddled and dishonest culture than a vital indication of spiritual depth....."

[Meet Bulgaria](#); RH Markham (1932) (who was Balkans correspondent of The Christian Scientist) may be seen as an example. The link gives you the entire book which paints a charming picture of a rural society - and has a complete chapter on painting.

Undoubtedly the most famous travel writer for this part of the world was [Patrick Leigh Fermour](#) (generally known as Paddy) whose trilogy about his walk from the English Channel to

Istanbul in 1933 was finished only last year. [A Time of Gifts](#) (1977) covered mainly his experience of Nazi Germany; [Between the Woods and the Water](#) (1986) of Hungarian aristocratic houses in Transylvania. But, in 2013, after a 25-year gap, we got [The Broken Road](#) (2013) dealt mainly with the Bulgarian and Greek sections of his trip. Paddy's writing is quite exquisite. He led a very full life - a [website is devoted to his memory](#); and a great biography came out quite recently.

[Rates of Exchange](#) by Malcolm Bradbury (1982) follows a British linguistics lecturer, Dr. Angus Petworth, on his first ever visit behind the Iron Curtain, to Slaka.

His arrival, the paranoia of his hosts, the changing moods of his ever-present interpreter and guide, the secret trysts with attractive female novelists, his increasingly desperate attempts to phone home and the fall-off-the-chair-laughing diversion into second-division British diplomatic circles are brilliantly written vignettes that can only be based on real events.

These may or may not of course have happened in Bulgaria - Slaka ultimately borrows a little from every country once behind the Iron Curtain - but anyone who visited before (or even immediately after) 1990's overthrow of the communists will immediately recognise much of communist-era Bulgaria in Bradbury's book.

Especially good are the descriptions of the hotels: dark wood everywhere, omnipresent men in long coats reading newspapers, peroxide-blondes smoking at lobby bars, terrible service and Byzantine bureaucracy.

[Imagining the Balkans](#) by Bulgarian anthropologist Maria Todorova writes that In the approach to the First World War specific countries were embraced by economic and military alliances and some countries acquired what has been called a "pet state" status.

[Todorova](#) sums up as the pet state approach to south-east Europe as consisting of "*the choosing from amongst the Balkan states a people whose predicaments to abhor, whose history and indigenous leaders to commend, whose political grievances to air, and whose national aspirations to advocate*". In this way Montenegrins, Serbs, Greeks, Bulgarians and Albanians were all, at different times, picked out for laudatory comment.

Sat 31 January

[In the mists of Bulgaria's past](#)

Bulgaria has a long and proud history - reaching back 1300 years. Sofia is Europe's second oldest capital..... Tribes and foreign armies have ravaged its territory for thousands of years.....

The Isihia music group gives us a [haunting ensemble here of painting and music](#) to help fix that reality in our minds.

And a [1980s film about the nation's first ruler - Han Asparuh](#) is a stirring 2 hour view (with subtitles) which also makes us aware of the emptiness of Hollywood epics.....

Initially I could find only one history book but am now beginning to develop the beginnings of a serious library....of which three books are the mainstay -

- "The Rose of the Balkans - a short history of Bulgaria" by Ivan Iltchev (Colibri 2005) - a delightful read (with good graphics) by the Dean of Sofia University who has also produced several other books on modern Bulgarian history
- [Short History of Modern Bulgaria](#) RJ Crampton (1987)
- [Historical Dictionary of Bulgaria](#) Raymon Detrez (the Scarecrow Press 2006) - an amazing find (thanks to The National Library of Scotland). 900 pages of information (of which no less than 100 pages are a bibliography of books and articles available in the English language!!) All freely downloadable!!

One of the main Sofia thoroughfares is Stamboulski St which I had assumed was a reference to Istanbul (if I had given half a thought to the Ottoman Empire, I should have known better!!). In fact it refers to one of Bulgaria's most prominent 20th Century politicians whose massive statue towers over the entrance to the Opera House -

One book clearly worth reading on him is Peasants in power: Alexander Stamboliski and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, 1899-1923 by John Bell (1977) which a review summarized usefully thus -

The Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU) was a left-populist political party based in the rural areas of Bulgaria. They briefly held power from 1919 to 1923, under the charismatic leadership of Alexander Stamboliski. In 1923, the BANU government was overthrown by a military coup. Stamboliski was arrested and tortured to death.

Bulgarian politics almost a century ago may seem like a somewhat obscure and esoteric subject (unless you are Bulgarian!), but the history of the BANU have broader implications. During the 20th century, modernization have essentially only taken two paths: capitalist modernization or socialist modernization. The latter path eventually proved unviable, unless one counts present-day China as still being socialist. Stamboliski and the BANU attempted a third way to modernization: a path based on neither the bourgeoisie nor "the working class" (actually a socialist state bureaucracy), but rather on the peasantry. They attempted to turn Bulgaria into some kind of non-capitalist, non-socialist system based on peasant private property and cooperatives. The ultimate goal of the BANU was to replace parliamentary democracy with an "estatist" organization based on the professional organizations of peasants, artisans and workers. ("Estatist" as in based on estates.) Apparently, this was a vaguely left-wing version of corporatism.

What makes the BANU interesting, is precisely that their commitment to the peasantry wasn't a call for anti-modernism or Throne and Altar conservative politics. Stamboliski was a freethinker who had studied Darwin, Renan and Bernstein. He opposed both the Bulgarian monarchy, the military and the nationalist wars of expansion carried out by a number of Bulgarian governments. He wanted modernization, but a modernization that would benefit the peasantry rather than squeeze them in the usual fashion.

Stamboliski believed that private property was legitimate as long as it was acquired through individual or family labour. He therefore opposed big landowners and called for a far-reaching land reform. In power, Stamboliski used the power of the state to carry out a radical redistribution of land. The BANU also encouraged the creation of cooperatives in agriculture, fishing and forestry. The Bulgarian government established a virtual monopoly on foreign trade in grain and tobacco, which led to the peasants getting higher prices for their products. A system of virtual rent controls was instituted to ease the burdens of the homeless after World War One. The government also set up a compulsory labour service to mobilize workers and peasants to build new roads, clean the streets of the towns, etc.



What this shows, of course, is that the idea of a radical redistribution of property without using the power of the state, is utopian. No matter whether the goal is to abolish private property, or merely to redistribute it, the power of the state is necessary. (The only exception would be a situation of general societal breakdown, at which point the local communities would presumably help themselves to whatever part of "big business" happens to be in their backyard.)

Another thing that intrigued me when reading "Peasants in power" was the peaceful foreign policy advocated by the BANU. As already indicated, Stamboliski

absolutely opposed the foreign expansionism of the previous Bulgarian governments and their bizarre allies, the terrorist organization IMRO. Opposing the tide of Greater Bulgarian nationalism against Turks, Greeks, Serbs and Rumanians must have been difficult, but Stamboliski stood his ground. Eventually the BANU got the support of a plurality of the Bulgarian voters, who were sick and tired of all the losing wars. In power, Stamboliski called for a Balkan federation and sought rapprochement with Yugoslavia, the traditional enemy of Bulgaria in all things Balkan.

Eventually, Stamboliski and his radical populist regime were overthrown by a bloody right wing coup. That the traditional circles in Bulgaria opposed the BANU is hardly surprising. To them, the BANU was "Bolshevist". The IMRO, a Macedonian terrorist organization with a substantial following in Bulgaria, also opposed the BANU and assassinated several of its ministers already before the coup. The IMRO wanted Bulgaria to attack the Serbs or the Greeks (or both!) in order to regain all of Macedonia for a Greater Bulgaria, a bizarre but typically nationalist project. Russian White Guards (stationed in Bulgaria at the prodding of the Allies) had been implicated in an earlier coup attempt, and resented Stamboliski's thaw with the Soviet Union.

Tragically, the BANU was also opposed by the other left-wing parties. The Broad Socialists (Social Democrats) opposed the BANU. So did the Communist Party, which viewed the conflicts between Stamboliski and the right-wing as an internal "bourgeois" conflict. Only after the overthrow and murder of Stamboliski did the Communists enter an alliance with the BANU, but their joint uprising against the new regime failed completely, and brutal repression followed. For rather obvious reasons, nobody can tell how world history would have looked like, had a "Green" path to modernization been chosen, rather than the "Blue" or "Red" paths actually followed, or if such a path is even feasible. Still, "Peasants in power" is an interesting and fascinating read about a little known episode in that world history...

Other English language books on Bulgaria clearly worth reading are -

- [Debating the Past: Modern Bulgarian History: From Stambolov to Zhivkov](#); [Roumen Daskalov](#) (2011)
- [Crown of Thorns; the reign of Boris III of Bulgaria 1918-1943](#) (1987)
- [Stefan Stambolov and the emergence of the Bulgarian nation](#) (1993)
- [Who Owns the Past?: The Politics of Time in a 'model' Bulgarian Village](#); [Deema Kaneff](#) (2006)
- [The Iron Fist](#) ; - inside the archives of the Bulgarian Secret Police Alex Dmitrova (2007)

- [Voices from the Gulag - life and death in communist Bulgaria](#) (1999) looks in harrowing detail at this period of Bulgaria's history
- Papers of the American Research Centre in Sofia (2014); a very impressive collection of monographs on different aspects of Balkan history eg about commerce between Brasov and Vidin in the 15th century!!

I found the painting (by Ivan Getsov) several years ago in a pile of old stuff kept in a Gallery storeroom but could never identify which of the many wars which have raged on Bulgarian territory it was referring to. A visitor in November identified it as the 1923 communist uprising.....

4 February

A Chance Encounter

It was typical that the very day I was hoping to put my new E-book on Bulgaria online. I stumbled on yet another great but neglected Bulgarian painter....And all thanks to family, friendship and drink!

My eldest daughter will visit me (with her husband) for the first time in a week and I therefore had to find a bed settee. A visit to IKEA soon produced the goods - which lay in pieces in the spare room for a week or so.... My friend Yovo promised to come to the rescue on Wednesday - and I duly set off to the nearby CasaVino to ensure he was properly recompensed for what proved to be 2 hours of work....

As I hit the park, I decided to see if the Vaska Emanouilova gallery had anything new to show and was quite stunned by what I found - an exhibition of the work of Iakim Banchev (1884-1967 - a magnificent portraitist and landscape artist who captures, for me, the essence of Bulgarian art and society in the first half of the 20th Century



Admitted 1903 to the National School of Drawing in the studio painting of Ivan Markvichka and Ivan Angelov, he was part of the student flow to the Art Academy in Dresden, where he stays until March 1904. Then he goes to Turin - where he graduates and stays for five years. In 1905 he takes part in an exhibition with his work "Nude" and received First Prize (the picture is located in the Turin Museum). He returned to his native Lovech, bringing with him his paintings from his workshops in the academies - a few of which were purchased in the early 50s by Sofia City Gallery,

He works as a military artist in the Balkan Wars and creates dozens of large-scale canvasses immortalising the horror of war (now part of the collection of the Museum of Military History in Sofia). But he wasn't able to break into the official art world and headed across the Atlantic hoping to find work as an architect. In summer 1923 he settled in Manhattan - but his hopes to find work as an architect quickly evaporated and he was forced to go back to his painting from which he earned enough money to return to his beloved Mina.

Financial difficulties forced him to leave again and, from July 1927 to July 1933, the Banchev family lived

in the US but saved enough from portraits to allow them to return to BG and buy in Sofia a property at 5a "August 11" St where he designed his own studio on the top floor .

In the remaining three decades of life he worked in the pharmaceutical office of his brother Ivan. After Sept 1944 he withdraws from the artistic party because of the change in tastes but mostly because of his bad bourgeois past.

Despite attempts after the political changes in the country to adapt and to participate in exhibitions, his works are never admitted. "As a kind of reward for his modest nature, UBA accepts one work in 1949 but doesn't display it. He sank into the solitude of his own studio, where he painted and then destroyed the works to avoid trouble - Sometimes doing portraits on order for a ministerial office with pictures of Botev, Levski Georgi Dimitrov. Portraits not signed. Jakim Banchev meets death on the doorstep of his home on January 19, 1967".

Here's a brief TV programme on the [exhibition which runs at the Emanouiliva Gallery](#) until the end of the month.

6 February

A Daughter and Son-in-Law's Visit

The nomadic existence I've had for the past 25 years has meant that meetings with loved ones are events which carry anticipation, appreciation and memories....

I have three daughters - two from my second marriage who were quite young when I started my wanderings and were therefore able to visit me several times in the 1990s in various parts of Central Europe. When my mother died in 2005, my quarterly visits to Scotland stopped and meetings



therefore quite rare.

I was delighted that they were both able to visit me in my homes in this part of the world in 2013 and 2014 - events for which I prepared with the E-books on mapping cultural aspects of Bulgaria and Romania.

My eldest daughter's career and family have made such visits impossible - until now...and I was therefore delighted to welcome Jan and Peter to Sofia for a fleeting visit to Sofia (here they are with Vladimir Dimitrov-Maistera - and, below, a proud dad)



Inclusive and Extractive Societies

By coincidence I find myself reading three related pieces at one and the same time [Why Nations Fail](#) (2012) which gripped me from the opening pages of the Preface - as the review in the link says -

For anyone remotely interested in these issues Why Nations Fail is a must-read. Acemoglu and Robinson are intellectual heavyweights of the first rank, the one a professor of economics at MIT, the other a professor of political science at Harvard.

Mostly, such people write only for other academics. In this book, they have done you the courtesy of writing a book that while at the intellectual cutting edge is not just readable but engrossing.

This alone would be reason to take notice: a vital topic, top scholars, and a well-written book.

You will find an [excellent review here](#) which identifies one of the book's potential weaknesses -

Explaining the entire history of humankind by dividing the world into "extractive" and "inclusive" institutions is a daunting task. At one level the notion that "extractive" institutions fail and "inclusive" ones succeed can be a tautology - if we mean that "extractive" institutions are ones that successfully block growth and "inclusive" ones are those that do not.

This not what Acemoglu and Robinson have in mind. But lacking an axiomatic definition of what is "inclusive" and what is "extractive" that is independent from actual outcomes, the classification of historical institutions as belonging to one or the other group can end up being based on ex-post evaluations of the outcomes themselves, thereby making the argument circular and subject to a selection bias.

As a consequence, while many examples fit their theory well, others are more difficult and the discussion of those examples in the book is sometimes strained.

Empirically, when trying to classify a particular set of institutions either as "inclusive" or "extractive", one has to face the problem of quantifying what a "small" group of individuals, in one case, and "many, in the other, mean. In what sense were the institutional arrangements of the Roman Empire "inclusive" relative, for example, to those of the Communist USSR? Or in what sense did the Spanish Kingdom turn from "inclusive" to "extractive" between the XV and the XVII century?

I should at this point confess that I have reached only page 78 (there are another 400 to go) - but one of the delights of the internet is that it allows you to find and read the most important critical reviews, thus giving you the key questions right from the beginning with which to query the authors....and the review I have quoted from and linked to is, quite simply, the best review I have ever read!!!!

And it warns me that an issue to which the book devotes little attention is the "role of competition between nations"....

Clearly the book will keep me occupied for the week - but the other two (thankfully shorter) pieces which swam into view (as it were) pose the important question which I suspect the book doesn't deal with about how to explain the huge discrepancies in life chances WITHIN nations.

A significant percentage of citizens living in "north Britain" (ditto most EU countries and the USA) spend their lives in quasi "third-world" conditions. I myself spent 20 years helping Scotland's largest public agency develop a strategy to ameliorate this.....and the second piece is (yet another) pamphlet about the deep-rooted poverty within ScotlandIt's called [No More Excuses](#) and has some good lines -

Essentially, the consumption model that dominates our economy exploits workers in poor countries, undermines businesses which are local and based in the community, offers minimum wage part-time and casual employment for the sake of cheap goods and excess profits.....

A society where esteem and self-worth are derived from acquisition, material consumption, and perceived status, rather than from relationships, mutuality or the pursuit of equality, is problematic.....

But despite the structural causes, it is possible to overcome poverty. It requires that we pull the right levers, focus on the necessary structural change, cherish what is really important and deploy our wealth (money and beyond) for justice and equality rather than compassion. We know this is possible: as already discussed poverty is at much lower levels in the Nordic countries which are at similar stages of development and yet are more competitive, suggesting that equity and economic performance are complements and not substitutes. Ending poverty in Scotland is about allocating our resources in a more effective and sustainable way.

But it is a post from one of the best websites - Real Economics - which rams home the key point that "[the current conflict is not between nations but between classes](#)"

German banks managed to capture a large portion of the growing surplus created by German workers and, instead of seeing it invested domestically, lent it abroad (to a broad array of Spanish, Greek and other borrowers)—which was the flip side of Germany's positive current account balance (since German capitalists, benefiting from lower unit labor costs, could easily outcompete potential exporters in the European south, while German demand for European goods dropped as wages fell).

It is not countries that lend or borrow; different classes within countries create the conditions for and engage in large-scale capital flows between countries. But didn't Spain (and Greece) have a choice? After all it seems that Spain could have refused to accept the cheap credit, and so would not have suffered from speculative market excesses, poor investment, and the collapse in the savings rate. This might be true, of course, if there were such a decision-maker as "Spain". There wasn't. As long as a country has a large number of individuals, households, and business entities, it does not require uniform irresponsibility, or even majority irresponsibility, for the economy to misuse unlimited credit at excessively low interest rates. Every country under those conditions has done the same. . . And this is a point that's often missed in the popular debate.

Over and over we hear — often, ironically, from those most committed to the idea of a Europe that transcends national boundaries — that Spain (or Greece) must bear responsibility for its actions and must repay what it owes to Germany.

But there is no "Spain" and there is no "Germany" in this story. At the turn of the century Berlin, with the agreement of businesses and labor unions, put into place agreements to restrain wage growth relative to GDP growth. By holding back consumption, those policies forced up German savings rate. Because Germany was unable to invest these savings domestically, and in fact even lowered its investment rate, German banks exported the excess of savings over investment abroad to countries like Spain. . .

Above all this is not a story about nations. Before the crisis German workers were forced to pay to inflate the Spanish (and Greek) bubble by accepting very low wage growth, even as the European economy boomed. After the crisis Spanish workers were forced to absorb the cost of deflating the bubble in the form of soaring unemployment. But the story doesn't end there. Before the crisis, German and Spanish lenders eagerly sought out Spanish borrowers and offered them unlimited amounts of extremely cheap loans — somewhere in the fine print I suppose the lenders suggested that it would be better if these loans were used to fund only highly productive investments. But many of them didn't, and because they didn't, German and Spanish banks — mainly the German banks who originally exported excess German savings — must take very large losses as these foolish investments, funded by foolish loans, fail to generate the necessary returns.

It is no great secret that banking systems resolve losses with the cooperation of their governments by passing them on to middle class savers, either directly, in the form of failed deposits or higher taxes, or indirectly, in the form of financial repression.

Both German and Spanish banks must be recapitalized in order that they can eventually recognize the inevitable losses, and this means either many years of artificially boosted profits on the back of middle class savers, or the direct transfer of losses onto the government balance sheets, with German and Spanish household taxpayers covering the debt repayments.

9 February

[Inclusive institutions???](#)

I romped through Acemoglu and Robinson's [Why Nations Fail](#) (the link allows you to read in full for yourself) and have been musing over it for the past 24 hours - so it gets full marks for its readability and provocation. It helps that its 500 plus pages consist really of short potted histories of various countries selected to illustrate its main thesis about institutions, power, privilege and challenge. In that sense it has similarities with the [charming books of Robert Greene](#) which deal with such issues as power, seduction and war.

It was [Arnold Toynbee](#) who, in the post-war period, had the temerity to try to explain the rise and fall of nations but his efforts did not seem to inspire the next generation to similar efforts. Recent reviews in the [New Statesman](#) and in [The Nation](#) have suggested that "big history" has only now returned - but it was 1987 when Paul Kennedy brought out his [Rise and Fall of the Great Powers](#); 1997 when Jared Diamond published [Guns, Germs and Steel](#); and 1999 when David Landes gave us [The Wealth and Poverty of Nations](#). Like Toynbee, these books offered possible explanations for the different trajectories taken by nations.

2010 also saw [Why the West Rules - for now](#) by [Ian Morris](#) which was the subject of [a long, highly detailed and caustic review](#) - and a long and injured response by the author. Morris is a classical archaeologist and History Professor but his book is not even included in the 26 page bibliography which graces [Why Nations Fail](#) (2012) - Acemoglu, it should be noted, is an economist; Robinson a political scientist.

David Landes' book does make it to the bibliography but the [distinguished economic historian's key work](#) is totally ignored in the text and his name, therefore, does not figure in the book's 18 page index.....

There are, for me, other curious omissions and weaknesses in the 529 pages of *Why Nations Fail* - a book which offers from its start a distinctive lens with which to view history, namely that of "extractive institutions" and "countervailing power" and which suggests western societies owe their pre-eminence to their "inclusive institutions".

When they define what they mean by this phrase, we get a paean to liberal or capitalist democracy - which I find a tad...well... curious given that the book was drafted in the aftermath of the 2008 global crisis; the spread since then of disgust at the behaviour of the power elites; of deepening concern about the scale of inequality within the west; and of massive alienation from political parties and voting.

I would therefore have expected a suggestion that the west is now in danger of going the same way as others - and for the same reason....

But no - the book ends on a note of almost laughable complacency. "Failure" is what has happened to Africa and most of Asia (apart from Japan and South Korea) and will, according to the 10 page analysis they give China in the concluding chapter, also be the fate of that country's current effort....

It is in this concluding chapter at the very least that I would have expected to see a recognition that Contemporary Europe and North America are showing the very same exclusion and "extractive" power which they have identified as the fatal weakness of the powerful - but this passes our authors by!! If ever there was a case of "institutional exclusion" of citizens, it is what we have been experiencing in the past decade. But these don't figure on the author's radar screen. Not a single reference to the extensive "end of oil" literature - or to the recent important [Rebalancing Society](#) of Canadian management theorist Henry Mintzberg. There is a passing reference to the different use of patents in Europe a hundred years ago - but no mention of the variety of the variety of other ways in which resources are sucked from citizens and passed to the ruling elites eg military expenditure; pharmaceuticals; intellectual ownership; marketing; privatisation; commodification etc

Astonishingly it is only on the second last page that the authors mention the role of the media as a change agent!! And this in a book which purports to be about power.

Karl Popper's [The Open Society and its Enemies](#) (1945) is, of course, a work of political philosophy - not history - but should be a key reference in any work which purports to offer "countervailing power" as a driver of history.

Paul Hirst was another political scientist who developed in the 70s and 80s the notion of "[associative democracy](#)" (people power) which was taken up by thinkers such as [Will Hutton](#) and morphed, in the 1990s, into the vision of a "stakeholder society" which I wrote about [in a 2011 post](#). With Mintzberg, these are the authors we should be paying attention to.

12 February

Profiling the art market



[Angela Minkova](#) has set me a challenge. She is a quirky Bulgarian artist who deserves to be better known. The previous post carries one of her artefacts I have in my Carpathian mountain house - and today's one of her Balchik prints (which also occupies a prominent place there).

I am not an art dealer - rather a writer, networker and art collector (of Bulgarian paintings) - but she has asked me for help in raising her profile.

She is not alone in feeling somewhat frustrated and anxious. It is, of course, the quintessential fate of artists - but particularly of those from small, poorer countries on Europe's periphery which have only the vaguest of profiles...In Bulgaria's casethe Black Sea, skiing, wine andpoisoned umbrella tips....

Traditionally artists have needed galleries to display their paintings - whether individually or in special exhibitions - but the internet now offers an additional, more direct, route to the buyer. There are a lot of private galleries in Sofia - but (currently) no guide to them for the visitor. The annotated list I have in my book [Bulgarian Encounters - a cultural romp](#) focuses on the small galleries selling mainly the classic painters of the early part of the last century - and identifies 17 in this category.

There are at least that number selling contemporary art - although only a few with owners who identify and actively promote quality work. My friend Vihra's [Astry Gallery](#) is the most prominent of these - and she occasionally takes work for exhibition in European capitals.

So the question these days for Bulgarian artists is - how should they best promote themselves?

The choices are various - through

- **traditional galleries** - individual paintings/ special exhibitions/ group exhibitions?
- **word of mouth?**
- **websites** - own sites or individual entries in "gateway" or portal sites such as [SaatchiArt?](#)
- **portals** - marketing contemporary Bulgarian painting eg [Modern BulgarianArtists](#)
- **Facebook?**

The answer is simple - through all of these routes! As is argued in this well-written article which [gives great tips for artists](#) - from a [site full of much better advice](#) than I'm capable of giving. My initial thought had been to target some of Europe's art critics - but the article shows the error in such an approach. I strongly advise you to read the article and also [this one](#)

Although I know very little about the art market, I have been lucky enough to be able to practice strategic skills and networking for45 years....I have a natural inclination to look at a situation and want to identify the key players who form the system or market - suppliers, consumers and

intermediaries with the latter as the most complex. It is they who shape perceptions and channel (or not) the demand and supply.....

My first inclination therefore with this problem facing Bulgarian artists is to PROFILE - ie to identify (a) the relevant galleries (real or virtual) and (b) the potential buyers for the paintings of contemporary Bulgarian artists and then try to sketch the profiles of these groups.

That's actually three distinct groups which need to be mapped and profiled -

- Bulgarian physical galleries
- Virtual galleries
- The art buyer

The easiest to deal with is the first - I've already said there are very few effective "impresarios" of Bulgarian contemporary artists. [Last sanctuaries of originality](#) contained some short profiles I did a couple of years ago

This is the first in what may be a series as I brainstorm this challenge which Angela has set me.

Two funerals and a scandal

Attending funerals was one of the things which I did as a senior Regional politician in the 1970s and 1980s - as the older officials in the ranks of our professional advisers passed away. As I changed countries and roles in 1990, only the street procession of an Azeri President's funeral registered - until my mother's own funeral in 2005.

But this past week has seen two funerals of older friends in this part of the world. First, in Sofia on Friday that of my friend Vihra's father - from whom I always received a warm welcome in her gallery.

And yesterday we bade farewell to Maritsa our neighbour for 15 years in the Carpathian village I call home.



Both were Orthodox ceremonies but provided sharp contrasts - partly because I witnessed only the church ceremony in Sofia but mainly because of the different settings. Rural funeral ceremonies are permitted the traditional "wake" and horse-drawn "carriage" when the open coffin lies on an open cart amidst the mourners who accompany the body, carrying the wreaths (in this case almost 100) from the house to the church - stopping every few minutes for prayers. We had arrived at 17.00 the previous evening

just as the night's "wake" was starting - Maritsa had been dressed in the costume of the area and she and her grieving husband Viciu were surrounded by friends, relatives and neighbours....It was to be a long night for him. At 07.00 he was still able to smile as we shared a coffee - but he seemed a broken man as he stepped out at midday to accompany Maritsa on the last long walk to the church....The two had shared a warm marriage for 64 years....

The evening and morning provided quite a few choice vignettes as the entire village and surrounding area turned out for one of the area's important social occasions. Of course, the mayor was in his element with such an opportunity to network and negotiate - although, sitting next to Viciu and me in the kitchen, he totally ignored Viciu and proceeded to chat at length with a city official about the budget!

The week so far in Romania has been a powerful one - one of six books I picked up in Bucharest's English Bookshop was Mike Ormsby's book of short stories (indeed sketches) - [Never Mind the Balkans, here's Romania](#) which capture incredibly well the consumerist amorality which has penetrated so quickly into the soul of Romanians.....I refer (discretely) to this in several places in my E-book on the country - [Mapping Romania - notes on an unfinished journey](#), particularly in the section on films which mentioned a tough portrayal of contemporary Romania - [Child's Pose](#) - which received the top award at this year's Berlin Film Festival but which we found a bit too close for comfort.



One cold evening in March, Barbu is tearing down the streets 50 kilometres per hour over the speed limit when he knocks down a child. The boy dies shortly after the accident. A prison sentence of between three and fifteen years awaits. High time for his mother, Cornelia, to intervene.

A trained architect and member of Romania's upper class, who graces her bookshelves with unread Herta Müller novels and is fond of flashing her purse full of credit cards, she commences her campaign to save her lethargic, languishing son. Bribes, she hopes, will persuade the witnesses to give false statements. Even the parents of the dead child might be appeased by some cash.

Călin Peter Netzer, the film's director, portrays a mother consumed by self-love in her struggle to save her lost son and her own, long since riven family. In quasi-documentary style, the film meticulously reconstructs the events of one night and the days that follow, providing insights into the moral malaise of Romania's bourgeoisie and throwing into sharp relief the state of institutions such as the police and the judiciary.

A detailed review of the film [can be read here](#). It is a good example of the strength of familial loyalty in the country (see Annexes for more on this theme)

The media these past few weeks have been full of the scandal of one Presidential candidate in the autumn elections - Elena Udrea - whose misuse of funds was caught by various surveillance devices

and friend and husband's confessions. I'll write more on this in a later post since this affair is a typical mixture of soap opera and the Italian [Tangentopoli scandal](#) of the early 1990s which Perry Anderson has [brilliantly dissected](#) on [several occasions](#). I have no intention of recycling the facts which are being endlessly regurgitated by journalists here - rather I will try to put them all in the context of the way Romanian society has "developed" in the 25 years since Ceaucescu fell.

Florin Grancea is one Romanian who has tried to do this in 2006 with his [Inside the mechanisms of Romanian modernisation](#); and gave a shorter (but pretty opaque) piece a couple of years later on ["the concept of Freedom"](#)

26 February 2015

Survival in Romania

I referred briefly yesterday to the scandal which is currently gripping Romania - that of ex-Presidential candidate [Elena Udrea](#). Anyone familiar with the [writings of Tom Gallagher](#) would have evinced not an iota of surprise at the revelations of greed and illegality. They loomed large in his most recent book on the country - [Romania and the European Union - how the weak vanquished the strong](#) which had followed his 2005 book [Theft of a Nation](#) itemising the kleptomania which has been a feature of the country's political class for centuries....

Yesterday's post used the phrase "consumerist amorality" of contemporary Romania - the last word alluding to Edward Banfield's study in the early 1950s of a small town in southern Italy whose inhabitants displayed loyalty only to the members of their nuclear family and who had absolutely no sense of social responsibility for wider circles. The book (published in 1955) was called ["The Moral Basis of a Backward Society"](#)

Banfield concluded that the town's plight was rooted in the distrust, envy and suspicion displayed by its inhabitants' relations with each other. Fellow citizens would refuse to help one another, except where one's own personal material gain was at stake. Many attempted to hinder their neighbours from attaining success, believing that others' good fortune would inevitably harm their own interests. "Montegrano"'s citizens viewed their village life as little more than a battleground. Consequently, there prevailed social isolation and poverty—and an inability to work together to solve common social problems, or even to pool common resources and talents to build infrastructure or common economic concerns.

"Montegrano"'s inhabitants were not unique nor inherently more impious than other people. But for quite a few reasons: historical and cultural, they did not have what he termed "social capital"—the habits, norms, attitudes and networks that motivate folk to work for the common good.

This stress on the nuclear family over the interest of the citizenry, he called the ethos of 'amoral familism'. This he argued was probably created by the combination of certain land-tenure conditions, a high mortality rate, and the absence of other community building institutions.

Sixty years later, Ronnie Smith profiled (in ["City Compass Guide Romania"](#)) the ordinary Romanian in a similar way -

If you are fortunate enough to drive in Bucharest you will witness what is probably the clearest evidence of mass individualism in global human society. Romanian people, of all shapes, sizes, social and educational backgrounds and income brackets will do things in their cars that display a total disregard for sanity and other drivers.

Manoeuvres such as parking in the middle of the street, u-turning on highways without any warning and weaving between lanes in heavy traffic at 150 kilometres per hour are commonplace and point to an extreme lack of concern for the safety or even the simple existence of others.

The next time you are waiting to get on a plane at Henri Coandă airport, take a little time to observe how queuing in an orderly and effective manner is clearly regarded as an affront to the sovereignty of the Romanian individual. Enjoy the spectacle of the pushing, shoving and general intimidation that follows the arrival of the airport staff to supervise boarding. Even while watching an international rugby test match you will only occasionally see the same intense level of barely controlled aggression.

Outside of their core social networks Romanians closely follow the rule stating that it is every man, woman and child for themselves. There is an opinion poll, published in early 2012, showing that around 90 percent of the Romanian population regards almost all of their compatriots as utterly untrustworthy and incompetent. At the same time 90 percent, possibly the same 90 percent, see themselves as being absolutely beyond reproach. This is clearly an extreme response no matter how you view it and provides evidence of an extraordinary and troubling imbalance within the generality of Romania's social relationships.

There is a well-known prayer in Romania, which roughly goes: "Dear God, if my goat is so ill that it will die, please make sure that my neighbour's goat dies too."

So what does this commonality suggest? The EU's first Ambassador here was Karen Fogg who gave every consultant who came here in the early 1990s (like me) a summary of what can be seen as the follow-up to Banfield's book - Robert Putnam's [Making Democracy Work - civic traditions in Italy](#) (1993) which suggested that the laggardly nature of southern Italian Regions was due entirely to this "amoral familism". Putnam made an even greater play of missing "social capital" - indeed spawned an incredible technocratic literature on the concept and ideas on how it could be "engineered" to deal with the new alienation of modern capitalism..

Romanian communism, of course, had almost 50 years to inculcate more cooperative attitudes and behaviour - but the forced nature of "collective farms"; the forced migration of villagers to urban areas to drive industrialisation; and the scale of Securitate spying created a society where, paradoxically, even fewer could trust anyone.

From 1990 the market became God; Reagan and Thatcher had glorified greed; the state was bad; and television - which had been limited by Ceausescu to 2 hours a day - the great good.....As the commercial stations and journals spread, the values of instant gratification became dominant. So we shouldn't be surprised that the average Romanian seems to behave in such an aggressive and selfish if not amoral way.....

Grancea's article on "[the concept of freedom in Romania](#)" may be a very bad translation but does emphasise a crucial point - that the words foreign business men, consultants and academics have brought to Romania do not resonate in people's minds the way we imagine them to.....They have in fact become simply another series of verbal weapons to use in the struggle for position.....

Almost [5 years ago](#) I quoted this poem -

Smuggler

*Watch him when he opens
His bulging words - justice
Fraternity, freedom, internationalism, peace,
peace, peace. Make it your custom
to pay no heed
to his frank look, his visa, his stamps
and signatures. Make it
your duty to spread out their contents
in a clear light
Nobody with such language
Has nothing to declare*

My E-book [Mapping Romania - notes on an unfinished journey](#) tries, in various places, to deal with some of these cultural aspects - particularly section 7.2 at page 31 and all the annexes

27 February

Amoralism - Thought for the Day

"Lower standards" has been a common complaint in society for decades. Indeed things have been going downhill for many European commentators for most of the past century. The 20th century began so hopefully but the first world war - and its aftermath - destroyed these hopes and led to the ideological struggles which ended only 25 years ago. Jose Ortega y Gasset's 1930 [The Revolt of the Masses](#) blamed in 1930 the "political domination of the masses" for the decline in standards. Ortega believed that the rise of the masses threatened democracy by undermining the ideals of civic virtue that characterized the old ruling elites.

Loss of religious authority is often regretted as having created a moral vacuum leading irresistibly to the present-day culture of [instant gratification](#). *Television; parental laxness; the language of entitlement; political correctness; and multiculturalism are variously identified as the main culprits.....*

If we can agree that the balance between freedom and authority has gone too far, how do societies pull back?

Most people assume that some sort of behavioural change is needed - along the lines perhaps of Ametai Etzioni's [Communitarianism](#) which sets out ways in which the ethic of social responsibility can be brought back into our schools and workplaces.

But a growing number of people see that as impossible to achieve against the power of consumerism and commodification which advertisers thrust on us every minute of the day - and are simply choosing to opt out of the materialist society.

Of course, that in itself is a highly individual choice and fragments us socially even more.....

This is part of a series of thoughts sparked off by my use of the word "amoralism" to describe contemporary Romania.....

Sunday 1 March

[An Etzioni resource](#)

Last week's sad funeral at least gave me the chance to retrieve a package which had been waiting for me since November in my neighbour's house in my Carpathian village. By great coincidence it included a copy of Etzioni's 2003 autobiography [My Brother's Keeper](#) - which tracks the life of a rare character who managed to straddle successfully the worlds of academia (he is an organisational sociologist) and activism and therefore thoroughly to warrant the label of [public intellectual](#)

Etzioni's has worked as a theorist, researcher, and political advisor, and has even developed his own political strategies. Only a few social scientists have been as active as Etzioni (born in Koeln in 1929) in all four of these fields. He follows in the footsteps of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, all three of whom were not just theorists, but were also able - although each in his own manner - to act as polemicists and political activists.....

Instead of being demoralized by the power of the market and the state, Etzioni places faith in the citizen's practical abilities of self-organization. Etzioni counterposes the failures of the market and the state by pointing to a third social sector, the communitarian society. Even in his first important book on social theory, "The Active Society" from 1968, Etzioni formulates the ambitious goal of "societal guidance".

His multiple roles and activities are nicely set out in an assessment of his work by David Sciulli - [Etzioni's Critical Functionalism - communitarian origins and principles](#) (2011) and another book (produced in 2005) [The Active Society Revisited](#) took another look at one of his classic 1968 productions which I remember being a bit too overwhelmed by to venture far into....

[The Communitarian Reader](#) (2004) is a useful collection of articles by his major associates in the venture to sketch out an alternative to neo-liberalism and collectivism which became known (in Europe at any rate) as the "third way" and which, arguably, somewhat tarnished his reputation - by virtue of the charlatans (such as Blair and Schroeder) with whom he associated

Nothing daunted, he ran a journal - [The Responsive Community journal](#) - for almost a decade; inaugurated the [International Communitarian Society](#) and broadened his application of his approach in the book [The New Golden Rule](#)

For my money, the one weakness of his analysis is that it does not properly take on board issues of power and profit. He is now 89 and still going strong - Last year he issued [The New Normal](#) and also an interesting paper on [Politics and Culture in an age of Austerity](#) which spends too much time for me on issues of "happiness" but which makes the following critical comment on one of the recent key books on that subject

Skidelsky and Skidelsky's seven elements of a good life are decoupled from consumerism but not necessarily from self-centeredness. Two goods are dedicated to creature comforts - namely security and good health. In their rendering, security is of the person, not the nation; health is that of the individual, with little attention to public health. The inclusion of respect and friendship (akin to Maslow's self-esteem and affection) in the list of goods is a major step forward, as gaining these goods is disassociated from buying things to enhance one's status or to express friendship.

Skidelsky and Skidelsky enrich Maslow by adding three goods. First is harmony with nature, which for them is not an expression of concern for the environment but, rather, a quest for inner tranquility of the individual (Skidelsky & Skidelsky, 2012).

Next on the list is personality, which is "the ability to frame and execute a plan of life reflective of one's tastes, temperament and conception of the good... as well [as] an element of spontaneity, individuality and spirit" (ibid., p.160). Both are self-centered.

Finally, while Maslow put self-actualization at the pinnacle, Skidelsky and Skidelsky crown leisure at the top of the list of the goods. Leisure is defined as "self-directed activity" and "purposiveness without purpose" (ibid., p. 9). It is an intrinsic good wherein people can and should flourish by doing well in whatever they choose to undertake: "The sculptor engrossed in cutting marble, the teacher intent on imparting a difficult idea, the musician struggling with a score...such people have no other aim than to do what they are doing well" (ibid.)

At the peak of his European peregrinations selling the "third way" he wrote [this short piece](#) for The New Statesman - and this [longer pamphlet for the Demos](#) ThinkTank

[This review of his autobiography](#) not only gives a good sense of the trajectory of his life but sums up my own feelings that he got his wings sizzled by supping too close to the devil....

Despite this reservation, however, he is one of these rare individuals I feel who have used their endowments to create a real and original sense of the "public good".....

Those wanting to know more about Etzioni can access archives [here](#) and interesting comments [here](#)

Friday, March 6, 2015

The C word



We don't need anyone these days to tell us that we're in a mess. Nor to explain why. The libraries are groaning with books on globalization..... deregulation.....privatization.... debt....neo-liberalism.... greed.....inequality.... corruption..... pollution..... austerity..... migration.

I've just finished a book by Jerry Mander - [The Capitalism Papers - Fatal Flaws of an Obsolete System](#) (2012) (the link gives the entire text) which is as good a moral critique of the system which few dare to name as you're likely to read - "Jerry!", one of his friends, says - "I hope you're not going to use

the "C" word"!!

I wondered about this reluctance to talk about capitalism - and duly googled the word, unearthing quite a few treasures I have so far missed, two of them produced in 1999 and clearly major works. [The New Spirit of Capitalism](#) is a French contribution by L Boltanski and E Chiapello whose main focus is -

management literature, and the ways in which it shifted between the 1960s and the 1990s in tone, content, and the general set of assumptions about capitalism and the role of management. Boltanski and Chiapello, as their title suggests, draw directly on Weber's classic analysis of "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism". Put simply, Weber's account maintains that the emergence of a full-scale capitalist economy depended in part on a change in the habits of commercially-successful merchants, master craftsmen and entrepreneurial farmers, whose forebears might have spent their profits on luxurious lifestyles and, if sufficient, on the land, titles and symbolic goods necessary to gain admittance to the aristocracy.

The pursuit of such worldly glories might always have diverted resources away from investment in further productive capital if the ideology of Puritanism had not motivated the proto-capitalist actively to avoid them in favour of dedication to the singular vocation of his 'calling'.

Boltanski and Chiapello derive from this account the axiom that capitalism requires from its key agents a degree of dedication, hard work and self-sacrifice which does not come naturally or easily. As such, capitalism must always be animated by a 'spirit', an ideology which inspires and motivates not the entire population, but the key sections who must be committed quite explicitly to the project of capital accumulation if it is to carry on successfully.

Boltanski and Chiapello identify three such 'spirits', the first being Weber's; the second being the bureaucratic 'spirit' of the era of high Fordist industrialism (the ideology of the 'company man'), and the third being the 'new spirit' of the highly flexible, network-intensive knowledge economy

The Cultural Studies journal gives [a well-referenced review](#) of the book which was only translated into English in 2006 and was in 2013 paid the tribute of a book-length analysis - [New Spirits of capitalism? Crises, justifications and dynamics](#) (2013) by Paul du Gay, Glenn Morgan. The language of both books is, however, a bit off-putting and presumably explains their lack of impact on the general public.

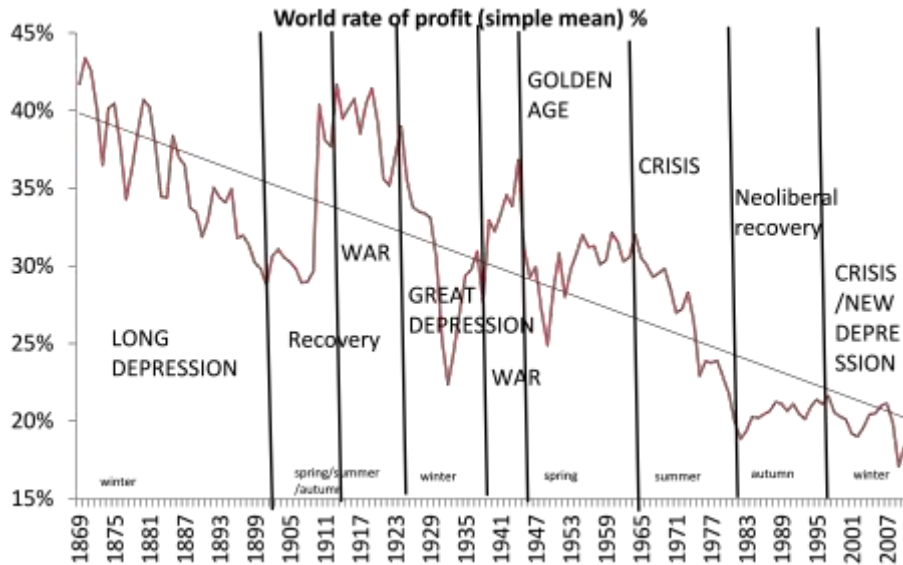
1999 also apparently saw the first appearance of what looks to be a blockbuster of a book - [The cancer stages of capitalism](#) by John Mc Murtry [reviewed here](#) whose author gave us, more recently, both [a second edition](#) and a [summary of his argument](#) (warning - written in short-hand - not easy to follow!!)

My failure to register his book makes one wonder about the motives behind the high profile of writers such as Naomi Klein.....is it just her beauty that impacts I have to wonder.....

Richard Sennett is a better known writer - although hardly a rabble-rouser.....I was disappointed by his book about cooperation but his [The Culture of the new capitalism](#) (2006) looks much more interesting and seems to link up with The New Spirit of Capitalism- see [this review](#)

[The Great Recession](#) is a Marxist treatment of profits and this particular post from the blog behind it gives the sort of [longitudinal treatment of the subject](#) which is so often missing from discussions

The graph below (the simple mean average world rate of profit from the work of Esteban Maito ([Maito, Esteban - The historical transience of capital. The downward trend in the rate of profit since XIX century](#)) shows the golden age of the 1950s and 1960s in profit terms.



But the Golden Age was unprecedented and relatively short. It was not as long as a 'lucky half century' as Andy Haldane, chief economist at the BoE, has claimed in a recent paper ([Haldane on growth](#)). This lucky period was over by the late 1970s as capitalism entered a crisis of falling profitability.

But we were the lucky generation. When I graduated from university in the late 1960s I did not have worry about getting a decent job on the whole and I had no student debt. And during my 'prime' working years of 35-54, I was able to maintain a stable and even rising income, able to get a mortgage that allowed me to build up some property wealth as the housing bubble exploded from the 1990s in many countries. Now many of us aged over 55 years are relatively better off.

Those preferring more journalistic approaches could do a lot worse than read [this Spiegel article](#) about the world view of the new billionaires.

I'm reminded of a wave of books in the 1970s which were early harbingers of this sense of crisis - James Robertson's [The Sane Alternative](#) (1978) and Ronald Higgins' "The Seventh Enemy" (1978) were typical examples. The second described the 7 main threats to human survival as the population explosion, food shortage, scarcity of natural resources, pollution, nuclear energy, uncontrolled technology - andhuman nature. The author's experience of government and international institutions convinces him that the most dangerous was the moral blindness of people and the inertia of political institutions.

A lot has happened in the subsequent 47 years - new pressing issues have been identified - but who would gainsay Higgins' identification of the "seventh" enemy? These days, there would probably be a majority in favour of stringing up a few bankers, politicians and economists - "pour encourager les autres" - were it not illegal...

Over the years, I've read and collected books and articles to help me identify the sort of agenda and actions which might unite a fair-minded majority.

Like many people, I've clicked, skimmed and saved - but rarely gone back to read thoroughly.

The folders in which they have collected have had various names - such as "urgent reading" or "what is to be done" - but rarely accessed - for example this [post of last September which listed books about "the crisis"](#) which were waiting for me in a special pile few of which I have yet got round to.....

Occasionally I remember one and blog about it.

I need to be more disciplined.....

I lead with a Zlatyu Boiadjiev painting from 1945 - one of the highlights of the great exhibition on Industrial Landscapes at the National Gallery these days....

Wednesday, March 11, 2015

[How governments have bought - and used up - time](#)

It's significant that the best expositions of the global economic crisis and its causes do not come from economists.....somehow the framework within which the modern economist operates precludes him/her from even the vaguest of glimmerings of understanding of the complexity of socio-economic events. Their tools are no better than adequate for short-term work....

For real insights into the puzzles of the modern world, think rather David Harvey (a geographer); John Lanchester and James Meek (novellists and writers); Susan Strange and Susan George (political science); or Wolfgang Streeck - a



Koeln Professor of Sociology. All have extensive and eclectic reading; a focus on the long-term; and the ability to provoke and write clearly.

Streeck is also Director there of the Max Planck Institute and an unlikely scourge of capitalism - but his texts are becoming ever more apocalyptic.

For my money, his analysis offers much more than everyone's current favourite Thomas Pikety - whose 700 page magnum opus I suspect few have actually read.

The New Left Review is the favoured outlet for Streeck's long, clear and incisive articles eg [one in 2011 on "The Crisis of Democratic Socialism"](#) and then one last summer on "[How Will Capitalism End?](#)" introducing an English audience to the arguments of the short book [Buying Time - the delayed crisis of democratic capitalism](#) which had appeared in Germany in 2013. European Tribune offered the following useful summary -

Capitalism and democracy were a powerful couple during the "trente glorieuses" post-WWII years. Expectations of economic growth, full employment and increasing prosperity became so entrenched that the fundamental antagonisms between the two were overlooked, or even deemed to have been definitively relegated to the dustbin of history. This, indeed, was the dominant view of the Frankfurt School during Streeck's formative years.

The book's introduction, "Crisis theory : then and now" deals with this historically embarrassing mis-analysis. Jürgen Habermas, in particular, developed the notion of the "legitimation crisis", postulating that people expect governments to intervene successfully in the economy to try and ensure economic prosperity, and that failure would cause the validity of the capitalist system to be questioned, thus undermining its legitimacy.

Streeck presents his book as an attempt to rehabilitate crisis theory, explaining that the postulated legitimation crisis is now upon us... forty years later, having been pushed back by our governments' successive, and moderately successful, attempts at buying time. In fact, the end of the post-war boom indeed led to a legitimation crisis - but it was not the workers/ consumers / electors who revolted. It was capital.

The notion of "[Late Capitalism](#)" has been around since the beginning of the 20th Century. But the predicted demise of capitalism is late, and keeps getting later. The error committed by the neo-Marxian Frankfurt thinkers, in Streeck's analysis, was to have considered capital as a resource, more or less biddable and accountable to democracy. Of course, as they should have known, capital is an actor, particularly in class struggle.

Streeck outlines several phases in the attempts by governments to buy time for their socio-economic model subsequent to the boom years :

Inflation *In the 70s, productive investment started to fall short of what was required for full employment. Inflationary monetary policy was the first ploy to buy time, accommodating wage rises in excess of productivity growth. But the replacement of real growth with nominal growth lost its charm with stagflation in the late 70s, which put a squeeze on profits and threatened to lead to a capital strike.*

Public debt *The monetarist revolution of Reagan, Thatcher and imitators put capital back in the driver's seat. The recession they provoked, with its mass unemployment, did however require additional revenue to keep the wheels turning, and governments resorted massively to borrowing.*

Private debt *In the 1990s and 2000s, slashing of public services and reduction of public debt was accompanied by an explosion of private debt.*

Each of these phases is seen by Streeck as a means of conjuring money out of nowhere, in order to enjoy the benefits of growth in excess of growth itself.

The financial crisis of 2008 is seen as the final reckoning, the democracy/capital nexus being confronted with its contradictions. According to Streeck, democracy and capital were forced by circumstances into an arranged marriage after WWII.

But each successive crisis entailed the progressive emancipation of capital from democratic constraints. Self-regulated markets were alleged to function efficiently, and government intervention in economic matters was de-legitimised. This ideology is now so dominant that it is hardly even questioned after the massive nationalization of private losses which was imposed on the citizen/taxpayer as the price to prevent economic collapse in the recent crisis.

The expansion of the financial sector, and the ever-increasing mobility of capital, have made the capital markets a harsh and fickle mistress for democracy. In fact, Streeck identifies the fact that governments are now accountable to two distinct constituencies : their citizen electors, or people of the nation (Staatsvolk), and their creditors, or people of the market (Marktvolk). The characteristics of these two constituencies of what he calls the "debt state" can be portrayed thus -

Staatsvolk	Marktvolk
National	international
Citizens	investors
civil rights	claims
Voters	creditors
elections (periodic)	auctions (continuous)
public opinion	interest rates
Loyalty	"confidence"
public services	debt service

Other useful resources on the book are -

<https://vimeo.com/113376601>

<http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2015/1488>

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=2642>

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/pdf/2014-MT/20141020-Streeck-PPT.pdf>

<http://www.renewal.org.uk/articles/interview-capitalism-neo-liberalism-and-democracy>

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n16/susan-watkins/vanity-and-venality>

<http://www.eurotrib.com/story/2014/8/17/152951/315>

<http://www.resetdoc.org/issue/01/05/2014>

http://www.mpi-fg-koeln.mpg.de/downloads/14-10-00_Streeck_Renewal.pdf

[The crisis in context - democratic capitalism and its contradictions](#) (2011)

The painting is a Petar Dochev from the National Gallery exhibition on Industrial Landscapes

Saturday, March 14, 2015

[Raymond Williams - a voice never stilled](#)

[Raymond Williams](#) is a name to conjure with - at least for a Brit of my generation. In 1959 he produced a book "Culture and Society" whose significance as I was starting university I was vaguely aware of but whose very "worthiness" disinclined me actually to read. My loss you might say from glancing at [its last chapter and footnotes](#).

His name was linked at the time to that of Richard Hoggart who - 2 years earlier - had published [Uses of Literacy](#) but, more importantly for my developing politicisation, was that he was part of the group of intellectuals which was then establishing the New Left Review journal and the author of the scintillating [Mayday Manifesto 1967/68](#)

Geoff Dyer's [introduction to the reissued "Politics and Letters"](#) tells us why we should be reading Williams these days - and [Culture and Society - then and now](#) helps us understand the significance of that first book. I needed little encouragement since I recently got hold of a new version of his [Keywords](#) which I had first read in the late 70s...and which was perhaps an unconscious exemplar for my "[Just Words](#) - a glossary and bibliography for the fight against the pretensions and perversities of power". I was glad to see that his book has become [an inspiration for a new university project and website](#)

My morning's surfing unearthed quite a few inspiring books about the man who died at the height of his powers - at the age of 66 -

- [Raymond Williams](#) - a biography by Alan O'Connor
- [Raymond Williams - Making Connections](#) - John Elridge
- "[Border Country](#) - Raymond Williams in adult education 1946-1961". A collection of his early writings....

I was particularly taken with the second book - since it is a very sensitive treatment of his works written by a Glasgow University Professor of Sociology I encountered all too briefly. [Here he \(Elridge\) is reminiscing](#) about the sociologists he knew.....he's one of the old guardwhen he talks about Weber, you feel he actually knew him!!!!

Monday, March 16, 2015

[My key Books of the 20th Century - Part I](#)

For the past few days I've been engaged in a frustrating and probably useless task - trying to list the non-fiction books I think worthy of consideration as the "seminal books" of the last century....for English-speakers. This links to a table you will find on page 2 of the paper "[Ways of Seeing...the Global Crisis](#)" which tries to give a sense of the key debates of the post war period.....

Any such list has to be arbitrary since league tables of book purchases or library loans are difficult to get hold of, unreliable and nationally biased. And note the dual (rather heavy) qualifications "I think" and "worthy of consideration"..... **it is a list drawn up by a white male who had a Scottish university education (in politics and economics) in the early 1960s and is limited therefore by that interest in political economy - rather than, for example, psychology....** (although I have included the injunctions of Dale Carnegie and Benjamin Spock as well as the more thoughtful analyses of Carl Rodgers)

But "Mein Kampf" and the writings of Ayn Rand are excluded - despite the influence they had..... I simply can't view them as serious....

My surfing did unearth some "mega-lists" generated from 107 "best of" book lists from a variety of sources eg [this one](#) which is, however, strongly biased to American reading....

As a starter, let me offer this list of 35 books - taking us to 1973.

[Political Parties](#) - Robert Michels (1913). One of the key texts during my course on Political Sociology in 1963 and one I often refer to. Focused on the German SPD and trade unions to demonstrate how even democratically-elected leaders fall prey to "the iron law of oligarchy"

[Public Opinion](#) - Walter Lippmann (1921) Continued the critique of actual democracy from where Michels left off. He looked at how public perceptions are formed and argues that politicians are incapable of accurately understanding issues and proposes that a professional, "specialized class" collect and analyze data, and present their conclusions to the society's decision makers, who, in their turn, use the "art of persuasion" to inform the public about the decisions and circumstances affecting them.

"*Public Opinion*" proposes that the increased power of [propaganda](#), and the specialized knowledge required for effective political decisions, have rendered impossible the traditional notion of [democracy](#). Moreover, Public Opinion introduced the phrase "the manufacture of consent", which Chomsky used for [Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media](#) (1988)

[Revolt of the Masses](#) - Jose Ortega y Gasset (1930) critical of the masses, contrasting "noble life and common life" and excoriating the barbarism and primitivism he sees in the mass-man.

[Moral Man and Immoral Society](#) - Reinhold Niebuhr (1932) - one of the books which made the biggest impact on me at University. His collected papers have been published recently and [a review says](#) -

The foundational doubt in Niebuhr's work is whether, and how, Christianity can be a force for justice in this world. He believed profoundly that it must, and yet he never underestimated the obstacles. First, the theological obstacles: in the gospels, Jesus preaches a radically otherworldly and self-sacrificing ethics, in which the Christian is commanded to turn the other cheek and render unto Caesar. Niebuhr was never truly attracted by this kind of passivity, perhaps because the mystical and millennial aspects of religion had so little appeal for him.

By the time he came to write Moral Man and Immoral Society, Niebuhr had arrived at the conclusion that Christianity was proving an alibi for inaction rather than a creed of change. This explains the militantly confrontational tone of much of the book, whose primary audience and target was moderate socialists. Niebuhr had run for Congress on the Socialist ticket in 1932, but he came to believe that religious progressives believed too much in individual changes of heart, not enough in systemic transformation.

In some of the most unsettling parts of the book, Niebuhr seems to come out in favor of violent revolution. But if this ends-justify-the-means rhetoric sounds odd coming from the minister of a religion of peace, by the end of the book Niebuhr has retreated from it somewhat. In theory violence might be justified, he argues, but in practice the American proletariat has no more chance of winning a revolutionary struggle than do American blacks. For both of these "disinherited" groups, Niebuhr concludes, confrontational nonviolence on the Gandhian model is the best course: "Non-violence is a particularly strategic instrument for an oppressed group which is hopelessly in the minority and has no possibility of developing sufficient power to set against its oppressors."

[The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money](#) - JM Keynes (1936). It was the core of my economics education although, like most people, it was the summaries I read rather than the original.....

[How to make friends and influence people](#) - Dale Carnegie (1936) I read it for the first time recently and had to confess to finding it useful....

The Managerial Revolution - [James Burnham](#) (1941) A book which helped move the left to the notion of a reformed capitalism in which private ownership was tamed by a new managerial class.

[Escape from Freedom](#) - Erich Fromm (1941) Another book which was still influential in the early 1960s....

[Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy](#) - Joseph Schumpeter (1942). "Elite theory" was one of the most important parts of my politics course - taking in not only Michels but Italians Mosca and

Pareto. One of the most scintillating books was Schumpeter's - particularly for his theory about the "circulation of elites"

[The Open Society and its Enemies](#) - Karl Popper (1944) The book which made the biggest impact on me and to which I owe my scepticism....A lot of it (particularly the sections on Platp, Hegel and Marx) went over my head - but its assertion of the importance of scientific "disproving" has stayed with me my entire life.....

[The Road to Serfdom](#) - Friedrich Hayek (1944) One of only a handful which I never read

Baby and Child Care - [Benjamin Spock](#) (1946)

[Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male](#) - Kinsey (1948)

[The Second Sex](#) - Simone de Beauvoir (1949)

[The Lonely Crowd](#) - David Riesmann (1950)

[The Power Elite](#) - C Wright Mills (1956) Another major influence - he wrote beautifully....

[The Future of Socialism](#) - CAR Crosland (1956) Fifteen years about Burnham's book, Crosland enshrined its central message in the key revisionist text for the left...

[The Hidden Persuaders](#) - Vance Packard (1957)

[The Affluent Society](#) - JK Galbraith (1958) The book which coined the phrase "private affluence and public squalor" (as well as "the conventional wisdom").....

[The End of Ideology](#) - Daniel Bell (1960)

[The Death and Life of American Cities](#) Jane Jacobs (1961)

[On Becoming a Person](#) - [Carl Rodgers](#) (1961) The figure who most clearly expressed the mood and feelings of my generation....

The Fire Next Time - [James Baldwin](#) (1962)

[Silent Spring](#) - Rachel Carson (1962) The first environmental book!

[In Defence of Politics](#) - Bernard Crick (1962) Along with Popper, the book which changed my life!

[Capitalism and Freedom](#) - Milton Friedmann (1962)

[The Feminine Mystique](#) - Betty Friedan (1963) Interesting that it took almost 15 years for de Beauvoir's message to find wide expression....

[Unsafe at any speed](#) - Ralph Nadar (1965)

[Modern Capitalism - the changing balance of public and private power](#) - Andrew Shonfield (1966)

[The New Industrial State](#) - JK Galbraith (1967) The only author to get 2 books in the list reflects both the importance of the subjects he dealt with - and the accessible and wryly humorous style of his writing

[The Costs of Economic Growth](#) - EJ Mishan 1967. A book so in advance of its age.....

[The Active Society](#) - Amitai Etzioni (1968) A book whose importance I was aware of without having the tenacity to read.....

[Deschooling Society](#) - Ivan Illich (1970) One of several Illich books which gave me my scepticism about organisational power...

[Future Shock](#) - Alvin Toffler (1970) The first of the books which alerted us to the scale of the change underway in our societies.

[Beyond the Stable State](#) - [Donald Schoen](#) (1971) Clearly quite a few books made a major impact on me as I was emerging from teenage and in my 20s. None, however, more than this one whose core arguments I vividly remembering listening to on the family radio as Reith Lectures in 1970..... This when I became seriously interested in organisations.....

The [Limits to Growth](#) - Club of Rome (1972)

[Small is Beautiful](#) - Ernst Schumacher (1973)

Somehow I think it's going to be difficult to find an equivalent number for the 40 years which followed!!

Thursday, March 19, 2015

[Seminal Books of the 20th Century - part II](#)

Apparently I'm not alone in my interest in making a list of "the key books of the century"....I've just unearthed the first of what promises to be a series of posts on "[the hundred most influential books since the war](#)" - which appeared last month in the Time Literary Supplement and gave us 20 titles from the 1940s...

It draws our attention to an interesting initiative of 1986 when a diverse group of writers and scholars came together to try to assist independent East European writers and publishers both at home and in exile. The Chairman was Lord Dahrendorf, Warden of St Antony's College, Oxford (and prominent German politician!).

Other members were the French historian Francois Furet; Raymond Georis, Director of the European Cultural Foundation, Amsterdam; Laurens van Krevelen of the Dutch publishing house Meulenhoff; the Swedish writer Per Waestberg, at the time President of International PEN; the

European correspondent of the New Yorker, Jane Kramer; and the historian and commentator, Timothy Garton Ash.

The result, in 1995, was a book "[Freedom for Publishing, Publishing for Freedom](#)" which listed 100 key books, listed sequentially on the TLS blog.

The very first book on the list for the 1940s is one I knew I had forgotten to put on my list - Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" (now rectified).

I think I should also have included the writings of Max Weber and Raymond Aron.....so reserve the right to produce a more definitive list which better reflects my particular criteria of impact, coherence and "sustainability" (ie "lasting power")

I have resisted the temptation to peek at the books the TLS blog gives for each of the following decades - until I have completed my own effort - and simply [pass on this list of 20 key books for the 1950s](#). A few years ago, Time Magazine gave us an interesting annotated [list of the 100 best nonfiction books](#)

Of course all such lists are arbitrary - but the last post does give a good sense of the conflict and repression which was the European experience in the first half of the 20th century with the sense of liberation and assertiveness of the immediate post-war period - as well as the first warnings of the excesses of our way of life in the late 1960s.

Saturday, March 21, 2015

Key Books of the last 40 years

I am having much more difficulty identifying "seminal books with a distinctive voice" for the last 40 years. I had little difficulty naming almost 40 books for the earlier 40-year period - mainly because they marked me at an impressionable age.

That's perhaps one of three reasons for this deficiency - ie that, after the age of 30, one is less easily impressed. Certainly there are more books on this list which I haven't actually read - but whose importance warrants their mention....

The other two reasons for the shorter list are that

- the battle-lines on most disputes were drawn in the first part of the century - and we are now operating in the tracks made by more famous (and original) men and women....
- University growth, social science specialisation and bureaucratisation have killed off creativity....

Clearly such assertions need to be justified and I hope to post on this shortly.....

For the moment, let me simply list the books which came to mind as I tried to complete the list.....the Peters book is there not for its quality but simply because it reflected the "mood of the time".

And, so far, I don't feel able to include a book covering the post 2001 anxieties about migration - although Chris Caldwell's 2009 [Reflections on the Revolution in Europe](#) is a front-runner. Nor have I tried to touch the issues related to information and security.....

So my tentative list for the post 1973 years includes -

[The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism](#) - Daniel Bell (1976)

[Orientalism](#) - Edward Said (1978)

[The Breakdown of Nations](#) - Leopold Kohr (1978) A personal favourite....

[The Culture of Narcissism](#) - Christopher Lasch (1979)

[In Search of Excellence](#) - Tom Peters and Robert Waterman (1982)

[Imagined Communities](#) - Benedict Anderson (1983)

[Casino Capitalism](#) - Susan Strange (1986) Another personal favourite

[Manufacturing Consent](#) - Noam Chomsky (1988)

[The End of History](#) - Francis Fukuyama (1989)

[Reinventing Government](#) - David Osborne and Ted Gaebler (1992)

[Everything for Sale](#) - the virtues and limits of markets - Robert Kuttner (1996)

[Short Circuit](#) - strengthening local economies in an unstable world - Ronald Douthwaite (1996). The book I would vote as the MUST READ for all of us these days

[The Lugano Report](#): On Preserving Capitalism in the Twenty-first Century - Susan George (1999)

[Change the World](#) - Robert Quinn (2000) A vastly underrated book

[A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism](#) - David Harvey (2005)

[Injustice - why social inequality persists](#) - David Dorling (2011)

Then there are tens of thousands of volumes which management writers have given us - of which the better have been produced by people such as Henry Mintzberg, [Charles Handy](#) and [Ronald Dore](#)

40 billion pounds' worth of social sciences????

I have a love-hate relationship with the social sciences - grateful for the vistas its literature opened up to me at university in the early 1960s in Scotland when it was still possible to roam widely amongst the disciplines.....still able to feel the energy of the disputes and the freshness of what people such as Durkheim, Michels and Weber were saying.....since then things seem to have closed over a bit - not least, perhaps, because of the "instrumentalist turn" the social sciences took in America as brilliant minds turned their attention in the aftermath of the second world war to social and organisational problems. First [corporate planning and management](#) with contributions from people such as Russell Ackoff - then [PPBS](#) and the "[War on Poverty](#)".

I was gripped by the stuff and failed to appreciate the hubris involved.....although people such as Aaron Wildavsky; Peter Marris and Martin Rein; Etzioni; and Donald Schoen were exemplars of a more sceptical and humanistic approach.....From 1968 I pursued a dual track of political involvement and fairly interdisciplinary academic reading - for 15 years having the freedom to roam the library stacks and inflict monologues on political issues on polytechnic students who were following Degrees courses in Land Economics and Engineering.

From the mid 1970s I had become an almost full-time (Regional) politician but was confronted in 1983 with the need to make a serious contribution to a new full-time Social Science Degree at my Polytechnic. By that stage I had changed my loyalties from economicsto politics/public admin - but could not take the narrowness of what I was expected to teach seriously.....after 2 years I got out.... And as the universities increased in number and size, the pretensions of economics, management and even psychology grew enormously (Sociology was a bit of an outrider). Their claims - and language - grew a bit outlandish.....and I, for one, lost sympathy with it all....

In 1978 Stanislaw Andreski had written a magnificent critique called [Social Sciences as Sorcery](#) which, significantly, has long been out of print despite the fond memories it produces in many who who have read it...I was trying to find a similar attack on the pretensions of modern social science but could find only the rather puffy [Profscam - Professors and the demise of higher education](#) (1988).

I had hoped that Michael Billig's [Learn to Write Badly - how to succeed in the social sciences](#) would have some of the same punch and weight as Andreski but, despite some disparaging remarks about the factory conditions of university life, it ultimately disappoints. It [reviewed quite well](#) - but you would expect that!

My surfing, however, did reveal that social scientists are deeply concerned about their lowly status in academic and political circles. So concerned that (in the UK) they have launched a [Campaign for social science](#) (with booklet).....which has attracted [some media coverage](#). The [need for a shake-up](#) was explored in this article

The first thing to have in mind, as background, is the astonishing size of the social science literature. Few people appreciate this. The Thomson Reuters Web of Science database (which is by no means exhaustive of the entire global academic output) lists more than 3,000 social science journals. The journals classified as economics alone contained approximately 20,000 articles last year. This implies that one new journal article on economics is published every 25 minutes - even on Christmas Day.

This iceberg-like immensity of the modern social sciences means that it is going to be difficult to say anything coherent and truly general across them. Nobody walking the planet has read more than 1 per cent of their published output. Most of us have not read 0.1 per cent. Such facts should give all of us - whether or not we agree with Christakis - pause for modesty in our assertions. "The social sciences have stagnated," he says. "They offer essentially the same set of academic departments and disciplines that they have for nearly 100 years: sociology, economics, anthropology, psychology and political science. This is not only boring but also counterproductive, constraining engagement with the scientific cutting edge and stifling the creation of new and useful knowledge."

Lack of interdisciplinarity, narrowness and impenetrable language are the common criticisms - which can be found in many publications throughout Europe and North America. Key reports and books include -

[Disciplinary Barriers - a report on the State of Higher Education in 8 European countries](#) (2005)

[Social science for what?](#) 2007

[Social science and policy-making - the search for relevance](#) (2007)

[Public Value in the Humanities and Social Sciences](#) (2010)

[If only we knew - increasing the public value of ss research](#) - John Willinsky (2010)

[In Defence of Public Higher Education](#) (2012)

[Toward a knowledge Base for university-public engagements](#) (2012)

[The public value of the social sciences](#) - John Brewer (2013)

[Prospering Wisely](#) (Feb 2014)

[Sir Humphrey and the Professors - what do the mandarins want from the academics?](#)(2014)

[Social Impact of the sciences - the end of the ivory tower?](#) (2014)

[Impact and Value in the Humanities](#) (2014)

[Measuring the impact of social science](#) (2014)

More than a million academics are employed (full-time) in British Universities these days - and about 50,000 of them are social scientists with a similar number (according to the UK campaign's 2015 report "[The Business of People](#)") employed in government and commerce.....

The report proudly claims that they contribute an astonishing 40 billion pounds' worth of value to the economy - a claim which reveals the very philistinism of which they accuse those who attack social science.....

An [excellent critique of what is a quite disgraceful document](#) can be found on Open Democracy

Monday, March 23, 2015

[Good viewing in Sofia](#)

Some great exhibitions recently here in Sofia. You don't often get to see collections of Nikola Tanev's paintings - the last one was 5 years ago at the National Gallery. But last month the Finesse private Gallery put on a [fascinating collection some of which I've put on flickr](#)

Spassov, Angel (1884-1974) was a well-known sculptor - one of many greats produced by Bulgaria although the current exhibition at the Bulgarian Union of Artists on Shipka St also shows what a good painter he was...A [great catalogue on his work](#) was recently issued by Pleven Gallery



And the National Gallery has just opened a rare exhibition of industrial landscapes which cover not only the communist period but the early part of the century too. Here are [some examples from my flickr collection](#). Zlatyu Boiadjiev (from 1945) and the second a Petar Dochev head earlier posts



The first a powerful canvas (1965) from one of Bulgaria's first women industrial landscape artists - Maria Stolarova (who's still going strong - but with still-lives); and this a 1950s Nikola Tanev

Those wanting to see more of examples of Socialist realist can consult [Socialist construction in the work of Bulgarian artists](#) (Sofia 1954) - one of the many resources available in my [Bulgarian Encounters - a cultural romp](#)

Tuesday, March 24, 2015

Big Screen Time

It's 40 years since I read John Berger's "[Ways of Seeing](#)" (reviewed [here](#)) but it's a phrase which has returned recently to haunt me - see my latest E-book effort [Ways of Seeing....the Global Crisis](#). I heard the phrase again in a Bucharest cinema in a short trip I made at the end of the month - although it was expressed as "Maniere de voir" and it came from the mouth of the legendary photographer [Sebastiao Salgado](#) whose life film director Wim Wenders was celebrating in the documentary [Salt of the Earth](#).

About time that such photographers were properly celebrated - have there, I wonder, been films about such figures as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Andre Kertesz and the times in which they lived? Documentaries we have - eg a curious one with [CB here](#) which has him reminiscing...a much [more insightful commentary here](#) but what about films which try to recreate the lives and events through actors and film sets?

This question occurred to me since I have been viewing recently quite a few films about other artists.....such as Picasso, Renoir, Turner, Dickens and Beethoven. And it led me to Jeremy Iron's portrayal of iconic Alfred Stieglitz in a film (TV biopic actually) which actually focuses more on the American painter [Georgia O'Keeffe](#) and bears her name [as the title](#). Indeed the only photography which figures in the film is the infamous exhibition Stieglitz mounts of O'Keeffe's naked body.... **For the most part films about artists are trite** - even if the scenery is nice (Turner) - with plots turning on an highly selective aspects of the artist's life...and failing to give either a sense of the artist's creativity or of the times in which (s)he lived.

One exception - [The Invisible Woman](#) - made a big impact on me largely because it gave us insights into the importance of public readings for people such as Dickens; and of his God-like status in those days - which allowed everyone to whitewash his young love out of existence. But although the film apparently cost 12 million dollars to make only 3 million has been recouped in box-office takings - hardly an encouragement to creativity when most blockbusters these days cover their costs within the first month (here I have a confession - I was able to stream it.....).

The detailed book by [Claire Tomalin on which the film is based](#) can be bought for about 15 euros - but will give many hours of pleasure.....As did Hilary Spurling's 600 pages of [Matisse](#)

It made me wonder about the economics and aesthetics of the different ways of presenting ideas and creativity - such as films, documentaries, books or even video presentations such as this [ted talk by Salgado](#). **So many millions of dollars (and wo-man hours) spent on film production to give (each of) us less than 2 hour's (shallow) "entertainment" compared with a multiple of that enjoyed during the reading of a book - whose costs are a tiny fraction. Nae contest!**

And yes I know that it is not a question of either/or - that films encourage (some) people to buy (and even read) books.....and most people have neither the time nor the energy to read.... But, still, we need to fight for the book - ""Fahrenheit 451" still gives me a thrill every time I think of it, depicting a world without books in which a few brave individuals risked prosecution for their having memorised the text of one particular book.....

Regular readers know that my nomadic existence of the past couple of decades has helped me develop an immunity to television and newspapers - now television sets are banned in the places I

control and I am happy to buy only [Le Monde Diplomatique](#) (as the only journal which still retains footnotes!). It is my location which enables me to be so selective - and makes me yearn for a campaign on the lines of the 1978 book "[Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television](#)". Rather ironically, I'm currently reading a superbly-written book [Armchair Nation - an intimate history of Britain in front of the TV](#)

addenda

This [list of 100 films based on the lives of artists and writers](#) reveals that I missed one great film - [Carrington](#)!! And [this list of books](#) which the current TV series Mad Men has shown characters reading is a sign of hope.....

5 April

King James English

"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest" (Ecclesiastes 9.10)

What is it that makes these and the other words and phrases from the King James edition of the Bible have such a deep impact on our mind and soul? And do they have the same effect on those who read them in translation?

Brits usually think that the 17th Century language of the Bible is original - but it is in fact a translation. Not only that but an example of what we imagine to be impossible - excellence by committee!! The story [is told here](#).

10 April

Saturday, April 11, 2015

Kafka is alive and well

Both my passport and my driving licence need renewal this year - the hurdles I face (on mainly the former) will force me to stay put in Romania for the entire summer period....I am amazed that British citizens are (literally) not up in arms about the impossible (centralised) systems which have been in place for passports for the past few years.

We are told to expect a wait of 3 months (minimum) for the delivery of updated passports - during that period we are without a passport with emergency passports being available (returns only) for 100 quid.

If, like me, you have changed your address almost each year and find it impossible as a result to satisfy the requirement of notifying the driving licence authority of changes of address, you are reduced to giving a relative's address.

If you are living abroad, you are told to get a driving licence from the country of residence - with all the tribulations that involves of presenting yourself for a test as if you were a trainee driver (instead of one with 50 years' experience - in 12 countries)

Now I read of the Kafka-esque experiences Brits are having with their cars being towed away and being forced to pay hundreds of pounds to get them back even although their road discs are entirely up-to-date.....

This post may sound a bit Colonel Blimpish but it does indicate that IT systems in the UK are not exactly delivering on the promising new world we had been promised!!!!

Update

Online renewal of my passport proved no problem - it duly arrived in less than a month in early July. The driving licence was more problematic - being initially returned to the Driving Licence Authorities by Royal Mail "address unknown" but eventually making it to the old Glasgow address successfully in early August and via DHL (in a journey which took in Edinburgh, East Midlands, Bergamo (Italy), Bucharest, Brasov and my local courier) to my clammy hands in the village square.....

In Praise of Older (Wo)Men

Sheldon Wolin is a name to conjure with - in the early 1960s his book "Politics and Vision" was the core text for my course on political philosophy. He was born in 1922 and taught at Princeton University.

I thought he was long dead...but was delighted to discover yesterday that not only is he still going strong but that he has become almost a revolutionary in his old age....

In one very recent video series he deals with the question of whether Capitalism and democracy can Co-exist - allowing me to stumble on his explosive 2008 book Democracy Incorporated- managed democracy and the specter of inverted totalitarianism which can be read in its entirety here; reviewed here and summarised here



If this analysis of a 'democracy without citizens' - in which popular sovereignty is reduced to 'consumer sovereignty' - sounds too Cassandra-like, Wolin backs it up with detailed history. (This history is, admittedly, heavily US-centric, but since the US is perhaps the limiting case of a managed democracy, this focus is instructive.)

Wolin rides roughshod over the standard American self-image of being the world's most robust democracy. In chapters 11-12, he traces the evolution of American democracy back to the Putney debates of the 1650s, in which Ireton upheld the interests of 'independent' property-owners against Rainsborough, who championed the rights of the non-landed, and therefore non-voting classes .

It was Ireton's anti-egalitarian position which, Wolin maintains, effectively triumphed in post-revolutionary America. Hamilton and Madison (unlike Jefferson) were deeply sceptical of democracy, precisely because it threatened the extant distribution of property and wealth: portraying the popular

will as infected by 'passion', they confined 'reason' to a class of 'guardians', which was purportedly blessed with the insights of 'cool and sedate reflection'. They hence went about constructing a political system in which elaborate checks and balances stymied the wishes of the democratic majority, thereby ensuring a politics of 'deadlock', which could be resolved only by the intervention of the powerful.

According to Wolin, then, though the 'political coming-of-age of corporate power' (xxi) took centuries, the conditions for managed democracy were instituted early on. The one real exception on this road to inverted totalitarianism was Roosevelt's New Deal 'experiment' of the 1930s, which Wolin discusses in chapter 2. This 'counterimaginary of a state-regulated capitalism' was a valiant attempt to control corporate activity for the common good, but it did not survive World War II.

This 'constitutional imaginary' succumbed, steadily, to a Cold War 'power imaginary' which was prepared by the US's wartime taste of global power. This power imaginary replaced a preoccupation with welfare, participation and equality, with what Wolin terms a 'dematerialised' ideology of patriotism, anticommunism and fear

This new, Manichean ideology, although not explicitly in the service of corporate wealth and inequality, certainly had these as its corollaries. And this because,

- *first, the Soviet Union was (nominally) committed to anti-capitalism and a thorough-going egalitarianism, thereby lending capitalist individualism a patriotic aura, and impugning its detractors.*
- *Secondly, the Cold War generated a massive increase in defence spending, which in turn made the American economy highly dependent on the corporate defence industries.*
- *And thirdly, since all enmity was now directed at Communism, any suggestion that there might be economic enemies at home became seen as artificially and invidiously divisive, or even (as in McCarthyism) tantamount to Communism itself.*

There is also an interview with both Wolin and another iconoclast - J Ralston Saul - at an [interesting website called Common Dreams](#)

The emphasis on age and experience reminded me of a charming blog which carries the (sexist) title [Britain is no country for Old men](#) which celebrates the lives and achievements of various characters. It gives a good sense of the Britain that was.....My posts sometimes feature older, inspiring activists such as [Stephane Hessel](#) (95) and [Grace Lee Boggs](#) (99) With all the emphasis these days on innovation, it's good, however occasionally, to have the perspective of experience

13 April

Update: On October 21, the political theorist Sheldon Wolin died at the age of 93. "The Atlantic" paid this great tribute -

Wolin helped revitalize political philosophy as a living discipline with much to say about contemporary politics and society, not to mention the growing gap between the wealthy few and increasingly destitute many.

In numerous books, from his classic *Politics and Visions: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (1960) to *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (2008), Wolin noted the growing tendency of the republic toward consolidation, oligarchy, and totalitarianism, and [urged](#) leftists to look to "a more decentralized and local politics, scattered and diffuse," as "the first best hope."

Over the years, Wolin published three important essays (and one shorter comment piece) in the pages of *The Nation*, each at what seem now to be pivotal moments in the life of American democracy at the turn of the 21st century. They are self-evidently worth reading again today.

In "*Beyond Marxism and Monetarism*" (March 19, 1990), Wolin predicted that after the events of 1989, "*democracy*' will be reshaped into a mere rhetorical function serving to legitimize politics of austerity." He suggested that the American establishment would falsely interpret the political convulsions of the previous year as the dying spasms of history, which had reached its ultimate end, and argued that it would be up to democrats to prove such a reading wrong.

It has taken a few decades, but these days, all across the world, millions seem finally to be answering Wolin's call.....

Revolutionary change in Europe is thus perceived by a United States that has itself changed profoundly since the Prague Spring of 1968. Twenty-five years ago the United States was quintessentially liberal, expansionist and interventionist in its formal institutional policies and foreign policy (the Great Society of Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War), and democratic and antiexpansionist in its spontaneous politics (the civil rights movement, antiwar protests, campus revolts and ecological activism).

Now the society is essentially conservative, apolitical and corrupted into cheering what the Times vulgarly described as presidential "initiation rites" in Grenada and Panama. The politics of democratic change flourishes at the local level, but what prevails nationally is not democracy but traditional, mostly white, middle- and upper-middle-class liberal politics: the defense of rights (E.R.A., abortion, sexual preference) and the domestication of potentially radical concerns, such as environmentalism, so that they become the livelihood of technocrats on one side or the other.

What is at stake, there as well as here, is whether political revolution of self-organized initiatives can be made permanent and truly constitutive of political life or whether revolution will take the postmodern apolitical form of consumerism and privatism.

The following year, Wolin contributed to a special issue *The Nation* published on **patriotism**, featuring the meditations of dozens of influential scholars, writers and activists on what the word meant to them. Wolin defined patriotism as "*a reasoned but critical allegiance to certain shared values that define the kind of collective identity to which we would want to think of ourselves as loyal.*" He observed, "The left has trouble with patriotism not because it is the party of humanity but because it is, nationally and internationally, the party of losers: not to mention, outsiders. So what would a leftist patriotism look like? Wolin concluded his remarks:

Is there an ideal of collectivity that cherishes differences and commonality, that takes pride in some of our history while accepting the dark chapters? I would propose democracy: It is far less exclusionary, in principle and practice, than nationalism, patriotism or the ideology of capitalism. And because everyone is "in," each is historically responsible for what the collectivity may do to others in our name. Democracy owes a historic debt to America for the freedom that has enabled democracy to survive, even if mainly as an endangered species. Democracy can be patriotic, but only on condition that the first loyalty is to it.
* * *

Wolin's most lasting contribution to *The Nation* came in May 2003, with his essay, "Inverted Totalitarianism," which described what Wolin saw as the beginnings of the United States' transition to an illiberal democracy. For Wolin, the term "inverted totalitarianism," since taken up by others, referred to a social and political system in which powerful corporations use sensationalism and mass-consumerization to lull citizens into willfully surrendering their rights and liberties. Wolin's account of this transition is a

profoundly useful tool for trying to understand the otherwise entirely illegible American political scene of 2015.

The elements are in place [for a quasi-fascist takeover]: a weak legislative body, a legal system that is both compliant and repressive, a party system in which one party, whether in opposition or in the majority, is bent upon reconstituting the existing system so as to permanently favor a ruling class of the wealthy, the well-connected and the corporate, while leaving the poorer citizens with a sense of helplessness and political despair, and, at the same time, keeping the middle classes dangling between fear of unemployment and expectations of fantastic rewards once the new economy recovers. That scheme is abetted by a sycophantic and increasingly concentrated media; by the integration of universities with their corporate benefactors; by a propaganda machine institutionalized in well-funded think tanks and conservative foundations; by the increasingly closer cooperation between local police and national law enforcement agencies aimed at identifying terrorists, suspicious aliens and domestic dissidents.

That was now twelve years ago. What more is there to say?

No Excuse for Apathy

One of my unfinished projects has been a mapping of "alternative" ways of using our energies than that of the mad economic system which has had the globe in thrall (and peril) for at least the post-war period.....

The project started with a short essay in 2001 (updated in [Notes for the Perplexed](#)) and moved into higher gear with the opening last autumn of a website [Mapping the Common Ground](#) which acts as a library of useful material for those keen to effect social change. [Ways of Seeing....the Global Crisis](#) was my round-up of the reading I had been doing in recent years - with my common complaint being the failure of writers to give credit to others and indeed to make any attempt to do what Google Scholar exhorts us to do - "stand on the shoulders of giants".

So I was delighted, this morning, to come across an encouraging American initiative [The Next System](#) whose opening video may be a bit crass but which makes amends with its initial report - [The Next System Report - political possibilities for the 21st Century](#) which contains extensive references to writing I had not so far encountered and to good community practice in various parts of the world. This led me to new writers such as [Pat Devine](#) and [Andrew Cumbers](#) (celebrating [public ownership](#)); and such gems as -

- the manual [Take Back the Economy](#);
- the book [Capitalism 3.0](#) by Peter Barnes
- [We are Everywhere](#) - a celebration of community enterprise
- An article on [Democratizing Finance](#) by Fred Block
- The [full bibliography](#) of Danny Dorling's glorious Injustice book

And that was just a couple of days after I had downloaded a lot of material relating to "the commons" which delicately tiptoes round the topic of "common ownership" - see this excellent overview [The Commons as a new/old paradigm for governance](#) - with a [second section here](#)

I was alerted to that by a fascinating article in Open Democracy [Planning a Commons-based Future for Ecuador](#) which is part of a wider effort that country has been making - set out in a document [National Plan for Good Living](#) which must be one of the first efforts this century to have a National Plan!

Other finds are -

- [Celebrating the Commons](#) - from [On the Commons](#) website
- [The evolution of social enterprise](#) - a very friendly overview of various landmarks in the important history of this "movement" (rather US-centric)
- [Commons Transition](#) - the book from a site "of practical experiences and policy proposals aimed toward achieving a more humane and environmentally grounded mode of societal organization. Basing a civil society on the Commons (including the collaborative stewardship of our shared resources) would enable a more egalitarian, just, and environmentally stable society.
- [Bibliography for the Social Knowledge Economy](#)
- [Humanising the Economy](#)
- [Beyond the Corporation](#)
- [Owning our Future](#)
- [Cooperative enterprise building in a better world](#)

So no excuse! Let's get off our backsides and do something to build a more sensible world!!

April 16

Busts I admire

OK I admit it - I admire busts - particularly the sort I see in Museums

I have grown increasingly to admire Bulgarian sculpture - for example [Angel Spassov](#) (1884-1974) and, on the contemporary scene, one of Bulgaria's foremost sculptors [Spartak \(Paris\) Dermendjiev](#) - who has done a diverse series of clay sculptures whose [There are no Happy Bulgarians](#) and [mother](#) I admire most....

So not altogether surprising that, as someone who has become (in the past few years) an art collector, I submitted this weekend to sitting (actually standing) for "Paris" as he "did my head".....His uncle was a partisan during the war who sported the alias of Spartak - to which Paris owes his name. Some years back he gave me a clay carving of Spartacus when I bought a small bronze he did....



The weekend's [process can be seen here](#) - finishing touches will be done these days; the bust then sliced and emptied (ugh!!); some darkener added; some drying; and then placed in the kiln for almost 12 hours.....with some 15% reduction in mass....

Although we had some good laughs as we chatted (and he sloshed on the clay and carved away), he chose to go for the **severe look**.....It was a fascinating experience during which I learned more about the manwatch this space.....

20 April

anticipating post-modernism

Every day, 3-4 articles or blogposts catch my interest and have me surfing and collecting url links for future reference. Occasionally I do a post which incorporates those hyperlinks. It's the small bit of public service I do these days.

As someone who benefited from university education in the 1960s when it was very much a privilege, I have mixed feelings about their subsequent growth - and about the slavish worship of neo-liberal principles and language which has followed. So I'm always a sucker for a rant about how the "bean counters" (accountants) and management thinking are destroying universities and, in particular, the social sciences and humanities.

Last week saw a [good example in a catholic journal](#) which had me surfing nicely. It is one of the many recent (and worthwhile) challenges to the prevailing conventional wisdom that humanities (and "liberal studies") need to be scaled back if not abolished. It is a rallying cry for such things as scepticism, inquiry, originality

The language, as one might expect, is a trifle ornate - but bear with me,,,,,"there's gold in them there hills...."

In an atmosphere dominated by postmodern irony, pop-neuroscience, and the technocratic ethos of neoliberalism, the self is little more than a series of manipulable appearances, fashioned and re-fashioned to meet the marketing needs of the moment. We have bid adieu to existential inwardness. The reduction of the mind to software and the brain to a computer, which originated among cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind, has been popularized by journalists into the stuff of dinner-party conversations. The computer analogy, if taken as seriously as its proponents wish, undermines the concept of subjectivity—the core of older versions of the self. So it should come as no surprise that, in many enlightened circles, the very notion of an inner life has come to seem passé.

One consequence of this seismic cultural shift is the train wreck of contemporary higher education. Nothing better exemplifies the catastrophe than President Barack Obama's [plan to publish the average incomes earned by graduates](#) from various colleges, so parents and students can know which diplomas are worth the most in the marketplace, and choose accordingly. In higher education as in health care, market utility has become the sole criterion of worth. The monetary standard of value has reinforced the American distrust of intellect unharnessed to practical purposes:

"An undergraduate experience devoted exclusively to career preparation is four years largely wasted. The purpose of college is to enable you to live more alertly, more responsibly, more freely: more fully." The key to this process is "developing the habit of skepticism and the capacity to put it into practice. It means learning not to take things for granted, so you can reach your own conclusions." So it comes down to an effort at self-culture, as Emerson would have said. And self-culture involves an inward turn: it is "through this act of introspection, of self-examination, of establishing communication between the mind and the heart, the mind and experience, that you become an individual, a unique being—a soul. And that is what it means to develop a self."

The preoccupation with process over purpose, means over ends, has long been a feature of the technocratic mind, which despite occasional countercultural protests (as in the 1960s) has dominated American universities since the late nineteenth century and now seems poised to render other forms of thinking invisible.

The focus on mastering technique rather than grappling with substance means that too often higher education "does nothing to challenge students' high school values, ideals, practices, and beliefs," as the author of a new book (Deresiewicz) observes. How can it, if it has no vision of what an educated human being should be, as Allen Bloom complained nearly thirty years ago in "The Closing of the American Mind". It is interesting how often Deresiewicz cites Bloom, the bogeyman of the politically correct left in the 1980s, who was nothing if not a passionate defender of the humanities. Resistance to technocratic imperatives cuts across conventional political boundaries. In recent decades, au courant educational ideologues have put technocratic imperatives in a determinist idiom—"the train has left the station" etc.—and have added a dose of management jargon.

The most egregious management-speak is the near universal use of a customer-service model for what universities do. As Deresiewicz observes, commercial values are the opposite of pedagogical ones. If you are interested in students' long-term welfare, don't give them what they want—don't be afraid, he tells professors, to stand on your own authority, to assume you know something your students don't, which they might profit by learning. The very fact that he has to make this obvious point suggests the parlous state we are in. The easy equation of students with consumers confirms Deresiewicz's conclusion that the schools "finally don't care about learning at all"—or about teaching.

"Teaching is not an engineering problem. It isn't a question of transferring a certain quantity of information from one brain to another," he writes, implicitly challenging the current fashion of online education.

On the contrary: "Educate' means 'lead forth.' A teacher's job is to lead forth the powers that lie asleep within her students. A teacher awakens; a teacher inspires." Not every teacher can measure up to this exalted standard, but its presence at least can make us try.

By comparison, when it comes to motivating teachers, the commercial model offers nothing. The emptiness of management jargon, applied to traditional moral concepts, is nowhere more apparent than in the ubiquity of the word "leadership." Once upon a time it was something that was considered a duty, an accompaniment of privilege. Now, Deresiewicz writes, it's little more than "an empty set of rituals known only to propitiate the gods."

Like so many other ideals of the meritocracy ("innovation," "creativity," "disruption"), indeed like the meritocrats themselves, "leadership" lacks content. And where content is absent, power pours in. We are left with Mark Edmundson's witty summation, quoted by Deresiewicz: a leader is "someone who, in a very energetic, upbeat way, shares all the values of the people who are in charge."

As often happens it was one of the discussants who led me in the most interesting direction - simply referring us to a book written in 1944 I had never heard of - [The Abolition of Man](#) - penned however by a very well-known figure - CD Lewis. The argument of the (short) book is [summarised here](#) - and the full version can actually [be downloaded here](#). Amazingly the book seems to anticipate the threat which the "anything goes" strand of post-modernism would bring (what I have taken to calling - the "whatever" response

It seems that Lewis (father of Daniel D) took this so seriously that he wrote a dystopian novel about it - [That Hideous Strength](#) whose plot is [summarised in great detail here](#); serialised [here](#); and available (courtesy of Gutenberg) in [entirety here](#)

Now I have to find the time (and inclination) to read the 2 books.....

26 April

Memory's Veil - forgetting and remembering

Books have been appearing in recent years celebrating the simple pleasures of life (such as swimming, walking, eating, not talking) and bearing such titles as Wanderlust - a history of walking; "Cooked; a natural history of transformation"; and A Book of Silence

Not that there is anything novel about this - Henri Bergson wrote an entire tract on Laughter in 1900 (popularised in the 1960s in Arthur Koestler's The Act of Creation). And artist and art critic John Berger's most famous book is entitled Ways of Seeing (1972)

Faithful readers will know that I have been working on a new (and enlarged) edition of Introducing the Bulgarian Realists which adds cultural and historical references and a lot more painters.

So it wasn't surprising that I had dreamed up a new title - "Exploring Bulgaria - a cultural romp". I briefly entertained the idea of making the subtitle "a sensual romp" before realizing that this would attract the wrong sort of reader! As the book includes short sections on such things as wine, food, video and cinema I even thought of the title "Using Your Senses"!!

It was, however, only when I was going through a catalogue at the weekend - and found myself constantly having to add the phrase "a superb but forgotten painter" to the names in my book - that I realized **that the book's sub-text ismemory.....and forgetting...and not just in Bulgaria**

Like many other European countries, Bulgaria has had periods during which a "veil of silence" has been drawn over parts of its history - with September 1944 being the point at which individual memories became selective. By contrast memories of the struggles which brought independence from the Ottomans in 1878 have always burned brightly.....

It is our fate to be forgotten when we die - but one of the nice features of present-day central Sofia are the crimson plaques which now grace the street corners, reminding us of the events and individuals who played a role in Bulgaria's history. Not just Tsars and Russian generals but poets, revolutionaries, politicianseven an English one (William Gladstone). A small station on the gorge which winds through the hills outside Sofia on the way north to Russe bears the name (Thompson) of an Englishman (Frank) parachuted into the country during the second world war who was quickly captured and shot. His brother (EP) went on to become a famous British Marxist historian!



But it was only yesterday when I was about to send the text to the printer that it was brought home to me that the whole book is, in a sense, an ODE TO FORGETFULNESS and that my references to Bulgarian events and people are simply one of myriad examples about what I've now started to call "Memory's Veil" - the highly selective way all of us - in whatever country - remember people and artistic talent

Some of you may know the author Nassim Nicholas Taleb whose book The

Black Swan became a best-seller a few years ago. In it he makes a profound point about the process by which artistic "genius" is recognised (or not - the latter being more often the case)

*More than four centuries ago, the English essayist Francis Bacon had a very simple intuition. The idea is so trivial that he puts to shame almost all empirical thinkers who came after him until very recently..... Bacon mentioned a man who, upon being shown the pictures of those worshipers who paid their vows then subsequently escaped shipwreck, wondered **where were the pictures of those who happened to drown after their vows.***

The lack of effectiveness of their prayers did not seem to be taken into account by the supporters of the handy rewards of religious practice. "And such is the way of all superstition, whether in astrology, dreams, omens, divine judgments, or the like", he wrote in his Novum Organum, written in 1620.

This is a potent insight: the drowned worshippers, being dead, do not advertise their experiences. They are invisible and will be missed by the casual observer who will be led to believe in miracles.

Not just in miracles, as Taleb goes on to argue.....it is also the process which decides whether an artist is remembered. For every artist of genius, there have been many more with the same talent but whose profile, somehow, was submerged....

Art, of course, is the subject of high fashion - reputations ebb and flow.....we are vaguely aware of this...but it is money that speaks in the art "market" and it is the din of the cash register to which the ears of most art critics and dealers are attuned.....

One of the few other people I know who celebrates unknown or, rather, forgotten artists is Jonathan in Wales who runs a great blog called [My Daily Art Display](#) which fleshes out the detail of the lives of long-forgotten but superb artists.....

27 April

[The Emperor has no clothes! - Questioning reform](#)

Readers will know that I spent the first half of my working life encouraging structures which gave voice to people who had previously been ignored in and by local government - and the next half working as an external consultant trying to get central government systems in various parts of central Europe and central Asia to operate more in the interests of "the citizen".

In all cases, the issue was the complacent self-serving nature of those in power - be they professionals or political leaders. Not that the private sector escaped censure since the shortcomings of the large private bureaucracies were well exposed in the 70s and 80s by writers such as JK Galbraith and Rosabeth Kantor.....Untrammelled power was the issue.....



In all my cases, [I wrote the experiences up](#) - aware that I was venturing into unknown territory with "shabby and untested equipment" (as TS Eliot might have put it). As a young but senior politician in a Scottish Region in the 70s and 80s with a commitment to community development and action (and a writing bent), I was then almost unique in Britain; and was subsequently one of the first consultants let loose by the European Commission into "transition land" in the 90s in an effort to have a different type of public agency, with different accountabilities....

Of course Africa and Asia were well-frequented haunts of "development consultants" (and had been for some decades) but they were a different breed - with a different language as well as funding. Certainly I was one of a small minority in the decades until the new millennium - but there *must now be several millions of such "experts" these days* who are paid (good wages) to do (short-term) contract work to get public organisations to operate "more effectively". And academic institutions throughout the world churn out thousands of papers and books every year about the "development work" which is going on.....critical, well-intentioned and often well-writtentake, for example, [this impressive list](#) from the [Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre](#) at the University of Manchester.

Curiously, however, only a tiny number of people seem to have tried to make sense of the efforts at "good governance" in central and east Europe and Asia - Tony Verheijen's [Administrative Capacity in the new EU Member States - the Limits of Innovation](#) (2006) and Nick Manning's [International Public Administration Reform - implications for the Russian Federation](#) (2006) were two - and in 2009 a collection of papers was published about [Democracy's Plight in the European Neighbourhood: Struggling Transitions and Proliferating Dynasties](#)

In 2011 I presented [a detailed overview of these various efforts](#) to a network of Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe ([NISPAcee](#)) but have been disappointed by the way the members of the network have simply aped "best practice" nonsense from the west....

Every now and again the size of the programme budgets of government consultancy work makes the headlines - particularly in the UK - but no one feels able to challenge the notion of squeezing increased productivity from what has been seen for the past few decades to have been bloated bureaucracies.....

I sense that these perceptions - both about "reform" and "bureaucracy" - are in for a rude shock shortly.....we are, after all, approaching almost 50 years of reform efforts and some voices are being raised to question what has been achieved....

This weekend, for example, I hit on a couple of videos of academic addresses by 2 big UK names - Chris Pollitt on [40 years of Public Sector Reform](#) - and Rod Rhodes on [political anthropology and political science](#) whose text can be [scanned more quickly here](#) (the papers on which the two addresses are based can be read in [Rethinking policy and politics - reflections on contemporary debates in policy studies](#))

Allowing for the simplicities such deliveries require, the basic message they have about the British experience of reform is quite savage.....

At the same time I was trying to make sense of a new (and rare) book on "institutional reform - [Limits of Institutional Reform in Development - changing rules for realistic solutions](#) - whose early part is devoted to a single and obvious point; that almost all institutional reforms have failed in "developing countries" because they don't fit local circumstances.... Outside experts have been parachuted in with "ready-made solutions" and made little attempt to prepare the locals for the real problems of implementation. The literature on "capacity development" has been strong on how cultural factors impact on organizational performance and, although Andrews doesn't refer to that literature, the first half of his book emphasizes the counter-productivity of the consultancy industry's preaching of "best practice"

A rather dry summary of the book's scope and contents can be found in [this LRB review](#)

His discussion (in chapter 3) of the "multiple logics" present in organisations is useful - as is his recognition of the importance of "building change off some of the alternative logics" always present..... and the second half of the book is more promising in its focus on "problem-solving" and "flexibility" (iterative learning).

He still sees a role for external experts - but mainly as a catalyst to help locals (a) explore what sort of "issues" can be reframed as the sort of "Problem" which will receive political attention and (b) develop feasible "solutions" which will attract consensus and support at the implementation stage...It's not often that the Japanese "5 whys" technique is recognized in this sorts of books - and this was good to see on pages 142-160

But, otherwise, the book reads like something written by a well-read post-graduate in Economics and political science who has been granted open access to all the World Bank files on "developing countries" - ie by someone with limited knowledge both of the real world and of the literature outside his chosen disciplines. And indeed Andrews is an Associate Professor at the Centre for International Development (part of Harvard's JF Kennedy School of Government) who worked briefly at the World Bank and graduated from a South African University...The book can be [partially read here on google](#)

But the book needs a total rewrite - for two reasons. First he needs to identify the lessons from the [huge literature on Managing Change](#) of the 1990s - let alone the more recent "political economy" approach of (say the UK's ODI) and indeed of the World Bank itself in such recent and major works as its 2008 [Governance Reform under Real-World Conditions - citizens, stakeholders and Voice](#) which, amazingly, is not even referenced (although he contributed a chapter).

And then he needs to do something about the way he uses words and phrases (if not logic). This is a very repetitive and badly-written book full of technocratic jargon and implicit and highly questionable assumptions. He would benefit from reading George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" (1944) and Michael Billig's recent [Learn to Write Badly](#) which savages the way social scientists these days have taken to using opaque invented nouns (rather than simple verbs) leaving the reader utterly confused about who is doing what to whom

4 May

Britain at the Polls - but no longer "Great" or "United" - let alone a...Kingdom

As the UK prepares to go tomorrow to the polls, I have a guilty secret to confess - I haven't actually cast a vote since 1990 (when I voted for myself in the elections for Strathclyde Region)....As someone who went into politics (in 1968) because it was so obviously an honourable activity, I'm glad that Scottish voters - due largely to the devolved parliament there and the new style of political conduct it introduced - still consider that the vote counts....Clearly that is not the case elsewhere in the UK

Although my posts in [The Independence Argument - home thoughts from abroad](#) showed that, ultimately, I had not been convinced by the argument for Scotland separating from the UK, I have been happy (and amazed) to see the speed with which erstwhile Scottish Labourites have shrugged off their tribal affiliations in recent months.....I was always vaguely annoyed when I was chapping the doors at election time to be told that "we've always been Labour here" - somehow I needed a more calibrated endorsement!!!

Who could have anticipated the massive haemorrhaging of the Labour vote since the independence referendum of last September???

One pollster who has been focusing on individual British constituencies seems to be giving a boost to the decidedly un-British (but sensible) phenomenon of "tactical voting" - which seems to be empowering a lot of rightwing voters to hold their noses and switch their support to high-profile (but empty) characters such as Jim Murphy and Nick Clegg.....

I was actually moved by the [John Harris video of doorstepping \(with](#) a 70-year parliamentarian no one has heard of) to write a comment about what an unctuous piece of stuff that particular guy was all the time I had known him on at the Scottish level before he went to Westminster.....and how staggering it was that he considered himself entitled to keep taking good money.....

My views on political parties these days are set out in the second part of [Ways of Seeing...the global crisis](#). Scottish Television actually asked me yesterday to complete a short (and rather stupid) survey on the election - and I duly recorded that I would be voting Green (on principle, not tactics).

We seem, frankly, to be going backwards in British politics - in 2007 or so there was a strong electoral reform campaign (who remembers the [Power Inquiry of 2004-06](#) and "Power 2010"?). Now we just seem to have comedian [Russell Brand's](#) antics (intriguingly the German word for "fire") - although people do seem to be taking more to the idea of coalition government.....

Understandably, my preferred option would be for a Labour-SNP coalition (given the strong sniff of social democracy the latter exude) - but the collapse of the Labour vote in Scotland (they seem set to [lose at least 30 of their 41 seats](#) to the Scottish nationalists) seems paradoxically to have ruined [Miliband](#) (!)'s chances of commanding the largest group of MPs.....

John Harris - in [this latest clip whose accent may be difficult to follow](#)....- shows just how effective the Conservative propoganda seems to have been about the idea of a minority Labour Government depending on Scottish nationalist support.....

6 May

Collapse

Just seen one of the pithiest epithets for the generation I belonged to in the middle of the 20th Century -

"We were poor, but we didn't know it." In fact, however, in the breadth and depth of the social support we enjoyed, all my classmates (whom I have contacted recently) described our youth in strikingly similar terms - "we were rich, but we didn't know it".

It's from a short piece - [Crumbling American dreams](#) - penned a couple of years ago by Robert Putnam (of "[Bowling Alone](#)" fame) about his home town into which he was born in 1941.

He's now expanded his thoughts into a book - [Unhappy Days for America](#). The link is to a NYRB review which is less than enthusiastic in its assessment.....

Monday, May 11, 2015

Spare a thought.....

The world will have noticed that the British Conservative won a surprisingly clear-cut victory in last week's General Elections; and that Scottish nationalists (less surprisingly) swept the board there, leaving only 3 of the 59 Westminster seats for the other three British parties to split equally between them.

But far fewer will have appreciated the speed, scale and significance of the utter and total collapse in the Labour vote in Scotland which was, for most of the post-war period, a stronghold of Labourism...

I grew up in its heartland and actually contested a political election in May 1964 on the eve of my University Finals in Politics at the University of Glasgow - [just as 20 year-old Scottish Nationalist Mhairi did last week](#). The difference is that I was running for a municipal seat I had little chance of winning - and that she was running for a winnable seat - and not only won but (as did most Nationalists on the night) did so by a massive majority. It was 4 years later before I made it to local political office - and another 6 to a senior position in regional government.....

Today I want to spare some thoughts for the individuals involved in the sea-change which is underway in Scotland - both the winners and losers.

I know that good advice generally drops on deaf ears - as Oscar Wilde put it "I always pass on good advice - it's the only thing to do with it...." But I really hope someone takes Mhairi aside and has the clout to warn her against the seductions of office....I hope that politics students at my alma mater are still given Robert Michels to read..... and that someone gives her a good reading list of "alternative" stuff to read.....

I can't say I'm a fan of the trend there's been of appointing younger and younger people top high office - I had a poster in my own political office in Glasgow which read "I wish I had been born earlier, I would have made the same mistakes....but faster....."

I feel real pity for her losing opponent - a real heavy-weight who punched well above his age...Douglas Alexander. I knew his father in the early 1960s in Greenock - a Church of Scotland Minister - who subsequently became Leader of the highly-respected Iona Community....Douglas -

despite being a lawyer and colleague (if not acolyte) of Gordon Brown - was decidedly not one of the many machine Labourists of whom there were, bluntly, far too many in the West of Scotland. Glasgow Labour MPs in particular were a disaster and gave the Labour Party a dreadful name from which it has never been able to recover.

And I include in that criticism a colleague of mine from Strathclyde Region in the 1980s - Ian Davidson - whose tongue became well known for its infamous forked calumny even then and became more so the older he got and the higher he climbed (a vicious Chairman of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Scottish Affairs for the past few years).

He was one of many who deserved to go - although less so was Iain McKenzie who was Leader of the Labour group of Inverclyde Council in my hometown until he successfully sought election to Parliament only a few years ago on the (premature) death of the incumbent MP. His victor - by a massive 15,000 vote margin, is an unknown Scottish nationalist whose sole claim to fame is to be the grandson of the town's most famous goalkeeper!!

I don't pretend to be a polling pundit - so can't offer any convincing theory about why the conservatives pulled off this surprising victory - but my gut tells me that the Nationalist campaign of backing Labour was the strongest factor persuading wavering voters in England to go with the Tories.

The Conservatives pay big money to ensure they are plugging the right messages - David Cameron took a lot of stick for sticking with the lines given him by [his highly successful \(Australian\) campaign pollster](#). But I suspect that their huge posters showing the long arm of one of the Nationalist leaders reaching for the wallet in the back pocket of the English voter will prove to have been the most effective poster in decades. [Another blog has expressed it well](#) - Not only have the SNP destroyed the Left in Scotland they have pretty much destroyed it in England too. The SNP campaign of promising to rule both England and Scotland and propping up a Labour government has spectacularly backfired. English voters faced with this campaign preferred to vote Conservative rather than have Alex Salmond pulling the strings.

7 May

[Unwelcoming Pleven](#)

Pleven is a city in the northern part of Bulgaria which looks rather forbidding from the heights of the main Russe-Sofia road above which skirt it - densely-packed fingers of white high-rise blocks pointing to the sky. You can imagine the Russian troops in 1877 surveying the settlements as they struggled to break the Turkish siege.....

It has two famous artistic sons - the caricaturist Ilyia Beshkov () and the grand old man of Bulgarian art, Svetlin Roussev, who was Chairman of the Bulgarian Union of Artists from 1973-85 and whose amazing collection in the Sofia Atelier which bears his name (just down from the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral) I had discovered only in December. But is actually one of a pair - the other being in Pleven - to which I



made a slight detour on Friday on my way to Bucharest....

The city is approached by strange, empty dual carriageways which suddenly disgorge you into bustling traffic buzzing around a series of hills. It is a couple or so years since I last visited its Ilyia Beshkov gallery - to whose concrete carbuncle I was guided by intuition.....The same happened yesterday... I swung right up a hill and soon caught sight of the old low-slung building on the left which is the National History Museum, with a park on the right which turned out to contain the Svetlin Roussev Gallery....Fortunately there is still uncontrolled parking in the quiet area just under the Beshkov Gallery.

Svetlin Roussev had apparently acquired thousands of artefacts during his time at the heart of Bulgarian painting - passed on presumably by his colleagues. In the last half of the 80s he fell out of favour with the authorities for the stand he took on various issues - and I was shown with some glee in the Sofia library a copy of the one of the Encyclopedias of Bulgarian art from which most of his entry had been airbrushed from history....

His Pleven collection has found an appropriate location in an old Ottoman Hamam - which has one of the most beautiful interiors I have seen. Beshkov cartoons start the tour and my camera was just about to spring into action when I was checked by one of the younger attendants - the first time this had happened in all my tours of regional Bulgarian galleries. Fortunately I was able to use my link with the Sofia gallery which I phoned to have things sorted out.



But the same happened when I popped in to renew my acquaintance with the Beshkov gallery - and this time no friends in high places to help! What, I wonder, is the thinking here? I use no flash; the gallery offers no books whose sales might suffer from art enthusiasts with cameras? In any event I was informed that if I sent a written request in advance, I would be allowed.....It was so cold on my last (winter's) visit that I had been left alone - the attendants, wrapped in their furcoats had been huddled in a side-room in front of an electric heater!

So bad marks to an unwelcoming Pleven.....I will not forget the woman whose spiteful hand is trying to block a Boris Denev painting I really wanted to have join the small file I have on one of my favourite Bulgarian painters.....(so many fall into that category!!)

10 May

[The great Romanian Realist school](#)

An "Art Safari" is taking place this week on Bucharest's central thoroughfare, Magheru Boulevard, in what was, until recently, an art-deco garage which I used a few years back for my car's annual test.

The jewels in the display are the regional collections - from Constanta, Arad, Galati but [Baia Mare in particular which was, at the turn of the 20th century, a real magnet for painters](#)... the link gives a good history - as well as excellent sections on some of the key local painters...

The Constanta Curator - Doina Pauleanu - is clearly one of the country's key art historian - having written at least three magnificent looking books on the painters of the period (unfortunately only in Romanian) - but shared the problem she has finding someone with the necessary qualifications and dedication willing to take the administrative burdens involved for about 300 euros a month..She's active in cross-border work, for example, with the Bulgarian curators of Dobrich Gallery (whom we know) and Russe - and has run trips to the traditional art colony of Balcik...

Last year, the safari was located in a large tent in the central square in front of the National Gallery and was rather small and stifling. This is a much better location - giving the conditions to allow the slow savouring of the amazing treasures the curators have brought forth.

And the organisers are to be congratulated on the creativity they let loose on the old building...



The display encourages us to make the trip to the various regions - particularly Constanta - and to resume the editing of more than 500 pages of text and reproductions I had accumulated for some 75 of the better known Romanian realists of a century ago. I took me quite a few years to appreciate the power of the Romanian tradition - their works are not so easily seen in the smaller galleries and one of my posts [referred to the number of private collections](#) which apparatchiks have squirrelled away. The Masters were

- the classicist [Theodor Aman](#) (1831-91);
- the impressionist [Nicolae Grigorescu](#) (1838-1907); and his friend, the tragically short-lived
- [Ion Andreescu](#) (1850-82)

and it is quite astonishing how many great artists were born within 15 years or so of one another in the country. Here's the top ten for me -

- [Nicolae Vermont](#) (1866-1932) had great landscapes;
- [Stefan Luchian](#) (1868-1917) is better known for his still-lives.
- [Artachino Constantin](#) (1870-1954) he and the trio who follow are the great colourists
- [Strambu Ipolit](#) (1871-1934)
- [Stefan Popescu](#) (1872-1948) my favourite - who has many North African landscapes;
- [Biju Leon](#) 1880-1970



- [Camil Ressu](#) (1880-1962) with wonderful peasant scenes; and
- [Bunescu Marius](#) 1881-1971
- [Jean Alexandru Steriadi](#) (1881-1956) with a lot of inspiration from the Black Sea.
- [Iosif Iser](#) (1881-1958) was a very colourful artist - who gave us great figurative work ...of racetracks and Ottoman figures.
- [Bednarik Ignat](#) (1882-1963)
- [Darescu Nicolae](#) 1883-1959 - another great colourist
- [Nicolae Tonitsa](#) (1886-1940) is well-known for his portraits - and the curious dark eyes of many of his figures.

- [Samuel Muntzner](#) (1884-1959) is also a favourite - with river or sea generally present in his paintings.

You'll find a series of my posts [on the Romanian realists here](#)

15 May

[Making sense of one's Life](#)

I'm always intrigued by confessional-type books which sketch how the scales fell from a writer's eyes and how (s)he began to "connect the dots" in their various worlds ie produce a coherent account of the exercise of power.

Voltaire's [Candide](#) was, of course, a satire - I prefer less manipulative and anguished portrayals of "intellectual journeys".....which seem to be quite rare.....millions of autobiographies or memoirs which show what an interesting life the author had or interesting times they lived in - but few hints of the sorts of deep questions they might have been exploring.....let alone attempts to set out their "world views", the assumptions which sustained them and how and why experience was forcing adjustments....

Almost before they start writing a book - be it political, financial, economic - authors have taken decisions about how they will "frame" and tell the story - and are writing the book to convince you of its rectitude. Don't expect them to share their uncertainties with you....

Patrick Chalmers is a fellow Scot born in 1966 - the generation after mine - and, after graduating first in engineering then journalism, had several years of contract work before landing a job with Reuters in 1994. Happy to have such a job - initially on finance then EU affairs in Brussels - he was slow to recognise the interests he was serving although it was in Brussels he developed his Euroscepticism as he began to understand the extent of the "behind-the-doors" dealing and the power of the big business lobby.....a spell as a foreign correspondent in the Far East completed his disillusionment with the rhetoric of democracy and he resigned in order to seek a more honourable channel for his energies....[Fraudcast News - how bad journalism supports bogus democracies](#) is his (self-published) book which tells the story - with the final chapters updating his story and giving a quietly upbeat message about "alternative journalism".....

We need more books like this....for the life of me I can't at the moment remember others I've read of this genre - although I know they exist. Coincidentally, I've spent the past few days drafting possible text for a new introduction to the little E-book [Crafting Effective Public Management](#) which I uploaded a week or so ago. This latest effort of mine had collected my musings of the last decade about efforts to improve systems of government. This [post earlier this month](#) reflects my rather belated realisation of how few people seem to have had my experience of straddling "reform efforts" in so many countries and from a "practitioner" standpoint.....Writers on this topic are academics - or employed by global institutions.....paid to put walls around pretty gardens of increasingly specialized "knowledge". Practitioners rarely have the time or temerity to challenge such gatekeepers...

It was some 15 years ago I started to pose serious questions about the conventional wisdom on the sort of "institutional change" which people in post-communist countries were being urged to make and the legitimacy of the bodies funding programmes of institutional reform....

I delivered a major paper [Missionaries or mercenaries?](#) on the topic to the 2007 Annual Conference of the NISPAcee network of schools of public administration; an update [Play the Long Game - not the log frame!](#) at the 2011 Conference; and have mused intermittently about public management reform, training and the use of structural funds in new member states - but realized only this week that I needed to pick out more explicitly the "theories of change" which have been implicit in the programmes of the past 4 decades.....

Sunday, May 17, 2015

Enough is Enough

I've been "doing development" for so long that I've just begun to realise how odd if not questionable an activity it is.....preying on people's dissatisfactions and hopes.....and yet more and more consultants, academics and development workers get paid good money to keep churning out reports and books which identify organisational failure....and to work on programmes which order people what they should be doing - rather than helping the organisation's staff to flourish.....

It doesn't seem to matter whether the change programmes are those inside the private or public sector - they are all controlled by the same type of person in the Corporate Consultancy or national/international Funding Body..... they make the same sorts of assumptions....use the same sort of models.....and generally fail...

I'm at last beginning to pick up a sense that something is wrong....although there are huge political and financial interests in keeping a state of amnesia; a sense of bafflement amongst so called experts about the health of our organisations....[The Emperor has no clothes](#) post referred to some recent critical assessments in both the field of public management and development. And this book on [Reinventing Organisations](#) also seems to be making waves - taking us back to management books of the 1980s and echoing the work of maverick Richard Semmler....

Is it too much to suggest that there is a link here with the "slow food" and the "limits to growth" movements? All signalling a wider revolt against the way advertising, marketing and the corporate media has so insidiously, in the post-war period, developed a collective sense of dissatisfaction??

For the first part of my working life I was an "insider" working to improve a very large (public) organisation - with a strategy and structures which tried to use the energies of a range of people which the organisation's "logic" had trained it to ignore....These were its lower-level officials, its more junior politicians and, above all, citizen activists we brought into new structures we established in the early 80s. I'm glad to say that this sort of work was so strongly accepted and "embedded" (to use an important concept in the change literature) that it has continued to this day in the structures and strategies of the Scottish Government....

But my role fundamentally changed after 1990 to that of an "Outsider" - the European Commission (and the small private "consultancies" it sub-contracts) funded me to appear in capitals and to "effect change"... using increasingly detailed prescriptions and tools which I wrote about with increasing frustration.....What I enjoyed was identifying and working flexibly with people who wanted to change their institutions for the better - but the rigidity with which EC programmes are designed made that increasingly impossible....

It was a decade ago I first came across the notion of "[good enough governance](#)" which challenged the push global bodies such as The World Bank were making (at the start of the new millennium) for "good governance" - including the development of indices to measure the extent of progress "developing countries" were making in reaching the standards of public management apparently possessed by "developed" countries.

We need to explore this "good enough" concept in all our thinking but, above all, we need to have an outright ban on externally-imposed organisational change....and a requirement that anybody proposing change should have to justify it to a panel of self-professed sceptics....

[A Call to Arms!](#)

I have been reading these past 2 days an important tract which appeared last year and which pillories the state of British government - [Stand and Deliver](#). It suggests that the performance of the British government system is so poor as to require a total overhaul and indeed formal "[Treaty](#)". The BBC gives [good coverage to the author in this piece](#)

His more radical ideas are based around bringing in new feedback systems into the working of governments. He likens government at present to a gardener planting seeds, telling people what the garden will look like but then never actually checking whether or not they have grown as planned (instead spending lots of time checking on the sharpness of a spade or the water efficiency of a hose). That is in contrast to the private sector, which checks on the outcomes of spending continually.



A similar discipline needs to come into government, he says. There has been progress with the National Audit Office, the Office for National Statistics and select committees, he says, but he

wants them all brought under the umbrella of the second chamber (the House of Lords at the moment) becoming a "Resulture" able to score policies and kill off those ones which are not working.

I call this a "tract" since it is not the normal "run of the mill" academic, political or technocratic treatise. Its author is thoroughly familiar with the political and technocratic worlds (less so the academic) and is very angry with what he has experienced.....

So it is a very individual take on the British system of government - despite his consultancy experience in other countries and his emphasis on the need for "benchmarking", only the Swiss system really seems to rate for him (and the Canadian experience of health reform).

My first reaction as I read the opening pages was to try to remember when I had last read such a diatribe.....

- Simon Jenkins' "Accountable to None - the Tory Nationalisation of Britain" (1996) and [Thatcher and Sons](#) (2006) were both powerful exposes of the excesses of the 1979-2006 governments;
- Christopher Foster's [British Government in Crisis](#) (2005) was more measured and brought his particular rich blend of academia and consultancy.
- It took a search of the latter's book to remind me of the title and author of the famous expose of civil service waste which had first attracted Margaret Thatcher's attention - Leslie Chapman's [Your Disobedient Servant](#) (1979).
- And 2005 saw the launching of the Power Inquiry into the discontents about British government.....

Oddly, however, none of these books appear in Straw's three page and rather idiosyncratic bibliography (nor a clutch of recent books on government "failure").

The book itself promises to give an "organisational" rather than political take on the subject - which suited me perfectly as this has been my perspective since I first went into "government" (local) in 1968 - absorbing the more radical challenge to hierarchies and power.....

Faced in turn with the challenge in 1975 of becoming one of the senior figures on the new Strathclyde Region, I used my position to develop more open and inclusive policy-making processes - extending to junior officials and councillors, community activists.

With a huge Labour majority we could afford to be generous to any opposition! And, even under Thatcher, the Scottish Office Ministers were conciliatory - "partnership" was the name of the game we helped develop and was most evident in the [success of the "Glasgow" revival](#).

Straddling the worlds of academia and politics, I was able to initiate some important networks to try to effect social change

It was this experience of cooperating with a variety of actors in different agencies I took with me when I opted in 1990 to go into consultancy work in central Europe - to help develop the different sort of government capacity they needed there.....then, for 8 years in Central Asia. I was lucky in being allowed to operate there to take advantage of "windows of opportunity" and not be hogbound with the stupid procurement rules...but I became highly critical of the EC development programme as you will see in this 2011 paper [The Long Game - not the Logframe](#)

Throughout this entire 45 year-period, I have been keeping up with the literature on change and public management - so am intrigued by this book of Ed Straw's which promises to bring an organisational perspective to the frustrations we all have with government systems..... It was published more than a year ago; has a dedicated website but, from my google search, seems to have gone down like a lead balloon.

Tomorrow I hope to present his arguments and explore how well the book fares on the following tests -

- "resonating" with the times?
- a "convincing" argument?
- demonstrated "feasibility"?
- opposition identified?
- sources of support?

Thursday, May 21, 2015

is British journalism dead?



My first draft for this post went as follows - "If ever people needed proof that British journalism and newspapers are no longer capable of serious analysis and comment, they got it in the days immediately after the General Election earlier this month.....with prominence being given to the disgusting "spin" we were given by the Blairites of the Labour Party that its electoral failure was due to its rejection of "New Labourism" and its overly "leftist" stance"

This was then to point to the best analysis I have so far read of the results - being not in a newspaper but in one of Britain's most sustained (and left) bloggers - Boffyblog which is currently running a series of posts to help us interpret the results. [Part 3 gives us the basic facts](#) -

in England, Labour gained exactly as many additional seats as did the Tories - 24. In addition, Labour's vote share, across the UK, rose by twice as much as did the Tories, 1.5% points for Labour as opposed to 0.8% points for the Tories, despite the huge fall in Labour's vote in Scotland. Labour's failure to gain a majority, therefore, most certainly cannot be placed at the door of the party having moved too far to the Left. It gained seats in England, on the basis of its mildly left stance, just not enough to compensate for the seats it lost in Scotland.

The loss of seats in Scotland, most certainly could not be put down to standing on too left a programme, given that the SNP swept the board on the basis of a much more left-wing populist stance.

Other parts of his series do something which almost no journalist bothers these days to do - put the results in the context of how the Labour leadership since 1979 has tried to find a plausible strategy (or "narrative" as the post-modernists would put it) for the country's economic difficulties which had evicted them from power

I will return to that important argument shortly - but I have first to make a detour since I realised that I was not on solid ground in simply asserting that British journalists are no longer capable of independent analysis. I only read one newspaper - the liberal-leaning Guardian - and am beginning to realise that I have been taking its integrity and fairness too much for granted. I simply don't read other British newspapers - so have no basis for saying there are no independents left.

Of course I know the corporate structure of these newspapers gives little hope of finding unbiased coverage - but I can't just assume that.

Who knows - perhaps I would be surprised if I actually took the time and trouble to do a proper analysis??

An idea for a quick bit of research and future post???

As long as I can remember I have been a Guardian reader. I know that the Financial Times is supposed to have better European coverage but my left-wing sympathies made me assume I would get fairer coverage in The Guardian. And, certainly, the way it has in recent years dealt with first the scandal of phone-tapping by the Murdoch press; and then the Wikipedia leaks has demonstrated great courage....

But I became increasingly uneasy when I saw how the paper dealt with Craig Murray's allegations of American-British collusion in torture in Uzbekistan (duly vindicated by Wikileaks) and the outright propaganda of journalists such as Polly Toynbee...and (in Scotland) Severin Carroll. The speed, therefore, with which Guardian journalists moved to feed us the new Labourist spin has shocked me.....Of course, I shouldn't have been surprised - the Guardian has always supported the "Liberal way" - the only journalist apparently allowed to tell it from an open and radical stance has [been John Harris](#)

So where to go for honest, unbiased analysis???

Before I go, let me give you [another bit of Boffy's independent analysis](#) - dealing first with the "myth" that, under Michael Foot, the Labour party was unelectable - he reminds us that it was the breakaway of the (new labour) SDP which caused a drop in electoral support which was however restored; and that the 1983 election was lost because of the upsurge of nationalist sentiment which came from the Falklands War.....

Apart from a very short spike in support for the SDP at the end of 1981, coinciding with the Crosby By-Election, Labour remained above both the Tories and the Liberal/SDP, with an average poll rating of about 40%.

Labour suffered a temporary reduction in support due to the betrayal of the SDP, but the main reason it lost in 1983, was not Michael Foot, nor the SDP, nor its programme being the longest suicide note in history, as Golding described it, but the willingness of Thatcher to see the loss of thousands of lives in the Falklands War, and the Tories ability to whip up nationalist hysteria on the basis of it. Cameron has won today, for similar reasons.

The SNP declared a political war on England on nationalistic grounds, and the Tories responded in like manner, by unleashing English nationalism in response. Nicola Sturgeon, simply fulfilled the same role for Cameron that Galtieri performed for Thatcher.

What is more, this nationalistic sentiment played into the existing nationalistic sentiment that existed, in places, and was manifest in support for UKIP, a nationalism whose focus was not necessarily directed against Scotland, but against the EU, and migrants.

Friday, May 22, 2015

Must Labour Lose?

I had no sooner remarked on the absence of serious analysis of the results of the British General election of 7 May than I was almost overwhelmed by numerous analyses - but none of it, significantly, from newspaper sources.

- Ross McKibbin is an Oxford University political scientist whose well-informed pieces in the London Review of Books are always a joy to read - with hard analysis combining with good writing. The lead piece in the current LRB, his [Labour Dies Again](#) achieves the standard we expect from him
- Henning Meyer is editor of the leftist Think Tank "Social Europe" which has produced some booklets on social democracy's contemporary travails and his [brief commentary on the lessons](#) will reflect thinking in that quarter.
- Mike Rustin is a London Sociology Professor and a well-kent face in the old-left crowd - so this critical [piece of his](#) (from the hard left stable of Lawrence and Wishart) contains few surprises....
- Brendan O'Neill is Editor of Spiked - a [libertarian journal](#) whose provocative pieces always entertain and his [Social Democracy is Dead, Don't Mourn](#) piece appeared while the final votes were still being counted in some places - hence perhaps the elements of triumphalism it contains.... The "Twitterati" he contemptuously refers to will certainly include Mike Rustin and the [Soundings](#) Kilburn Manifesto crowd whose language I also confess to finding a bit distasteful....
- But the [Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute](#) is a bit more hardnosed and less easy to dismiss and [this analysis is a sound dissection](#) of Miliband's attempt to supply a convincing "story" during the past 5 years

None of Miliband's attempts at creating an underpinning narrative for his agenda focused on empowering people through collective action. Instead, Labour's message was marred by a confusing mix of well-meaning managerialism and romanticised communitarianism.

Miliband's only public critique of New Labour statecraft arose from his flirtation with Maurice Glasman's [Blue Labour](#) campaign. Central to Blue Labour is the notion that the state, as well as the market economy, has dispossessed local communities of autonomy. In 2011, Glasman [described](#) New Labour's 'embrace of the state' as 'manic' and 'almost Maoist'. But the question of how communities can defend themselves against market forces is left bafflingly unaddressed. Blue Labour has little to say about how the retrenchment of the state, through austerity, is the biggest threat to strong communities in Britain.

Miliband adopted '[responsible capitalism](#)' in 2011. By suggesting capitalism can be reformed, the concept sounded a bit lefty - New Labour suggested capitalism could be harnessed, but never tamed. Yet it offered no substantive role for citizens in taking back control over a rampant economy. Rather, we look to capitalists themselves to lead the change.

In 2012 Miliband introduced the odd 'predistribution' concept. It presented government as both limited in its interventions - eschewing the politics of redistribution - and overtly technocratic, in that

it suggested state managers know best how to create good citizens.

Finally, Miliband gave us '[One Nation Labour](#)', the most blue of all his rhetorical ploys. 'One-nation' is a traditionally conservative concept, associated with Benjamin Disraeli. Indeed, [David Cameron](#) reclaimed the term in his first public remarks after his election victory had become clear. It suggests a version of society in which our common humanity matters as much as social order (or more precisely, that achieving the latter is dependent on recognising the former). It is, in a social democratic context, almost entirely meaningless.

'One-nation' presents the nation as an association, not a polity, and offered people looking to Miliband for hope nothing that they would not have already expected to hear from the Labour Party, even under Tony Blair. The prominence given to the concept in subsequent Labour communications tells us that, essentially, Ed Miliband did not know what kind of government he wanted to lead. It left him defenceless against the primitive appeal of austerity rhetoric. Labour lost this election to the Conservatives. Conservatism has little ideological appeal in a post-crisis environment, as there is no order left to defend, but the Conservatives were extremely successful in perpetrating a politics of fear, against vaguely lefty otherness and incompetence, in order to acquire a vote share just about high enough (36.8%) to deliver a majority under our flawed electoral system.

Yet the election was lost to [the SNP](#) too. The SNP offered Scottish voters something that Labour did not: re-empowerment through transformed statehood. One does not really have to take a view on the plausibility of the SNP's approach (I made my views clear at the time of the independence referendum) to recognise its appeal. Labour should be thankful the SNP's nationalism restricts it to standing in Scotland alone - because it could well have demolished Labour candidates further south as well. Ed Miliband should have done more to change the conversation. But crippled as he was by an ambivalence towards the state, he failed to convince himself what he wanted to do with power - so it is little wonder he failed to convince the electorate.

The title I have given this post is actually the title of a Penguin Special produced in 1960 by Mark Abrams. The surprise of this election is not Labour losing (the polls never had good news for Labour) but the Tories winning an overall majority (even if a very small one). The Labour Party has been in decline for more than a decade....it certainly lost my affections in 2000 when I realised (largely through George Monbiot's expose in [The Captive State - the corporate takeover of Britain](#)) the scale of the concessions New Labour had made to Big Business

[Part 6 of Boffy's series of posts](#) puts it all in an even longer historical context -

The idea that Miliband lost the election because he was too left-wing is risible. Not only was Miliband's political stance to the right of successful Labour leaders such as Wilson or Attlee, but it was even to the right of Tory leaders like Heath, or even Home, and Macmillan before him, who in the post-war period governed within the social democratic consensus of [Buttskellism](#). Even those Tory leaders saw no reason not to follow a Keynesian policy of deficit spending, even when Britain's debt to GDP ratio was 250%, rather than the 70% it is today. [Heath even nationalised industries like Rolls Royce](#) when they ran into trouble, a measure that would have been anathema to Miliband's outlook, let alone that of the Blairites.

So is it too late to take the Labour Party back? Certainly those contending for its leadership inspire no confidence. The implication of [John Harris' latest post](#) seems to be that a grass-roots revolution is possible...

Sunday, May 24, 2015

A model for People Power??



I know that some of my (many) global readers who share my critical/sceptical stance on power structures have had their hopes raised recently by my homeland and will have been hugely encouraged by the electoral landslide in Scotland which wiped out the representatives of the British political system on May 7th - with all but 3 of the 59 Scottish parliamentary seats in Westminster being taken by the Scottish Nationalists.

For 60 years Labour has been the establishment party in Scotland - on 6th May they had 40 seats - reduced overnight to one. In many cases, rock-solid Labour majorities of more than 10,000 votes were transformed into Nationalist strongholds with majorities of equivalent size. If ever there was an example of "people power", is this not it?

I have been out of Scottish politics for 25 years; was never a "mainstream" labour activist (to put it mildly); and was never disturbed personally or politically by the upsurge of Scottish Nationalism which started in the 1960s with the discovery of North Sea Oil (establishment Labour figures clearly had a better "nous" than me - since they treated them viciously - I treated them as a bit of a joke).

Readers can therefore assume that what follows is as objective an assessment of that question as they are likely to obtain elsewhere..... The basic facts are -

- Just 8 months ago, a massive 85% of the Scottish electorate voted by a 10% margin to remain in the United Kingdom
- What reputation the Nationalist government which has ruled since 2007 enjoys for "social democracy" it actually owes to the Lab/Lib Coalition which ruled Scotland from 1999
- It was during this time that all the distinctive social democratic policies were developed and implemented such as community land ownership; free care for the elderly; free University tuition fees; and continued public water and health systems
- All supported by the block UK tax transfer which is made to Scotland.
- The Nationalist Government which has ruled Scotland since 2007 (initially a minority one) has never used the powers for marginal tax increases
- And refused to take part in the broad Scottish coalition which pushed (successfully) for the significant devolved powers enjoyed by the Scottish government and Parliament
- Far from articulating a social democratic position, their leaders until recently had policies for marginal taxation for multi-national companies and "entrepreneurs" such as Donald Trump
- The Scottish Nationalist Party (despite its soft leftist image) has never articulated a coherent statement of its political philosophy (the [600 page manifesto](#) for the 2014 referendum published by the Scottish Government was pasted together by civil servants)

- The upsurge in Nationalist support came in the 12 months preceding the [September 2014 Independence Referendum](#) and seems to have been due in large measure to an amazing outburst of independent leftist organisations in Scotland such as [Common Weal](#) and [National Collective](#)
- the SNP candidates attracted 1.5 million votes on 7 May - compared with Labour's 700,000 - and took 50% of the overall vote
- this compares with the SNP vote in the [2010 General Election](#) of 491,300; and Labour's 1,035,000
- in 5 years, that is, the SNP vote increased by 300% (1 million); and the Labour vote declined by 300,000

Let my English friend [Boffy spell it out for you](#) -

The SNP argument was that they would be able to blackmail a Labour government -but, the Tories were able to use that threat of blackmail to rally a large enough block of nationalistic sentiment, in England, behind them to win a majority.

The SNP believed that they could blackmail a Labour government, and instead led their citizens into another Tory government, the SNP now have to try to delude them into a belief that this Tory government "must" listen to them.

But, of course, the Tory government has no reason to listen to the SNP at all. In fact, what the one-party SNP regime in Scotland has now created, ironically, is a situation where a Scottish voice in government is pretty much excluded. In conditions where there are a large number of Scottish MP's from Labour or the Tories, there is always a good chance that some of those Scottish MP's will themselves be Ministers. In fact, in the last Labour Government, it was Scottish MP's who occupied the position of Prime Minister, Chancellor and other top jobs.

Because, today there are virtually no Scottish Labour or Tory MP's, the chances of any of them being in government, is thereby automatically excluded! In more ways than one, the delusions of the SNP have led the Scottish people into a dead end that has also excluded them from any voice in government. SNP MP's in Parliament will just be onlookers. If they really had the courage of their convictions, they would follow the example of Sinn Fein, and refuse to take their seats.

The fact, that the SNP currently purport to be pro-European, whilst wanting separation from the rest of Britain, simply exposes the illogicality and contradiction of their arguments and position even more. If, as the SNP claim, their problems arise not from capitalism, but from the fact that decisions are made in Westminster rather than Holyrood, how much greater would their problems be if decisions were made in Brussels rather than Holyrood, and under conditions where Scottish representation in the corridors of power would be even smaller than they are now, in Westminster?

The Tories understood these economic and political realities, which is why Cameron is already rushing to offer the SNP "fiscal autonomy". Jeremy Hunt let that cat out of the bag on Newsnight, whilst Cameron and other Tories have tried to make out that they do not propose to give Scotland fiscal autonomy. They intend to make the SNP demand it, so as to give it to them as an apparent concession, so the SNP will have to take the blame. If the SNP have to raise the finance required to cover Scottish spending, particularly in conditions where North Sea oil revenues are declining, and the ability to use them to bolster state finances are likely to disappear completely, the SNP will have little more scope to actually change anything in Scotland than a sizeable metropolitan council in England. It will have less ability to do so than does London.

I don't like to be the bearer of bad news - but be prepared for all now to go downhill in Scotland.....unless a serious strategy can be created by those outside the Nationalist ranks who have worked so hard in the last two years.....

Expect nothing from the nationalist MPs.....they are an undisciplined rag-bag of troublemakers who simply have naivety in common.....The E-book I published last autumn - [The Independence Argument - home thoughts from abroad](#) has a detailed list of the most significant books, websites and blogs on the issue. Only one of the 8 books which might be said to be in the "pro" camp conducts a serious analysis of the issue - and that is "Arguing for Independence - evidence, risk and the wicked issues" by Stephen Maxwell whose voice is sadly no more,.....

Gerry Hassan is an independent Scottish commentator and [reflects here on the possible reasons](#) for Scotland now being a one-party state

The repro is from my copy of Frans Masereel's superb "The City - a vision in woodcuts" (1925)

Sunday, May 24, 2015

[In Praise of the Free Spirit](#)

Institutions are conservative (Donald Schon coined in 1970 the lovely phrase "dynamic conservatism") and, despite the rhetoric in recent decades about "innovation", don't tend to favour original thoughts or ideas - so those seeking support for their ideas from university promotion boards or from lending agencies are generally disappointed and learn to dumb down. I grant you that the Web came out of the state scientific system but most significant innovations these days have come from youngsters pottering in garages and using their own cash....

And a remarkable number of the books which have made an impact in the last 100 years were not written by those with university sinecures.....

[George Scialabba](#) is not exactly a name to conjure with - but he is probably one of the greatest of our contemporary polymaths/public intellectuals. I apparently downloaded a short book of his - [The Divided Mind](#) - a year or so ago but did not appreciate then the other collections of his essays which have been available since 2006 and which point to a very rare writer who has at least 5 crucial qualities -

- Breadth of reading
- Humanist perspective
- Generosity of analysis
- Elegance and clarity of writing
- Significant chunks of quotations to allow the reader to make his/her own judgement

He may be known to an increasing number of American readers as a critic and essayist but is - as [this review points out](#) -

a building manager at [Harvard](#), the school from which he graduated in 1969. The facts of his vocational life are quite relevant, in a very homely, obvious way, to the splendid work that he does. There are almost

no professors who do Scialabba's kind of work, nor any journalists. It is not the case today, nor has it ever really been the case, that one got tenure by knowing the collected works of thinkers like Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, George Orwell, Leszek Kolakowski, Alasdair MacIntyre, John Gray, both Trillings, and Pier Paolo Pasolini.

Academia is simply too segmented by disciplines, and besides, many of these writers matter not for any scholarship they wrote but because of how their writing influenced a broader audience. No, the only people who read public intellectuals current and past are professional journalists or book critics, and obsessive, usually left-wing amateurs. The book critics stop at a certain level of difficulty. "Times" critics might [review](#) the English political philosopher John Gray, but would their readers be interested in Kolakowski?

So it's largely left to the obsessive amateurs. What most amateurs lack, however, are the skills. George Scialabba has the time, the freedom, and the passion of the amateur—and he also has the perspicacity, and the pen, of the Harvard alumnus. It's a wicked combination.

What does Scialabba want, besides that you read good, important books? Just turn to the book's dedication, which reads: "For Chomsky, Rorty, Lasch—three answers." I can't imagine there are too many people who would be willing to spend their lives sitting on that three-legged stool. First, as noted, there are very few people alive who know the works of all three writers well. What's more, while I am attracted to both Rorty and Lasch, it's hard to imagine anyone's allying with both Rorty and Chomsky—the former with his affirming, and ultimately patriotic, pragmatism and the latter with his curdled, bitter skepticism.

A [review of one of his earliest collections](#) of essays (2007) pinpoints his writing style - He writes in what William Hazlitt -- the patron saint of generalist essayists -- called "[the familiar style](#)" and he is sometimes disarmingly explicit about the difficulties, even the pain, he experiences in trying to resolve cultural contradictions. He challenges the aura of mystery and mastery which seems to be sought by those who aspire to intellectual authority.

But it is the scope of his reading that has impressed the American cognoscenti and led to one of the best of the academic blogs ("Crooked Timber") dedicating [one of their famous seminars to his 2009 book What are Intellectuals Good For?](#)

But before you pursue that link, I want to present [an excellent review which epitomises the fairness](#) with which Scialabba apparently conducts his work -

Scialabba belongs to a tradition of generalist essay-writers and "citizen-critics" (his term) of the democratic left whose forebears include Albert Camus, Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, George Orwell, and Ignazio Silone—to mention those Scialabba refers to most often. In the book's title essay, Scialabba describes this species of intellectual. They "wrote in the vernacular, with vigor and clarity, for the general, educated reader. Their topics were large, their interests wide; however small their actual, engaged audience, their writings opened out, and so helped sustain at least the idea and the hope of a public culture."

He quotes Irving Howe's description of one group of such writers: "The kind of essay they wrote was likely to be wide-ranging in reference, melding notions about literature and politics, sometimes announcing itself as a study of a writer or literary group but usually taut with a pressure to 'go beyond' its subject, toward some encompassing moral or social observation."

Reading several of Scialabba's essays together, one can sense his particular intellectual vocation. It is what Matthew Arnold, writing about Edmund Burke, called a "return . . . upon himself." Scialabba writes:

"To perceive as readily and pursue as energetically the difficulties of one's own position as those of one's opponents; to take pains to discover, and present fully, the genuine problems that one's opponent is, however futilely, addressing—this is disinterestedness as Arnold understood it".

Scialabba is forever returning upon his own arguments, subjecting them to the most serious critiques he can find or invent. Again and again, he comes back to the cases against his own democratic, modernist, and socialist convictions: the nagging questions raised by elitist critiques of democracy, the conundrums of the liberal-communitarian debate, the new griefs that arrive with modernization, the unarguable successes of the parties of social inequality and war and imperial power.....

We are saturated with words and images produced by "anti-public intellectuals" of the public relations industry; corporations and the wealthy have accumulated overwhelming political power: the "decline of print literacy" saps what sources of public thought might remain. Thus our most evident intellectual need is for writers who can research, expose, debunk. It might seem obvious, for example, that Reaganomics was bad for ordinary Americans—this, if nothing else, a contemporary left-wing intellectual ought to be able to affirm with confidence. Unfortunately, some undeniably honest and intelligent people affirm the contrary. One who is determined to see 'all sides of every question' must then learn how to distinguish among ways of measuring median family income, job creation and job loss, unemployment, and several other economic indicators, along with the basics of monetary theory.

For a literary intellectual, this is quite a chore. The chore becomes a Herculean labor when we consider not just the specialized vocabulary and research methodologies of economics but also those of ecology, public health, nuclear physics, chemical engineering—and so forth.

"To be, or at any rate to seem, an expert on everything," Scialabba writes, "is now not a challenge but an invitation to vertigo." None of us today can "put together' all of culture." The scope and complexity of our problems and the quantity of information necessary to the serious investigation of our situation are so great that generalist intellectuals cannot hope to "make social relations transparent," as Merleau-Ponty called on them to do. Literary intellectuals cannot be the legislators of our world because they are simply "ordinary citizens without politically relevant expertise."

And without relevant expertise, how is one to make a useful contribution to a public world in which rulers rule by obfuscating and in which questions of justice must be formulated and answered in technical vocabularies?

Scialabba argues, against his own example, that the only useful thing to do is to abandon the ideal of the humanist intellectual and become an expert in some area of public debate. Social criticism has necessarily "grown far more empirical, more specialized," than it was in the day of writers like Macdonald and Orwell. The newer kind of intellectual this situation calls for does not display the "pleasure in dispute, dialectic, dazzle" (Howe's words, from a passage Scialabba quotes more than once) of the older literary intellectuals but simply aims to teach citizens "how to read the newspaper." These empirical intellectuals are not artful in their composition of ideas; the most we can ask is that their writing be "[l]ucid, penetrating, austere, unaffected."

The contributions of the seminar [can be read here](#). His website [is here](#)

Wednesday, May 27, 2015

[The Internet - part III](#)

I'm always about three years behind - be it films, fashions or books. And I'm not all that interested in the latest "technological breakthroughs" (such as the driverless car). My [blog records do, however, tell me](#) that I did, last October, read Morozov's critical [To Save Everything, Click Here](#) (2013) and, some years' earlier, Jeff Jarvis' [What Would Google Do?](#) (2010)

The last couple of days I've been reading John Naughton's [What you really need to know about the internet](#) (2012) which I found an excellent overview - using the structure of the [9 assertions of this 2010 article of his](#) which contained this useful statement -

As an analytical framework, economics can come unstuck when dealing with the net. Because while economics is the study of the allocation of scarce resources, the online world is distinguished by abundance. Similarly, ecology (the study of natural systems) specialises in abundance, and it can be useful to look at what's happening in the media through the eyes of an ecologist.

Since the web went mainstream in 1993, our media "ecosystem", if you like, has become immeasurably more complex. The old, industrialised, mass-media ecosystem was characterised by declining rates of growth; relatively small numbers of powerful, profitable, slow-moving publishers and broadcasters; mass audiences consisting mainly of passive consumers of centrally produced content; relatively few communication channels, and a slow pace of change. The new ecosystem is expanding rapidly: it has millions of publishers; billions of active, web-savvy, highly informed readers, listeners and viewers; innumerable communication channels, and a dizzying rate of change.

Despite my "old-fogey" image, I'm apparently fairly typical of the modern age - Internet and PC savvy; blogger (1000 posts) which contain a lot of quotes and hyperlinks; owner of 2 websites; user of Flickr; and publisher of about a dozen E-books

In Naughton's terms I am an interactive, "Read-Write" citizen - as distinct from the passive "Read-only" consumer of monopoly suppliers.

The question, however, is how this will all play out? Naughton quotes the "long-tail" statistics which show that in 2011 73.5% of internet users used the services of just one company - Google and its subsidiary Youtube. And also Tim Wu's analysis of the history of other communications systems which demonstrate that, after the initial flush of freedom, they descend to monopoly control....

Just last month Naughton delivered this lecture - [You can't always get what you want](#) which suggests that he has hardened his analysis.

Those wanting to read the views of others in this field could usefully have a look at [Naughton's top internet books of 2012](#) which gives us access to two free books [The Wealth of Networks](#); and [The Future of the Internet](#)

One subject which gets only passing reference in Naughton's book is that of "net neutrality" which got reaffirmed support from America's Supreme Court very recently. [Tim Wu had a piece on it](#)

Thursday, May 28, 2015

Stand and Deliver - a new design for successful government ??

A week ago I mentioned [a new book](#) with the title "Stand and Deliver". In this - and a future post - I want to examine its analysis and claims.

It is an angry book - which reflects the public's loss of trust in the political system.....

It has attracted surprisingly few reviews so let me start with the BBC coverage which, as you would expect, is simply a summary of the book's blurb they were given -



The thrust of Ed Straw's book is that the current system of government is too adversarial, fails to include any feedback on whether policies have succeeded, gives little choice to voters and suffers from a civil service which hampers politicians' attempts to get things done. "Between elections, the places where power resides are the news media running their various agendas, good and bad, political and business - large companies and industries with expert preferential lobbyists and party funders, dealing with a political and civil service class mostly ignorant of their business," he says.

He says governments "limp on with a mixture of muddle, error, howlers and the occasional success" and politicians "rarely work out before getting power that it's bust". He says he has come to the conclusion that the civil service cannot be reformed on its own, because reform would involve transferring more power to the government, which would "make it worse because they have too much power already".

So his solution is a revamp of the whole system of government.

The better-known reforms that he wants to see include proportional representation and state funding of political parties - with a ban on large donations - to promote competition among parties and make sure that individuals or interests cannot buy influence.

Swiss-style referendums would be held on a more regular basis, while governments would be limited to four-year terms and prime ministers not allowed to serve more than eight years (to stop the "autocracy cap" where a leader with pretty much unchecked power becomes autocratic and "wants to stay for ever because you can't imagine life without that power").

His more radical ideas are based around bringing in new feedback systems into the working of governments. He likens government at present to a gardener planting seeds, telling people what the garden will look like but then never actually checking whether or not they have grown as planned (instead spending lots of time checking on the sharpness of a spade or the water efficiency of a hose). That is in contrast to the private sector, which checks on the outcomes of spending continually.

A similar discipline needs to come into government, he says. There has been progress with the National Audit Office, the Office for National Statistics and select committees, he says, but he wants them all brought under the umbrella of the second chamber (the House of Lords at the moment) becoming a "Resulture" able to score policies and kill off those ones which are not working.

The civil service would be radically revamped with it retaining a smaller administrative role, but in other areas there would no longer be a permanent civil service. Instead specialists with knowledge of, say, the railways, would be brought in to contract, manage and regulate that industry.

Ed Straw says that his application of organisational theory onto how the UK government works is unique. He has also strong views on the Labour Party's structure. He says a lot of Labour's problems could have been avoided if they had a better process for challenging or replacing a leader, saying the Conservative system is much more efficient. It would have allowed Mr Blair to be removed before the 2005 election, for Gordon Brown to have gone within a year of taking office and John Smith to have led Labour in 1992 rather than Neil Kinnock, he says. But whatever the changes within parties, he says that successive governments have shown that nothing much will change without the wider reforms he is suggesting.

Most Brits will find all of this very acceptable....although I personally am a bit disappointed that his book doesn't make any reference to the voluminous "What's Wrong with British Government" literature.

- Chris Foster (academic, government adviser and fellow PWC consultant) wrote in 2005 an important paper [Why we are so badly governed](#) - an enlarged version of which can be found in his book of the same year [British Government in Crisis](#)
- Kate Jenkins was an active participant in the changes of the 1990s and wrote an important book in 2007 about her work [Politicians and Public Services](#) which is admittedly more descriptive.
- But others - such as [John Seddon](#) - have offered a more systemic approach - and
- most British Think Tanks at one time or another have written critiques containing fairly radical proposals for change in the government system.

So it would have been useful to get from Straw an indication of exactly how his approach differs from others. But all we get is a short sentence saying his approach is "unique"!

Apparently this is because his is an "an organizational perspective" (page 10) But what exactly does he mean by this?

He seems to mean the "contestability" brought by competition between commercial companies (when it is allowed to exist) thereby **raising a couple of critical questions** - the first being the hoary question which occupied some of us in the 1980s - the extent to which it was possible to apply the same management principles in public and commercial organisations. One the Professors on my MSc programme wrote one of the classic articles on this - with a strong warning about the scale of the difference between the two contexts and their measures ("profit" and "public interest")

The second question is - Has the contestability factor not been at the heart of New Public Management (NPM) which the UK has had for the past 20-odd years?

Ed Straw has been a senior partner in the Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC) Management Consultancy for many years - and [gave evidence](#) to the British Parliament's Select Committee on Public Administration in 2005 which included strong support, for example, for the privatization of the Prison Service...and talked loosely about the need for further "politicization" of the Civil Service. In the name of "accountability".....

His Demos pamphlet of the same year - [The Dead Generalist](#) (2005) - spelled out in more detail what he meant. Apparently he wants more contestability.....but his book is not happy with NPM - on page 36 he says simply that *"the developers of NPM omitted some essential components of the original conception"*.

On the same page he refers to the

"countless diagrams attempting to represent the unified field theory of public sector reform developed in central units like the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit and Delivery Unit from international management consultancies.....some are worth reading and some so limited as to be aberrant".

And that's it! He divulges no more - except to tell us to read Norman Dixon's "[On the Psychology of Military Incompetence](#)" (1976), Peter Drucker, Charles Handy, Michael Porter, Peter Senge and 3 others I have only vaguely heard of....So what are the essential components of the NPM model which the British designers missed? We're not told....

After at least ten years musing and writing on such matters, I would have expected more.....

footnote; the subtlety of the book's main title may be lost on some of my foreign readers - it is the demand that came from the highway robbers of the past when stopping stage-coaches - "deliver your valuables....." But "delivery" (implementation) is also the bit of policy-making which governments (let alone consultants) [have been identifying for decades](#) as the key weakness of the government process

Thursday, May 28, 2015

[You have nothing to lose but your Chain.....-link Fences](#)

The last few posts may have appeared to have had different themes but, I realise, were linked to the basic difficulty we seem these days in establishing common ground about the state of our societies/systems - or agreeing actionable programmes of change.

I mentioned the failure of Ed Straw's book to mention - let alone begin to analyse - the important contributions which have come from other consultants/academics about the sad state of the machinery of British government. Everyone - left/right; Ministers/civil servants; Think Tanks/consultants/ economists/ sociologists/ political scientists - has their own narrative - and all talk past one another.....and the citizen...

Almost no one tries to establish a common denominator about this - let alone alliances.

I appreciate that this is perhaps more of an Anglo-American thing than European - where there is broader acceptance of the need for negotiation and coalition.

But the academic specialisation which Scialabba was talking about - plus the niche marketing which the various experts (their institutions and publishers) are compelled to take part in in order to make any impact in the modern Tower of Babel we all now inhabit - has also affected the "consensual" aspect of European society....We are confused and cynical.....

A couple of books which were delivered just a few hours ago make the point - [Governing Britain: Power, Politics and the Prime Minister](#) was published in 2013 by a well-known British academic (Patrick Diamond) and is the detailed story of how New Labour tried to modernise the machinery of government over its 13 years. [Who Governs Britain?](#) is a short book published this year by one of the doyens of British political science (Anthony King) and explores the question whether "our system of government is fit for purpose".

Both books have copious indexes and bibliographies which I immediately checked for mention of the books of practical men such as Ed Straw or John Seddon. What do I find?

- No mention of these two - although Chris Foster (with an academic background) does rate 2 entries in Diamond's book.
- Michael Barber (Tony Blair's Education guru and the inventor of "deliverology") is the only significant change-agent to get real space in Diamond's book.
- The important Power Inquiry of 2005-2010 oddly gets no mention in King's book and only 2 references in Diamond's index.
- Democratic Audit's satirical [The Unspoken Constitution](#) (2009) which gives us a very pointed critique of the concentration of irresponsible power of the British system is, of course, totally ignored.

What conclusion do I draw from this? Simply that academics reference only one another (within their own narrow discipline) - and disdain to mention the outputs of mere practitioners (if they even bother to read them).

And practitioners (civil servants/politicians) don't have the temperament or patience to read and distill what the academics write.

Consultants, journalists and Think-Tankers, however, are the sort of intermediaries who should be capable of selection and summary - but have their own interests, disdain most writing (Think-Tankers being an exception) and bring instead their particular brand of snake oil.....

One of the (few) heartening sections of Naughton's book about the Internet is his chapter on the "media eco-system" in which he produces several case-studies of the upstaging of the mainstream media by bloggers who had more specialized knowledge than the journalists.

There are an increasing number of (older) bloggers who have the time and inclination to challenge what the power elites are doing - but they have to network more - and sharpen their message.

Perhaps my contribution is to try to identify those who are working in my field(s)....and try to get more of them working together and developing a higher profile???

Coincidentally, another book in the packet which arrived this afternoon offers an approach which might help pull ourselves out of our confusion - Ben Ramalingham's [Aid on the Edge of Chaos](#) which applies systems theory to a range of complex problems faced in most parts of the world.

Saturday, May 30, 2015

Praising - not burying?



People writing books on social affairs will usually spend at least a couple of years on their book - only to see it dealt with in a 1,000 word review (if they are lucky) - even in professional journals. That's why I'm a big fan of the [Crooked Timber](#) book seminars which produce at least 50 page overviews of selected books - made up of 6-7 contributions. The last (on [Red Plenty](#)) had 135 pages!

I am currently reading Will Hutton's new book [How Good We Can Be](#) (not to be confused with [As Good as it Gets!](#)) - an update of the series of books Hutton has been writing on the DNA of Anglo-American capitalism since "The State We're In" (1995)

Hutton is that rare character - a British journalist who cares about ideas and shares his wide and deep reading in his books; someone who can and does try to build bridges between the worlds of academia and action which I have been blogging about recently.

But, as I've [said before here](#), the trouble with bridges is that, in peacetime, horses shit on them and, in wartime, they are blown up!

A lot of people therefore "have it in" for Hutton - Frederic Mount is a good example. Someone who was at one time Head of Margaret Thatcher's Policy Unit but reengineered himself a few years ago to write [a devastating critique](#) of the new British oligarchy. His [review of Hutton's latest book](#) has a fairly typical tone

*If a book's worth writing once, it's worth writing several times. This homely maxim has often proved a recipe for success. Will Hutton is a case in point. Twenty years ago, he had a runaway hit with *The State We're In*. He followed that up with "*The State to Come*" (1997), then came "*The World We're In*" (2002). As Hutton moved from the editor's chair at the *Observer* to the *Work Foundation* and now to the *Principal's lodge* at *Hertford College, Oxford*, he has stayed heroically on his own message.*

The title's tweaked, but the melody lingers on - The continentals are enlightened, the Anglo-Saxons are deluded. Europe is the future and we would be crazy to stay out of the euro. John Maynard Keynes is good, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman are no good. The state is the solution, not the problem. It already showers blessings on us and would shower many more if only we could overcome our misguided suspicions. Government regulation and high taxes are the way to make us happy. For painting in black and white there are few like Hutton.

There is no hesitation or deviation, although there is quite a bit of repetition,

Yet, oddly enough, many of Hutton's proposals will appeal to a wider audience than social liberals and socialists. In fact, they are pretty much the new consensus: the separation between high street banks and the casino banks; a stiffer stewardship code to deter looting in the boardroom; Treasury

guarantees for big construction projects; restoring the insurance base of the welfare state; a return to the old sliding scale for capital gains tax, in order to encourage long-term holding of shares; an end to the tax advantages of debt over equity; reforming council tax and giving local authorities back their financial independence.

I warm to all this, and I also like Hutton's proposals to reinvent the trade unions as co-partners with business, particularly the idea that they might set up mutually-owned service companies to sell their services to employers.

These days we are all in favour of diversifying patterns of ownership beyond the standard plc model, to include more co-operatives and also "public benefit companies," which guarantee under charter to deliver certain public benefits and enjoy tax advantages in return. Free enterprise used to be more diverse and could be so again.

The awkward truth is, though, that these alluring alternatives are no more risk-free than the old limited company. It is an awkward thought that the best-known alternative corporations of this sort over the past few years have been the Co-op, Railtrack/Network Rail and the BBC—none of them exactly without problems of governance.

But it's Hutton's grand narrative that seems the more rickety. We are constantly told that the past 20 or 30 years have been a disaster for the United Kingdom. Yet at the same time we are also told that "Britain has more world-class universities per head of population than any other country," that "The triangle bounded by the M3 in the south M40 to the north and with Heathrow at its centre boasts the highest concentration of high-tech start-ups outside California and Massachusetts," that the BBC remains the finest broadcasting service in the world, that the National Health Service is "the cheapest system in the world producing the best health results across a range of key indicators" and "on measures of effectiveness, safety, patient-centredness, co-ordination, quality and access, Britain scores number one."

I must confess that my eyes did begin to glaze over after the fifth or sixth of the series of injunctions Hutton gets started on later in the book. I longed for a lighter touch - and was therefore quite fascinated to discover this issue touched on in this detailed and very serious review calculated to warm the cockles of all writers - it's called [Calling Capitalism to account](#) by Steve New

Writers who want to engage seriously with economic and political reality face a problem. How to pitch the tone of what they say? Every simple story needs goodies and baddies; more complex stories need some sort of moral trajectory. But how explicitly should you tell the story? The vast bulk of serious academic work avoids offence by talking in the abstract, layering oblique evasion upon tactful qualification. Academics settle for the low temperature, formal modality of the learned journals; passion is excluded. Much is made of broad generalisations; no-one is criticised directly. 'Firms' and 'Markets' feature, as do 'agents', but mostly they don't have names: authors can be pretty sure they're not going to be sued by anyone, even in the rare event that a normative judgement is explicitly made.

Even academic work which reflects some kind of moral or political purpose (not all does) tends to be scrupulously anodyne, and keen not to offend. You'd really struggle to find explicit criticisms of particular firms or managers in the Academy of Management Review or the Journal of Finance or the Harvard Business Review².

Politicians and activists can be more specific - we don't like Shell, we don't like Nike - but, often deliberately, tend to prioritize effect over accuracy or content³.

Journalists can be more direct, but mostly without the tedious necessity of consistency or depth. Will Hutton - over a prolific career operating in the relatively unpopulated overlap between journalist, academic and (perhaps) politician - has mastered a kind of middle ground. He writes about general ideas, but he also names names; he treads a line between rounded argument and polemical assertion; he tries to be critical

Writing about companies and business people and their ethics is tricky because it is easy to blunder into two equally stupid traps: you can declare them all horrible, beyond sympathy and empathy, or you can end up fawning and cooing in line with corporate propaganda. Nuanced and balanced treatment is hard: that's part of why academics often stick to the abstract or typical case. If you get specific, you risk being a bombastic Spart or a corporate patsy.

Hutton navigates this carefully; he talks about particular firms, but from one particular angle at a time. So, in HGWCB, Apple is hailed as an example of innovation, with its 'handsome, well-designed devices' (26). But the working conditions in the supply chain are not discussed. On the other hand, INEOS and Sports Direct are bad because of their employment practices; ARM is good because it's successful and hasn't been bought up by foreigners. Unilever has a declared purpose (of which more, later) and doesn't do quarterly reporting (good). Virgin uses tax havens (bad). News International is beyond the pale because of its 'purpose-free amoral culture' (87). Hutton uses specific examples of firms to point out particular virtues and vices, praising for X, damning for Y.

Tuesday, June 2, 2015

[Why are the Brits schizophrenic?](#)

The British public remains proud of its National Health Service - although electors have shown little apparent concern at the non-stop organisational upheavals to which it has been subject over the past 30 or so years. [The latest survey](#) showed that 89% of adults in Great Britain support a national health system that is tax-funded, free at the point of use and provides comprehensive care for all citizens. Oddly, however, 43% of those polled didn't seem to care whether the service was provided by the NHS or another provider (e.g. private company or not-for-profit body such as a charity or social enterprise). 39% expressed an active preference for this care to be delivered by the NHS.

Although I've been out of the country for 25 years I understand this apparent schizophrenia. I was heavily influenced by the anti-institutionalism of the post '68 period - seeing with my own eyes the complacency of protectionism of local bureaucracies. I avidly devoured the critiques of [The Local State](#) and the works of Ivan Illich (of Deschooling Society and [Medical Nemesis](#) fame)



I belonged to that small wing of the Labour Party which regretted that the party had, in the 1940s, turned its back on its "voluntarist" tradition and opted for the centralisation model ([Egalitarian thought and labour politics - retreating visions](#); Nicolas Ellison (1994) nicely sets out the three strands (or "visions") of Labour thought)

Presented, however, with a choice between professional or managerial power, I opted for the latter - consoling myself that the "new managers" being promoted in the 1970s in the wave of enthusiasm for corporate management would challenge the complacency I saw. I never imagined that the managers would take over - and pave the way for the privatisation and commodification of everything!

At a personal level, I have always been wary of the "health system" - seeing its overworked doctors as too much as the prey of the pharmaceutical industry; and the fashion for monstrous new "factory" hospitals as horrific expressions of gigantism. Hence my activity in the World Health Organisation's Healthy Cities Network - with its emphasis on health promotion and prevention. And, from a distance, I have followed with distaste the various scandals which have erupted whether about medical malpractice or hospital mismanagement.... And yet I have never supported the neo-liberal project of privatising health care.

My partner challenged me yesterday on this apparent contradiction - how could I still support "the British model" given the views I have expressed over the years (let alone my own rejection of the idea of ever being hospitalised)?

I knew that the French health system represented one of the world's best - and the US one of the worst but had been getting conflicting signals recently from the various international league tables with which we are now assailed. [One table \(in 2007\)](#) told me that the NHS was only 17th globally for healthcare systems. Another (just a few months ago) focused on health and wellbeing (ie outcomes) and put Britain in 27th place. But [a survey conducted by The Commonwealth Fund last year](#) ranked the UK first overall, scoring it highly for its quality of care, efficiency and low cost at the point of service, with Switzerland coming an overall second.

What are mere mortals to make of such contradictory reports? Fortunately there is help to hand - for example from something called "The Health Foundation" which published earlier in the year this [short pamphlet which shines light on both the strengths and weaknesses](#) of the British system. Knowing the scale of money from dubious sources behind Think Tanks, I checked out [their website which gives reassuring answers](#) to the obvious questions. Of course there are other, even better-known places where such analysis is conducted (such as the King's Fund)....

But perhaps the most interesting find was [this survey commissioned by the Health Care Commission](#)

*Views of the NHS and Healthcare have to be viewed at three levels.
Views of the NHS as a whole are often very different from, and influenced by different issues,
than public perceptions of local health services, and different again from patient perceptions.*

*- The NHS as a whole, and in particular the principles it embodies, remains a huge source of latent pride.
It is still perceived by the British general public to be one of the best of its kind in the world. People also*

see the NHS as critical to society, and despite concerns about its management, they feel it needs to be protected and maintained rather than re-invented.

- Despite this, the NHS regularly features as one of the biggest issues facing Britain today for the public. In early 2006, levels of optimism about the future prospects of the NHS reached their lowest recorded levels since 2002.

- However, public satisfaction with the NHS at a national level, and patient satisfaction, have remained relatively stable since 2000 and have recently shown signs of improvement. Patient ratings of their treatment are always far higher than ratings of the NHS as a whole.

Our analysis highlights the impact of media coverage and politics on the NHS at a national level, where people rely on media coverage to form judgement.

Not surprising that the barrage of hostile comment about health care from those in the pay of corporate power (waiting to pick up rich pickings) has been having an affect.

I remain an unrepentant "mutualist" - believing that healthcare is too important to be left to commercial, managerial, political or medical interests on their own. It needs to be locally owned - with citizen interests balancing the others.....

I appreciate that this is a minority position which may indeed be seen as positively "cavalier" (Don Quixote) these days - so will try in future posts to explore what might be involved.....

5 June

[Introducing the Romanian Realists](#)

I've been stuck this past week on the hot Bucharest plain - so not exactly fizzing with ideas. I took the opportunity to pull together some of the material which has been lying on my PC about the Romanian Realist painters of the late 19th and early 20th Century

[Introducing the Romanian Realists](#) is 200 pages long - and excludes the well-known work of Theodor Amman, Nicolae Grigorescu, Ion Andreescu, Camil Ressu, Stefan Luchian and Nicolae Tonitsa!!

15 June

[Beacons of Hope](#)

Employee-ownership is not the most obvious of subjects to set one's spirits soaring - but two books I've just been reading on this subject are positively inspirational and probably the best guides available for those of us who have been searching for a plausible challenge to the amoral corporate power tearing our societies and planet apart. The books are -

[Beyond the Corporation: Humanity Working](#) by David Erdal (2011); and [Owning Our Future: The Emerging Ownership Revolution](#) by Marjorie Kelly (2012)

Each complements the other beautifully - Erdal's book uses the story of the employee buy-out he led in the 1980s of his family's Fife-based paper business (Tullis Russell) as an introduction to

employee-owned businesses the world over (amongst many others, the John Lewis Partnership in the UK, the Mondragón group in Spain and the US supermarket chain, Publix) - and then examines the history of the legal structures that underpin modern capitalism and convincingly exposes the gross errors in the conventional models economists use to describe people and businesses (which he labels 'just-so stories') - showing how and why employee-owned businesses are superior to publicly listed companies in every way.

Marjorie Kelly's book helps us understand the "financialisation" which has overtaken companies in the last thirty years - I was able to download the first draft of the book (minus a couple of the chapters) by simply tapping the title and author's name and the preface and first chapter [can be read here](#)

The first section of Erdal's book demolishes the predictions made by traditional economists about the supposed efficiency of the Market (a word that Erdal capitalises) and the supposed flaws of employee-owned concerns:

Very little of the money raised by public shares is invested in strategically building businesses - most of it is used for (often destructive) acquisitions and lining the pockets of shareholders and top management. For companies to flourish in the long term, employees must have a real sense of ownership. No management techniques can substitute for the rights and benefits of genuine ownership, but even the managers of employee-owned concerns need to work hard to ensure workers feel involved.

Communication is key: managers must make information fully and openly available, must listen, and must allow employees to make contributions to improving how things are done. Although employee-owners need leaders, given the same quality of leadership employee-owned businesses always outperform those owned by outsiders. The former are more productive, they survive better in bad times, they have lower employee turnover and absenteeism and they give better service (the top-rated companies for service in both the UK and the USA are employee-owned).

Employees in employee-owned companies learn more participation skills, they are better trained, they contribute more innovative ideas, they implement change quicker, and they are wealthier, with communities in which they live benefiting from both money and skills. Many economists are blind to all the above, repeatedly citing old papers based on nothing but theory, and falsely claiming that such organisations will be overwhelmed by free-riders, that decision-making will be impracticably slow, and that employee-owners will forever be falling out with each other. These unevidenced views of economists place significant obstacles in the way of those hoping to set up employee-owned concerns.

As he puts it -

'Ironically, capitalism itself is built on the idea that owners will work more energetically and creatively, and with greater commitment, than people who are employed by others. Instead of following through [this] logic [...], the owners of capital [...] have built company structures in which employees have none of the participation of ownership: they have no right to influence the choice of leader or the policies set, and no right to participate in the wealth that they create together. The vast majority of people are systematically deprived of any ownership stake. It is as if they are seen as coming from a different species, insensitive to the galvanising effect of ownership.'

The second section describes the horror of working for publicly traded companies subject to so-called 'market discipline' and contrasts this with the experience of employee-owners, and shows why 'market discipline' is powerless to curb excessive executive pay and does nothing to promote stability and innovation. It also relates the jaw-dropping history of the employee contract (which Erdal contends violates what should be inalienable rights) and of the present economic system - rigged from the outset in the favour of the rich and powerful.

The impact of asset-stripping by private equity investors on the employees and customers of Debenhams, as well as its suppliers, is powerfully conveyed. After all but destroying staff morale, delaying payment for suppliers, decreasing investment in new stores and the refurbishment of old ones, and making various cut-backs and redundancies, investors left the company nearly £1 billion in debt.

.....Crucial to the success of all employee-owned businesses are consultation and keeping employees informed: 'If it feels to the managers like overkill - as if they are giving out too much information - then they may be close to giving out enough'. People must also be allowed to make a difference, and increased efficiency should not result in people being sacked - they can be redeployed or given further training. Although hierarchies do exist in employee-owned concerns, their purpose is simply 'to enable the front-line workers to be wholly effective'.

Sustaining employee ownership requires some thought: 'The structuring of the ownership is of crucial importance in ensuring longevity. When all the shares are held by the individual employees a substantial 'repurchase liability' - the need eventually to find the cash to buy back the shares - builds up.' Erdal discusses this topic in some depth, suggesting various alternatives and criticising US ESOPs (Employee Stock Ownership Plans, where shareholding trusts take the form of pension funds) as being 'vulnerable to Wall Street types'. He champions the capital account system used by Spain's Mondragón group, and urges tax concessions to support this.

However employee-owned businesses are structured, Erdal believes that in the end they can 'be made effective only through the courage, energy and personal ethics of those involved'. Nonetheless, he maintains that they are certainly less vulnerable to abuse of power by CEOs than public corporations where 'CEOs are running away with the loot'.....

.....Contrary to economists' predictions, reinvestment is not a problem for employee-owned concerns as people generally 'want to keep the company strong for their own sakes and they want to pass it on strong to the next generation'. As Erdal says, 'They are much more than the money-grubbing automata of economists' models'.

If by this stage you are still not persuaded of the virtues of employee-ownership, perhaps you will find Erdal's measurement of the wider effects of employee ownership on communities in Italy convincing. Erdal compared three similar towns, differing only with regard to the proportion of their residents working for employee-owned concerns. He found that where many people worked for such businesses, residents lived a lot longer, they enjoyed larger and more supportive social networks, they perceived political authorities as being more on their side, more voted, they believed that domestic violence was less prevalent, they donated more blood, their children stayed at school longer and did better, and, 'to a radically greater extent', they continued being trained and educated throughout their lives. Most intriguingly, they apparently didn't bother buying big cars to show off their wealth, despite having higher disposable incomes! Employee-ownership kills conspicuous consumption?

Friday, June 26, 2015

Flushing Out What's Worth Reading?

A couple of months ago, in a post headed [No Excuse for Apathy](#) I reminded readers (and myself!) that one of my unfinished projects has been a mapping of the different paths which various authors have suggested in recent years we need to take in order to improve (if not replace) the mad economic system which has had the globe in thrall (and peril) for at least the last thirty years.

The project started with a short essay in 2001 (updated in [Notes for the Perplexed](#)) and moved into higher gear with the opening last autumn of a website [Mapping the Common Ground](#) which acts as a library of useful material for those keen to effect social change.

[Ways of Seeing.....the Global Crisis](#) was my round-up of the reading I had been doing in recent years - with my common complaint being the failure of writers to give credit to others and indeed to make any attempt to do what Google Scholar exhorts us to do - "stand on the shoulders of giants".

Most books about the "global crisis" focus on the easy part of the story - "diagnosis" and "blame" - and skate over the really challenging (later) stages of the process of social change - such as prescription ("what is to be done?"); and, most of all, "coalition-building" (with what sources of power?).

Indeed I now have three tests for any book about the global crisis I look at -

- What proportion of space they devote to the later, prescriptive, stage
- What awareness they show of the "problems of agency" ie of the tenuous nature of the "toolkit of change" which the change management literature introduced us to in the 1980s
- How generous their references to other literature are

Most writing demonstrates a naïve belief in the power of persuasion - the belief that argument can mobilise change. Many people can indeed be persuaded of the "need" for change - but fewer about its precise "direction" and shape..... Robert Quinn is one of the few people who has powerfully pointed out how mechanistic is the discourse of reformist "persuasion" - with its assumption that an intellectual elite has the capacity to "mobilise" people to its way of thinking.....His books talk rather of the power of example.....and the growing literature on systems theory of the "emergence" of new methods and models..

The post I referred to in the opening paragraph linked to a fascinating American project - [The Next System](#) whose short, initial publication promised to

launch a national debate on the nature of "the next system" using the best research, understanding, and strategic thinking, on the one hand, and on-the-ground organizing and development experience, on the other, to refine and publicize comprehensive alternative political-economic system models that are different in fundamental ways from the failed systems of the past and capable of delivering superior social, economic, and ecological outcomes.

By defining issues systemically, we believe we can begin to move the political conversation beyond current limits with the aim of catalyzing a substantive debate about the need for a radically different system and how we might go about its construction. Despite the scale of

the difficulties, a cautious and paradoxical optimism is warranted. There are real alternatives. Arising from the unforgiving logic of dead ends, the steadily building array of promising new proposals and alternative institutions and experiments, together with an explosion of ideas and new activism, offer a powerful basis for hope.

And the last week has seen several more straws in the wind -

- [Democratic Wealth](#) - being a little E-book of Cambridge and Oxford University bloggers' takes on the crisis
- [Civic Capitalism](#) - ditto from some Sheffield University academics
- [Laudato-Si](#) - the latest Papal Encyclical. A summary is [available here](#). Its entire 184 pages [can be read here](#)
- [We All Want the Change the World](#) is a book which represents the mature thoughts of one (American) lefty and, for me, is a superb illustration of why the left is in such deep trouble. The book starts brilliantly but quickly degenerates into cultural tripe

Sunday, June 28, 2015

[Libraries and writers](#)

It was some decades ago I first realised how few books are produced to help people understand a subject. Publishers need to make their books stand out in a very crowded market - they therefore select books which can claim to distinctiveness, for which read "market niche" or "narrowness". Of course we have the "[Dummy](#)" and the [Very Short Introduction](#) series catering for those who wish to get the big picture. Sadly, however, they tend to be regarded with some disdain by publishers, writers and readers alike. Personally I have found the few books I have read in the latter series both original and clearly-written - and one of the authors actually has a [blog which gives practical examples of the issues](#) his book explores.

In the past 6 months, I've been fairly prolific in producing 4 E-books (see top right of the blog for the list) - three of which have are my posts of the past 4 years or so on a particular subject with the discipline of a book structure and an introduction. I find it both salutary and stimulating to reread them with a fresh eye and to ask, in editorial style, "what is this actually trying to say...how can I express it better?...where is the narrative - and how can it flow better??" And, to help identify such things, I have to print and bind the book - I find I can't edit onscreen....

Each of the books retains the structure of the original blog - which I like to think is more user-friendly for the reader....I hate these books which consist of endless pages of text, unrelieved by headings....I need to get a fix on the writer's thinking by seeing some headings....

But somehow I can't bring the four works to rounded conclusions - the final bit of editing bores me. I know that I need to be even more disciplined in my questioning of each post. Ideally I should actually attach to each post a brief summary and identify the inconsistencies, repetitions etc But that's too much like work!!!

So for past few days have been mooching in the library here in my mountain house.... which has a wide range of subjects and titles. I was reading recently that [Susan Sontag's library](#) consisted of

25,000 books - and Umberto Eco's famous library must consist of the same number....My nomadic life has meant that I keep losing my library - but the last few years has allowed me to develop quite a respectable library here in the mountain house which must amount to about 2,000 books

Amazingly, as I have prowled amongst its shelves (which cover shelves on the top of each door and cascade over stairs) I can't find anything to grab my interest - although I was moved this past couple of weeks by some books about economic ownership (see the last 2 posts); a highly original account of the source of American economic strength and decline written by a couple of 80-year old Scottish engineer emigres - [The Puritan Gift](#); and [Patrick Leigh-Fermour - an Adventure](#).

But I just couldn't find anything else to whet my appetite.....Typically, I assume the grass is greener elsewhere and duly sent off for the books which had been languishing on my Amazon wishlist.

The first three are by authors who have given me much pleasure in the past - the first 2 being new

- [The Hidden Pleasures of Life: A New Way of Remembering the Past and Imagining the Future](#) by Theodore Zeldin
- [The Second Curve: Thoughts on Reinventing Society](#) by Charles Handy
- [The Proper Study Of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays \(Vintage Classics\)](#) by Isaiah Berlin - whose scintillating essays I first came across at University.

Despite my disillusionment with economics and management, I am always a sucker for a new "take" on the subjects and was intrigued by -

- [Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness](#) by Frederic Laloux
- [Economics of the 1% \(Anthem Other Canon Economics\)](#) by John Weeks

I am always intrigued by material on Germany (see my posts of May and June 2013 when I spent 10 weeks there) and found the idea of a history written by a non-academic very appealing and therefore look forward to -

[Death of a Nation: A New History of Germany](#) by Stephen R A'Barrow; as well as a collection of historical reviews - [In Defence of History](#) by Richard Evans

The final books I sent off for were - [The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate The World](#) (2012) by Evgeny Morozov whose writings I find very stimulating; and the only novel, another of the rediscovered books by Hans Fallada - [Iron Gustav: A Berlin Family Chronicle \(Penguin Translated Texts\)](#)

Sunday, July 5, 2015

[Confessions of a Financial Illiterate](#)

Readers know that, despite my 4 years of economic studies (and some years actually teaching it to others!), I make no claim to understand the nature of the global plague that has befallen us in the past few decades. I buy the books to help me clear the confusion those studies gave me - but find that my eyes soon glaze over....a [list of books I pledged to read](#) some 9 months ago lies almost untouched - ditto [others I mentioned 3 months back](#).

Economics was like a snake for me - I was fascinated but scared by it. I toiled in the early 1960s to make sense of its focus on marginal calculations and "indifference curves" and probably took only the following lessons from my four years engrossed in economics books

- the strictness of the preconditions which governed the notion of (perfect) competition;
- the notion of profit-maximisation;
- the belief (thanks to the writings of James Burnham and Tony Crosland) that management (not ownership) was the all- important factor
- trust (thanks to Keynes whose work was dinned into me) in government to deal with such things as "exuberant expectations"
- the realization (through the report of the 1959 [Radcliffe Commission](#)) that cash was but a small part of money supply. Financial economics was in its infancy then.

For someone with my education and political motivation and experience, however, my continued self-confessed financial illiteracy is almost criminal but not, I feel, in any way unusual.

Most of us seem to lack the patience to buckle down and take the time and discipline it needs to understand the operation of the system of financial capitalism which now has us all in its thrall. We leave it to the "experts" and have thereby surrendered what is left to us of citizenship and political power.

A future post will hopefully try to explore this phenomenon .

Two rare books which survived the "glaze-over" test were -

- [The Financial Crisis - who is to blame](#) (2009) by the ex-Chair of the British Financial Services Agency (Howard Davies) which identified and explored 39 different explanations of its possible cause. You can see [some overheads](#) and videos from his various presentations [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)
- [Rebalancing Society](#) (2014) by Henry Mintzberg

Writing about the Greek crisis tends to be governed by tomorrow's headlines but there is one blog which gives a [consistently strategic perspective and its latest](#) post gives some useful graphs and analysis -

Greece's public and private debt burden is just too large for the Greek economy to service, despite already squeezing Greek labour to the death - literally. The Greek public debt burden arose for two main reasons. Greek capitalism was so weak in the 1990s and the profitability of productive investment was so low, that Greek capitalists needed the Greek state to subsidise them through low taxes and exemptions and handouts to favoured Greek oligarchs. In return, Greek politicians got all the perks and tips that made them wealthy too. This weak and corrupt Greek economy then joined the euro and the gravy train of EU funding was made available and German and French came along to buy up Greek companies and allow the government to borrow and spend.

The annual budget deficits and public debt rocketed under successive conservative and social democratic governments. These were financed by bond markets because German and French capital invested in Greek businesses and bought Greek government bonds that delivered a much better interest than their own. So Greek capitalism lived off the credit-fuelled boom of the 2000s that hid its real weaknesses.

But then came the global financial crash and the Great Recession. The Eurozone headed into slump and Eurozone banks and companies got into deep trouble. Suddenly a government with 120% of GDP debt and running a 15% of GDP annual deficit was no longer able to finance itself from the market and needed a 'bailout' from the rest of Europe.



But the bailout was not to help Greeks maintain the living standards and preserve public services during the slump. On the contrary, living standards and public services had to be cut to ensure that German and French banks got their bond money back and foreign investment in Greek industry was protected. So through the bailout programmes, foreign capital was more or less repaid in full, with the debt burden shifted onto the books of the Greek government, the Euro institutions and the IMF - in other words, taxpayers.

Greece was ultimately committed to meeting the costs of the reckless failure of Greek and Eurozone capital. The

Troika's plan was to make the Greeks pay at the expense of a 25% fall in GDP, a 40% drop in real incomes and pensions and 27% unemployment rate.

- *The government deficit was turned into a 'primary surplus' within the shortest period of time by any modern government. Greece has reduced its fiscal deficit from 15.6 percent of GDP in 2009 to 2.5 percent in 2014, a scale of deficit reduction not seen anywhere else in the world.*
- *Total public sector employment declined from 907,351 in 2009 to 651,717 in 2014, a decline of over 255,000. That is a drop of over 25%.*
- *Greece has gone from one of the lowest average retirement ages to one of the highest. In this sense, Greece had undertaken the most significant pension reform in Europe even before the latest demands of the Troika.*

This was austerity at its finest. But the horrible irony is that this policy failed. Far from recovering, the Greek capitalist economy went into a deep depression..... That the debt cannot be repaid is now openly admitted by the IMF in its latest debt sustainability report on Greece (here). The IMF now recognises that it got its forecasts of recovery hopelessly wrong

..... Whether there is now a deal with the Troika or alternatively, Grexit, the Greek economy needs to grow. Only this can make any public or private debt burden disappear. Take the US. The US public sector debt is huge at nearly 100% of GDP. But the US can service that debt easily because it has nominal GDP growth of just 4% a year. And the interest costs on its debt are very low at just 3% a year. As growth is higher than the interest cost on the debt, the US government can run a deficit of taxes versus spending (before interest) of 1% of GDP a year, and its debt ratio will still stay stable (but not fall). Greece, on the other hand, in 2011, had interest costs of over 4% on its debt and nominal GDP of -5% a year, so it needed a government surplus of 9% of GDP just to keep the debt from rising. The government

was applying austerity but still a deficit. Even the small debt restructuring of 2012 in the second bailout program did not stop the rise in the debt ratio. It is still rising.

The painting is one of my favourites - of Thassos in 1942 by Alexandra Mechkuevska

Tuesday, July 7, 2015

[German Musings](#)

Tourism is one of the biggest global industries and yet gives us few real opportunities to fathom the soul of a country - although a retired generation with time and education is now beginning to experience some of the treasures which Europe offers....and can access books from such publishing houses as [The Collected Traveler](#), The Intercultural Press and [Cities of the Imagination](#) which offer great cultural insights not only into countries but even to a few cities Readers will know that I recently started my own contribution to this genre when my daughters started to visit me in Romania and Bulgaria - see the list of E-books at the top-right of the blog....

Now I want to announce a little one on.....Germany based mainly on posts I made during a 10 week stay in Koln in 2013. The booklet is called [German Musings](#) I have been out of the UK for 25 years - spending about 2 years apiece living and working in about a dozen countries on projects designed to improve the capacity of their state institutions. I was in Bulgaria in early 2013 when I was diagnosed with prostate cancer and had to decide where to go for appropriate treatment.

But first I had to learn more about the condition and its treatment - which helped me understand that the surgical treatments which had become routine were now being questioned - not just because of their invasive nature but because there was every probability that the symptoms would reappear after a few years....

As an expat Brit I quickly ruled out that country - partly for the delays trying to go as a citizen without medical records would entail but also because the French and German health systems were performing better (in general terms) in the various international league tables (not least WHO). But I did want to go to a country whose language I spoke.

I narrowed the internet search to hospitals in those two countries which seemed to have a good record for treating prostate cancer and E-mailed off some queries....The French hospitals were quickly ruled out for two reasons -

- Their focus seemed to be on surgery and I was determined to avoid that
- They required bureaucratic paperwork which annoyed me

The West German Prostate Centre (Koln) simply asked me to send electronic copies of the diagnosis I had received and quickly gave a detailed commentary which persuaded me that this was the place to go. A few weeks later, on the first of May I touched down in Koln and remained there until mid-July - undergoing initially daily radiation treatment and then three minor operations.....

Time weighed - but Daniela and I were lucky in the choice of flat we had made - even although it involved a couple of moves....

We were in the outskirts - with great parks to walk in (the cemetery was our favourite); trams to ride; and bookshops to visit.....Unhappily, however, we found few people to talk with - apart from our last landlord.....

When I eventually was able to connect with the internet, I started to blog and surf again (the habit had started in 2009) and that is what forms the core of this little offering....

I hardly mentioned Koln in the posts - let alone the treatment I was undergoing. This was rather an opportunity to sink into another culture - using the immediate environment as a trigger for questions and casual insights..... One of my delights, for example, was the open-air charity stall near my treatment which offered free second-books.....

I think you'll find the booklet an interesting read - and the annotated reading list is, I think, quite original.....

Friday, July 10, 2015

[Culinary and cultural delights despite the Sofia heat](#)

I don't remember such heat as I've experienced this past week in Sofia - although I lived through 4 Tashkent summers; 2 [Baku ones](#) and 2 Bishkek ones.

The saving graces for the latter 2 were the sea (Caspian) and the mountain respectively. And Vitosha mountain does give Sofia delightful breezes.....



The afternoon trips to the (indoor) pool also help. The (ageing) body needs such compensations - which is why I look forward to returning shortly to my (Carpathian) redoubt which was still in June a bit cold and damp.....



In the meantime I'm enjoying the culinary delights of Sofia in my new neighbourhood - Papa Joe's and a great street café with very tasty Czech beer....And a great Chardonnay from a new winery in Svilengrad - [Santa Maria](#), for only 3 euros....courtesy of Sofia's [best little wineshop](#) (at the Russian Monument) owned by young Asen Tsekov

Sofia's big event a couple of months ago was the opening of its new art complex in what was its Museum of European Art. It took me 4 hours to do it all justice - but I am a copious note-taker (for my ongoing project about Bulgarian art -

[Memory's Veil - lifting the shroud concealing Bulgarian Art](#))

I hope shortly to create a new folder about this on [my Flickr file](#)

In the meantime, here's a little painting of us both we were wonderfully surprised to be given this week by Yuliana Sotirova.....

Saturday, July 25, 2015

[Hugh Stretton - polymath and social democrat - RIP](#)

Most "social scientists" are actually narrow technical specialists - in such subjects as economics or political science - loathe to threaten their career path by taking on big issues or using clear language...

[Hugh Stretton](#), who died earlier this month at the age of 91, was a polymath whose work should be a powerful reproof to the rubbish most social scientists inflict on us. His work ranged from [The Political Sciences](#) (1969); [Capitalism, Socialism and the Environment](#)(1976); to a 900 page anti-Samuelson textbook [Economics; a new introduction](#) (1999)

Forty years on, I still feel the tingle brought on by the clarity of his writing in the second of these books - and regret that I failed to notice his 1999 blockbuster which looks to deserve inclusion in any short list of key books about Economics.

There is a nice [vignette of his work in this paper](#) which stresses the social democratic essence of the man and should shame those of us who come from that tradition to do more to reassert it....(Craig Murray has a recent post about the present [UK Labour leadership contest](#) in that vein) Sadly, Stretton's work does not seem to have impacted beyond Australia although Steve Keen (of [Debunking Economics](#) fame) carries on the tradition.

JK Galbraith is one of a handful of social scientists who has been able to surmount the ostracism and ridicule generally heaped on those who challenge what he called "the conventional wisdom" with superb clarity of writing.....

While googling for more material on Stretton, I came across this fascinating 734 page [Biographical Dictionary of Dissenting Economists](#) which, curiously, fails to include him.....not specialist enough??????

For those wanting more on Debunking Economics - there are a [couple of freebies here](#) and [here](#)

Thursday, July 30, 2015

The Puritan Gift

I'm always on the lookout for books which challenge how we look at the world which, I've realized, rarely come from the incestuous and patronizing world of academia - let alone from the battalions of cheerleaders for "new management thinking". I should know because I chose, twenty years ago as part of a career change, to undergo a crash course of reading [the literature on "change management"](#). It's true that I did find some useful stuff (which I summarized on [pages 145-165 of my book In Transit](#)) - particularly the (neglected) writings of Robert Quinn - but most material was pretty superficial and I probably got more out of two devastating critiques - [Management Gurus - what makes them and how to become one](#) (1993); and [The Witch Doctors - making sense of the management gurus](#)(1996)

A month or so I read a really original book - [The Puritan Gift](#) (2009) - which told a powerful story of how and why American business had changed its values in the second half of the 20th Century. The argument of the book (written by brothers in their 80s) is that the mid-20th century strength of American business, and the prosperity and cultural confidence that created, was due to key characteristics inherited from the country's founding fathers, the Puritan dissenters, and reinforced by many of the subsequent waves of immigrants. The Hopper brothers list these characteristics as:

- a sense of moral purpose in life;
- a liking and aptitude for mechanical skills;
- collegiality, giving the group priority over individual interests; and organizational ability.

As they sum up: "The Puritan Gift is a rare ability to create organizations that serve a useful purpose, and to manage them well."

The book falls into three parts. The first is a history of the early days and heyday of US corporations, which they start with Colonel Roswell Lee's Armory in Springfield, Massachusetts. It demonstrated to many subsequent businesses the importance of technical know-how, it was innovative organisationally, it was an enlightened employer, and was collegial - including outside the boundaries of the Armory itself, sharing know-how and best practice with other gun-makers.

One fascinating chapter describes the transplantation of this American approach to Japanese business through the actions of three communications engineers employed in the MacArthur occupation. The Japanese communications and electronics industry was remade in the image of the best of America, and the Hoppers attribute the success of the consumer electronics industry to the adoption of these management practices. A war-destroyed, impoverished country became the world's second biggest economy in the space of three decades.

Decay set in early, however, and the Hoppers' first villain is Frederick W Taylor. He started the process of turning efficient organisational structures into social hierarchies, with top managers increasingly less likely to be engineers or technicians working their way up from the shop floor. Business schools continued this evisceration of the actual process of business, creating a professional cadre of managers, superior in status in pay, and with purely financial and abstract knowledge in place of the tacit skills and experience previously displayed by management cohorts. The downfall was completed by the steadily increasing celebration of greed, sucking the moral heart out of American capitalism.

It's hard to disagree with the outlines of this argument, harder to know what to do about it. The final part of the book is a brief attempt to suggest some ideas, with a list of 25 principles of Puritan management. Most of these seem very sensible without setting the heart racing. The key aspect of the Puritan Gift seems to be the sense of purpose. As John Kay has argued (in [The Foundations of Corporate Success](#)), a good business is one with a clear sense of purpose. The profits are a by-product, but without the core purpose there is no hope of sustained profitability.

Perhaps a benefit of the crisis is that the penny has dropped with some business leaders. Of course all too many are still driven by short-term financial engineering and their own bonus, linked to the share price. But it could be changing. One encouraging straw in the wind was the declaration recently by Paul Polman, chief executive of Unilever, that shareholders after the next quarterly profit were not welcome: "Unilever has been around for 100-plus years. We want to be around for several hundred more years. So if you buy into this long-term value creation model, which is sustainable, then come and invest with us. If you don't buy into this, then I respect you as a human being, but don't put your money in our company." (Quoted by Michael Skapinker, FT, 24/11/10)

Friday, July 31, 2015

[The Loss of German Identity?](#)

In the post-war period academics were about the only British writers who tried to deal with Germany - and then only historians such as AJP Taylor and Richard Evans or political scientists such as Willie Patterson. John Ardagh was the exception with his large book on contemporary German society - [Germany and the Germans](#) - which came out in the early 1990s but was quickly out of print. Those wanting to read about Germany had to make do with books about the Nazi period or knockabouts such as Ben Donald's [Springtime for Germany - or how I learned to love Lederhosen](#) (2007) whose German edition ("Deutschland for Beginners") I found a good read when I picked it up in a remaindered pile for 1 euro a couple of years ago.

About five years ago, things began to change with Peter Watson's monumental [German Genius](#) and Simon Winder's rather eccentric [Germania](#). Now a trickle has turned into a stream with serious books such as [Germany - Memories of a Nation](#) (focusing on cultural objects); [Reluctant Meister - how Germany's past is Shaping its European Future](#); and [Germany - beyond the Enchanted Forest](#) (a literary anthology) vying for space on the bookshelves. Last year a long book actually appeared with the title [The Novel in German since 1990](#) (which is actually the only one of this new stream now to be wending its way to me)

And Berlin's new role as a tourist hotspot has produced a variety of tantalising books such as Cees Nooteboom's [Roads to Berlin](#) (2012); Peter Schneider's [Berlin Now - the City after the Wall](#) (2014); and Rory McLean's [Berlin - Imagine a City](#) (2014) - all of which await on my bookshelf for my attention

Curiously, however, still nothing on contemporary Germany to vie with John Ardagh's book of 20 years ago!

These last few days, however, I have been devouring a large book which has just appeared - [Death of a Nation; a new History of Germany](#) - a delightful and enlightening read which I could hardly put down (despite the weight of its 700 pages). The provocative title gives a clue to the author's approach - which focuses on the loss of German identity and lands since its heyday a century ago.....

This is a real history - whereas Watson and Winder concentrate on intellectual achievement and cultural monuments respectively. But it's not your typical dry academic stuff! It's highly committed and doesn't pull punches - opening my eyes, for example, to the behavior of Czechs and Poles in the early part of the last century.....

And he really makes the history of the German lands (and key actors in both Germany and Europe) come alive in a way I have not experienced with other history books. Although I lived in Prague for more than a year in the early 90s, I never real understood the remnants I saw there of its German past....Unusually for an historian he doesn't hesitate to "contextualize" German brutalities by citing the extensive history of massacres perpetrated by Belgian, British and Soviet authorities in Africa, Russia and Asia.

The author states clearly in his Preface his intention to

" put in a much broader historical context the enormous human and cultural cost to Germany and German Austria of losing two world wars and the damage that has done to their sense of national identity"

This focus becomes clear in the second half of the book - which covers the fate not only of Jews but of the people who, in 2 World Wars, suddenly found themselves (by the massive border changes) living as minorities in foreign countries - a tale which has been ignored until recently in the huge literature of the second world war. As someone who has been living in central and eastern Europe for the past 25 years, I find this is an important and highly commendable objective and one rarely attempted by an outsider.

I have to confess, however, that my focus wavered in the section dealing with the death struggle of the Nazi regime (more than 100 pages after page 400). He had carried me with him until that point - and then lost me...too harrowing????

Saturday, August 1, 2015

Schuld

I'm conscious that my big readers these past few weeks have been from Russian servers - although I'm not sure if they are from heartland Russia or, perhaps, from places like Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan where I lived for 7 years - ie friends who happen to have Russian servers.....

So far they don't seem to have been turned off by my recent posts on German subjects - so let me pursue the thoughts aroused by the latest book I have been reading these last few days.....

Gunther Grass - writer, artist (not least gastronomic) and political activist - was a larger than life German who died last April at the age of 87. I was never a fan of his novels (I preferred Heinrich Boll) - although I did appreciate his social activism (so typical of the post-war German generation). I found a lovely English first edition of his autobiography - "Peeling the Onion" - in Sofia's great second-hand bookshop (The Elephant) a few months ago and was bowled over when I eventually got round to reading it. It's not just that it charts so powerfully the trajectory of an intelligent youngster (from an area which is now in Poland) facing the monstrosities of the times - but the sheer poetry.....

It apparently caused a sensation in Germany a decade ago when it revealed that he had been in a youth SS group for the last year of the war - something which he had carefully hidden until the last phase of his life.....

But Timothy Garton Ash, the indefatigable chronicler of the 1980s central European spirit of revolution, was able to rise above that furor in the NYRB review (in the year of its English translation) entitled [The Road from Danzig](#)

this is a wonderful book, a return to classic Grass territory and style, after long years of disappointing, wooden, and sometimes insufferably hectoring works from his tireless pen, and a perfect pendant to his great "Danzig trilogy" of novels, starting with The Tin Drum.

An account of his life from the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, when as an eleven-year-old war-enthusiast he collected fragments of shrapnel from the first fighting in his native Danzig, to the publication of The Tin Drum in 1959, "Peeling the Onion" repeatedly surprises, delights, and moves with passages of great descriptive power.

He enables us not merely to see but to hear, touch, and smell life in the tiny, two-room apartment in Danzig where he grew up, with a shared lavatory on the staircase—"a stink-cell, the walls of which fingers had smeared."¹ From this suffocating narrowness the teenager longed to escape into what he saw as the romantic, heroic world of service in the Führer's armed forces. So at the age of fifteen he volunteered to fight on a U-boat, but his offer was not accepted (although he was called up a year later to a SS brigade).

One of my favourite British blogs - [That's How the Light Gets In](#) - picked up the story [in a recent post](#)-

What follows after this last admission (which stunned the world) is a brilliant evocation of scenes that the teenager witnessed when his unit was taken to the collapsing front in Lower Silesia, passing through a burning Dresden:

Soldiers young and old, in Wehrmacht uniforms. Hanging from trees still bare along the road, from linden trees in the marketplaces. With cardboard signs on their chests branding them as cowards and subversive elements. [...] Off to the side I see peasants working their fields, furrow after furrow, as if nothing were wrong. One has a cow hitched to his plough, Crows following the plough. Then I see more refugees, filling the streets in long processions: horse carts and overladen handcarts pushed and pulled by old women and adolescents; i see children clutching dolls, perched on suitcases and rope-bound bundles. An old man is pulling a cart containing two lambs hoping to survive the war.

His first encounter with the enemy comes with a 'Stalin Organ' rocket attack that leaves bodies strewn everywhere. Soon he is stranded behind enemy lines, in woods with Russians close by. Twigs crack underfoot - someone is nearby; a figure approaches and, terrified, the young Grass sings a German melody which is answered in kind.

Grass the memoirist can now only identify the man who appeared, the man who became his guardian angel, who led him out of the woods, over the fields and across the Russian front line, as 'the lance corporal'. He had fought with the Polish campaign, in France and Greece, and as far afield as the Crimea. The lance corporal is his saviour, but then, in a Soviet tank attack, the lance corporal's legs are ripped to bits. The

last sight young Gunter has of him is of him being wheeled past from a battlefield operating room, his eyes wide open, amazed and unbelieving - a legless torso.

Soon the Fuhrer is no more and Grass, having been transferred to a military hospital in Marienbad finds himself, a seventeen-year-old priapic youth, under the care of Finnish nurses. Hungry for sex, he is even more hungry for nourishment. Finally freed from the American POW camp at Bad Aibling, a displaced person in the British Occupied Zone, Grass found his first officially-registered residence as a free man in Cologne,

'a pile of debris with an occasional miraculously-surviving street sign stuck to what was left of a façade, or hung on a pole sticking out of the rubble, which was also sprouting lush patches of dandelions about to blossom.'

He scavenges 'like a stray dog for food, a place to sleep, and - driven by that other hunger - skin on skin contact'. An encounter in the station waiting-room leads him to Hanover and his first job of work after the war is over: an encounter with 'the eternal lance-corporal in his dyed Wehrmacht uniform', his wooden leg stretched out in front of him, smoking a pipe filled with 'an indefinable substance only distantly related to tobacco'. He looked as if he had survived not only the most recent war but also the Thirty Years' War and Seven Years' War: he was timeless. The veteran suggests Hanover where there is work underground in the potash mines.

There, Gunter finds work as a coupler boy, hooking up dumper wagons laden with potash to form underground trains. It is there in the mine that, for the first time by his own account, he entered the world of politics, albeit still only as a teenage observer. During breaks in the intensive work routine caused by regular power cuts, the older men would sit and argue politics - the Communists, the Nazi nostalgists, and the Social-Democrats:

Even though I had trouble making sense of the issues that infuriated them so, I realized, coupler boy and idiot on the fringe, that when push came to shove the Communists inevitably teamed up with the Nazis to shout down the Social Democrat remainder.

One Sunday morning Gunter's locomotive driver took him into Hanover to hear the head of the Social Democratic Party, Kurt Schumacher, speak to an open-air audience of several thousand (mull over that number for a minute). No he didn't speak, he screamed, the way all politicians ... screamed. And yet the future Social Democrat and unflinching supporter of "ontheonehandandontheother" took to heart some of the words that the frail figure with the empty, fluttering sleeve thundered down to his ten thousand adherents in the blazing sun.

Later, of course, Grass would be a supporter and speech-writer for Willy Brandt and his 'policy of small steps', and in "The Diary of a Snail" would prescribe 'crawling shoes for the ills of progress. The snail's track, not the fast track. A long road paved with cobblestones of doubt.'

And, finally, to the NYRB review -

Fear and hunger are the twin sensations that permeate these pages. His chapter about seeing action with the Waffen-SS is entitled "How I Learned Fear."

His hunger is threefold. First, hunger for food, especially in American prisoner-of-war camps. Second, hunger for sex, described in a kind of lingering, amused physical detail that reminds me of the work of the English poet Craig Raine, whose poem "The Onion, Memory" anticipates Grass's book-long metaphor.

The object of Grass's final hunger, after food and sex, is art. He calls his chapter about becoming an artist "The Third Hunger." Battling his way, alone, with a strong will and professed egoism, up the physical and social rubble mountains of postwar Germany, he becomes first a stonemason and part-time sculptor, then a graphic artist, then a poet, and only at the end, in his late twenties, a writer of prose, inspired by Alfred Döblin's Berlin Alexanderplatz and Joyce's Ulysses, both discovered and devoured in the library of the well-heeled, cultivated Swiss parents of his first wife, Anna. "Anna's dowry," he calls it. The memoir ends with his finding, in Paris, what would become one of the most famous first lines of any novel—"Granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital." And the rest is literature.

Blogs worth reading

Like most active bloggers, I have a section on the site which lists my "favourite links" - and, like most bloggers, I rarely update it or even reference them myself all that often.

And I find that my taste for blogs change - some soon pall for their rants; others (eg [Craig Murray](#)) begin to annoy for their predictable contrariness even although I will still access them.

A few of the good ones send me automatic updates - generally the collective sites such as [Eurozine](#) journal, [RSA](#) and [the Real World Economist](#) blogs; the great [Scottish Review](#) E-journal; and one single blogger [How to Save the World](#).

Those I have discovered in the past year which deserve a special mention include -

- [Poemas del rio Wang](#) - the most amazing site which tends to focus on memories of old central and east European lands; which runs some trips to them; but whose [current series is on Iran](#)
- [That's How the Light Gets In](#) - the imaginative site of a retired Liverpoolian Polytechnic lecturer with strong cultural tastes
- [Michael Roberts blog](#) - an elegantly written Marxist economist blog
- [Econblog101](#) - a blog about economic matters written by a German
- [Club Orlov](#) - a very original "end-of-oil" blog by a writer who has written several fascinating books
- [Stumbling and Mumbling](#) - a rather academic blog with, however, good hyperlinks
- [Britain is no Country for Older Men](#) - an informative (if rather sexist) blog which celebrates the life achievements of various unsung heroes
- [Paul Cairney; politics and public policy](#) - one of the best academic blogs for me, written by a Scottish Professor who explains in clear language the approach to various aspects of public policy
- a recent one whose title [Economy for the common good](#) resonates with my own new website - [Mapping the Common Ground](#) - leading in turn to another new interesting site - [Take Back](#)



[the Economy](#) which was discussing Paul Mason's new book [Postcapitalism - a Guide to the Future](#)

[The Different Faces of Power](#)

I have been reading a provocative book about "development" which came out recently and whose very title gives a flavour of its thesis - [The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor](#) (the link gives the full text!).

From its many reviews, it has already created quite a furor in the extensive community which has been earning its (considerable) living from advising poorer countries for the past 50-60 years. I found myself engaged in a bit of a confessional when I tried to put down my initial thoughts about the book's thesis. This post explains why - the next post will try to summarise the book's content and the arguments it has produced.

"Development consultancy" is a term used for people funded by international agencies who fly into countries which have been designated as "underdeveloped" and write reports and implement programmes designed to increase their social and economic wellbeing.... Sadly the reality has generally proved disappointing and had, by the 80s attracted a considerable backlash led by the likes of [PD Bauer](#).

The collapse of communism in 1989 gave development (and other sorts of) economists the kiss-of-life.....in central and Eastern Europe where, I found myself occasionally rubbing shoulders with some of them. By then I had morphed from a specialist in "urban and community development" (with both academic and political roles) in the West of Scotland (1970-1990) to a role as a technical consultant in "institutional development" - working on programmes in central Europe (and central Asia) designed to develop the capacity of state bodies to serve the interests of



citizens in democratic societies.....if the reader will forgive me for the jargon.....I

offered some thoughts about this experience [in a recent post](#) (more fully developed in one of my E-books [Crafting Effective Public Management](#))

Some 20 years ago I penned a small autobiographical book entitled "Puzzling Development" marking that change of role - a book whose cover carried the famous [1871 painting "The Geographer"](#) by Henri de Braekeleer and whose subtitle was "Odyssey of a Modern Candide" - a theme which has run through quite a few of my scribbles since the 70s. The introduction promises to cover issues relating to bureaucratic, urban and policy change; public involvement; privatisation; and technical assistance and covered experience of four countries



In 1977 I had produced my first little book - "*The Search for Democracy*" whose cover showed community activists poring over a map and, I noticed yesterday for the first time in 25 or so years, a puzzled little boy cut out from the main group and standing alone at the side.....my alter ego and hero no less - Hans Christian Anderson's creation who dared utter the magic words "but the Emperor has no clothes!!). Its sub-title had been "a guide to and polemic about Scottish local government" and it tried to answer 43 questions which people I worked with would ask me

Was it significant that the cover of my later and most rigorous book - "*In Transit - notes on good governance*" (1999) - written as a calling card for the younger generation I was by then working with in ex-communist countries - showed simply a rock on an Atlantic beach with the geological strata starkly revealed by the ocean's pounding.....???? Had I even then become fatalistic about human endeavour??? Chapter headings of that book were -

- The Journey of Reform
- The Triple Challenge - market, state and society
- Advice for coalition government
- The bureaucratic-political dynamic
- Improving the performance of government
- Some conditions for inclusive government
- Managing change
- Training for effective state bodies



But "revenons aux moutons" as the French say....the author of [The Tyranny of Experts](#) is an American guy called William Easterly who published an earlier book in 2006 with the equally provocative title - *The White Man's Burden - why the west's efforts to aid the rest of the world have done so much ill and so little good*. Easterly, clearly, is a sceptic - but [scepticism](#) is a feature I value - have a look at my *Sceptic's Glossary* if you don't believe me. It's actually called "[Just Words](#)" - a glossary and bibliography for the fight against the pretensions and perversities of power"

Sceptics challenge what JK Galbraith wonderfully called "the conventional wisdom" and, providing they actually embody the spirit of sceptical inquiry, are a necessary and critical element in any intellectual journey....I add the qualification simply because quite a few contrarians do have an agenda (generally a libertarian one).

We have an ambivalent attitude to "experts" - even medical ones - conceding that engineers and surgeons deserve our respect but rightly questioning the "expertise" of many experts in the field of social sciences....particularly those employed by powerful international bureaucracies which certainly have agendas of their own....

But it is the development economists that Easterly has it in for.....who seduce the powerful with talk of the wealth and progress which will come if only they follow their advice....

I found the opening section of the book very worthwhile because -

- it gives a rare insight into the start of the discipline of development economics; some of its key figures and arguments; and its "divorce" from mainstream economics

- it questions the focus on the nation, reminding us that the infrastructure of economics is based (questionably for many of us) on the "rationality" of the individual consumer and (small) company
- it reminds us of how important to the development of capitalism was the challenge to power of the spirit of liberty

As it happens, my University course developed an interest for me in the space between the nation and the individual company - and how its operations might be improved ie regional, urban and, latterly, community development.

And one of the people whose writings made a big impression on me (some ten years later) was [Ivan Illich](#) whose challenge to the power of health and educational professionals was a breath of fresh air for me and profoundly influenced the community power element of Strathclyde [Region's Social Strategy for the Eighties](#) which I helped shape.

Illich was, of course, your quintessential anarchist - distrusting the sort of well-intentioned power held by those of us who managed a social strategy which went on to shape the strategies of the system of the Scottish governments which have held power in the past 15 years.....But governments have to select priorities for both their attention and funding. With some hesitation we did designate what we called in the late 1970s "areas of priority treatment" - initially 45 of them whose inhabitants' lives we tried to improve with the help of community structures led by community activists assisted by development workers....

I doubt whether we got the balance right between community, professional and political power - and subsequent events demonstrated how easily economic power caps everything.....But at least we tried
The question for readers of Easterly's book is how well he deals with those different faces of power.....

Tuesday, August 11, 2015

Tribalism of the Intellect

Normal people get hooked on detective novels....eccentrics like me get their fixes from books about things like development.. The habit started 20 years ago when I found myself (as we performance artists put it) "resting" between projects and, as a result, haunting the book-stacks of the (then well-endowed) British Council library in Bucharest. The books I read then are still listed in my [annotated bibliography for change agents](#) (section 7) - all 24 of them! And there have been more since.

I'm not a development economist - although my



mother (then heading for her 100th birthday) had difficulty understanding exactly what sort of craft I was plying in exotic places such as Tashkent, Baku and Bishkek. That reflects better on her time and values than ours - which have invented such crazy and questionable occupations.....it was Robert Reich, I think, who talked about "symbolic analysts".....

So what draws me to books with titles like [The World's Banker](#) (2005); [Ideas for Development](#) (2005); "Aid on the Edge of Chaos" (2013); [The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development](#) (2014) and Easterly's "Tyranny of Experts"??

One reason may be that such books are remarkably like detective novels - there is a mystery (why do countries fail/not grow?); a plot; victims, suspects; goodies and baddies. What, however, they generally lack are character studies and, often, even a feel for place

I may not be a development economist but, as [several posts](#) this past year have emphasised, I have been in the development business all my life. Except that (a) the approach I have been drawn to has been political and institutional rather than economic; and (b) the focus has more often been local than national.

But I feel strongly that there is an underlying commonality to "development endeavours" which virtually all writers on the subject (tragically) miss - since almost everyone is corralled inside the barbed-wire fences which mark off the territories of intellectual disciplines and sub-disciplines (such as rural development, urban development, institutional development, economic development.....)

I remember first being aware of this in the late 70s - working then as I was in the field of community development and urban politics - and seeing planners, social workers and educationalists all trying to adopt a more inclusive approach to the newly-discovered problems of the marginalised urban poor but using slightly different terms....."community planning"; "community work"; "community education"

I had a curious position then on the edge of a variety of well-patrolled borders - Secretary of the majority party's Cabinet on Europe's largest local authority (SRC) but also a Lecturer at a nearby Polytechnic which was developing a new Degree structure. I had been appointed an economist but was more of a policy planner with an obvious interest in the political and organisational side of public administration - a subject rapidly going out of fashion.

After 4 years of freedom heading up a Local Government Centre, I was needed for academic work; forced to choose; opted for the Politics department; despaired of the narrowness of the curriculum I was expected to teach and hankered after the wider, inter-disciplinary focus I had been accustomed to.....

Little wonder, therefore, that I was soon pushed out. It's not easy to reinvent oneself at age 45 but I was lucky in having what was then the modest income of a full-time Regional politician and experience which proved thoroughly marketable as a consultant when the Wall fell down in 1989. I have always been my own man - able to follow my passion - and am now so grateful that I was rescued from a miserable academic existence and able to continue to prowl forbidden borders....

Yesterday we visited the superb [Campulung-Muscel](#) yet again - Romania's first capital with an amazing location and replete with old houses, some of which we visited.... the photograph is one of the externally-painted murals on an unknown church in what seemed the town's nicest area.....

Thursday, August 13, 2015

Fast Reading - Ten Tricks

I've reached the last chapter of Easterly's [The Tyranny of Experts](#) and have great sympathy [with a review which starts](#) -

I wanted to love "The Tyranny Of Experts", the new book by William Easterly. I've admired his work for years. I love the provocative title, and how could you not fall for the subtitle, "Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor"?

And the fundamental thesis of the book is such an important one: Authoritarian, technocratic, one-size-fits-all development is bad, and the individual rights of the ostensible beneficiaries of development should be paramount. People know what's best for them, and even proven and effective development interventions will fail to have lasting effects in the context of oppressive governments.



The best stuff bubbles up from below, when markets and technology are allowed to amplify the ideas of people who are given voices and choices.

The problem is that however pressing and true this message may be, there have been many cogent critiques of witless top-down policy, and there isn't a lot that's particularly fresh or contemporary in "The Tyranny Of Experts".

The bibliography I referred to in my last post had listed about 20 books I read 20 years ago most of which had strong

critiques of the devastating effect which World Bank mega-dam projects had in displacing millions of people and destroying the environment.

Why do we need another critique which doesn't even refer to those earlier studies and books??????

Easterly's book promises to rediscover a missing intellectual debate between people such as Hayek and Myrdal but, I noticed, missed so many other names which might have been brought in.....

It got me thinking,,,,,and the fingers surfing.....

In that sense a good read.....

Some people ask how I'm able not only to get through so many (non-fiction) books but also to remember things about them.

I will now reveal - exclusively for you - my ten tricks of fast reading and comprehension.

They are very simply expressed -

General

- Read a lot (from an early age!)
- Read widely (outside your discipline)

- Read quickly (skim)
- If the author doesn't write in clear and simple language, move on to another book asap. Life's too short.....Bad writing is a good indicator of a confused mind

For each book

- Mark extensively (with a pencil - ideally a soft one such as my favourite Faber-Castell SV1111) - with question-marks, ticks, underlines, comments and expletives
- Read the reviews (surf)
- Identify from these questions you can use for a critical interrogation of the book
- Write brief notes to remind you of the main themes and arguments
- Identify the main schools of thought about the subject
- Check the bibliography at the end - to see what obvious names are missing

Let the review continue -

The book opens strongly enough, with the story of Ohio farmers thrown off their land at gunpoint as the result of a project financed and promoted by the World Bank. The details are awful: kids trapped in fires set by soldiers, cows felled by machine guns, harvests doused with gasoline. It's upsetting, but it's also implausible, and when Easterly reveals that it's really an account of an incident that took place in Uganda in 2010, the effect is jolting. I thought to myself: Man, we are in for a ride.

Next thing I know, we're in the middle of an imaginary debate between two Nobel economists: Friedrich Hayek and Gunnar Myrdal. In Easterly's telling, Hayek and Myrdal represent the advocates of bottom-up and top-down development, respectively, and an exploration of their diametrically opposed approaches is a central part of the book. Hayek's view, as Easterly paraphrases it, is that "individual rights were both an end in themselves and a means by which free individuals in a free society solved many of their own problems."

Myrdal, by contrast, comes across as a pointy-headed jerk who believes in the wisdom of centralized authorities. Sometimes it may be necessary to impose, say, better agricultural policies from on high—even if (and here Easterly is quoting Myrdal directly) "it require[s] the killing of many half-starved cows."

Whether Easterly's rendition of these guys' views is accurate, I'll leave for others to decide. I'm more concerned with what's happening in international development in 2014. I'd hoped that Easterly would proceed to deliver a full-on critique of the current state of affairs, replete with juicy material about nitwit technocrats and some great gossip about the stupidity of Big Aid organizations. Instead, I found myself mired in discussions of Sun Yat-sen, Adam Smith, and the technology of 15th-century Italy.

Eventually, I got so desperate to read about something immediately relevant that I started fishing around in the index to see if I'd missed something. I hadn't. Here's an example: The blurb copy on the book jacket singles out the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as a bad actor. The book's concluding chapter refers to that foundation's "disrespect for poor people." In between, there's very little to support that position.

I looked up every single reference to the Gates Foundation: The first mention is on page 123, where Easterly tells us that the foundation had the temerity to praise the (admittedly nasty) Mengistu

government in Ethiopia for its efforts to reduce child mortality. That's it! Pages 153, 156, 158, 165, and 197 simply offer brief variations on that same theme.

We could all gain from a thoughtful critique of Big Philanthropy and Big Aid. But there's little in the way of specific criticism of current development efforts here: There's the unfortunate complicity of aid donors in the depredations of the Ethiopian government, there's a single unconscionable World Bank project in Uganda, and that's all—two examples in the whole book. Where are these experts who are tyrannizing the poor now?

Now that's what I call a real review!!! No pussy-footing about - straight for the jugular... unfortunately too many "reviewers" are camp-followers who daren't tell it as it is since they are hoping for good reviews of the nonsense they are trying to perpetrate on us!!!

Friday, August 14, 2015

A Challenge to TINA and the Comfort Zone

This blog has a policy of not commenting on current affairs but, given what I have written about political systems, it would be strange indeed if I didn't look at the leadership contest which currently has the British public on the edge of their seats.....

The British Labour Party lost last May's General Election (particularly badly in Scotland where a wipe-out left it with a sole seat) and was immediately plunged into yet another leadership contest (its last was in 2010). Three of the candidates are "look-alikes" of the sort which have led most European social democratic parties to recent defeat....

The fourth candidate is a contrarian MP (of 32 years' parliamentary experience) - Jeremy Corbyn - who only entered the contest because it was his turn to be the left's "sacrificial lamb".

Astonishingly he has taken the contest and indeed the country by storm - giving voice to a frustration felt not only within the Labour Party but in Europe as a whole with what has passed for politics in the past couple of decades.

Here is [a column about his reception](#) this weekend in Scotland and here [a more predictable paean from The New Statesman](#) - the standard bearer of the British soft left.

Jeremy Corbyn has been under most people's radar for most of the time - Michael Foot, Tony Benn, Arthur Scargill, George Galloway, Michael Meacher, Ken Livingstone, Dianne Abbott and Derek Hatton were the leftist figures the British media (and right-wing people) loved to hate and demonise..... so it's been a brilliant tactic for this guy to outsmart the pack and pop up from nowhere..... They just can't get a handle on him.....and he exudes such calm.....shows that our concepts of leadership need revision (again).....

Given what I've been writing about the failure of the left in the past decade, it's fairly obvious I would now salute Corbyn's victory - even granted the reaction it would cause in the British and global power systems. My little book [The Global Crisis - Telling it as it is](#) tries to map the key elements in the collapse of the political and economic systems we used to know as the "mixed economy" and "liberal democracy"

We are sick to the back teeth with "New Labour's" endless focus grouping and "[triangulations](#)".....we just want to get back to good old principle and the honourable negotiating which is part of the give and take of any sensible politics.

But three-time election winner Tony Blair popped up last week to tell people like me that we [needed to move out of or "comfort zone"](#) . What he means is that the decisions of thousands of bond-holders trump electoral power - and derisively so; and that the scale of sell-offs of public assets to the "private sector" is impossible to reverse...

And this is something I just don't see the left dealing with.....Jeremy Corbyn has set out a good agenda - not least taking rail back into public ownership. But people don't have to go back [30 years to the Mitterand experience](#) to be reminded of the power of global capital. It was in front of our eyes just a few weeks ago in the immediate aftermath of the July Greek referendum - and the ignominious acceptance by the Greek government of the punishing policies to stay in the euro.....

I would respect Jeremy even more if, in addition to his programme, he had the courage to deal with this publicly and say something about how to deal with such an obvious scenario. In the absence of this, the accusation about comfort zones rings true.....on the other side of the coin those who know their history understand that, every generation or so, the conventional wisdom does tend to be turned on its head - or has noone read Taleb's [The Black Swan](#)....?????

One of the purposes of my book (and website - [Mapping the Common Ground](#)) is to try to identify ways of extracting ourselves from what one writer called The Global Minotaur. With the exception of one school of thinking, virtually all writers spend their time, space and energy on description and analysis - and have nothing serious to say about "solutions". In that sense they confirm the fatalism of Margaret Thatcher's famous TINA assertion - "there is no alternative!....."

I said there was one exception to this fatalism - it is those who base their thinking on the "end of growth" premise.....

update - George Monbiot presents here a [good analysis of why Corbyn is having such an impact](#) - the discussion thread is also worthwhile and [this Guardian podcast contains an excellent discussion](#) of the Corbyn phenomenon - although my non-British readers may have difficulties with the (speed of the) regional accents. Positive reaction also [from an unlikely source](#) to his economic pitch.

Sunday 16 August

Waste, Need, Imagination and Courage

The young need hope to survive - but so many of Europe's young people live in a hopeless situation - well-educated but fighting for jobs. The Greek situation is particularly horrific - with more than half of youngsters in their 20s unemployed - but things are almost that bad in countries such as Italy, [Portugal](#) and Spain. In Europe as a whole, there are 5 million youngsters (ie 16-24) jobless - an average of 1 in 4. This is [a useful little paper](#) on the subject.

In 2013 the EU established a 6 billion fund (for a 6 year period) to deal with the problem - less than a third of what the ILO had suggested in 2012 was actually needed. And a year later [Angela Merkel had to admit that little progress was being made](#) in the implementation of the [Youth Employment Initiative](#).

Youth unemployment rates are slightly better in Bulgaria (one third) and Romania (one quarter) but the young people I know here are either working on short-term projects with EU funding; self-employed; working with friends and family; or (at best) climbing the greasy pole of academia.....

European money in these two countries is mind-boggling in its scale - but its impact difficult to see. It is notoriously difficult to access - even in northern Europe where they tend to play by the book. In southern countries, the behavior of civil servants, municipal officials and their various political and business patrons makes life even more difficult for those with pet projects. Hardly surprisingly, therefore, that we have seen [various scandals in the management of the huge funds](#) which the EU has seen fit to transfer to these countries in the last few years have led to "[absorption](#)" rates of [less than 20%](#) (in 2012 Romanian managed 11% but Bulgaria 34%!!) although [Balkan Insight tells us](#) that Romania's rate was 30% in 2013. That's 1 billion euros actually paid out in one year - mainly for motorways....although the [total value of the contracts signed off that year](#) was a mind-boggling 17 billion euros



The only projects I see in my part of the Carpathians are tiny and actually counter-productive - grants to guesthouses which take the money from the mouth of the older village residents who have tried to supplement their meagre existence with "Cazare" (bed and breakfasts).....

What I don't see is any attempt at creative harnessing of the money to the multiple social needs in rural areas - decrepit social and physical infrastructure could be brought into the 21st century with the help of the

trained skills of young people.

But that would require not only new forms of social enterprise - but a more Germanic approach to skill development, encouraging not just the fashionable IT skills (and academic learning) but also the more practical skills required in rural areas.....

I googled "social enterprise in Romania" and was encouraged to find several reasonably recent reports. The academic ones hardly worth wasting time on but [this 2014 country report](#) made for interesting reading

This past couple of weeks, my village authorities have been busy upgrading the little road which runs below my garden - it doesn't go anywhere, just connects about 10 houses only 3 of which use cars (mine being one) so fairly pointless. But the "[Bucharest Live](#)" [blog gives us a lovely insight](#) into such roads in another part of Transylvania

I wish someone would do a real study of the mentalities (and networks!) of the people who have the fate of such places in their hands.....

The Art of the Memoir

Politicians have given narcissism a bad name - the story-line of too many of their autobiographies being "Look what I achieved - despite all the bastards out to get me". And yet there are superb exceptions such as [Dennis Healey's](#) "Time of my Life" beautifully-written and wry study of politics when it mattered - with a dash of culture thrown in from time to time. En passant he mentions that Leonard Woolf's 5-volume "[Memoirs](#)" were an inspiration - when I eventually got round to reading them I had to agree they were one of the best in the English language. By contrast Tony Benn's 50 year series of "Diaries" are little more than a series of notes.....

Other examples of authors who led fascinating lives and whose account of them generally avoids the emptiness of modern political scribbles are -

- **Arthur Koestler's** 4 volumes - "an unrivalled study" as the blurb on the back of the third volume ("The Invisible Writing") puts it "of twentieth century man and his dilemmas"
- The World of Yesterday; **Stefan Zweig** (1942) - is probably the century's greatest memoir which I write about later
- The various volumes of **Simone de Beauvoir's** autobiography convey a powerful sense of an exciting new Europe taking shape in the post-war rubble.
- **JK Galbraith's** "A Life in Our Times; Memoirs" (1970s) offer an unsurpassable repast of memories and intellectual musings
- Writer **Luise Rinser's** "Saturn auf der Sonne" (2nd part of her autobiography) does the same for Germany
- [Gregor von Rezzori](#) is one of the most neglected of writers from lands which have been variously part of Austro-Hungary, CzechoSlovakia, Hungary, Romania and now Ukraine. Over thirty years he wrote marvellous prose about his early years in the town of Czernowitz when it lay in the northern redoubts of Romania. It is difficult to classify them - novels or memoirs? [Memoirs of an Anti-Semite](#) (1979) and [Snows of Yesteryear](#) (1989) generally appear as the former but to my mind can be read as "creative memoirs".



- graphic artist **Tisa von Schulenberg's** harrowing little book "Ich Hab's Gewagt" (1981) covers her life before the war....I'm the proud owner of a signed copy of this fascinating woman's memoir
- I also thoroughly enjoyed historian **Fritz Stern's** "[Five Germanies I have known](#)"
- Also German novelist **Gunther Grass's** so poetic "[Peeling the Onion](#)"
- Jigsaw by **Sybill Bedford** is (perhaps like a lot of memoirs) semi-fictional
- poet **Dannie Abse's** "Goodbye Twentieth Century" is a gentle memoir
- **Diane Athill's** various Memoirs are as good as they get
- **Des Wilson**, the great campaigner, I knew briefly in the late 70s and he was good enough to send me his rumbustious "Memoirs of a Minor Public Figure"
- **Martin Amis' [Experience](#)** (2001) I had ignored until recently since I see him as a self-opinionated brattish writer.....
- **Clive James'** output is almost unclassifiable - memoirs, essays, notes - give a real insight into a great mind, reader and writer...
- **Amitai Etzioni** and **Richard Rose** are two prolific academics whose foray into Memoir (entitled respectively "My Brother's Keeper" and (very jazzily?) [Learning about Politics in Time and Space](#)(!!) give a great sense of their intellectual development. And, like Fritz Stern, they straddle different countries.....
- The Importance of Being Awkward - the autobiography of **Tam Dalyell** (Birlinn 2012)

What exactly, I wonder, do we get from these attempts of creative people to make sense of their lives? What insights into human behavior? What lessons for us? There must be a Phd thesis in there somewhere???

Update:

James Wood's review of the Amis memoir (which I added to the list only a couple of months later after seeing [this video series](#) and then remembering that I had seen a copy of the book in Sofia's second-hand English bookshop) has this to say

It is an escape from memoir; indeed, an escape into privacy. In the very book which might, at first glance, seem most exhibitionist, most shamelessly metropolitan, Amis has softly retreated to the provinces of himself. His book often reads like a letter to his family and closest friends. It is sometimes embarrassing to read; the ordinary reader feels voyeuristic, at times almost uninvited, but very moved. What seems at first just gossip and guest-lists - sprays of names offered without explanation, diaristic footnotes, a refusal to universalise - soon becomes a kind of tender defiance, as if Amis wanted the book to vibrate with an atmosphere of wounded privacy

22 August

Intimations of Mortality - I

About once a year a book has me on the edge of the seat and really challenged - [Being Mortal - illness, medicine and what matters in the end](#) seems to be this year's book. It's written by a rather special doctor of Indian origin who has been working in US hospitals and also writing for The New Yorker Atul Gawande

Initially it presents a rather harrowing description of what the onset of age does to our body - and how modern medicine responds....with more and more sophisticated (and expensive) treatment - increasingly in hospital. The deservedly acclaimed film "[One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest](#)" may be about patients in a "mental home" but the treatment which audiences saw exactly 40 years ago is all too evident in all institutions these days....

In my parents' generation people tended to die a few years after retirement but a mix of factors (eg the decline of manufacturing industry and medical advances) has added at least 10 years to "life expectation" in Europe and North America.

That led to political panics a decade or so ago about the fiscal burden of pensions (assuaged to an extent by the breaking of social promises and contracts) and the constant climb in health costs then led to campaigns to get us living more healthily. But the public continue to expect the best medical treatment and - when that fails - institutional care of "the elderly" who tend these days to be living on their own hundreds of miles/kilometres away from sons and daughters....

Gawande paints an ugly picture of the suddenness with which people in their 70s can fall from autonomy to institutional dependence and regimentation and rightly accuses us all of failing to prepare for this.

I am as guilty as the next although a little voice has been encouraging me this past couple of years to "copy and save" articles and papers about ageing - **on which I will draw for my next post**

The heroes in Gawande's story are some mavericks who couldn't accept the regimentation; had a passionately-held vision of an alternative system which allowed people to assert the independence they had come to expect in their own homes; and had the guts, skills and perseverance to build examples of such alternatives whose results were not only cheaper but led to a better quality of life....By 2010 the number of residents of such small complexes which spread across America was approaching the number in nursing homes. But then, Gawande tells us

"a distressing thing happened - the concept of assisted living became so popular that developers began slapping the name on just about anything. The idea mutated from a radical alternative to nursing homes into a menagerie of watered-down versions with fewer services....concerns about safety increasingly limited what people could have in their apartments and defined ever more stringent conditions which would trigger discharge to a nursing home. The language of medicine, with its priorities of safety and survival was taking over again" (p101)

And the boards running such places wanted the profits which come from a larger scale than the original concept

I was reminded me of the "sheltered accommodation" my mother chose to live in between the ages of 85 and 95 - cooking and shopping for herself. I checked and there it was - [a complex of only seven flats](#) - part of a charity which has more than 100 such places in the UK...So all is not lost!!!

But we still need more recognition of our need for "autonomy" - whether in [company structures](#) or the way we live our lives.....

Monday 24 August

Intimations of Mortality - II

Those of us who enjoy good health don't give a moment's thought to the prospect of growing old and frail. Making a will should be a wake-up call but is all too quickly forgotten. I sometimes wonder if my inability to even start the process of applying for the pension which was rightfully mine some years back is not a sign of psychological resistance to the very notion that I am "getting on in years"!

The face that stares back at me from the mirror has still some resemblance to my old passport photos (the body doesn't). When my mother made the decision at age 95 to transfer from the independent flat she had in a small and lightly "supported accommodation" I vividly remember her looking around at her new neighbours - most of whom were considerably younger than her - and remarking (quietly) that there were a lot of old people around!

It is indeed all in the mind.....It's almost 50 years ago that [The Coming of Age](#) by Simone de Beauvoir burst on the world

In 1967, Beauvoir began a monumental study of the same genre and calibre as "The Second Sex". La Vieillesse (The Coming of Age, 1970) met with instant critical success. "The Second Sex" had been received with considerable hostility from many groups who did not want to be confronted with an unpleasant critique of their sexist and oppressive attitudes towards women; "The Coming of Age" however, was generally welcomed although it too critiques society's prejudices towards another oppressed group: the elderly. This masterful work takes the fear of age as a cultural phenomenon and seeks to give voice to a silenced and detested class of human beings.

What she concludes from her investigation into the experience, fear and stigma of old age is that even though the process of aging and the decline into death is an inescapable, existential phenomenon for those human beings who live long enough to experience it, there is no justification for our loathing older members of society - nor should the "aged" merely resign themselves to waiting for death or for younger members of society to treat them as the invisible class.

Rather, Beauvoir argues.... that old age must still be a time of creative and meaningful projects and relationships with others. This means that above all else, old age must not be a time of boredom, but a time of continuous political and social action. This requires a change of orientation among the aged themselves and within society as a whole which must transform its idea that a person is only valuable insofar as they are profitable. Instead, both individuals and society must recognize that a person's value lies in his or her humanity - which is unaffected by age.

Thanks to campaigning efforts of bodies such as Age Concern (in the UK) and the efforts of prominent older people such as retired trade union leader Jack Jones and Joan Bakewell, I noticed signs about a decade or so ago of such positive developments....but the media and entertainment industry (which still tends to set the tone) is still remarkably "ageist". [On Golden Pond](#) was unusual for 1981 (with Henry Fonda and Katherine Hepburn as the elderly couple) but was very much a one-off - presumably the studios calculated they needed more upbeat messages.

More recently we have had the French film "[All Together](#)" with Jane Fonda and Geraldine Chaplin and, in early 2013, [another \(more harrowing\) French film](#). In the same year a Japanese politician was caught [telling the elderly to hurry up and die](#) but British think-tanks offered some reasoned discussions about [housing options for the elderly](#) in the UK and the whole issue of [images and perceptions of old age](#). The writer Penelope Lively had [a more celebratory piece](#) -

So this is old age. If you are not yet in it, you may be shuddering. If you are, you will perhaps disagree, in which case I can only say: this is how it is for me. And if it sounds - to anyone - a pretty pallid sort of place, I can refute that. It is not. Certain desires and drives have gone. But what remains is response. I am as alive to the world as I have ever been - alive to everything I see and hear and feel. I revel in the spring sunshine, and the cream and purple hellebore in the garden; I listen to a radio discussion about the ethics of selective abortion, and chip in at points; the sound of a beloved voice on the phone brings a surge of pleasure.

I think there is a sea-change, in old age - a metamorphosis of the sensibilities. With those old consuming vigours now muted, something else comes into its own - an almost luxurious appreciation of the world that you are still in. Spring was never so vibrant; autumn never so richly gold. People are of abiding interest - observed in the street, overheard on a bus. The small pleasures have bloomed into points of relish in the day - food, opening the newspaper (new minted, just for me), a shower, the comfort of bed. It is almost like some kind of end-game salute to the intensity of childhood experience, when the world was new. It is an old accustomed world now, but invested with fresh significance; I've seen all this before, done all this, but am somehow able to find new and sharpened pleasure.

The following year, Jenni Diski had [a much nastier take on old age](#) in a piece called "However I smell" Atul Gawande - author of the book I wrote about yesterday - may be a surgeon and Professor but is not your normal medic. In this [interesting interview earlier this year in Guernica magazine](#) he explains how he came to be able to give voice to his own uncertainties and to celebrate by example the importance of "listening" - something which medical training has apparently come round to only recently..... (this critical section of the interview is toward the end)

The biggest thing I found was that when these clinicians were at their best, they were recognizing that people had priorities besides merely living longer. The most important and reliable way that we can understand what people's priorities are, besides just living longer, is to simply ask. And we don't ask.

Guernica: *How did your research on end-of-life care change how you behaved as a doctor?*

Atul Gawande: *As a doctor, I felt really incompetent when trying to understand how to talk to patients and their loved ones about an illness that we were not going to be able to make better. We might be able to stave off certain components of it, or maybe we couldn't even do that. And I felt unprepared when it came to having those difficult conversations and helping patients make those decisions.*

I found that these end-of-life care experts were making me feel much more competent. They were giving me the words that I could use, and I began to use those words. I'd simply say to a patient, "I'm worried about how things are going." I'd ask questions like, "Tell me what you understand about your health and your prognosis." "Tell me what your goals are, if time is short." "Tell me what your fears and worries are for the future." "Tell me what the outcomes are that you would find unacceptable."

This [little newsletter](#) also carries a useful overview on the subject
Tuesday 25 August

Expanding the Mind - Working Across Cultures

I opened a veritable Pandora's Box of personal memories this week - with the post on memoirs..... Then remembered a stack of large notebooks I had used in the 1980s to record both initial scribbles and final typed-up papers as I had struggled to make sense of nature of the organisational venture I was then engaged in - trying to reshape a large bureaucratic system in the West of Scotland. And duly found about 1,500 pages - stashed away behind the Scottish section of my bookcase!!

As I dipped into them, I realized that I now write much better than then - indeed that I think more clearly.....And how much of this I owe to my nomadic lifestyle of the past 25 years.

In central Europe in the 1990s I needed to speak more slowly (generally through interpreters); had the time in the pauses, as the interpretation was being done, to think carefully about both what I should be saying - and how to say it. And, under questioning, I was having to explain more clearly what I thought my concepts actually meant!!

Far from being a nuisance, it helped me see things from other people's point of view. I was having to "relativise" - to be aware that the experiences and images certain words and concepts brought to my mind generally aroused very different images in my interlocuteurs' minds - and to try to deal with this.....

I was able to produce a detailed analysis of the 1980s venture only nine years later - thanks to the greater "distance" my nomadic work had helped me develop. A short Urban Studies fellowship in the mid 1990s in my old University (Glasgow) also helped. You can see the result in [Organisational Development and Political Amnesia](#)

All relevant to the flood of books which hit me this week - mainly collections of essays - a genre I have loved since my schooldays when [Francis Bacon](#) and [Charles Lamb](#) were favourites. The literary canon, apparently, [distinguishes various forms of essay](#) and "personal essay" is evidently the more precise term for the type I like. [The Art of the Personal Essay](#) is a 770-page collection with a superb introduction to the genre by Phillip Lopate who writes.....

The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue -- a friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship. (xxiii)

The personal essayist must above all be a reliable narrator; we must trust his or her core of sincerity. We must also feel secure that the essayist has done a fair amount of introspective homework already, is grounded in reality, and is trying to give us the maximum understanding and intelligence of which he or she is capable. . . . How the world comes at another person, the irritations, jubilation's, aches and pains, humorous flashes -- these are the classic building materials of the personal essay. We learn the rhythm by which the essayist receives, digests, and spits out the world, and we learn the shape of his or her privacy. (xxiv-xxv)

The collection makes quite an interesting contrast with the other 700 page anthology which landed with a thud this week - [The Lost Origins of the Essay](#) by John D'Agata. Both volumes are international in scope (unlike John Gross's 704 page classic [The Oxford Book of Essays](#) edited some

decades ago which looks only at English writers) but D'Agata's seems to have more focus on longer, Eastern works. Lopate's gives us the range and writers we expect. Both are large and handsome but the [Gray Wolf Press](#) edition of [The Lost Origins of the Essay](#) is a real example of sensual work - with great quality paper, typeface and a delicate folding cover (an interesting [background piece on that publisher here](#))

Three of Clive James's explosive collections also await - [Cultural Cohesion: The Essential Essays, 1968-2002](#); [A Point of View](#); and [The Revolt of the Pendulum: Essays 2005-2008](#). But And I'm tempted to order George Orwell's Collected Essays which I have been without for the past 4 decades..... talk about making up for lost time.....

Saturday 29 August

Village Life in the Mountains 2 generations ago

One of my great fortunes in life is to have a mountain house which had stood empty for more than a decade when we first clapped eyes on it in summer 2000 and bought on a whim (and for a song). It needed a lot of work - it had no running water, electricity or insulation.

Indeed it was little more than a shell - its lower (stone) level hewn into the hillside having served as a shelter for family cows and the maturing of cheese; the wooden floor above as accommodation - kept warm in the winter by the heat of the animals below - and the attic as storage for the hay. It is part of a collection of houses which form one of the scattered villages which cling to the mountain valleys which stretch up from Brasov and Campulung **and whose stories deserve to be told.**

For the next few years, Daniela (living 200 kilometres south in Bucharest) would hitchhike almost every weekend; find the workmen and materials; lug the materials from nearby villages and manage the work of digging (water and sewage), building (bathroom, kitchen and stoves) and insulation. My excuse was that I was a few thousand kilometres further east and therefore managed to take in only a bit of the insulation; the construction of the subsequent central heating; back terrace; and loft conversion..... During that last bit of work we were delighted to find not only beer bottles from the 1930s but carefully-kept accounts of the sales of the cheeses - a real glimpse into village life....

The house may be legally (and emotionally) mine - but it is Daniela's creation - down to the furniture, bookshelves, arrangement of the paintings and the Rene McIntosh stained glass-like designs.....

Only since summer 2008 have I been able to spend substantial time here (from May through to October) and get a sense of the sorts of lives people lived here in the twentieth century....centred around the church and its frequent saintdays whose piped incantations still echo around the valley..... I am a city boy but have grown to appreciate the superb air and silences here.

One small section of my library is devoted to books which try to give voice to this (dying) way of life - the titles include -

- *Road to Alto - an account of peasants, capitalists and the soil in the mountains of southern Portugal;* Robin Jenkins' (1979)

- *House by the Shore - twelve years in the Hebrides*; Alison Johnson (1986)
- *A Wild Herb Soup - the life of a French countrywoman*; Emilie Carles (1991)
- "*A Year's Turning*"; Michael Viney (1996) about life in a remote Irish location to which they moved in the late 1970s.
- [*Celestine - voices from a French village*](#); Gillian Tindall (1996)
- "*Mourjou - the life and food of an auvergne village*"; Peter Graham (1998);
- Harry Clifton's poetic "*On the Spine of Italy - a year in the Abruzzi*" (1999);
- *War in Val D'Orcia: An Italian War Diary, 1943-1944*; Iris Ortigo (2000)
- *Love and War in the Pyrenees; a story of courage, fear and hope 1939-1944* - Rosemary Bailey (2008)
- *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*; Roger Deakin (2008)
- *An Island in Time - the biography of a village*; Geert Mak (2010)

Recently I have been reading -

- *The Stronghold - four seasons in the white mountains of Crete*; Xan Fielding (1953)
- *Thin Paths - journeys in and around an Italian mountain village*; Julia Blackburn (2012)

All of such books make for gripping reading - but the last two I have found particularly powerful - perhaps because I am now spending more time with my 89-year old neighbour who was widowed earlier in the year. For many years in the 50s and 60s he delivered the post in the valleys here - on horseback! He must have some tales to tell!

Blackburn's book has touches of WG Sebald - poetic with small unfocused black and white photos...she befriended the old people in her village and gradually got them to talk about their lives....first time I had heard of the feudal system still prevailing there in the early part of the 20th century with the residents calling themselves "mezzadri" (half people) and being at the beck and call of "il padro"....

Sunday 30 August

"Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me"?



Austerity policies and anti-terrorism strategies have become two of the strongest parts of European government responses to the global crisis which has gripped the 21st century.....precisely the conditions for stoking up public fears about the wave of refugees pounding European borders.

The shocking scenes which hit us earlier in the year from the Mediterranean and now from the Balkans show a crisis, we are told, as great [as any in the post-war period](#). Figures become meaningless after a time - so what are we to make of the figure of 50 million "forced refugees" - quickly taken up to 60 and then 70 million?? [This report](#) is a useful guide to the problem.

Before any comment, let's remind ourselves of some previous "flows".....

- Armenians were brutally evicted from their lands by the Turks after accusations that they had been helping the (Russian) enemy - the famous travel writer, Leigh Fermour, paints a vivid picture in his final book of meeting up with some of their descendants in the early 1930s in Plovdiv in central Bulgaria (as I did 75 years later).
- Greek aggression led in the early 1920s to savage ethnic cleansing and population exchange between Turkey and Greece;
- Italians bled from the country in the early part of the 20th century - whether to the US or my hometown in Scotland
- Hitler's persecution of Jews in the 1930s led to a massive exodus from which America and Britain were the beneficiaries;
- no quarter was given during the murderous Spanish civil war and led to a huge refugee flow across mountains to southern France.
- The end of the war - and the radical redrawing of European boundaries by the victorious forces - saw tens of millions of people forcibly removed from their homes and trekking in all directions. Keith Lowe's 2012 [Savage Continent; Europe in the aftermath of World War II](#) rightly talks of it being "an until now unacknowledged time of lawlessness and terror" to whose portrayal the final section of Stephen A'Barrow's recent [Death of a Nation](#) added a powerful voice.
- Post war saw the first ships arrive in Britain with West Indians seeking a better life - joining Indian and Pakistan middle class people whose restaurants woke the country up from a gastronomic torpor...
- and Germany was, of course, the recipient of many Turks in the 1970s also seeking a better life there....

In 1975 John Berger wrote a book called [The Seventh Man](#) - one in seven of the working force in Britain and Europe was then an immigrant. And indeed - full disclosure - so am I! My blog masthead

states, rather cheekily, that I am "a political refugee from Thatcher's Britain" but I am actually more of an economic refugee. It's the fees I earned from my work with (mainly) Danish, Dutch and German companies when I chose to leave the UK in late 1990 that keep me in my current life-style in Bulgaria and Romania. No need to make ironic comments - call it "reverse flow".....

The Scots and the Irish have a reputation for leaving their country to seek fame and fortune in far parts of the globe and have done fairly well out of it - although some of the early migrants were driven from their homes by rapacious landlords (The Highland Clearances) and famine.

Commentary

This [short but masterly podcast](#) about the situation puts to shame the outpourings of the corporate media which spew their poison at us every minute of the day. A real example of what a lone voice can achieve!!!! And the inestimable John Harris gives an [important lesson in lexicology here](#)

The initial responses of the German people and leaders are what we expected in the past when hearts and homes were open to those driven from their countries by forces outside their control. This was my parents' response in the early 1940s when they took in a family belonging to the Free French forces stationed in my home town - I still remember the red, white and blue of the silver-crepe ornament which adorned our front window at Christmas in the 1950s; and our PE teacher was a refugee from the Greek Civil War.....

But materialism and fear (the later instilled by the prejudice whipped up by the media) have hardened our hearts. It appears that the old spirit is [still alive only in Germany](#)...scenes at Munich central station [described here](#). Two factors explain the initial positive German response - historical feelings of guilt and their current manpower needs - but that response is careless surely of the potential effects on the country's social fabric. But the political position quickly changed

Having said all the above, I must confess to having some difficulty myself with the initial welcoming response to the refugee flow from "liberals" whose secure lives all too easily lead them to an insensitivity about the anxieties of the average citizen.

Tuesday, September 1, 2015

[Our Carbon Democracy](#)

Those of us who try to keep up with things have piles of books on the key subjects of the day - global warming, end of oil, neoliberalism or Islamic extremism. The books in each of these categories all have their particular cast of characters; storyline; prescriptions; and prejudices. But, like ships that pass in the night, they steer clear of (and rarely reference) one another.

I've just finished a rare book which aims to connect the dots between these categories - it's [Carbon Democracy - political power in the age of oil](#) (2013) and a stunning bit of work whose provocative historical insights turn upside down many of our preconceptions

The use of coal and oil in the context of industrialization has always been about who has the power to profit from the surplus these energy forms produce, but until now, no one has pulled the various historical details together into a historical narrative laying bare the fascinating power dynamics behind the rise of

Western political systems and their relationship with energy. [Carbon Democracy](#) is an examination of our civilization's 400 hundred year use of carbon-based energy fueling sources, and the political systems that grew up intertwined with them. Rather than presenting energy and democracy as separate things, like a battery and a device, Mitchell discusses the political architecture of the Western world and the developing world as inherently tied to fuelling sources.

The thesis is that elites have always sought to maximize not the amount of energy they could extract and use, but the profit stream from those energy sources. They struggled to ensure they would be able to burn carbon and profit, without having to rely on the people who extract and burned it for them. Carbon-based fuels thus cannot be understood except in the context of labour, imperialism and democracy.

This book is a response to David Yergen's [The Prize: The Epic Question for Oil, Money, and Power](#), a classic story of hardy entrepreneurs taking huge risks to find oil in the most remote places. Yergen's narrative centers on oil scarcity, and its contributions to economic growth in a capitalist framework. Oil is, to Yergen, the prize, solving the key problem of how to supply enough energy for a modern consumer society with a flexible and inexpensive fuel source.

In *Carbon Democracy*, Mitchell has a counterintuitive take on oil, one that after a while, makes much more sense than Yergen's. Mitchell points out that the problem of oil has never, until recently, been that it is a scarce commodity, but that it is a surplus commodity. We had too much of it. And the central problem that this created was now how to find more of it, but how to ensure that oil cartels profiting from high oil prices could make sure that very few new oil finds, especially from the massive fields in the Middle East, came online. Far from a hardy band of entrepreneurs searching for more oil, the story of oil is one of parasitic cartels manipulating governments and inventing concepts like mandates, self-determination, and national security to ensure they could retain high profits selling a widely available commodity. But Mitchell takes the story much deeper than Yergen did, because Yergen's book is fundamentally a fairy tale that skirts over questions of labor and colonialism.

Mitchell goes back before the widespread use of oil, to the industrialization of England and England's use of carbon-based fuels, like forests, peat, and coal. Industrialization demanded two seemingly contradictory factors - huge new tracts of land to grow industrial raw materials like cotton and high energy food crops like sugar, and far more centralized urban centres for manufacturing. What happened, of course, is that England simply acquired colonies with large land tracts overseas, using slave labour to harvest necessary commodities, while becoming an urban society in its core areas. Eventually, England began using coal to fuel its economy, leading to substantial economic growth and imperial strength. Coal, though, presented a challenge to the governing elites, since the characteristics of coal, with its labour intensive extraction methods, were quite vulnerable to strikes. Coal was hard to transport, and miners operated underground in a collaborative manner. Once on the surface, coal had to be moved by fixed networks of trains. There were multiple bottlenecks here, and in the late 19th century, for the first time, the energy system of the industrialized world was reliant on workers who could withhold their labour and block a key resource. This translated directly into political power.

As Mitchell put it, "Coal miners played a leading role in contesting work regimes and the private powers of employers in the labour activism and political mobilisation of the 1880s and onward. Between 1881 and 1905, coal miners in the United States went on strike at a rate of about three times the average for workers in all major industries, and at double the rate of the next-highest industry, tobacco manufacturing." The coal industry was the key radicalizing force in bringing democracy to the Western world.....

Mitchell is a British born political scientist and student of the Arab world. He is a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at [Columbia University](#) having previously been Professor of Politics at New

York University. When he arrived in the United States in 1977 to start a Ph.D. in Politics at Princeton, he was

"surprised to discover that the Politics Department at Princeton was teaching the same old positivism. I was interested in the politics of the Arab world, having traveled there several times, so I evaded political science by taking courses in Middle Eastern history and Arabic language and spent three of the next six years studying and researching in Cairo".

He's also the author of [Rule of Experts - Egypt, technopolitics, modernity](#) (2002) and it's this background which helps give his study of "Carbon Democracy" such great originality...The book has an amazing historical sweep but gives us chapter and verse on aspects of the various turning points of the developments of coal and oil in Britain and America which tend to remain hidden from view in most accounts..... And what a wonderful title - "carbon democracy" with all the connotations of institutional leger-de-main.....The excerpts are from the long review the blogsite "Naked Capitalism" gave the book in 2012

*Flowing through the narrative is the question of [imperialism and neo-imperialism](#). A variety of ideological mechanisms, such as the **self-determination ostensibly preached by Woodrow Wilson**, were in fact ways for Western oil consuming states to control and slow the flow of oil from poorer but oil rich countries. Mitchell shows how Palestinian strikes at oil installations in the late 1930s led Britain to support a Jewish state in the area, and how American mining engineers helped craft the apartheid regime in South Africa.*

At the same time, aggressive left-wing parties in the British parliament sought to combat imperialism, because they understood that imperialism abroad was meant to break the power of British labor - in particular coal mining - at home. Mitchell pays particular attention to the negotiations of the Treaty of Versailles and the period of negotiations after World War II to set up an international management framework. The League of Nations, he writes, "was to be an economic mechanism to replace, not war between states, but its taproot - the conflict over material resources."

*In addition to what would become the World Bank and IMF, Keynes wanted to establish an international body to manage commodities, including and especially oil. While no institution was ever set up to do this, a framework of national security and "the Cold War" managed to keep Middle Eastern and Russian offline for a long period of time. In addition, the oil companies used public relations to encourage a high oil consumption lifestyle in the United States, so as to keep the price of oil as high as possible. **In Europe, Mitchell encourages a revised view of the Marshall plan, as a joint European and American elite plan to break European labor power. It's a particularly interesting way to interpret the rise of the European Union, one deeply at odds with thinkers like George Soros who see the EU as a success of far sighted visionaries who sought to to build an "open society". Mitchell cites American intervention in post-WWII European economic and political arrangements as evidence.***

*Three years later, after rapid inflation caused real wages to collapse, coal miners joined a series of strikes demanding that the government increase pay levels or extend food rations... Rather than yield to these claims, France and other European governments turned to the United States. **Keen to promote their new corporate management model abroad (and to have Washington subsidise their exports), American industrialists used a fear of the popularity of Communist parties in Western Europe to win support for postwar aid to Europe. 'The Communists are rendering us a great service', commented the future French prime minister Pierre Mendès-France. 'Because we have a "Communist danger" the Americans are making a tremendous effort to help us...***

The European Coal and Steel Community, established as a first step towards the political union of Europe, reduced competition in the coal industry and supported the mechanisation of production, with funds provided to alleviate the effects of the resulting pit closures and unemployment. The United States helped

finance the programme, which reduced the ability of coal miners to carry out effective strikes by rapidly reducing their numbers and facilitating the supply of coal across national borders. The third element was the most extensive. The US funded initiatives to convert Europe's energy system from one based largely on coal to one increasingly dependent on oil.

The curious thing, however, for a book with "democracy" in its title, written by a political scientist and with a sub-title which includes the phrase "political power" is how little exploration we get of the implications of the end of oil for our so-called democracy. The book is very strong on the methods used to "manufacture" the "consensus" of the ruled (curiously without mentioning Chomsky!!)

3 September 2015

How Sofia opened Robert Conquest's (and the world's) Eyes

Robert Conquest - who died last month at the age of 98 - was the best known British investigator in the post-war period of the true scale of the communist tyranny. During the 1960s he edited eight volumes of work including "*Common Sense About Russia*" (1960), "*The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities*" (1960) and "*Power and Policy in the USSR*" (1961). His other early works on the Soviet Union included "*Courage of Genius: The Pasternak Affair*" (1961) and "*Russia After Khrushchev*" (1965) published in the United States republished as The Contemporary Soviet Union Series by [Frederick Praeger](#), whose U.S. company published, in addition to works by [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn](#), [Milovan Đilas](#) and a number of books on communism.

Many of us saw him overly-fixated on soviet atrocities - but the opening of soviet records after 1990 proved him correct. I learned several new things from the obituaries and tributes. First that [he was a poet](#) and close friend of Kingsley Amis - with a strong line in doggerel. But the most important insight was that his revulsion against Soviet tyranny stemmed from his personally witnessing the Communist takeover of Bulgaria in 1944 - an event which [I have written about here](#). In 1944, Conquest was posted to Bulgaria as a liaison officer to the Bulgarian forces fighting under Soviet command, attached to the Third Ukrainian Front, and then to the [Allied Control Commission](#). There, he met Tatiana Mihailova, who later became his second wife. At the end of the war, he joined the Foreign Office, returning to the British Legation in Sofia. Witnessing first-hand the communist takeover in Bulgaria, he became completely disillusioned with communist ideas. He left Bulgaria in 1948, helping Tatiana escape the new regime. Back in London, he divorced his first wife and married Tatiana.

The third fascinating fact is that, on the war's end, he actually joined the Labour Party's International Bureau - working therefore with Dennis Healey (sadly dead just a week or so after I wrote this - at 98). Conquest then joined the Foreign Office's [Information Research Department](#) (IRD), a unit created by the Labour government to "collect and summarize reliable information about Soviet and communist misdoings, to disseminate it to friendly journalists, politicians, and trade unionists, and to support, financially and otherwise, anticommunist publications."

You can read [more about his life here](#). He is an obvious candidate for the next entry in the blog [Britain is no country for old men](#)

Saturday 5 September

Fatalism - democracy's default position?



I have become a sucker in recent years for "intellectual histories" - what you might call "stories about stories" - or trying to identify the common strands in how we try to make sense of "what happens". I can't quite remember why I decided to order David Runciman's [The Confidence Trap - a history of democracy in crisis from World War I to the Present](#) (2013) - perhaps because he is an elegant reviewer for London Review of Books.

But I had not expected old debates to be brought to life so vividly - unlike John Keane's massive tract on [The Life and Death of Democracy](#) (2010) which I had to abandon on page 51 or so and has been languishing on my shelves for the past 4 years.

After the initial surprise with the "executive" style of the sparse narrative (with lots of binary contrasts) I quickly got hooked on Runciman's counterintuitive approach to seven turning points he examines

- 1918, when democracy was confronted with the catastrophic consequences of an unanticipated war;
- 1933, when it had to cope with a global slump;
- 1947, when Europe was being divided and the cold war was developing in the aftermath of World War II;
- the Cuban missile crisis in 1962;
- oil shock and stagflation in 1974;
- short-lived triumphalism in 1989;
- and the financial crisis of 2008.

The book's beginning - with an analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville's classic work "Democracy in America", the first volume of which was published in 1835 (Tocqueville had travelled to America from France in 1831) - sets the tone for the various intellectual dialogues Runciman sets up in the book

"The person who first noticed the distinctive character of democratic hubris—how it is consistent with the dynamism of democratic societies, how democratic adaptability goes along with democratic drift—was Tocqueville." Neither an optimist nor a pessimist, Tocqueville "did not share either the concerns of the traditional critics of democracy or the hopes of its modern champions." Runciman does not share these concerns or hopes either, and yet with Tocqueville he seems convinced that the rise of democracy is the great political fact of modern times.

His basic argument is that "democratic regimes" deal with challenges better but that this very success has probably sown the seeds of future failure. Modern democracy seems, he argues, to

develop a "fatalism" which finds expression in two very different types of behaviour - first that of "resignation" ("this too will pass"); and, second, that of "recklessness" - when some sort of strong action seems called for...

I made de Tocqueville's journey 156 years later (from Scotland) - courtesy of the German Marshall Foundation - to explore (on a 6 week fellowship) how local communities (eg in the Pittsburgh area) were dealing with the effects of the closure of their steel mills. I was lucky enough to be "embedded" in the various municipal organisations with interests in community enterprise (including a brief period in the Chicago mayor's office at the height of one of their schools' crises) and soon found myself overwhelmed by the role of charitable Foundations in this sort of work. Like de Tocqueville, I could feel the energy in the air.... I came as a sceptic but identified no fewer than nine features of their local development process as "worthy of study and replication" -

- more pluralistic sources of Local Funding (the scale of corporate and tax-free grants to Foundations)
- networking of people from the private and public sectors (eg Community Leadership scheme)
- scanning for strategic work : the active, participative role played by the private sector in the process of setting the regional agenda in places like Chicago was impressive
- coaching : the way community economic development skills were encouraged
- marketing : of voluntary organisations
- affirming : affirmative action in Chicago Council was handled very systematically in areas such as hiring and sub-contracting
- negotiating : the flexibility of the planning system allowed local councils to strike deals with developers to the direct advantage of poorer areas.
- persevering : the realism about timescale of change
- parcelling into manageable units of action: the British mentality seemed to prefer administrative neatness to permit a "coordinated" approach. American "messiness" seemed to produce more dynamism.

A [Frans Masereel](#) woodcut (from his "Cities" series) graces the post

Wednesday 16 September

The World of Yesterday



A month ago I wrote about the [art of the memoir](#)listing some of the more memorable examples for me of that genre of writing. In the past fortnight a book has been keeping me company which must rate as one of the greatest of the 20th century - Stefan Zweig's [The World of Yesterday](#) which was first published in 1942 after his suicide the previous year but then languished for decades before being reissued recently as part of [a revival of his work](#). Zweig's memoir is less an autobiography than an

intensely perceptive historical account of fin-de siècle Europe-up to the start of the Second World War. It may also be the longest suicide note in history.

Most of the (long) reviews have been ecstatic - with the exception of an exceedingly intemperate one in the London Review of Books from [Michael Hoffman](#)

[This review will hopefully whet](#) the appetite

In the Introduction to his book Stefan Zweig rightly says that no generation in recent times had undergone such a series of cataclysms, each breaking bridges with an earlier period, as had his own. He had lived not only in one world of yesterday, but in several, and it is these worlds he sets out to describe.

He was born, a Jew, in 1881 into a cosmopolitan and tolerant Vienna and into a world of utter political and economic security, confident in steady progress in society and in science. It knew the douceur de vivre (except that unmarried young men and especially young women led a sexual life which could find an outlet only in prostitution), and where culture - no longer under the patronage of the Court, but under that of the Jewish bourgeoisie - was more honoured throughout society than was wealth.

The culture of the older generation was challenged by the avant-garde, with which Zweig and his fellow-students, even while still schoolboys in a stultifying educational system, were knowledgeably, passionately and actively engaged. Hugo von Hoffmansthal and Rilke were their lodestars. The universities were little better: Zweig was only a nominal student at the universities of Vienna and Berlin: his real intellectual life lay elsewhere.

Already at the age of 19 he had the first of several articles accepted for the feuilleton section of the prestigious Neue Freie Presse in Vienna (of whose editor, Theodore Herzl, he gives a wonderful account). In Berlin he was looking for (and found) a wider circle - socially and intellectually - than in the somewhat inbred bourgeois and mainly Jewish milieu in which he had moved in Vienna. He drank in influences of every kind, from the sophisticated to the louche, exposing himself to 'real life' as opposed to the purely literal and to some extent derivative life he had led so far.

In his travels in Belgium and his beloved Paris, he sought out the great artists and poets of his time. His descriptions of them - their physical appearance, their character and their psychology - are always masterful. His worshipful admiration of their work and of their personalities extends to reverence for the manuscripts or other memorabilia which he collected all his life. Though an Austrian, he identified himself first and foremost as a European.

The pivotal chapter, entitled "Brightness and Shadows over Europe", describes the first decade of the

20th century: what a wonderfully optimistic, vigorous, progressive, prosperous, and confidence-inspiring decade that was, and yet how that very energy was used in greedy competition, how states who had plenty wanted yet more and clashed with others who wanted the same, so that in the end that very vigour brought about the cataclysm of the First World War.

Written with tremendous verve, these few pages surpass many an analysis of the causes of that disaster. And he observed with horror how overnight not only the masses but his so sophisticated and sensitive intellectual friends were swept along by the hysterical and bombastic enthusiasm for war. The sole exceptions among his friends were the Austrian Rilke and the Frenchman Romain Rolland. Only when Zweig visited Switzerland did he meet other opponents of the war who, like Rolland, had moved there because they could not bear or dare to live in their own countries. (Not all of these, of course, were lovers of peace: they included communists who would unleash their own slaughter in the coming years.)

He then describes the immediate post-war years: the terrifying inflation in Austria, which however seemed moderate when compared by the even more horrific inflation which followed in Germany; the collapse of and contempt for all pre-war cultural and social norms and forms, especially among the young.

These four or five terrible years then gave way to a decade of relative normality. It was then that Zweig's fame reached its apogee and he became the world's most widely-translated living author. He has some fascinating pages analyzing what might be the cause of this success which he found both intoxicating and disturbing because - so he says - he had ever been beset by self-doubt, by a desire to avoid personal publicity and to feel under obligation to nobody.

He presents some wonderful vignettes relating to that decade: of a visit to the Soviet Union in 1928 in which he is overwhelmed by the naive warmth of the people and only just made aware that he was being manipulated; his encounters with Gorky and with Croce; or of how Salzburg, the town he had made his home, had become, through its Festivals which began in 1920, a place of cultural pilgrimage from all over the world which brought to his home the most famous literary and artistic figures.

When the Nazis came to power in Germany, they burnt and banned all his works, eventually, after tortuous discussions involving Hitler himself, forbidding their revered composer Richard Strauss (of whom Zweig again gives a superb pen-portrait) to stage his opera `Die schweigsame Frau' because its libretto had been written by Zweig. The pressure of the Nazis on Austria became ever greater, and in 1934 Zweig left, initially for England (later for Brazil). In helpless despair he saw from afar more clearly than his friends in Austria that his homeland was doomed. And when Austria fell to the Nazis and he lost his passport, he became a refugee, subject to constant bureaucratic form-filling.

There is an eloquent lament for the world before the first world war when one was free to travel the world without a passport, and free from so many of the humiliating restrictions and regulations which now control innumerable aspects of our lives. The man, who as a cosmopolitan had felt at home everywhere, as a refugee now felt anchored nowhere. Tortured by the collapse of civilization in Europe, demeaned, deprived and unconfident, he poured out this masterpiece. He sent it off to a Swedish publisher in 1942, and took his life on the following day.

Some excerpts (from the later chapters) can be [accessed here](#) and a quite [excellent long review here](#)

Saturday 26 September

INTERLUDE

Inspiration left me for a month.....so I missed the anniversary of my mother's birth (in 1903) just when I had been wanting to write about her for the first time....this picture was taken just after the war (my father, as usual, missing).....



She lived until the grand old age of 101....

also the death (at age 98) of one of the Labour Greats - [Denis Healey](#) on 3 October. I wrote about him at length in [February last year](#) - just a month before Healey's nemesis, [Tony Benn](#), departed this life...

Healey had been the UK's longest-serving Minister of Defence Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1960s and then Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1974-79. He towers over the present political generation - not least for his cultural and European sensitivities. His autobiography *Time of My Life* is as large as the man himself - there is [a lovely little video](#) interview with him (and his wife Edna) which shows the two of them wandering in their Sussex countryside and chatting as they visit Leonard and Virginia Woolf's house (he was a great fan of both) and an old church whose walls were brilliantly (if controversially) painted during the war by some of the Bloomsbury circle.....

The Daily Mail - no friend of the Labour Party - has a [good spread on the man and some of his wicked quotes](#). But, as his wife says, he may have had the public reputation of a "bruiser" but inside he was fairly sensitive - and funny.

Later the same month, an important Bennite died who was still active in Parliament - [Michael Meacher](#).

Confession Time



Apologies to my loyal readers for my (abnormally) long silence of the past month...I made the mistake of collecting and reflecting on this year's posts with a view to writing a proper introduction and conclusion to the 2015 volume which is due shortly.

I got as far as a draft Preface - but the harder I thought about the posts and how the issues they raised might be pulled together in a coherent conclusion, the more depressed I became about the impossible task I had set myself. To pretend that one person has anything original to add to the thousands of scribblers whose writings so learnedly analyse the world's ills.....!!

It was [Duncan Green's blog](#) which brought me back to earth - in a post about the limited use academics make of social media - by reminding me that -

a blog is a 'web log', i.e. an online diary. Regular blogging builds up a handy, time-saving archive. I've been blogging daily since 2008. OK, that's a little excessive, but what that means is that essentially I have a download of my brain activity over the last 7 years - almost every book and papers I've read, conversations and debates. Whenever anyone wants to consult me, I have a set of links I can send (which saves huge amounts of time). And raw material for the next presentation, paper or book.

In the past 18 months I've taken to raiding my posts in order to compose what are now ten E-books. I have to confess, however, that none of them attempted an overview.....

Green is spot on about the help a blog like mine offers in finding old material...you just type in the keyword and the relevant post with its quotes and hyperlinks generally appears immediately - a record of your brain activity that particular morning. I also have a file of more than 100 pages for each year with raw text and several thousand hyperlinks which didn't make it to the blog.....an amazing archive of months of brain activity which, of course, needs a bit more time to access.....

The problem, however, is when your brain switches off - as mine seems to have in the past couple of months!! Only 3-4 books have engaged my interest - eg Theodor Zeldin's [The Hidden Pleasures of Life](#); and, more recently, Naomi Klein's [This Changes Everything](#) - a writer, I must confess, whose celebrity status had until now discouraged me from reading her stuff...

[This review](#) explains why her new book is so well worth reading. But I have not been encouraged to excerpt either of these books..... nor to comment on the surprising victory of an old leftist in Labour's leadership contest. Somehow I have lost my capacity to believe in the possibility of "change for the better".....

I have, in the past decade, become increasingly [sceptical of the writings in my own professional field](#) about the possibilities of "reform" efforts actually improving public affairs and services for the better - but I had still been a bit shocked this year by the pessimistic tone of some of the

post-mortems which key political science figures have been delivering on [their retirements after some 40 years of analysis and exhortations](#).....

If that's how the key figures feel about their work, what hope is there for the rest of us?

I hope shortly to upload an early version of the 2015 E-book and share some of my preliminary thoughts about the task I set myself.....

The photo is one of series I have of marvellous Uzbek terra cotta figures which I acquired in 2000 in Tashkent

Thursday, October 29, 2015

When will they ever learn?

"Change" is one of these words that has had me salivating for half a century. According to poet Philip Larkin, "*Sexual intercourse began in 1963...*" - at roughly the same time my generation began to chafe under the restrictions of "tradition" - so well described in David Kynaston's [Austerity Britain](#) and [Modernity Britain 1957-1962](#). The notion of "modernization" (as set out in a famous series of "What's wrong with Britain" books published by the Penguin Press) became highly seductive for some of us - Coincidentally 1963 was the year Harold Wilson delivered his famous speech about the "[white heat of technology](#)" to an electrified Labour Party Conference, presaging one of the key themes of the 1964-70 Labour Government.



The need for reform of our institutions (and the power structures they sustained) became a dominant theme in my life when, in 1968, I found myself representing the east end of a shipbuilding town. I eagerly absorbed the writing which was coming from American progressive academics (such as [Warren Bennis](#) and [Amitai Etzioni](#)) about the new possibilities offered by the social sciences; and listened spellbound on the family radio to the 1970 Reith Lectures on "[Change and Industrial Society](#)" by Donald Schon - subsequently issued as the book "Beyond the Stable State". In it, he coined the phrase "[Dynamic conservatism](#)" and went on to talk about [government as a learning system](#) and to ask [what can we know about social change](#).

From that moment I was hooked on the importance of organisations (particularly public) and of institutional reform.....In those days there was little talk of management (!) and only a few Peter Drucker books.....

Toffler's [Future Shock](#) came the very next year (1971) by which time I had started to proselytize the "need for change" in papers which bore such titles as "*Radical Reform of municipal management*" and "*From corporate planning to community action*".....

In 1975 I got the chance to shape the key strategy of Europe's largest regional authority and to manage that change strategy for the next 15 years..... From 1990 I took my "mission" of institutional change to first central Europe and then (for 7 years) to Central Asia.....

In 1999 I reflected on the lessons of my work (and reading) in a 200 page book [In Transit - notes on good governance](#) which contains from page 145 my (fairly rough) notes on the literature on "management of change" I had been reading in the 90s... Then followed a decade of intensive experience and critical reflection set out in the long 2011 paper [The Long Game - not the log-frame](#) - which reflects the stage I had reached in my thinking about how to achieve institutional change "against the odds".....

These were the memories stirred by a draft book entitled [How Change Happens](#) by Duncan Green - well known development adviser and blogger - which I downloaded yesterday and read, along with a shorter 2007 [paper with the same title by R Kzarnic](#) (which is actually a very concise and comprehensive review of the relevant literature)

It has raised yet again the question which has been nagging me recently - "[when will we ever learn?](#)" Or rather "what" has been learned from all this exhortation to "change" or "develop capacities"? For 50 years the rhetoric has been "improvement", "reform"...."change for the better".....we have ridiculed those who wanted to "conserve".....

God knows I have so much sympathy for those fighting for "change" and a "better world" and the stories told in Green's book are indeed inspiring **but is it perhaps not time to pause and ask some questions about the agenda of those who have preached change - at least in the public sector???**

My own speciality has been the *process* of change - but it is the *substance* of most of the changes which is now being so seriously and widely questioned in Britain and Europe. Particularly the increased role of management and of private companies.....

We used to think it was advertising that made us such a dissatisfied people - constantly wanting "better" and "newer"....but it is also our political class which has helped create this dissatisfaction with public services and the demand for "better"....

I've always believed in what I called the "pincer" movement of change - that improving people's lives required both "bottom-up" social movement and "top-down" support from "caring dissidents" within the system....Sadly the programmes which funded me after 1990 rarely gave me the opportunity to work this strategy.....

The photo is of the famous folksinger Pete Seeger who made "When will they ever learn?" so famous

Sunday 1 November

How Change Happens

Yesterday's post was sparked off by a book and a paper with this title. [Kzarnic's paper](#) was written in 2007 (although I came across only yesterday in the book) and is simply the best introduction to the topic I have come across - identifying what for him are the core approaches which the various intellectual disciplines offer to explain change - whether that change is described as "technical", "economic", "political" or "organizational". And adding some multi-disciplinary approaches for good measure....

[Green's book](#) focuses on one very small part of the picture - "people power" in poor "developing" countries, emphasizing right from the start that

Activists seeking social and political change usually focus their efforts on those who wield visible power, presidents, prime ministers and CEOs, since they hold apparent authority over the matter at hand. Yet the hierarchy of visible power is underpinned by subtle interactions among a more diverse set of players. Hidden power' describes what goes on behind the scenes: the lobbyists, the corporate chequebooks, the Old Boys Network. Hidden power also comprises the shared view of what those in power consider sensible or reasonable in public debate. Any environmentalist who has sat across the table from government officials or mainstream economists and dared to question the advisability of unlimited economic growth in a resource-constrained world will have met the blank faces that confront anyone breaching those boundaries.



I'm long enough in the tooth to have seen many times the "conventional wisdom" of everyday conversation become a forgotten tale and am constantly amazed by how easily people move from one discredited world view to another without beginning to develop some scepticism about that conventional wisdom.....

Yesterday's post tracked my own journey of discovery about "change" and power - first as a Scottish politician working **with** community groups, political colleagues, official advisers, academics and journalists; and, since 1990, as a consultant working **to** European bureaucracy and **with** Central European and Central Asian technocrats and politicians - local and national - all the time trying to keep up with the burgeoning relevant literature in fields such as "managing change", "institutional reform" and "developing capacities"

From this experience, it seems to me that there are actually four **very different bodies of thinking and writing** about "*change - and how it happens*" - each using different language and each with different audiences and loyalties....

- ***Managing Change*** - the "management of change" literature was written by management consultants looking for markets and hit a peak about 15 years ago (yesterday's post gave a link to some of its insights and injunctions). [The ultimate business guru book](#) is an excellent introduction to the people and ideas on which that genre drew. [Critical management studies](#)

(CMS) was an interesting (if badly written) radical academic response to the overfocus of those writings on senior business executives with power and authority.

- **People Power** - the literature of what we might call "Social change" is diverse and developing fast as the sense of crisis develops. It includes such fields as self-help, community enterprise and social movements and, for me, offers the best written and least self-serving material. Ronald Douthwaite's [Short Circuit - strengthening local economies for security in an unstable world \(2003\)](#) is still one of the best arguments for social enterprise. Tarrow's [Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics](#) is a good summary of the last group. International Charities (such as Oxfam) also make an important contribution to thinking....
- **State Reform** - it's amazing to realise that Public Sector Reform (PSR) is only about 25 years old...the writings come almost exclusively from academics and consultants and either ape that of change management; or of the deconstructionists of CMS. Increasingly the literature on "change" has been coming from state bodies (national and international) such as The World Bank, OECD, Asian Development Bank, ODI etc and is addressed to senior officials, academics (and journalists?)...Its injunctions for the developed world generally boil down to the need for a smarter and leaner state; ...for developing countries the need for (foreign) expert input to help train "develop institutional and personal capacities".....
- **The White Heat of Technology** - everyone's great hope in the face of the environmental and financial disasters (which people have eventually understood) now face the world....We are overwhelmed by the books which all sorts of people have been pouring out in the past decade giving us the stories of the technological, economic and social forces which produced (and change) the world in which we now live.

Coincidentally, the first thing I found in this morning's surfing was a [presentation](#) by Chris Martenson's about his [Crash course](#) - a full version of which can be [accessed here](#). That single hour's viewing told me more than I had learned in the several hours it took me last week to read Naomi Klein's [This Changes Everything](#).

The presentation nicely complemented last week's reading of Frederic Laloux's [Reinventing Organisations](#) - a book which has apparently been making waves in Europe. His basic argument is that the wave of the future is **joint-ownership** and [his book](#) celebrates those companies (some quite large) which have adopted that principle and identifies some of the preconditions, systems and procedures which seem to account for its success.

Another [Frans Masereel](#) woodcut

Monday 2 November

What am I Good At? A SWOT analysis

Readers know that one of the few blogs I regularly check is the contrarian one of another Scot who worked in Uzbekistan (as British Ambassador) just after I had left my 3 -year assignment there in 2001 - the blog of [Craig Murray](#). He has been a thorn in the flesh of not only the British, Uzbek and American Governments - for his early revelations of Uzbek torture condoned by the Brits and continued by the Yanks. These cost him his position but he was [subsequently vindicated](#) - by no less a body than the US Senate's "Intelligence Committee"(sic).

But his beloved Scottish Nationalist party then lacked the guts (and intelligence) to accept him as an official candidate for the 2015 General election - despite his sterling (!) work for them.....

He poses [on today's post](#) the most critical question any man can ask -

I am confused as to what I might usefully do with my life. I suppose the question I have been pondering is, what good am I?

Anyone who reaches his/her late 50s and has had the sort of rich work experience enjoyed by many born in the immediate post-war period; good health; and reasonable and accessible capital should have been asking Craig's question for the past decade.....

Fifteen years ago, in a similar mood, I posed not one but five questions in a short paper called [A Draft Guide for the Perplexed](#) -

- why I was pessimistic about the future and so unhappy with what the French then called "La Pensee Unique", the post 1989 "Washington consensus"
- who were the organisations and people I felt were fighting for a better world
- what they were achieving - and what not
- how these gaps could be reduced
- how with my resources I could help that process

The paper has been updated every few years until [its latest version](#)

Craig asks the blunt question of what good he is - which is a slightly disparaging way of putting things. A more useful question is "What am I good FOR? In other words, to what purpose should someone of my age, experience and resources (time, networks, money etc) turn this latter stage of his life? We all admire older people who have resisted the temptation to rest on their laurels and have turned their experience and energies to serve a larger purpose - eg [Stephane Hessel](#),

Let me share with you some of the ideas which have come to me as I have pondered this question for the past 15 years...

- Initially I thought I might leave some money to a Trust Fund to honour my father's memory as a West of Scotland public man; or to celebrate the sort of community enterprise I've been associated with. But my family has no claim to fame - and such ventures tend to peter out after the initial years of enthusiasm.
- So, in 2009, I started this blog and also [a website](#) with some of my papers with no less a purpose than *leaving behind a record of how one 20th century man thought of the world he had been lucky enough to experience.....*

- With a newfound passion for Bulgarian painting (and one foot now in Romania and another in Bulgaria) I briefly entertained the notion of organising a summer painting retreat to help break down the barrier of indifference which seems to exist between these two nations. More recently I thought of approaching [Mircea Dinescu](#) - the well-known Romanian poet and dissident of the late 1980s - who has [a cultural centre](#) just across the Danube from Vidin about the idea.....
- At one stage I became so desperate about the rise of corporate greed that I actually contemplated launching the idea of a geriatric kamikaze mission to target the financial class on the Mintzberg argument that the vanishing "people power" of trade unions and voters needed some strengthening to ensure the "[rebalancing of society](#)". But I quickly realised that this would merely further strengthen the repressive power of the "security state" which has replaced our mixed economies and liberal democracies....
- Last year I launched a second, specially designed, website with a larger capacity - [Mapping the Common Ground](#) - as a resource for those who share my concerns and want to do some sharing.....On to it I uploaded not only my own books and essays but more than a hundred books which I thought would be helpful to others struggling with my questions..... But, after five years, I have to confess there's not been much response.

Craig's (rephrased) question is a good one since it forces us to do [a SWOT analysis](#) - and to try to craft a strategy for this phase of our life on its results. I know that when I first did the [Belbin test](#) about team roles about 15 years ago, I had expected to come out as a "leader". But I was not altogether surprised to discover that I was more of a "resource person".

I've been lucky enough to have been "my own man" for most of my life - an academic of a sort for 17 years but able to devote more time to a role as an (influential) elected official; maintaining a senior position for 22 years through a dozen elections by colleagues; since 1990 a maverick consultant who has challenged the conventional wisdom.

What am I good at? Bluntly expressed - just reading, writing and looking/exploring!

What do I offer the world?

- The results of broad and deep reading over 50 years about social science matters
- The practice of thinking out aloud since 1970 - in short papers about the work in which I was involved (see "lessons learned" on the new website for those from the past 20 years; "E-books" for almost a dozen of that genre)
- More than 1000 mini-essays with almost 10,000 hyperlinks - on the blog [Balkan and Carpathian Musings](#)
- the results of pretty intensive net-surfing for relevant writing over the past decade - available in [Mapping the Common Ground's](#) library

I'm good at producing books - and also, I have realised, at [bringing people together](#) across different sorts of boundaries.....But I'm also bad at living (totally impractical) and loving (my kids and partner) *Of course that still doesn't answer the question which has been nagging me for the past 15 years - of where I should be putting my experience and resources.....!!*

In the spirit of SWOT, I need to become more proactive in the search for others pursuing the same question in order to develop "a yes-able proposition". Or, more realistically, to identify some programmes/projects which already embody the requisite "approach"/principles.

Tuesday 3 November

Bucharest Flames

Romanian politicians don't do resignations. When, a few years back, one of their previous Ministers who had migrated to Brussels as a Euro MP was one of three Euro MPs to be caught in a sting, the other two quickly resigned but not Adrian Severin.....When Victor Ponta became Romania's Prime Minister some 3 years ago, he was almost immediately discovered by a global scientific journal to have committed extensive plagiarism for his PhD. He shrugged that off - although it had immediately led to resignations of German and other national Ministers guilty of such transgressions. But not in Romania.....Even being indicted a few months ago by the country's powerful [anti-corruption brigade \(DNA\)](#) didn't seem to rattle him - only one of the charges would have been liable to remove him.

But [Ponta duly went](#) (pushed it appears) this past week as public anger at political shamelessness reached boiling point - first from the death of a police outrider escorting a the Ministry of Interior's car which had no right for such protection but then, at the weekend, from almost 40 deaths in a night-club which, like all such places in the country, had absolutely no fire or safety precautions..... The "Sarah in Romania" blog can always be relied upon for a [caustic comment](#) on such matters - and her latest comment doesn't disappoint.....

This time there seems some focus for policy change to the anger....the country now has a President who has used at least the language of radical change (although the jury must remain out on whether he has the capacity to deliver); and the street protests which were normally led by a party political element look this time to have a slightly more hopeful base in the citizens.....but so-called "civil society" (about which one does not hear so much these days) has never really taken off in Romania - despite the extensive funding it got from external sources.....

There simply is no moral authority in the country - the Orthodox Church is one of the richest organisations (as in Greece) taking tithes from poor people; running money-spinning projects (such as TV and Radio); priests are civil servants their salaries paid by the state; and the Church is now vying with Ceausescu's construction megalomania with the scale of the new Cathedral it is starting to build in Bucharest - whose grounds already groan under the number of churches.....

I had a little soiree at my flat in Sofia this evening (coincidentally the night the Brits celebrate the night of Guy Fawkes' failure to blow up Parliament in 1605!) at which I discovered that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church enjoys no such advantages here....Why the difference, I wonder - although the two neighbouring countries - as I've frequently [noted in the blog](#) - are SO different (in all respects) that I shouldn't have been surprised....

5 November 2015

Despairing of the World – how artists cope



I [wrote in April](#) about my [experience of having my bust sculpted](#) by one of Bulgaria's best-known sculptors - [Spartak Dermendjiev](#) (also known as "Paris"). His uncle was a partisan in the second-world war and Spartak was baptized in his honour with his nom de guerre. Last night I unveiled the completed bust for a few friends who were available.

Like most good artists, perhaps, he displays his contradictions more openly than the rest of us....His charming manner and [superb studies](#) conceal a despair about the world which finds expression in the part of his work he calls "cynical art" - artefacts which, for me, are more appropriately described as "[erotic art](#)", focusing for the most part on pudenda and vulvae.

The theme of Don Quixote is, for some reason, a beloved one in the work of Bulgarian sculptors and also figures in Spartak's work - in 2003 indeed he had an exhibition entitled "Don Quixote dies" which for him -

reveals the Way of Despair - from the lunacy of Idealism, through the rude awakening of living, to Despair and Death.

Art creates Idealists, life kills them...

Don Quixote did not die from the sword of the Evil, rather from the poison of Despair....

There is no place in life for Don Quixote, and he left... Yet to appear time and again like a ghost reminding us that there is no need of Idealism in Life...

Outside Temples, beyond the cover pages of books, beyond the frames of paintings, the Faith in Good and Justice dies...

Don Quixote died, but left his ghost to remind us that without Faith in the Good - the human in us dies...

Recently he also staged an event whose title also reflects on his outlook - "Fin Du Monde".

The [video of the event](#) is worth watching although you have to wait until about the 7th minute to get the denouement (I'm the guy in the blue anorak who wanders across the scene at the end of the 2nd minute and pretends to ignore the painting!) And here is his [tribute to Georgi Markov](#) the Bulgarian writer whose ultimate dissidence brought his famous murder on a London street, pierced with a poisoned umbrella tip.....

I must confess that I am drawn to the work of artists who have a sense of outrage about the world - summed up in German poet Bert Brecht's memorable challenge - "*So ist die Welt - und musst nicht so sein!*". I was drawn immediately to [Kathe Kollwitz](#)'s powerful depictions of poverty and war in her graphics and sculpture; to [George Grosz](#)'s savage portrayals of Weimar life and the Pillars of German Society (which I use as illustrations for some of my posts); to [Frans Masereel](#)'s woodcuts (ditto); to [Goya](#)'s series on the victims of war.

[Hieronymous Bosch](#) was, of course, the original inspiration for scenes of horror.

And British cartoonist [Ralph Steadman](#) has been a hero since the 1970s - with [Gerald Scarfe](#).

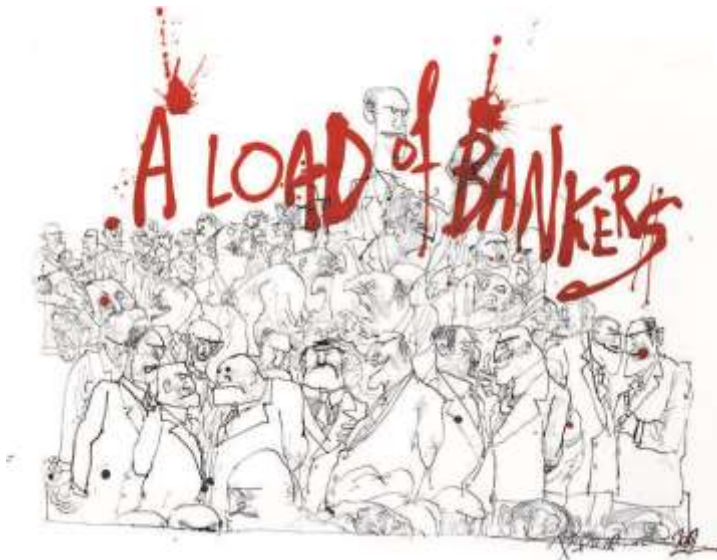
When, however, I hear the phrase "cynical art" I think not of such people but of Damian Hirst - who has cynically milked stupid rich people of their money - and duped many galleries into showing his offensive rubbish. Or of the work of [Tracey Emin](#)



Spartak talks of "sin" and I wondered at one stage whether his use of the phrase "cynical" art was a pun on the word sin.....Since we have become friends, we often talk of the phrase - indeed he invites me to help improve the English

translation of the titles he gives his various pudenda!

I have googled "cynical art" and get references only to some modern Chinese movements....it simply is not a phrase that has caught on...I tried "Nihilistic art" and got Dada references.



But it is the work of the German artists of the first quarter of the 20th century which best caught the "Angst" or despair of that period... Although I like their work I don't see it as [nihilistic](#). Paul Celan memorably said that "After Auschwitz, it is

impossible to write poetry". Googling brought me this interesting quote -

Until now nihilism has been a theory, an abstraction... the dark muse of poetry, philosophy and art. But now we are confronted with a nihilistic moment that neither Turgenev nor Nietzsche could have prophesied: a global meltdown wrought by wars - on terror, on planet, on self.

We are confronted with the moment when this experiment of ours on Planet Earth meets its spectacular and terrifying end, when civilization reaches its summit and begins to tumble into permanent decline. This new breed of nihilism - call it eco-nihilism, psycho-nihilism, apocalypto-nihilism - falls far beyond the bounds of the deeply personal loss of meaning Nietzsche warned of.

This new kind of nihilism degrades our very cosmic fiber, consuming not only our psyche, but the planet itself. And for this new, collective brand of nihilism, no philosophy has ever been written, no remedy ever prescribed.

Coincidentally I came across a couple of reviews of Michel Houellebecq's novels. Karl Ove Knausgaard - the title of whose [multi-volume My Struggle](#) (ie another "Mein Kampf"!!!) hints at the bleakness of his own vision - pays [tribute to Houellebecq's work in this review](#). Another long review puts it bluntly-

callow, cynical and sex-obsessed, openly racist and misogynistic in turn, rife with B-grade porn writing, full of contempt for art and intellectuals, and operate on a kind of low masculine anger at the indignities of being beta-chimp. Houellebecq's novels owe their reputation to artistic achievement as much as any naughty thrill they elicit.

I've read a couple of his books and this quotation from "Elementary Particles" seems to sum up his world view -

His effort at self-analysis emerges: "But I don't understand, basically, how people manage to go on living. I get the impression everybody must be unhappy; we live in such a simple world you understand. There's a system based on domination, money and fear ... there's a ... system based on seduction and sex. And that's it. Is it really possible to live and to believe that there's nothing else"

Perhaps Shakespeare [put it best of all](#) -

*..... Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

I can understand nihilism but, despite my recognition of the truth of such an analysis, I can't support it. I still believe in goodness.

I see many [reasons for despair](#) about the direction the world has taken us collectively - but feel, at personal level, it helps if we cultivate a more "fatalistic" (Buddhist??) approach - "this too will pass"..... And that's also why I find it difficult to deal with cynicism.

Woody Allen perhaps expressed it best when he suggested that "The artist's job is not to succumb to despair but to find an antidote for the emptiness of existence."

6 November

All in a Day's "Work"

A favourite blogger - [Duncan Green](#) - makes the important point that -

regular blogging builds up a handy, time-saving archive. I've been blogging daily since 2008. OK, that's a little excessive, but what that means is that essentially I have a download of my brain activity over the last 7 years - almost every book and papers I've read, conversations and debates. Whenever anyone wants to consult me, I have a set of links I can send (which saves huge amounts of time). And raw material for the next presentation, paper or book.



Green is spot on about the help a blog like mine offers in finding a reference you know you have but can't remember.....you just type in the keyword - and, hey presto, the relevant post with its quotes and hyperlinks generally appears immediately - a record of your (and others') brain activity that particular day.

I also have a file of more than 100 pages for each year with raw text and thousands of hyperlinks which didn't make it to the blog.....an amazing archive of months of brain activity which, of course, needs a bit more time to access.....

As I'm being more parsimonious in my blogging these days, I thought it would be amusing simply to copy and paste one of these pages - it gives an even better record of my "saves" and brain activity...

Like all blogs, it starts with the most recent.....

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseireviewofbooks/2015/11/11/book-review-conceptualizing-capitalism-institutions-evolution-future-by-geoffrey-m-hodgson/>

Writers on Youtube

Philip Larkin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqa6L22m0rY>

WH Auden

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUGVqup9ZGo>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvezOvM_VgQ

Kingsley Amis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MXMVeAbxRg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1PGaBDV2nY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HZts8JafWO>

Serious Interviews with Famous People

<http://blog.webofstories.com/>

<http://www.webofstories.com/themes>

<http://www.webofstories.com/play/diana.athill/57;jsessionid=BDEFF14755CC99C48CFA31321162AE39>
http://www.patmcnees.com/telling_your_story_29161.htm

Helmut Schmidt

Obituary <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/10/helmut-schmidt#comment-63107089>

a couple of years ago we got a glimpse of Helmut Schmidt's [long love affair with painting](#) - <http://www.zeit.de/2013/20/kunstsammler-helmut-schmidt/komplettansicht> - not least those of the German Expressionists.

See also this video

<http://culturmag.de/rubriken/buecher/theo-sommer-unser-schmidt-der-staatsmann-und-publizist/16183>

and the little book "German Musings"

http://media.wix.com/ugd/e475c8_5314bce24fe742288b8cb4252af0e574.pdf

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/10/helmut-schmidt>

*In autumn 2008, shortly before his 90th birthday, he gave an extraordinary, 70-minute television interview, publicising his new book, *Ausser Dienst (Out of Service)*, a reflection on a long life. The programme revealed as never before a man who not only had no religious convictions but blamed clerics - Catholic, Protestant, Islamic - for the mutual intolerance he identified between Christianity and Islam.*

He admitted that he was not "a seeker after truth" but he took an interest in all manner of philosophies and was a particular admirer of Confucius. He developed a friendship with Hans Küng, the progressive Catholic theologian whose views antagonised the Vatican.

In a masterly analysis of the world financial and economic crisis, he regretted that none of those responsible for the credit crunch would be brought to book. As an experienced economist, he dismissed the generality of contemporary politicians, including George W Bush, as economic "dilettantes".

He revealed that his political hero was Anwar Sadat, the assassinated Egyptian president, who had been a close colleague and friend.

One of his watchwords (and another of his English puns) was: "The biggest room in the world is the room for improvement." This could have served as Schmidt's political epitaph when his eight-year chancellorship ran down to its frustrating end.

He was not a "conviction" politician and his heart never got the better of his head, but a democratic leader needs a party, and in both Hamburg politics and his own family tradition, the SPD was the only place to be. In exchange for a power-base, Schmidt gave the party eight more years of power in Bonn and two federal election victories before the inevitable falling-out between the ideological left and the centrist master of realpolitik. But in the constrained art of government in difficult times, there was never a safer pair of hands.

<http://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/photo-gallery-helmut-schmid-t-life-in-pictures-fotostrecke-131808.html>

Heimat

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0_wEa4cfAs

[http://classes.uleth.ca/201201/germ2300a/Wanderer,%20kommst%20du%20nach%20Spa...%20\(German%20Edition\).pdf](http://classes.uleth.ca/201201/germ2300a/Wanderer,%20kommst%20du%20nach%20Spa...%20(German%20Edition).pdf)

<http://www.decitre.fr/media/pdf/feuilletage/9/7/8/2/0/8/1/2/9782081246331.PDF>

<https://gerryco23.wordpress.com/2015/11/09/ensemble-1010-explore-europes-20th-century-fault-lines/>

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/why-karl-ove-knausgaard-cant-stop-writing-1446688727>

<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/08/new-democrats-sound-alarm-over-sanders-clinton-leftward-march>

"There is no question that the prevailing temper of the Democratic party is populist: strongly sceptical of what we like to call capitalism and angry about the perceived power of the monied elite in politics," said PPI president and founder Will Marshall.

"But inequality is not the biggest problem we face: it is symptomatic of the biggest problem we face, which is slow growth."

tony hancock's half hour

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5UKNdLU5eA>

About God

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s47ArcQL-XQ>

another 50 academics speak about god

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Gt4WSK_NIQ

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHv_O8wvZI

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/09/why-i-wear-a-poppy-despite-naysayers>



12 November

Death in Paris

Death by gunshot of one innocent is murder - of 130 a massacre - regardless of where it takes place...it could have been any of us in those cafes and halls of Paris.....And anger was my first response - at the preachers of hatred in the mosques dotted around the cities of Europe. I felt sympathy for those who would lock them all up.....

But then I found myself asking why I seemed to have had a different response to 130 innocent deaths in places such as Afghanistan and Syria. [More than a hundred innocent deaths every day - from American, British, French and Russian missiles in these two countries](#) and so many thousands in Iraq and Libya not so long ago.....

I can, of course, blame the corporate media since we view the world through its' lenses and they simply don't rate such "incidents" or deaths from "accidental" or "friendly" fire.

In that respect, we use the same defence mechanism as so many Germans in Hitler's time who screened unpleasant or unacceptable "truths" from their consciousness.....

True, more than a million British people marched against the Iraq war a decade ago - and some foresaw the radicalization that would come from Western "interventions".

Even George Bush Senior has spoken openly (at last) about his son's stupidity in letting his advisers take America (and many other countries) to war.....

Four years ago, a Romanian journal asked me to [reflect on how the world had changed since September 2001](#). This was the opening of my initial response -

The attack on the Twin Towers certainly provided the opportunity for the security interests in leading States (adrift after the collapse of communism) to regroup and increase their budgets and power. "Counter-terrorism" became the slogan behind which the State increased various surveillance and control measures over its own citizens. Defence (aggression) budgets and actions boomed; powers of detention without legal redress were increased; a generation of young muslims radicalised; and cultural tensions increased.

But the 2011 attack was by no means the only significant event over the decade. Arguably, indeed, governments and media have used the threat of terrorism to distract us all from vastly greater threats to our security and social harmony which have developed as neo-liberalism has grown apace and threatened to destroy the democratic model which was so painfully constructed in the 20th century.

Earlier that day I had read of the death of one of France's last remaining intellectuals - [Andre Glucksmann](#) who was apparently the guy who had suggested to Sarkozy the appointment as Foreign Minister of socialist [Bernard Kouchner](#) (warning - the link's writer is [a self-avowed neo-Con](#)). And Kouchner typified a Blairite "moral activism" - and it is his legacy which looks to have come back like a boomerang to hit France.....France - despite its hostility to the American line on Iraq - has turned



out to be [more hawkish in Syria](#).....where even the UK hesitates.....That led me onto another assessment - by [Adam Gopnik of the New Yorker](#)

... when asked to distill Glucksmann's contribution to French thought, his friend and younger writer the writer Pascal Bruckner said that it was to put an end to any romance about Communism, but, more important, to reset the tuning of French understanding: he made it clear that building a more ideal world was a less important task than mending the evil in this one.

"I cannot tell you what to be for. But I know what to be against," was one of Glucksmann's favorite locutions. It was hard to know how to make a better world. But it was easy to see what was making a horrible one. Designing the ideal order was impossible work. Saving the victims from those engaged in designing ideal orders was not, in truth, as hard as our laziness let us pretend it was.

I suddenly remembered Albert Camus' 5 [letters to a German friend](#) in the book [Resistance, Rebellion and Death](#) which made a big impact on me at University.....Written in 1943/44 the letters offer a powerful argument against the nihilism of those who practice violence - or rather

"I have never believed in the power of truth itself - but it is at least worth knowing that, when expressed forcefully, truth wins out over falsehood"

His third letter contains an important message for those of now contemplating Fortress Europe -

You say "Europe" but you think in terms of potential soldiers, granaries, industries brought to heel, intelligence under control...you cannot keep yourself from thinking of a cohort of docile nations led by a lordly Germanyfor us Europe is a home of the spirit... Don't worry I shall not use fall back on the argument of Christian tradition....that is something you have talked of too much....Europe has another tradition...my tradition, that of a few great individuals and of an inexhaustible mass....two aristocracies - that of the intelligence and that of courage

It is difficult to imagine these days such a dialogue (however imaginary) between a Frenchman and a representative of ISIS and, if it did, the Frenchman would not be expressing philosophical confidence but rather anger and bewilderment....

We need cool heads these days - our elites (British, French or American) have become too polarised in their attitudes.....and seem incapable of exploring Middle East (in all their admitted complexity) issues in a balanced way. We need [Fred Halliday](#) back amongst us..... some of [his thoughts on terrorism here](#)

Here is [one balanced assessment](#) - another [here](#) and a final one from "Salon" whose [analysis needs to be absorbed by the hotheads](#) amongst us

RIP

Sunday 15 November

Is our Moral Outrage Relative and Selective?



It's been more than a week since the horrific massacre in Paris - whose death toll could have been at least tripled but for the effective work of security guards at the Stade de France where a friendly match had just commenced between France and Germany.... The lockdown this weekend of central Brussels may seem heavy-handed but warranted given the disaffection clearly embedded in at least one of the Brussels neighbourhoods.....

Given the long battle which raged around a flat in the St Dennis neighbourhood of Paris on

Wednesday before some of the apparent perpetrators were brought down, it is quite amazing that only three deaths seem to have resulted (more so in Mali) but, sadly, many more innocent people in Syria have died as France has stepped up its bombing of ISIS targets in that country.....

Like most people I have not only followed these fast-moving events but have tried to understand the motives of those concerned.... For me there are 3 basic questions -

- **Who are these people**, prepared to blow up people amongst whom they have lived?
- **Why are they doing it?**
- **What does it take to get them to stop?**

Although I have 7 years of living in muslim societies, the Russian cultural influence (for which read vodka) was still strong in Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan - although ebbing particularly fast in the last country... where indeed there was a lockdown in the Pamir mountains just outside Tashkent in 2000 because of terrorist activities...

I have, since that time, had a certain interest in Islam - to the extent, for example, of reading both [Among the Believers - an Islamic journey](#) by VS Naipul (1981); and [Desperately Seeking Paradise - journeys of a sceptical muslim](#) by Ziauddin Sardar (1981)

Curiously, few of the articles I have read seem to deal with **the first question**. One exception is Scott Atran and Nafeeds Hamid's [highly detailed profiling in The New York Review of Books](#)

that 90 percent of French citizens who have radical Islamist beliefs have French grandparents and 80 percent come from non-religious families. In fact, most Europeans who are drawn into jihad are "born again" into radical religion by their social peers.

In France, and in Europe more generally, more than three of every four recruits join the Islamic State together with friends, while only one in five do so with family members and very few through direct recruitment by strangers. Many of these young people identify with neither the country their parents come from nor the country in which they live. Other identities are weak and non-motivating.

One woman in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois described her conversion as being like that of a transgender person who opts out of the gender assigned at birth: "I was like a Muslim trapped in a Christian body," she said. She believed she was only able to live fully as a Muslim with dignity in the Islamic State.

For others who have struggled to find meaning in their lives, ISIS is a thrilling cause and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends, and through friends, eternal respect and remembrance in the wider world that many of them will never live to enjoy.

A July 2014 poll by [ICM Research](#) suggested that more than one in four French youth of all creeds between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four have a favorable or very favorable opinion of ISIS. Even if these estimates are high, in our own interviews with young people in the vast and soulless housing projects of the Paris banlieues we found surprisingly wide tolerance or support for ISIS among young people who want to be rebels with a cause—who want, as they see it, to defend the oppressed.

In another blog in the same journal a [well-known Pakistani journalist](#) (with a decade of personal experience as a guerrilla) looks at the divergent pattern of attacks on civilian targets by terrorist groups of the past decade and **offers the obvious explanation for the attacks in the European heartland -**

ISIS is now determined to launch attacks against those states that are waging war against it. Turkey has just given the US government permission to use some of its airbases for strikes against ISIS; Hezbollah is helping Bashar al-Assad fight ISIS. The Russians are now bombing ISIS and other groups, while the French are crucial partners in the anti-ISIS coalition. French warplanes bombing ISIS from runways in the Gulf states are about to get a fresh boost as the French government sends its only aircraft carrier to the Gulf.

ISIS's message is thus clear—the group is waging an all-out deliberate war against all those countries that are lining up to fight it. Again, this is not an attempt to take down the Western order, in the way that al-Qaeda was trying to do, nor is it a reaction to the evils of Western heathens. It is a direct reaction to what is being done to ISIS by coalition forces.

[A Turkish academic, Mehmet Ugur, offers a more nuanced approach](#) in "Social Europe"

The background for this sad state of affairs is common knowledge. The emergence of a unipolar world system in the early 1990s has induced Western governments to push for unrestricted market dominance at home and abroad. Also, triumphalism has become the norm of foreign policy, which embraced military interventions aimed at regime change in contravention to international law and massive public opposition.



One component of the 'regime-change' strategy was to support and collaborate with non-state armed groups. The first pilot exercise was the direct and indirect (through the ISI of Pakistan) support that the American administration provided to the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s. The support took an 'unintended' form during the 2000s, when the Taliban [were slicing off](#) US aid to the failed state that the US intervention had left behind. Then came the Iraq War, which created a large number of Sunni armed groups, including Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The latter joined other [Sunni insurgency groups](#) in 2006 to form ISIS. The recruitment ground for these groups consisted of Sunnis who lost jobs and livelihoods as a result of Western military intervention in Iraq.

The link between Western interventions and the strengthening of terrorist groups was also evident after the overthrow of Gaddafi in Libya. Under the nose of Western surveillance, Libyan arms depots were looted and weapons sent to Syria through a NATO ally - Turkey. The Times [reported on an arms shipment](#) on 14 September 2012. This is unlikely to have been the only shipment.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh wrote an article in April 2014, in which he exposed a classified agreement between the CIA, Turkey and the Syrian rebels to create the "rat line" - the covert network used to channel weapons and ammunition from Libya to Syria through Turkey.

The funding was provided by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, with full knowledge of the US authorities.

My third question does beg some further questions - not least the obvious one of why I haven't raised this question before in my blog.....I have to concede that our sense of moral outrage is relative and selective. Indeed even to pose the question is, for many, a concession to terrorism..... Translate it to more everyday behaviour....confronted by a bully, do we concede? Surely not! That's the "lesson" we've drawn from appeasement...Not surprisingly therefore it is the basis of most of the pundits' commentary.....

I think, however, we need to go back to the first question and be willing to explore more the nature of the people we are dealing with....it is certainly not the German friend Camus was writing to in 1944...

And the scale of games being played by our so-called allies in the Middle East (if not Russia) should certainly make us think ten times before sustaining or strengthening some of our strange alliances

Sunday 22 November

The glass is a lovely one I bought in a small Damascus workshop during a brief visit in 2000 which convinced me that I would not wish to have a 3 year project there.....

Passion and Dedication

I sometimes think that [Newspeak](#) has taken over. For years, for example, the journals have been full of talk of "innovation" and yet we live and breathe in ever more (globally) homogenised societies where "innovation" is, as often as not, simply what we used to call "product differentiation" - ie minute tinkering in design.

One of the reasons I am so fond of Sofia is that I am constantly coming across here the quiet assertion of real (as distinct from pseudo) individuality and creativity.....Its art galleries and bookshops have been described in these posts as "[the last sanctuaries of originality](#)" - with the [Astry Gallery](#) as the leading example. It's not just the way interesting (young and old) Bulgarian artists are cultivated and presented in her small gallery - it's the friendly almost family atmosphere. And the tastefully-designed bookmarks which mark every exhibition - real collectors' items - are a simple gesture of that aesthetic commitment. They are produced by a young couple who have also become a great help to me eg in the production of my booklet on Bulgarian art (just about to go into [a second edition](#)) and in setting up my new website.

Danail in particular has an exemplary "Can-Do" attitude as a result of which his little company has won more custom not only from me but from at least one other foreigner who found not only the quotes and deadlines unbeatable but the professionalism of the work deeply impressive.

Let me give some other examples - last Saturday, returning from the tribute to the Paris dead at the nearby French Embassy, I stumbled across an incredible little pub (intriguingly named "*Sterling Club*") just round the corner from my flat...It looks old but has in fact been operating for only three years....my next visit (with friends) I hope to get the story.....



Last year I was struck with [two beautiful and highly original books](#) about aspects of Bulgarian history and culture by two Bulgarians I now count as friends - Ivan Daraktchiev, with his amazing [Bulgaria: Terra Europeansis Incognita](#); and Rumén Manóv with his 700-page celebration of some 2000 cultural artefacts and photographs from his own personal collection - in [A Fairy Tale about Bulgaria](#). Each was a labour of love - paid for by the author....

And Wednesday I shall be at a tasting of some young wines in a small shop at the Russian Monument which I have been cultivating almost since its start 3 years ago. [Vinoorenda](#) is run by a young man, Asen, and his father and, to judge by the cards and references at last weekend's Annual Wine-tasting, has already built up an impressive reputation amongst particularly the smaller, craft vineyards in the country....

The blog has previously noted the proliferation in central Sofia of tiny shops run by both young and old.....a powerful expression of individuality which is repressed by the large stores which are the feature of most downtowns in European cities.

Is this just an accident of the narrow streets?I have a feeling it reflects something more cultural. Bulgarians, for example, don't seem to have adopted the debt life-style of other nations..... They're not taken in by fashions. They have a respect for healthy foods and vegetables (and for their country's history and culture)....

Bulgaria is a small, relatively isolated country, surrounded with indifferent if not unfriendly neighbours - perhaps this has developed an awareness of being on their own and needing to work at something about which they're passionate?

Coincidentally I'm reading one of Robert Greene's recent books called [Mastery](#). Guardian readers, as you will see [from this review](#), turn their nose up at Greene but I confess I enjoy his books - not least for their layout and charming tales of emperors and great men.

[Mastery](#) is a celebration of the life of the "vocation" and the dedication which goes with it....In these times of shallow showmanship and deceit, we desperately need the dedicated focus on quality of single-minded people....Of course, those wanting a more serious read should go to Howard Gardner's [Creating Minds](#)

Monday 23 November

Identity Politics and the human rights "industry"

The unease about "multiculturalism" that has been festering in many Europeans for the past two decades seems to have exploded into full open view - as a result, first, of the sight of hundreds of thousands of refugees on the move from the slow train-wreck that Syria has become and now, this month, of the Paris massacre.

This post may seem to wander - but please bear with me as I try to clear my head of the obfuscated language used nowadays to talk about issues of "identity"

[An article by Nick Cohen](#) attacking what he called "progressive liberalism" struck a nerve with me this week - although I realized from reading his [What's Left? - how the left lost its way. How Liberals lost their way](#) (2007) some years back that you do not get from him a balanced treatment.... But the book did make me aware of just how different Scottish conditions are. Somehow the rain and cold have conspired to keep most immigrants away from Scotland - with the most significant immigration to Scotland came a century ago across the narrow stretch of water which separates the country from Northern Ireland... These were not only poor - but Roman Catholic - and therefore marginalized in the labour and housing markets. We may have had some ripples of immigration from India, Italy and Pakistan but their entrepreneurial skills gave them a certain status.

As a youngster I was attracted to the language of "equality" used by people such as [RH Tawney](#), [Aneurin Bevan](#) and [Richard Titmuss](#) and therefore became active in my town's Labour Party in the late 1950s. As a "[son of the manse](#)", I was a bit of an oddity in the predominantly Catholic local party which was largely ostracised by the protestants who were the mainstay of the town's professional class. Their disapproval of my activities was strongly conveyed to my poor father who, to his credit, never remonstrated with me. In 1968 I found myself a councillor representing a (religiously) "mixed" area but with my sympathies strongly for those "disadvantaged" - not least by the fickleness of the hiring habits of the shipbuilding owners.

That's when I first saw the downside of democracy and the need for some "positive discrimination" - a concept just beginning to trickle across from the States.....I spent the subsequent 20 years of my life on this "mission". So I have "form" as an active "leftist" pushing such an agenda.

But I have never felt comfortable with the language of "human rights" - nor those using it...I well remember the impatience I had in the 1980s with the new language of "equal opportunities" which came largely from middle-class women with an understandable agenda of getting better jobs - when we were trying in Strathclyde to create better conditions for 300,000 people affected by long-terms unemployment, addiction and mental health.

And don't even talk to me about my attitude toward the young international professionals I began to encounter in the 1990s using the language and holy scriptures of "human rights". **To me rights are something you have to struggle for - not text you bow down to because it's enshrined in the documents of international bodies.....**

It was at this point I started to question the motives and integrity of the people associated with what was becoming [a huge industry](#).....and felt that my record gave me the right to challenge what I increasingly saw as (an excess of) "political correctness..." which has now reached the level of utter stupidity..

[Francis Fox Piven](#) is one of the American left's most distinguished activists and had this to say in 1995 about [the rise of identity politics](#). Robin Blackburn is an independent-minded British Marxist who brought an eagle eye to human rights a few years back in this article - [Reclaiming Human Rights](#)

There are many individuals - particularly those suffering from sexual discrimination - who have gained from the assertion of rights but, from being one of a small minority of the left who dared question the assertion of "human rights", I suspect I am becoming more mainstream.....

Wednesday 25 November

A Hard Day's Night

Bulgaria is famous for its red wines - I remember first coming across them in the Glasgow Oddbins in the 1970s and, lo indeed, 40 out of the 50 best wines recommended in the Bulgaria's magic little annual "[Divino Guide](#)" are red.

But it was their white wines which were the great discovery for me when I first motored through Bulgaria in 2002 on the way to Turkey. I was quite stunned by first the crispness of the vastly underrated Targovishte Muscat (which rightly won a bronze medal in a Paris fair a couple of years back) and then by the sheer variety I was encountering.

Now my palate (and body) reject red wines - apart from the heavy Mavruds in the Melnik area and reds from the Struma valley which crosses the border with Greece

But there were still more than 100 varieties of white on offer at the 2015 tasting of Bulgarian wines which took place a week ago at the Narodni Dom Kulturna (I always confuse it with NKD - which my young Bulgarian friends tell me is proof that I was a spy!).

That's quite a slog for one day - so it was very early to bed that evening. Sunday was for the roses - fewer in number so I emerged after a couple of hours with a clear head and an even greater commitment to their whites.... I had missed last year's tasting but had been sober enough in 2013 to keep [some notes of how I marked the whites](#)

To prepare for the 2015 tasting I had pulled out and checked the scribbles on my copy of the great little [Catalogue of Bulgarian Wine](#) (by T Tanovska and K Iontcheva - annual) which I use to record my impressions. [The Wine Routes of Bulgaria](#) (Vina Zona 2014) is also a nice little - if less technical - profile of 64 of the good Bulgaria vineyards. No fewer than [66 vineyards were presenting](#) on 20-22 November - which means about 400 bottles were waiting to be tasted!!

Six wineries battled it out for my palate's favour this year

[Marvin's Traminer](#) (6 euros) is from a vineyard in the Sliven area (in the centre of the country). A region whose wines first impressed me some years ago

[Boi and AR Pomorie](#) had a great *Chardonnay and Viognier* (6 euros). Pomorie at the Black Sea has some of the best white wines - but this particular winery was new to me....

[Domaine Menada](#) had a winner (*Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay*) for only 3.50 euros! A long established winery - near Stara Zagora in the middle of the country

[Edoardo Miroglio](#) was the best of quite a few *Chardonnay Barriques* in the fair - Sliven area again....

[Villa Yustina](#) is in the foothills of the Rhodope mountains near Plovdiv and had a lovely [Traminer](#) for 4 euros

Santa Maria at the moment is my favourite winery - in the south of the country near the Greek border - and offers two white wines (a *Sauvignon Blanc*; and a *Chardonnay* - 4 euros) which won great applause at my own home wine tasting earlier in the month

Seven jostled closely behind -

[Chateau Bourgozone](#) (a favourite of mine on the western part of the Danube stretch) actually had 2 wines which caught my fancy - a *Sauvignon Blanc*; and a *Chardonnay Barrique*.

[Levent](#) - also on the Danube - had a wonderful *Traminer/Miskat* from the Russe wine house. In the past few years their whites have been too strong for me.....

[Eolis](#) from the southern borderregion had a lovely *Gewurztraminer*

[Alexandra Estate](#) (Sakar Region) a *Vermentino*

[Four Friends](#) vineyard is in the central region, near Stara Zagora and had a great *Sauvignon Blanc* (6 euros)

[Neragora](#) is a new organic vineyard in the Plovdiv area (receiving Italian help). Their *Chardonnay and Miskat* was very acceptable

[Todoroff](#) - two of their wines pleased me - [Rainbow Green](#) (*Muscat and Aligote*); and Rainbow Silver (*Cuve - SB and Chardonnay with some Viognier*). Todoroff are in the village of Brestovitsa very near Plovdiv

And, finally, four which didn't score quite so high but deserve a mention -

[Levent](#) - *Riesling* (5 euros)

[Zelanos](#) - *Pino Gris* (7 euros)

[Saedinenie](#) - *Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier*

[Villa Yambol](#) - *Chardonnay* (2.5 euros!)

Favourite Vineyards in south-east - [Bratanov](#); [Milidare](#); [Medi Valley](#); [Katarzyna](#);

Favourite Vineyards in south [Strymon](#); [Villa Melnik](#)

Favourite Vineyards at Black Sea are [Black Sea Gold](#); [Ethno](#) - in a village near Burgas on the Black Sea near the border with Turkey; and [Slavyansti](#) - ditto

Central - [Targovishte winery](#); [Starosel](#); [Vinprom Yambol](#)

The Balkan Image

I've been quiet this past week simply because I've been wrapped up in what I hoped would be the final stages of completing the new book on Bulgaria - now running at 222 pages (compared with the 56 of [Introducing the Bulgarian Realists](#))

Trouble is that I keep finding new names for my annotated list - 15 or so in the past week thanks to several finds and a visit to Pazardzhik and to a new graphics exhibition at Sofia's City Gallery



These, however, are of minority interest and are therefore relegated to the last section of this post - which tries to confront the fact that potential readers may be disinclined to read a book which has "Bulgaria" in the title...*I've started to wonder whether I would be better advised to use Balkan imagery in the title....* After all, tales of travels and exploits in these parts have apparently been part of the staple diet for British readers for several centuries.....as we now know thanks to the publications in the past 15 years of literary scholars such as [Maria Todorova](#), [Andrew Hammond](#) and [Vesna Goldsworthy](#) who have carefully itemised and summarised the writings of foreign visitors to the area - and identified various phases of the "West's encounter with the near East"...

Hammond's *The Debated Lands - British and American Representation of the Balkans*, for example, suggests that -

*balkanist discourse has passed through three distinct paradigms. These are **denigration** before 1914; **romanticisation** in the inter-war years; and, after an ambivalent mixture of **sympathy and disappointment** during the Cold War, a **return to denigration** in the 1990s.*

He then goes on to make the interesting point that -

*pre-1914 denigration reveals close similarities to **colonial discourse**, how inter-war romanticism reflects the **modernist quest** for exoticism and psychological escape and how the reappearance of denigration coincides with the advent of **postmodern scepticism**.*

Todorova has a fascinating chapter exploring how the region came to be called the Balkans (it was previously known as Haemus.....

The earliest mention of the name Balkan known to me comes from a fifteenth century memorandum of the Italian humanist writer and diplomat Philippus Callimachus (1437-1496). Persecuted by Pope Paul II, Callimaco settled in Poland and became a close adviser to the Polish king. He was the author of a history of the deeds of Wladyslaw III Warnencyk, in which he left a short description of the Haemus, which he saw when he visited the Constantinople on diplomatic missions. In his 1490 memorandum to Pope Innocent

VIII, Callimaco wrote that the local people used the name Balkan for the mountain: "quem incolae Bolchanum vocant."

[Misha Glenny](#) is one of the foremost commentators on the Balkans with a massive book [The Balkans 1804-1912 - Nationalism, War and the Great Powers](#) to his credit. He [does not mince words](#) when it comes with dealing with the negative reputation the area has

To help set the record straight here are a few lesser-known facts about the Balkan peninsula that never make it into the newspapers. For those who would defend the Balkans but don't know how, they will be useful for dropping into conversations about how hopeless the situation there is.

1. The only country allied to the Axis that refused to allow any of its Jewish citizens to be deported to Nazi death camps was Bulgaria.

2. The single most violent period in Balkan history in terms of casualties sustained and the territorial extent of the warfare was a direct consequence of Hitler's decision to occupy Greece, a decision prompted by Mussolini's failed attempt to invade Greece in 1940. The Nazi resolve in March 1941 to dismember Yugoslavia was accompanied by the installation of a brutal Fascist administration in Croatia that was entirely unrepresentative of the political aspirations of the Croat people. Until Pavelic was installed in Croatia, there had been no history of mass violence between Serbs and Croats.

3. The Stalinist dictatorships that took root in Romania and Bulgaria were imposed by an agreement reached by Stalin and Churchill. In exchange for handing over these territories to Soviet influence, Churchill, and later Truman, were given a free hand by Stalin to smash a Communist insurgency in Greece that was on the verge of taking power with minimal foreign support.

4. Since 1989, the governments and people of Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania and Greece have all resisted attempts by nationalists to destabilise the local or regional polity.

5. The main victims of the sanctions imposed by the UN on Serbia have been the surrounding states, a number of which are attempting to steer their economies through the transition from Communism to capitalism. Bulgaria, for example, has been losing an estimated \$2 billion a year. The impact on the economies of Western Europe and America has been negligible. The UN refuses to give Bulgaria any compensation.

Sadly the visibility of gypsies and criminals amongst those who have taken advantage since 2007 of Europe's open borders has added yet another negative element to European perceptions of the area - so I have rejected the idea of a Balkan element to the book's title a draft version of which can be accessed at [The Bulgarian Realists - updated edition](#)

But places with traces of older ways of behaviour - let alone the feel of antiquity - are increasingly impossible to find in this homogenised world. When found, of course, they need nurture - not hordes of people tramping the grounds and polluting the atmosphere. So, despite the many attractions of the country, this will not be a book which tries to encourage foreigners to visit special sites - it is rather a book which celebrates people long dead who have, however, left a bit of themselves in the attitudes and tastes of those who now inhabit its country.

Finds I have to report are -

Contemporary Bulgarian Art - Paintings, Graphics and Sculpture ed Svetlin Rusev (Sofia 1982) was a large book I had seen a few years back but was discouraged from buying by the obviously political nature of the selection process. Seeing it again in the little second-hand place on Vasil Levsky corner at Sofia University made me realise that it was a real historical piece which warranted a place in my library - not least for its glorious reproductions. Its introduction is a stunning paean to the communist party - by the Chairman of the Bulgarian Union of Artists (7 pages which say absolutely nothing).

Rusev still bestrides the art scene these days but must regret the opening page's hymn to September 9th 1944 as well as the obvious omissions eg no mention of the country's most famous aquarellist [Konstantin Shtarkelov](#) (banned and disgraced for his royalism) or the caricaturist Raiko Aleksiev, murdered in prison. The illustrations are still magnificent 33 years later and the whole book is an incredible bit of history (c 400 pages - not numbered)

A new auction house started in Sofia this year and has apparently held 3 auctions - each offering a superb 70 page catalogue. This is [the November one](#) I missed just by a day

Then a visit to **Pazardzhik** - a small town close to Plovdiv, a gallery I had just become aware of - which is supposed to house more than 2000 paintings donated by one of Pazardzhik's most famous sons, the painter Stoian Vasilev. I could find no sign of them however! The first of the gallery's 2 rooms - with still lives - was bitterly disappointing but things were made up with the portrait room which had a wonderful display of the works of one of Bulgaria's best women artists - [Elisabeth Konsulova-Vaseva](#) as well as delightful examples of many others, including two I had not heard of - local painters Georgi Mashev (1887-1946) and graphic artist Georgi Gerasimov (1905-1977). Although the curator spoke only Bulgarian, she was friendly and pressed several little booklets of these two artists and also about Stoian Vasilev into my hands and wouldn't take any money for them....

My final find was *Catalogue of Graphic Art* (Sofia City Art Gallery 2015) a glorious record of the gallery's graphic collection with a small reproduction of each item - 770 pages bilingual. That's almost 4000 reproductions!!

Saturday 5 December

A Lion of Prose - William McIlvanney - RIP

Last May I wrote [a rare tribute \(for me\) to a novelist](#) - William McIlvanney who, I have just learned, has died at the age of 79. As a tribute, I want to reproduce the post -

These last few days I have been doing something I rarely do - I have been "savouring" a book - word by word as distinct from my usual habit of flicking.laughing out loud in delight at the language; marking sections every few pages with a pencil. And this is a novel - not my usual fare! A detective novel to boot - "Strange Loyalties" (1991) - [the last of a trilogy](#) McIlvanney is one of the most underrated writers not only of the British Isles but perhaps in the English-speaking world! I [wrote about him last year](#). Here are some excerpts -

The thought was my funeral for him. Who needs possessions and career and official achievements? Life was only in the living of it. How you act and what you are and what you do.... are the only substance. They didn't last either. But while you were here, they made what light there was - the wick that threads the candle-

grease of time. His light was out but here I felt I could almost smell the smoke still drifting from its snuffing....(p80).

It was one of her partners who answered (the phone). When she knew it was me, her voice - always distant - more or less emigrated.....(p112)

Attractiveness facilitates acquaintance, like a courier predisposing strangers to goodwill, and my mother had acquired early an innocent vanity that let her enjoy being who she was. But the kindness of other people towards her made her as idealistic as my father in her own way. She tended to think the way people treated her was how they treated everybody. She thought the best of them was all there was (p 128).

Why do the best of us go to waste while the worst flourish? Maybe I had found a clue.... Those who love life take risks, those who don't take insurance. But that was all right, I decided. Life repays its lovers by letting them spend themselves on it. Those who fail to love it, it cunningly allows very carefully to accrue their own hoarded emptiness. In living, you won by losing big; you lost by winning small (p 134).

Where I had come into what I took for manhood....meant much to me, not just as a geography but as a landscape of the heart, a quintessential Scotland where good people were my landmarks and the common currency was a mutual caring. Why did it feel so different to me today, a little seedy and withdrawn? p 183

(Some might have thought her mad). But she wasn't mad, just too sane to play along with the rest of us. She had awakened from her sleep-walk long enough to recognize the minefield we call normality. She had found a way to admit to herself the prolonged terror of living. Some people never do. p 206

The invention of truth, no matter how desperately you wish it to be or how sincerely you believe in the benefits it will bring, is the denial of our nature, the first rule of which is the inevitability of doubt. We must doubt not only others but ourselves. (p 210)

You offer him a vague perception and he takes it from you, cleans off the gunge and gives it back, having shown you how it works. He clarifies you to yourself. (p258)

Little wonder that in the tributes which started to flow in as the news broke, [this was said](#)

His true peers were not alumni of the American hard-boiled school, such as Chandler and Hammett, but the likes of Gogol and Dostoevsky, Zola and Céline. He wrote about hard times and tough people - so-called "big men" and trauchled women - dealing with the fallout of unemployment, poverty and ignorance. Why Willie is not better known outside his own heath has always been a mystery. In any other country that prizes the art of literature he would have been lionised.

5 December

Foray into Bulgaria's Wineries



Despite my 7 years' appreciation of Bulgarian wines, I've only once actually visited a Bulgarian winery - and there are apparently 150 of them in this small country according to the latest issue of the small gem which is the Bulgarian wine bible - the [Catalogue of Bulgarian Wine](#) (by T Tanovska and K Iontcheva - annual).

I had almost made it to the HQ of one of the Russe vineyards but last week offered an opportunity since I was visiting Pazardzhik on the edge of some of the great wineries around Plovdiv - which stretch up to Sliven and Stara Zagora...I selected three - two in the famous

wine village of Brestovitsa (site of my sole effort so far) and one in a neighbouring village of Yustina. The selection was done in consultation with my young wine merchant, Asen, who has a marvellous little shop [Vinoorenda](#) at the Russian Monument.

To reach the villages from the main Sofia highway, you take the signpost for Asenovograd at the Plovdiv roundabout and turn right when Brestovitsa is signposted. We were heading first for Villa Viofera whose Muscat Bianco had caught my fancy - the premises looked interesting but seemed lifeless...eventually a couple responded to the bell but looked bewildered by our request for degustation and purchases.....

The atmosphere in the spa hotel of Todoroff - the village's most famous winery - was not much more welcoming and we decided to pass the opportunity they gave us for wine tasting (at a price) - as well as what we felt would be an uninspiring lunch. I left Bulgaria's "village of wine" in some dudgeon.....

An excellent lunch in a village pub en route restored our good spirits...

And third time was lucky as we rolled through the gates of Villa Yustina into a spacious cobbled courtyard with two superbly crafted stone building complexes on two sides. One was a beautifully-designed set of open offices - with guest, storage and tasting facilities - and a friendly welcome. A few minutes later we were being shown with great pride the modern (wine) reception, bottling and dispatching facility. It was my first glimpse of this process and, as the owner branched out in 2006 from his main business of metal containers, it's clear that he sees this winery's facilities as a shining marketing tool to demonstrate the superiority of that produce range - let alone the wines themselves.....Our guide did the Bulgarian education system proud....in her early 20s, Elena had the sort of poise, enthusiasm and humour you need for such a job...

Just completing her education at Plovdiv's Food Technology College, she makes a point of visiting Bulgaria's various wineries and therefore speaks with an obvious note of confidence when she sings the praises of the Yustina wines - which I got to taste in the coolness of a large, tastefully-designed (excuse the pun) room....I left with a box of its white Cuvee (4 euros)

Only while writing this did I come across this comment from the [2013 DiVino wine tasing in Sofia](#) -

Two stalls left the greatest impression - Villa Yustina (established only in 2006 and located in a village in the Rhodopes foothills near Plovdiv) by virtue of the enthusiastic and helpful approach of

their sales guy Vencislav Lyubenov. And the stall of the well known Katarzyna Estate (located on the Greek/Turkish border) - by virtue of it being the only one whose staff (women) were encouraging feedback from their customers.

So full marks for consistency

8 December

Losing the Plot

The *plebs are stirring* - and nationalist banners are flying high everywhere. Not just in Scotland, Sweden and Hungary - but now France and Turkey...

The *barbarians* didn't need to clamour *at the gate* - they were smuggled in to *the fortress* via the *Trojan Horse* of the Human Rights industry.....Little wonder that "The Man in the High Fortress" is playing so well - with its crude imagery of jackboot Japanese and German Fascists in the US of A

The political, professional, commercial and financial class - with all their underlings - are utterly adrift in a sea of *moral decay* with only a few outsiders able to record - in Spenglerian tones - the [sad decline of the West](#).



Just 25 years ago politicians and intellectuals were celebrating not only the defeat of communism but "[the end of history](#)". A few dissented from this Panglossian view, reminding us of the cyclical nature of things and warned of the arrogance, indeed hubris, involved in our assumptions about "progress" - what [John Gray called recently "melioristic liberalism"](#)

Whatever their position on the political spectrum, almost all of those who govern us hold to some version of the melioristic liberalism that is the west's default creed, which teaches that human civilisation is advancing - however falteringly - to a point at which the worst forms of human destructiveness can be left behind. According to this view, evil, if any such thing exists, is not an inbuilt human flaw, but a product of defective social institutions, which can over time be permanently improved.....

I don't know exactly when the mood music began to change but I sense 2000 as the year - that's when the Harvard Business Review ran an article from Canadian business guru [Henry Mintzberg](#) which warned that people were mistaken to believe that it was capitalism which won in 1989 -

What triumphed in 1989 was balance. While the countries of Eastern Europe were utterly out of balance, with so much power concentrated in their public sectors, the successful countries of the West maintained a sufficient balance across their public, private, and plural sectors (usually referred to as "civil society" or the "third sector"). But a failure to understand this has been carrying many countries—east and west, north and south—out of balance ever since, as power has concentrated increasingly in their private sectors.

Most notably in the United States, likewise in the realm of globalization, many large corporations have attained positions of entitlement, justified by the prevailing dogma of our day, from economics: that greed is good, property is sacrosanct, markets are sufficient, and governments are suspect.

We have to understand that a balanced society, like a stable stool, has to rest on three solid legs: a public sector of political forces rooted in respected governments, a private sector of economic forces based on responsible businesses, and a plural sector of social forces manifested in robust communities.

A year ago [Pankaj Mishra](#) - summoning names such as [Alexander Herzen](#), [Reinhold Niebuhr](#), and Raymond Aron - told us that [The Western Model was broken](#)

The most violent century in human history, it was hardly the best advertisement for the "bland fanatics of western civilisation", as Niebuhr called them at the height of the cold war, "who regard the highly contingent achievements of our culture as the final form and norm of human existence". Niebuhr was critiquing a fundamentalist creed that has coloured our view of the world for more than a century: that western institutions of the nation-state and liberal democracy will be gradually generalised around the world, and that the aspiring middle classes created by industrial capitalism will bring about accountable, representative and stable governments - that every society, in short, is destined to evolve just as the west did.

The start of 2015 saw me in reflective mood - with a post "[Will this too pass?](#)" which referred to a paper about the global crisis I had just put online which opened with a table capturing the intellectual debates of each decade since the 1930s. The first few entries give the flavour - "the end of capitalism", "the managerial revolution", "meritocracy", "the end of ideology", "revisionism" I suggested that "many who look at the table will perhaps feel a shiver down their spine as they recognise how transitory many of our discussions have been. The issues don't necessarily go away - some are simply repackaged"

1990 was, as Mintzberg argues, a turning point when all restraints on greed and amorality were removed and my January post reflected the new pessimism -

It seems impossible to get a social or moral consensus in our societies for [the sort of rebalancing which Henry Mintzberg](#) has brilliantly argued for

- the voices are too diverse these days
- people have grown tired and cynical
- those in work have little time or energy to help them identify and act on an appropriate programme of change
- those out of work are too depressed
- although the retired generally have the time, resources and experience to be doing more than they are
- but they have lost trust in the capability or good intentions of governments
- let alone the promises of politicians
- and are confronted with too many disparate voices in the reform movement
- most of the "apocalyptists" (such as [William Greer](#) and [Dmitry Orlov](#)) who have confronted the collapse of industrial civilisation counsel a Candide-like "garden cultivation"

That was hardly online than the world was stunned with the cold-blooded killings in the Hebdo offices in Paris. With images of bodies of African migrants in the waters of the Western Mediterranean giving way first to those of flotillas of small boats in the Aegean and the onward treks through the Balkans and Hungary and then to the massacres on November 13 on the streets

of Paris (and the lockdown of the city of Brussels), the full consequences of [the "Great Game" being played in Syria](#) by so many powers has at last brought home to many of us....

10 December

Cultural Trails in the lower Danube Reaches?

Two tasks have occupied me these past few days. One of my daughters had come across some letters between her mother's parents and it had led her to wonder about aspects of my own parents and family. I duly pulled out the pages I had written about some of this way back in 1995 and set to work.....over the weekend I had about 30 pages...



At the same time, my thoughts had been running with an idea for a project in the lower reaches of the River Danube - which I have been crossing at Russe [every few months](#) these past 8 years..

Later this week I am scheduled to cross it into Romania at the north-east corner for the first time thanks to the new EC-funded bridge at Vidin - also near the border with Serbia....And to stay overnight at the refurbished mansion - [Port Cetate](#) - now a cultural centre owned by one of Romania's best known personalities, poet [Mircea Dinescu](#) whose satirical sketches I

remember watching on Romanian television in the mid 1990s...

I had sent the centre the latest draft of my new book [Bulgarian Realists - updated edition](#) - as well as the E-book [Mapping Romania - notes on an unfinished journey](#) - and wondered whether they might not be one of the partners for a future bid for (cross-border) EC Structural Funds with a focus on art, culture andwine...

Alternating between Bulgaria and Romania has made me think a lot about cultural differences. Despite sharing the Danube as a border, the citizens of the two countries have (apart from the summer trips to the Bulgarian part of the Black Sea) little contact and know very little about each other.

It probably hasn't helped that the Dobrogea area at the Black Sea has changed hands several times in the past few centuries - nor that the Bulgarian alphabet is Cyrillic and the Romanians so proudly Latin

Indeed it would not be exaggerating to suggest that relations are characterised by a "*state of studied indifference*". This is confirmed by the common perception that the two nations turn their back on one another at the Danube



On Sunday I invited an old friend (who is one of its most experienced consultants in cross-border work) to my flat here in Sofia, replete with art and library, in order to brainstorm about a possible project. With a wine from the Rila Monastery - in his case a Mavrud; in mine a Chardonnay. I'm glad to say that he too he was enthusiastic....Of course there have been previous projects such as

- TourNet - Promotion of cross-border networking for development of a common Bulgarian-Romanian tourist product (EC 2012 - see linked [Photo library of the Danube Region](#))
- [Impact Analysis of People-to-People project in Danube area](#) (2013) an interesting pot-pourri of projects (covering, amongst other topics, dental treatment, chess and singing)
- [Rafting holidays](#)

I'm aware of a range of recent projects using EU and other funding to develop cultural trails in this part of the Danube but they seem to have had limited timescales or ambition. Supply-driven approaches always fail - as do good ideas which don't take root for not trying to generate local understanding and commitment.

[Cultural Routes in the Middle and Lower Danube Region - the Roman Emperors Route and the Danube Wine Route](#), for example, is a German/Serbian project for the development and marketing of transnational and cross-border routes in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Croatia, launched in 2012 by the Danube Competence Center (DCC) and supported by the German consultancy GTZ.

The project runs another year and has issued [a brochure](#) and handbook - [Managing visitor on thematic cultural routes](#)

I have a deep interest in and knowledge of Bulgarian and Romanian painting (and wine) - as well as 20 years' experience as a consultant in capacity building - and am trying to work out how I can give something to what I see as mothing less than a spirit of reconciliation which is needed between the two countries. A lot of consultancy companies have jumped into the vacuum but what is needed is something much deeper

And I'm trying to track down [someone I met in May](#) who could be another excellent partner - Doina Pauleanu, the curator of Constanta's art gallery which houses Romania's best collection outside of Bucharest ...and who has good connections with the curators of the Bulgarian galleries in Dobrich... here's a [nice facebook clip](#) I found when doing that.....

The trick will be to find a powerful over-reaching theme....

16 December

Romania's Literary House on the Danube

I spurned the easy option of a fast exit from Sofia via the Balkan Highway which has me at the top of the mountain range within half an hour of leaving the flat and chose the direct route due north, over what I remembered as a hill. But memory was deficient and it proved to be a tortuous mountain route - but the ice-tipped branches and villages more than compensated (one was called Gini - surely not of "co-efficient" fame?)

There was a smattering of snow on the ground at the final metres...as I headed for Montana, realising that my road may be 40-50 kms shorter than the main highway from Sofia but is about an hour longer! Berkovitsa offered a gallery (closed for lunch!) but I did see some marvellous wood carving artefacts (eg the pulpit) in its 11th century (?) church....Memorials to the 1923 communist uprising are still to be seen in this isolated area which I had visited in 2012 on my way to workshops for municipal officials in Vratsa and Belogradchik (site of two great wineries)....

The new bridge over the Danube at Vidin is only the second such link between the 2 countries (the first was built in 1956) and the container traffic already making a nuisance of itself. Noone, it seems, thought to anticipate its effects - although a pathetically small stretch of bypass is being built around Montana....

I had forgotten how fascinating the Belogradchik crags and Serbian (?) mountain ranges are in the far distance and had to be careful both photographing on the straight stretches and negotiating the tight bends - a lorry had already come to grief and was causing a tailback.....There are no signs for the bridge as you reach Vidin - only for Belgrade and "Calafat" (a village on the Romanian side) but just follow the container traffic and you are soon on the new approach (clearly not much used by local traffic) and then on the white snake that is the long bridge.....

The Russe-Giurgiu entry to Romania is the one I know from the countless Danube crossings I have made these past eight years - and a soul-destroying entry it is with its garbage and dogs....Exiting from the Vidin bridge, by contrast, is a delight - with the villages being tidy and compact and a charming self-build idiosyncratic house style from of 1930s and before. Nowadays the only traffic



are the barges which play up and down - and the odd cruise ship (eg this one [which starts at Bucharest and ends at Budapest](#) with some fascinating destinations organised en route)

Port Cetate (Port Fort) was a customs point in earlier centuries when River traffic helped connect towns such as Russe, Svishtov and Vidin to their Romanian and other neighbours further upstream

The photograph shows the core of the complex as it has been restored in the last decade as a Writer's House by poet and TV star Mircea Dinescu.

A warm welcome was much appreciated after what had been a 6 hour drive (but less than 250 kms) from Sofia - all the warmer with a glass of the estate-made rakiya (which it's actually called in Oltanea). A gloriously clear liquid, it was one of the best rakis I've ever tasted - and I am now a bit of an expert!!

That was the start to a glorious bean soup produced by the kitchen staff (who seem well-used to people dropping in at odd hours) great home-produced bread, sausages and pickles...all with one of the white estate wines (a Pinot Gris) and good conversation.

The sun was setting as we ate and talked and was nicely captured on film.

I mentioned the village near Nitra in Slovakia with a restored Mansion House whose Director oversaw its transformation since 1990 and now runs a great [Training and Wellness-Centre](#) with major cultural events which draw in artists from far afield. There's [an interview here](#) (only in Slovak unfortunately) which gives an idea of the place



An hour or so in my room gave me the time to think more about what seem to be 2 projects - a modest "micro" one running with the first idea of bringing some of my Bulgarian artist friends together with some Romanian painters; the second the more ambitious one I hinted at in the previous post....

A second bottle of estate wine graced our next conversation in which we were joined amazingly by Mircea Dinescu himself who emerged out of the darkness and plumped down beside me. After some initial reserve, he was soon in great form (thanks to Sergiu's skilful translation) but perhaps helped by realising how well I knew some of the figures of Romania's recent past such as Josef Sava and Marin Sorescu....

The next morning I had the time to look at the material I had collected on Bulgarian strategies and projects in this part of the world; summarise them and distribute it to various friends for comment. Apparently the deadline for the next wave of bids for this Interreg programme is March which gives time for the collection of the necessary support from beneficiaries.....I duly left Port Cetate at midday heading through Craiova for Bucharest - a journey of more than four hours.....

20 December

55 Years in a couple of pages

I always like a bit of intellectual historyand last week I lighted on a conversation with Roger Scruton around a revamp of a book which this English Conservative philosopher first issued in 1985. We have been told for several decades that the left-right spectrum no longer has any basis in reality although it remains a label very much in evidence

Now 71, Scruton has been the bête noire of British left intellectuals for more than 30 years, and gives them another beastly mauling in his new book "[Fads, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left](#)". It is a tour de force that, the introduction concedes, is 'not a word-mincing book', but rather 'a provocation'. In just under 300 pages he Scruton-izes a collection of stars, past and present, of the radical Western intelligentsia - the likes of Eric Hobsbawm and EP Thompson in Britain, JK Galbraith and Ronald Dworkin in the US, Jurgen Habermas, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze in Europe. An expanded and updated version of his controversial "Thinkers of the New Left" (1985), the book ends with a new chapter entitled 'The kraken wakes' dealing with the 'mad incantations' of Alan Badiou and the left's marginally newer academic celebrity, the Slovenian Zizek.

A copy of the book was lying in Bucharest's English bookshop when I popped in there on Sunday - giving me the chance to read its opening pages which, I have to confess, made a great deal of sense even to an old lefty like me.

"Why, he asks, use a single term to cover anarchists such as Foucault, Marxist dogmatists like Althusser, exuberant nihilists like Zizek and US liberals like Dworkin, Galbraith and Rorty? Two reasons - they call themselves this and they all have an "enduring outlook" - some belonging to the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s and others to the post-war thinking according to which the state is or ought to be in charge of society and empowered to distribute its goods...."

This - the dimension of **economic ownership** (monopoly through oligopoly to cooperatives/shared ownership to private owners) - is indeed one of the axis you need to make sense of world views. But it is not the only one - particularly these days when the social dimension has become so important. Class (rarely talked about now) is only one form of group identity - with race and sexuality being the new entrants. So an additional axis is needed for the strength of **social norms** - with totalitarianism being at one axis and anarchy at the other. There is a third - for **the role of the state**, for example, in welfare provision and general regulatory measures - but that's a bit complicated for this blog.

So I will start with four quadrants which we can use, for example, to plot the old and new left and right -

Old Left; supporting a strong state sector for infrastructure and health (inc insurance although the religious and cooperative sectors could equally have responsibility for this last)

Old Right; recognizing the role of the state in sustaining property rights and traditional ways of doing things

New Left; which has supported the liberation struggles of repressed groups and the onward march of post-modernism....

New Right; which tends to divide strongly between the economic agenda of the Neo-liberals (whose eulogies for "the market" conceals support oligopolistic licence and the spread of "commodification") and the more traditional social agenda of the American Neo-Cons.

In *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands* Scruton attacks the left idea of thought for a cause, 'politics with a GOAL'.

'Conservatives are by their nature people who are trying to defend and maintain existence without a cause'. Simply to keep things as they are? 'We obviously all want to change things, but recognise that human life is an end in itself and not a means to replace itself with something else. And defending institutions and compromises is a very difficult and unexciting thing. But nevertheless it's the truth.'

For Scruton, the left intellectuals' apparent attachment to a higher cause only disguises what they really stand for: 'Nothing.' He writes that 'when, in the works of Lacan, Deleuze and Althusser, the nonsense machine began to crank out its impenetrable sentences, of which nothing could be understood except that they all had "capitalism" as their target, it looked as though Nothing had at last found its voice'.

More recently, 'the windbaggery of Zizek and the nonsemes of Badiou' exist only 'to espouse a single and absolute cause', which 'admits of no compromise' and 'offers redemption to all who espouse it'. The name of that cause? 'The answer is there on every page of these fatuous writings: Nothing.

So, what is all this Nothing-ness about? 'My view', says Scruton, 'is that what's underlying all of this is a kind of nihilistic vision that masks itself as a moving toward the enlightened future, but never pauses to describe what that society will be like. It simply loses itself in negatives about the existing things - institutional relations like marriage, for instance - but never asks itself if those existing things are actually part of what human beings are. Always in Zizek there's an assumption of the right to dismiss them as standing in the way of something else, but that something else turns out to be Nothing.'

Scruton's is not the only book this year to explore "the culture wars". A site I must consult more often is the [Society for US Intellectual History](#) which carried recently an [interesting comparison of a couple of books](#) which throw light on all this -

'Ideas moved first in the arena of economic debate.' Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the dominant tropes in economics had been institutional, even among conservatives. Right-wing critics of the welfare state and state-managed economies did not speak of the market; they spoke of corporations and banks and 'championed the rights of management and the productive powers of the free enterprise "system".'

The idea of the market that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s - 'self-equilibrating, instantaneous in its sensitivities and global in its reach, gathering the wants of myriad individuals into its system of price signals in a perpetual plebiscite of desires' - dispensed with these settings and constraints.

It also dismantled the 'troubling collective presence and demands' of social democracy, turning unions, workers and the unemployed 'into an array of consenting, voluntarily acting individual pieces'.

Everyone became a buyer or seller, everything - kidneys, pollution - got bought and sold. The only thing holding it all together was the magnetic energy of these individual acts of exchange.

Like most scholars of the free-market movement, Rodgers assigns great weight to Milton Friedman, 'the University of Chicago's most forceful politiciser', and the right's answer to J.K. Galbraith. He wrote columns for Newsweek, advised presidents (and dictators), and organised the ten-part PBS series *Free to Choose* as a counter to Galbraith's 15-part BBC series on capitalism.

With his focus on the money supply as the source of economic well-being, Friedman helped popularise a 'radically simplified model of aggregate economic behaviour', in which 'state, society and institutions all shrank into insignificance within a black box that translated money inputs directly into price outputs.'

But Friedman's monetarism was also far more state-centric - the Federal Reserve played an almost heroic role in determining the direction of the economy - than most market theologians would have liked. What truly pushed the market into the culture - high and low - were the adjutants of Friedman's revolution: the law professors and jurists, not just on the hard right (Richard Posner) but also on the squishy left (Stephen Breyer), who made economic efficiency the measure of all things and provided much of the rationale for deregulation; the second wave of free-market economists (Robert Lucas, for example, or Gary Becker), who took apart the field of macroeconomics in favour of game theory, behavioural economics, rational expectations and other individualist approaches; and journalists like George Gilder and Jude Wanniski who recast the market as a popular (and populist) vision of the good society.

For more, read -

<http://s-usih.org/2015/03/age-of-fracture-v-age-of-culture-wars.html>

<https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44132>

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n20/corey-robin/achieving-disunity>

<http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/the-eus-culture-war-against-the-people/15931#.VngkXf197IU>

<http://chronicle.com/article/Why-I-Miss-the-Culture-Wars/151435>

https://www.claremont.org/featured-article/that-new-time-religion/#.Ve8PdZd0c_g

http://www.claremont.org/download_pdf.php?file_name=1519Voegeli.pdf

<http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/260742/culture-wars-volume-v-black-book-american-left-david-horowitz>

23 December

Memory's Rooms



A rolling stone, we are told, gathers no moss - but give a nomad a base and it is amazing what artefacts he's able to produce from the folds of his traveller's cloak to domesticate the place...It was 15 years ago, just after starting my years in central Asia, that I acquired the Carpathian mountain house now home to so many books, paintings and small objects (the rugs not so small). The tiny Bucharest flat had already taken the Uzbek painted lacquered cases, silk scarves and terra cotta figurines.....but it took only a few months last year for the patina of the fading 1930s villa flat in Sofia to be complemented by paintings

for its expansive walls, books for the bookcases which lined two walls - even sculptures and ceramics for its piano

A few summers ago I looked round at the various artefacts in my mountain house and realized how many beautiful objects I seem to have collected - pottery, miniatures, carpets, Uzbek wall-hangings, Kyrgyz and Iranian table coverings, glassware, plates, Chinese screens, wooden carvings et al. Of very little - except sentimental - value I hasten to add!

Bookmarks - paper and silk - pens, pencils (they have to be soft!!) occupy pride of place on the desks.

At the time I [had been musing about the various roles](#) I had played in my life - *Lecturer, politician, networker, maverick, leader, writer, explorer, consultant, resource person* - and suddenly a new label came to me - "collector"!

All of this is by way of preface to a lovely book [The memory Palace - a book of lost interiors](#) which I came across this week at Bucharest's superb English Bookshop -

Taking his title from the Ciceronian rhetorical technique of memorising long speeches by means of an imaginary stroll through a series of grandiose palaces, and moving towards a depiction of the internet as a vast and ever-expanding memory palace, many of Hollis's potted histories establish a convincing relationship between the frailties of memory and the unavoidable solidity of material objects. As his grandmother's mobility has declined, so the interior of the house has become a world in miniature.....

[Another review](#) gives a sense of the subjects covered -

The book is organised around vignettes of his ailing grandmother, confined to her sitting room: her fireplace like an altar, her trinkets a cabinet of curiosities. The fireplace leads him back to the Roman hearth and myths about the origins of Rome: from the "Purple Room", in which the Byzantine emperors were born, to the cave in which a she-wolf was purported to have suckled Romulus and Remus.

Tea breaks with his granny aside, Hollis proceeds chronologically, taking in the relationship between medieval furniture and British statecraft; the collector's impulse; the commodity culture of Victorian England; and the screens and virtual rooms of the digital age. It's a vast span, which Hollis looks to condense thematically by dwelling on palaces. He yokes together actual historical palaces with the classical concept of memory as a type of palatial enfilade in which everything has its recorded place. It's a tidy idea that feels tenuous by the time we enter [the Big Brother house](#) in the final section.

I love such types of books - which defy categorisation, A [Scotsman review](#) puts it nicely -

All books have brief indicators of subject matter on the back. Hollis's reads "History/Architecture", to which could be added classical culture, popular culture, monarchy, politics, consumerism, memoir, art collecting and more. This is the kind of non-fiction - like the work of WG Sebald or Paul Collins or Rebecca Solnit - that makes fiction seem predictable, thin and uncurious.

[The Independent](#) also catches the atmosphere

Edward Hollis's *The Memory Palace* is ostensibly a selective and often forensic history of interiors. But it is, more tellingly, a kind of instruction manual about ways of thinking about these histories. It's less a descriptive route-march through physical interiors, more a treatise about the mysteries of time and place. "The mind wanders from room to room," he writes, "from the cave in which we began to the [data] cloud we inherit today, each one of which represents a different mode of memory."

As I survey my various collections, it is inevitable that I wonder about its eventual break-up.....occasionally I come across a book which records the paintings collected by one person - a lovely idea which gave me the idea of adding the pics to the volume of 2015 posts. But more often artefacts are found in antique shops with no provenance....One has simply to fantasise about where they rested before - and with whom....

I have, sadly, very few remnants of my own parents - a grandfather's inscribed inkwell (from 1920s); some notebooks from the 1930s and my mother's little commonplace notebook.....

Some 30 years ago, when I was going through some difficult times, my sister-in-law tried to help me by encouraging me to explore the various roles I had - *father, son, husband, politician, writer, activist* etc. At the time I didn't understand what she was driving at. Now I do! Makes me wonder what tombstone I should have carved for myself in the marvellous [Sapanta cemetery in Maramures](#) where people are remembered humourously in verse and pictures for their work or for the way they died!!

It was TS Eliot who wrote that "*old men ought to be explorers*" - perhaps the reason why my visiting card now says - "explorer and aesthete"!

25 December

The painting is by Georgi Rubev - with the Greek island of Thassos in the background

In Praise of Scepticism

The last week of the year is the time when the journals remind us of the year's key events and invited to think about how we might improve our behaviour....A regularly updated blog allows you to recall what was the focus of your attention at any given moment in time - in my case books, artefacts and places - with wars, refugees, election campaigns and results being noises off.....

The year began with an attempt to silence satire - so let us end it not merely with [a celebration of satire](#) but of the wider spirit of scepticism.

It's a basic human foible to enjoy seeing the pretensions of the powerful being punctured - but the sad fact is that most of us fall prey to the illusions conjured up by rhetoricians and their masters. The agnosticism which got into my bloodstream in my teens seems to have inoculated me against all false gods.....and indeed against the "suspension of disbelief" to which drama and novels invite us....That's perhaps why only essays, satire and realistic art and poetry (eg Brecht, [Bukowski](#), McCaig) have attracted me.

Once we stop thinking about the words we use, what exactly they mean and whether they fit our purpose, the words and metaphors (and the interests behind them) take over and reduce our powers of critical thinking. One of the best essays on this topic is George Orwell's "[Politics and the English language](#)" Written in 1947, it exposes the way certain clichés and rhetoric stifle our thinking capacity - for example how the use of the passive tense undermines the notion that it is people who take decisions and should be held accountable for them.

Fifty years before Orwell, Ambrose Bierce was another (American) journalist whose pithy and tough definitions of everyday words, in his newspaper column, attracted sufficient attention to justify a book "[The Devil's Dictionary](#)" whose fame continues unto this day. A dentist, for example, he defined as "*a magician who puts metal into your mouth and pulls coins out of your pocket*". A robust scepticism about both business and politics infused his work - but it did not amount to a coherent statement about power.

Twenty years I started to develop a glossary of some 100 words and phrases used by officials, politicians, consultants and academics in the course of government reform. Its updated version - [Just Words](#) - offers some definitions which at least will get us thinking more critically about our

vocabulary - if not actually taking political actions. While working on it I came across [John Saul's *A Doubter's Companion - a dictionary of aggressive common sense*](#) issued in 1994 which talks of the

"humanist tradition of using alphabetical order as a tool of social analysis and the dictionary as a quest for understanding, a weapon against idée reçues and the pretensions of power".

Saul contrasts this approach with that *"of the rationalists to the dictionary for whom it is a repository of truths and a tool to control communications"*.

In 2008, I left behind a glossary in the Final Report of a project - [Learning from experience; some reflections on how training can help develop administrative capacity](#) whose entires were fairly outrageous for such a publication. I doubt whether anyone read it!

I should emphasise that [Just Words](#) is not a Cynic's Dictionary - although I readily confess to the occasional lapse into self-indulgent delight in shocking eg my definition of **"consultant"** as *"a con artist who behaves like a Sultar"*.

The topic of politics, power and government reform is too important for cynicism. It does, however, require a strong dose of scepticism.

26 December

EndNote

1. The Books read

Rereading one's posts of the past year or so is a salutary experience - the book's Introduction gives an overview of the *subjects* treated over the period so I thought it would be useful here to identify the **books** which had engaged my interest sufficiently for me to devote a post to them during the year. I was fairly critical of five -

[Why Nations Fail](#) - by a couple of American academics

[Stand and Deliver](#) - a rather superficial and angry analysis of how the British system of public management could be improved. In a long line of such critiques....

[The Tyranny of Experts](#) - by a World Banker who's had enough...

Amateus [Etzioni](#)'s autobiography "My Brother's Keeper"

[How Good Can We Be?](#) By a well-read British journalist - Will Hutton

But very positive about the others which, now that I see them listed, form a fairly formidable list -

[The Capitalism Papers](#) by Jerry Mander

[Democracy Incorporated](#) by Sheldon Wolin

[Buying Time - the delayed crisis of democratic capitalism](#); by Wolfgang Streeck

[Death of a Nation; a new History of Germany](#) Stephen A'Barrow

[Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human](#)

[Consciousness](#) by Frederic Laloux

[The Puritan Gift](#) - a lovely book by a couple of octogenarians about the fall of American capitalism

[Cooperatives](#) - a post about a couple of books

[Our Carbon Democracy](#) - a very thoughtful book by an anthropologist
[The Confidence Trap](#) by David Runciman
Naomi Klein's [This Changes Everything](#) - about how to avoid the doomsday scenario
[Being Mortal - illness, medicine and what matters in the end](#)

Some light relief was brought by -

[The Scots' Crisis of Confidence](#) Carol Craig
[What you really need to know about the internet](#) by John Naughton
[Peeling the Onion](#) Guenther Grass' so poetic autobiography
[The World of Yesterday](#) by Stefan Zweig
[The Hidden Pleasures of Life](#) by Theodor Zeldin

[Key Books of the Century](#) was an important series in which I tried to identify texts which had made an impact on our thinking - many of which have echoes today....

2. Recommended Blogs

All blogs have a "blogroll" - many of which are outdated. I try to keep mine up to date
A few of the good ones send me automatic updates - generally the collective sites such as [Eurozine](#) journal, [RSA](#) and [the Real World Economist](#) blogs; the great [Scottish Review](#) E-journal; and one single blogger [How to Save the World](#).

Those I have discovered in the past year or so which deserve a special mention include -

- [Poemas del rio Wang](#) - the most amazing site which tends to focus on memories of old central and east European lands; which runs some trips to them; but whose [current series is on Iran](#)
- [That's How the Light Gets In](#) - the imaginative site of a retired Liverpoolian Polytechnic lecturer with strong cultural tastes
- [Michael Roberts blog](#) - an elegantly written Marxist economist blog
- [Econblog101](#) - a blog about economic matters written by a German
- [Club Orlov](#) - a very original "end-of-oil" blog by a writer who has written several fascinating books
- [Stumbling and Mumbling](#) - a rather academic blog with, however, good hyperlinks
- [Britain is no Country for Older Men](#) - an informative (if rather sexist) blog which celebrates the life achievements of various unsung heroes
- [Paul Cairney; politics and public policy](#) - one of the best academic blogs for me, written by a Scottish Professor who explains in clear language the approach to various aspects of public policy

CONCLUSION

My blog's masthead has a ringing statement that a post of several years back is as good as yesterday's. But the architecture of blogs honours only the most recent.

In a spirit of defiance I have therefore prepared this book version of the last year's posts.....I thought of calling it "*Chairman Ron's Collected Thoughts*" (as my own preemptive strike on sarcastic friends) - but settled instead on "*In Praise of Doubt*".



Of course such an endeavour smacks of egocentricity - but bear in mind that *one of the purposes of the blog is to give (posterity?) a sense of what it was like to be in the skin of an engaged man of second half of the 20th century.....* but with a rather more intellectual bent than the [usual collection of diaries](#)

Blogging, as the Introduction argued, focuses the mind - although the balance of advice seems to be not to try to make a book from blogposts.

But I've found that this (first) run at it has been enormously helpful -

- It has made me think about patterns in the past year's posts
- Encouraged even more deliberation in the choice of subjects; and of appropriate images to go with the text
- Inspired me to make lists of what for me are key books, painters, blogs and websites

This, after all, is the blog of a self-confessed "resource-person" and explorer.....

I want (indeed need) to share the results of what I've taken (and been given) from this life...

In a sense my blog is my answer to those, like Macbeth, who say that life is but

..... a tale
*Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

Just Words? How language gets in the way

Ronald G Young MA MSc

CONTENTS

1. Purpose
2. Searching for the heart of the onion
3. New words and phrases can cause amnesia!
4. Critiquing the professionals.....
5. Glossary
6. Floating in words and metaphors
7. The role of international agencies in creating La Pensee Unique
8. The importance of satire
9. The way forward
10. Further Reading

1. Purpose

*So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years -
... Trying to use words, and every attempt
is a new start, a and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
for the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
one is no longer disposed to say it.*

*And so each venture
is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
with shabby equipment always deteriorating
in the general mass of imprecision of feeling*

East Coker; Four Quartets
TS Eliot

History is assumed to consist of hard events like wars and revolts. But such events don't just happen - they are caused by what goes on inside our minds - not just feelings of ambition; fear; greed; resentment; but the stories (theories) we use to make sense of events. And they are legitimised by the words we use.

Words are very powerful - indeed have a life of their own - some more so than others. Once we stop thinking about the words we use, what exactly they mean and whether they fit our purpose, the words and metaphors (and the interests behind them) take over and reduce our powers of critical thinking. One of the best essays on this topic is George Orwell's "[Politics and the English language](#)" Written in 1947, it exposes the way certain clichés and rhetoric stifle our thinking capacity - for example how the use of the passive tense undermines the notion that it is people who take decisions and should be held accountable for them.

Fifty years before Orwell, Ambrose Bierce was another (American) journalist whose pithy and tough definitions of everyday words, in his newspaper column, attracted sufficient attention to justify a book "[The Devil's Dictionary](#)" whose fame continues unto this day. A dentist, for example, he defined as "a magician who puts metal into your mouth and pulls coins out of your pocket". A robust scepticism about both business and politics infused his work - but it did not amount to a coherent statement about power.

Twenty years I started to develop a glossary of some 100 words and phrases used by officials, politicians, consultants and academics in the course of government reform. Its updated version offers some definitions which at least will get us thinking more critically about our vocabulary - if not actually taking political actions. While working on it I came across John Saul's [A Doubter's Companion - a dictionary of aggressive common sense](#)¹ issued in 1994 which talks of the

"humanist tradition of using alphabetical order as a tool of social analysis and the dictionary as a quest for understanding, a weapon against idée reçues and the pretensions of power".

¹ an interview with him at <http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/saul.html>

Saul contrasts this approach with that "of the rationalists to the dictionary for whom it is a repository of truths and a tool to control communications".

I suppose, therefore, that this glossary of mine is written in the humanist tradition of struggle against power - and the words they use to sustain it. The glossary therefore forms part of a wider commentary on the effort various writers have made over the ages to challenge the pretensions of the powerful (and of the "thought police" who have operated on their behalf).

And, of course, the role of satire, caricature and cartoons, poetry and painting should not be forgotten! Nor the role of films and TV series these days.

2. Searching for the heart of the onion

I have been heavily involved in reform efforts (and words) now for almost 50 years. I was part of that post-war generation which first succumbed to the blandishments of social sciences² as my university subjects in 1962. Between 1968 and 1991 I was first a local councillor then powerful regional politician in Scotland; and the last 20 years I have spent advising government units in 8 central European and central Asian countries.

The social sciences were just beginning to flex their muscles in my student days and popular management texts also beginning to appear (we forget that Peter Drucker invented the genre only in the late 1950s). Books such as Marris and Rein's *Dilemmas of Social Reform* (1968); Donald Schoen's *Beyond the Stable State* (1971); and Hecllo and Wildavsky's *The Private Government of Public Money* (1974) impressed me enormously - not only for their application of social science to topics such as the fight against poverty; organisational structures and budgeting (respectively) but also for the clarity of their language. And the combination, between 1968 and 1985 of academic and political work gave me both the incentive and opportunity to explore what light that burgeoning academic literature could throw on the scope for government actions (and structures) for social improvement.

Not least of my puzzlements was about the source and nature of power. And the story told by one of the architects of the British NHS (Aneurin Bevan) about his own search for power - from his own municipality through trade unions to the heights of the British Cabinet - used the powerful metaphor of the onion. As each layer peels away, another appears - there is no heart!

I always knew that the best way to understand a subject was to write about it. And therefore developed the habit of writing papers to help me as much as others make sense of the various path-breaking initiatives in which I was involved - particularly trying to make government more "inclusive" both in its style and policy impact. The audience for such writing was practitioners - rather than academics - and also, with my first little book *The Search for Democracy* (1976), community activists who needed some help in confronting the more sophisticated bureaucracy (and words) with which they were confronted after a major reorganisation. So the language had to be clear - but not superficial.

This perhaps explains any idiosyncrasies in the voice I have developed. And writing that first book made me aware how few books seemed to be written to help the average person understand a

² inspired by the writings of such varied figures as Tony Crosland, RH Tawney [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R. H. Tawney](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R._H._Tawney), EP Thompson (eg *Out of Apathy*) and Bernard Crick (his *In Defence of Politics* (1962))

subject or question. When I looked again at the books I knew, I realised most were written for one of the following reasons-

- help people pass examinations (requiring compressing of knowledge into artificial disciplines);
- make a reputation or money (requiring minimising or discrediting of other writers)
- advance a new tendentious theory

The Readers and Writers Cooperative which started in the early 1970s (now the highly successful "For Beginners" series) was the first to use a more user-friendly approach to issues. And how helpful the Dummies' Guide series are! Even Rough Guides has muscled in on this approach.

This particular effort started, I suppose, way back in 1999 when I selected about 40 words for a glossary which accompanied a little book I wrote then (*In Transit - notes on good governance*) which tried to capture my understanding of what was then the fast-moving field of public administration - for a younger generation of central europeans. My definitions were jazzed up in order to provoke thought - eg performance measurement; "*judging an organisation by measuring what it produces, rather than whom it keeps happy or employed. Most usefully done on a comparative basis - over time: or among units performing similar work*".

In 2008, the glossary I left behind in a major report - [Learning from experience; some reflections on how training can help develop administrative capacity](#) - was more outrageous.

I should emphasise that this is not a Cynic's Dictionary - although I readily confess to the occasional lapse into self-indulgent delight in shocking. But the topic of politics, power and government reform is too important for cynicism. It does, however, require a strong dose of scepticism.

3. New words and phrases can cause amnesia!

We should be on our alert whenever we spot a new phrase entering government discourse. New words and phrases put a particular spin on an issue and often carry the hidden implication that a new problem has just arisen.. At first I was amused at the way, for example, the vocabulary for "poverty" changed over time - inequality, disadvantage, deprivation, social malaise, marginalisation, social exclusion, social injustice etc. Jules Feiffer had a nice cartoon about it in which he has a poor kid repeat the various words which had been used to describe his condition and then said ruefully, "at least my vocabulary is improving"!

But I now realise that three powerful forces propelled these verbal gymnastics - first the need of governments to avoid admission of failure - better to imply a new condition had arisen! But the new vocabulary kills institutional memory and prevents us from exploring why previous solutions have failed

Professional interests tend also to arise around each new definition - and create a second, powerful interest favouring new vocabulary. Mystification is one of several methods used by professionals to protect their power and income.

And the last decade or so has seen a third reason for us to pay more attention to the language we use - governments have fallen even further into the hands of spin doctors and corporate interests³ and a powerful new verbal smokescreen has arisen to try to conceal this. "Evidence-based policy-making" is typical - first the arrogant implication that no policy-making until that point had been based on evidence; and the invented phrase concealing the fact that policy is increasingly being crafted without evidence in order to meet corporate interests! "There is no better lie than a big one!"

4. Critiquing the professionals....

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.

JM Keynes (General Theory 1935) http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_Maynard_Keynes

In the 1970s, a South American priest Ivan Illich attacked professionals and to the mystification of their processes and language - with his various books which eloquently argued against the damage done to learning by formal schooling methods (*Deschooling Society*); and to health by doctors and hospitals (*Medical Nemesis*).

Stanislaw Andreski was one of the few academics who dared attack the pretensions of the social sciences - in his *Social Sciences as Sorcery* (1973 - now out of print).

The importance of demystifying complex language was continued by C Wright Mills in the 1950s and 1960s who once famously summarised a 250 pages book written in tortuous syntax by the sociologist Talcott Parsons in 12 pages!

Alaister Mant extended the attack to contemporary leadership (*Leaders we Deserve 1983* - also out of print) - puncturing somewhat the mythology about business leaders which was being spread in the popular management books which were beginning to sell like hot potatoes. Henry Mintzberg - a Canadian management academic - is about the only one who has written simply about what managers actually do (and attacked MBAs) and, in so doing, has stripped management literature of most of its pretensions.

By reducing management exhortations to 99 self-contradictory proverbs Hood's *Administrative Argument* (1991 and also, mysteriously, out of print) showed us how shallow management ideologies are. In 1992 John Ralston Saul gave us a powerful but idiosyncratic critique of technical expertise in *Voltaire's Bastards - the dictatorship of reason in the west*.

In 1996 Harold Perkins gave us a highly critical account of *The Third Revolution - Professional Elites in the Modern World* - whose moral critique is all the more powerful for its academic origin.

³ See section 6

By showing the parallels with religious doctrine, Susan George challenged the economic belief systems which sustained the World Bank (*Faith and Credit - the World Bank's secular empire* (1994). It was easier for people like Huycinski to take the scalpel to management gurus in *Management Gurus - what makes them and how to become one* (1993) since they are only peripherally of academia.

And a once worthy venture - the European Union - has, sadly, developed such powerful interests of its own that it too is part of this significant obfuscation with its use of such phrases as "subsidiarity".

5. GLOSSARY

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.
Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"
"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.
"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."
Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. "They've a temper, some of them—particularly verbs, they're the proudest—adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs—however, I can manage the whole lot! Impenetrability! That's what I say!"

Accountability; the requirement that those in power *explain - in a transparent, regular, structured and truthful way - what actions they have authorised and why*. The corollary is that any failure of their explanations to satisfy will lead to sanctions - including dismissal. See also "Open Government"

Address; (as in "the paper addresses the issue of...") In the 2000s I got really fed up with the "newspeak" of a British HRM (see entry) consultant who would use this phrase (amongst other wanker phrases). It epitomised for me the spinelessness of the breed, the reluctance to "confront" problems.....When I hear the verb now, I am tempted to reply - "return to sender"!

Adversarial systems; the more political parties have in common (UK and US) the more they pretend to be poles apart and fight an aggressive, winner-take-all, no-holds-barred contest which leaves no room for civilised discourse; nor policy consensus. Bad policy-making is normally the result

Agent; *an intermediary who performs actions on behalf of another*. A huge theoretical literature was built around this concept in the 1980s - to try to demonstrate the way in which public servants developed interests separate from that of the public - and to justify privatisation and the separation of public budget-holders from those who supplied public services. Pity that there are so few of these academics now bothering to develop a literature about the (actual rather than theoretical) self-serving and downright immoral behaviour of many of those who now own and manage the privatised bodies and "arms' length" agencies!

Agencies; *pretend companies* - with Chief Executives and others with hugely inflated salaries and pension rights.

Agnostic; *someone who doubts*

Ambition; what makes the world go....

"Our system obliges us to elevate to office precisely those persons who have the ego-besotted effrontery to ask us to do so; it is rather like being compelled to cede the steering wheel to the drunkard in the back seat loudly proclaiming that he knows how to get us there in half the time. More to the point, since our perpetual electoral cycle is now largely a matter of product recognition, advertising, and marketing strategies, we must be content often to vote for persons willing to lie to us with some regularity or, if not that, at least to speak to us evasively and insincerely. In a better, purer world—the world that cannot be—ambition would be an absolute disqualification for political authority" (David Hart).

Assumptions; *the things other people make* - which cause problems. Parsed - "I think; you assume; (s)he fucks up". Project management techniques do require us to list assumptions and identify and manage risks - but in the field of technical Assistance these are just boxes to tick. In any project, the best approach is to list the worst things which could happen, assume they will occur and plan how to minimise their frequency and effects.

Audit; *something both overdone and underdone* - overdone in volume and underdone in results. A process more feared at the bottom than at the top as frequent recent scandals (Enron; global banking scandals have demonstrated). See also "Law"

Benchmark; *a technical-sounding term which gives one's discourse a scientific aura.*

Bottleneck; *what prevents an organisation from achieving its best performance - always located at the top!*

Bureaucracy; literally "*rule by the office*" (and the strictly defined powers which surround it - as distinct from rule by whim). See "rule of law". The adjective (bureaucratic) has now become a term of abuse.

Capacity; *something which other people lack*

Capacity development; *something which consultants recommend and which generally boils down to some training programmes.* In fact capacity is developed by a combination of practice and positive feedback.

Capital punishment; "*Everyone knows that capital punishment means that those without the capital get the punishment.*"

Change; *something which was difficult to start in public organisations in the 1970s and is now difficult to stop.*

Change agent; in the beginning a brave person - now a spiv.

Citizen; *a displaced person in the modern polis* - replaced by the customer who has to have money and spend it before any rights can be exercised. Here is [an excellent article](#) which explores the significance and implications of the various terms and roles

Civil servant; *someone who used to be able to stand up to Ministers.*

Client; *someone receiving a (complex) service from a professional* - usually with the protection of a professional code.

Coalition; a government composed of political parties which have normally fought one another in an election; who have not gained sufficient seats to form a majority government; and who cooperate with other parties to avoid facing the electorate again. Seen by some as highly civilised (encouraging consensual qualities) and by others as highly undemocratic (smoke-filled rooms)

Collateral damage; *accidental shootings of innocent citizens.*

Commodification; *to put a market value on services which were previously offered voluntarily and offering them for sale on the market in order to make a profit.*

Communications; *the first thing which people blame when things go wrong* - parsed "I communicate; you misunderstand; he/they don't listen".

Compliance; *consistency with a required outcome.* Traditionally called "obedience".

Consultant; *a con-man who operates like a sultan!* An outsider who knows almost nothing about an organisation who is brought in to give the air of objectivity to outrageous changes the bosses have already agreed amongst themselves.

Consultation; *the skill of bouncing other people to agree with what you have already decided.*

Contract out; as in "put out a contract on" - *to wipe out.*

Control; *Something we try to do to others and lie that we do to ourselves.* Government used to do it by fear - but now use a range of clever carrots and sticks - as well as words and language itself. Control used to be "ex-ante" (detailed instructions before the event) but is increasingly "ex-post" - through audit, monitoring and evaluation.

Coordination; *the lack of which is the most annoying thing for the rationalist in organisations*

Corruption; *a fashionable thing to be against.* A new anti-corruption industry of consultants has arisen which reformulates the public administration principles to which NPM (see below) is opposed, thereby generating maximum confusion. See also "integrity"

Customer; the person who has supplanted the citizen and is responsible for environmental destruction et al

Decentralisation; *a system in which local people can be made scapegoats for deterioration in service.*

Deliberative democracy; In contrast to the traditional theory of democracy, in which voting is central, [deliberative democracy theorists](#) argue that legitimate lawmaking can arise only through public deliberation - generally through the presentation of evidence and then dissection of this in discussion

Democracy; *a system which allows citizens to select, at periodical intervals, from a small group of self-selected and perpetuating elites*

Development; a good thing.

environment; what's around me which I can use and abuse for my benefit.

Effectiveness; *the quality of combining the minimum of resources to achieve specified objectives*

Efficiency; *a positive ratio between output and input.*

Empower; a classic word of the new century which suggests that *power can be benignly given - when in reality it has to be taken.*

Evaluation; *job-creation for surplus academics.* The EU has a very traditional model of evaluation - carried out by outside experts which takes so long (and is so tortuous in language) that its results cannot be used in the design of new programmes. See "learning organisation" below.

Evidence-based policy-making; a phrase which represents the hubristic peak of the generation of UK social scientism which captured the UK civil service in the late 1990s at the time its political masters succumbed to corporate interests and therefore *were practising less rather than more evidence-based policy-making!* One of the best examples of "newspeak"

Focus group; *a supposedly representative group of voters who will give policy-makers good arguments for doing nothing.*

Governance; an academic term to describe the obvious - namely that governments lacked the power to do things on their own and required to work in partnership with private and others. Found useful by the World Bank - which is not allowed to engage in political activity - to conceal the fact that they were engaged on a highly ideological mission to privatise the world and to "hollow-out" government. See [Gerry Stoker's take](#)

Good governance; from a useful insight about the importance of good government to economic and social development, it has become a pernicious phrase which is used by the global community and its experts to force developing countries to take on impossible social and political objectives. It forms the basis of the UNDP Millennium Goals. It shows great stupidity to imagine that this could be developed by a combination of moral and financial exhortations by autocracies and kleptocracies. A

few voices of common sense have suggested a more appropriate strategy would be that of "[good-enough governance](#)"

Greed; something which is killing humanity and the planet - and is epitomised by ownership of an aggressive SUV; its assumed that increasing petrol prices will drive these monsters off our street - but a touch of ridicule would also help!

Groupthink; *blinkered thinking which overcomes the leadership of an organisation when its culture has become too arrogant, centralised and incestuous*. and when it is too protected from critical messages from and about the external world

Holistic; *a magical quality - creating harmony* - which some people imagine can be created in government by appropriate mechanisms of coordination. Others argue that the job will be done naturally by a mixture of decentralisation and the market.

Hubris; *something which politicians and policy experts suffer from* - ie a belief that their latest wheeze will solve problems which have eluded the combined skills and insights of their predecessors

Human Resource management (HRM); *a label thrown at those who mask a system which treats staff and workers like dirt*. Time was when we defined "resources" of "land, labour and capital". Now "labour" is a dirty word and a 4th resource has been added - "knowledge management"....

Humility; something which politicians and policy experts have too little of

Impact; the measured effect of an activity on identified groups.

Impact assessment; a process which (a) identifies of the groups which will be affected by a policy change and (b) measures its economic impact on those groups. Clearly, very demanding! See "systems approach"

Implementation; *the act of trying to bring an intended state of affairs to fruition*. The word used in the Slavic language perhaps is more powerful - execution! In the 1970s political science developed an [important body of literature](#) which showed the various ways in which the good intentions of laws were undermined. The classic book by Wildavsky and Pressman had the marvellous sub-title - "*How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland; Or, Why It's Amazing that Federal Programs Work at All*".

Input; the resources which are put into an activity

Integrity; *something which NPM has cleaned out from public life*. The strategy that came after anti-corruption when we needed to hide the fact that corruption was actually increasing.

Joined-up government; *New Labour's euphemism for Stalinism*.

Kleptocracy; A government system in which the transfer of public resources to its elite is a principles overriding any other.

Knowledge management; *one of the many "rationalising" fads which swept across global management in the 90s which (specifically) imagined that "knowledge" (both tacit and formal) could be archived and distributed to be available at the click of a switch to anyone needing it...*

Law; *"the spider's webs which, if anything small falls into them ensnare it, but large things break through and escape". [Solon](#)*

Leader; *the head of an organisation or movement whose attributed qualities range variously from the saintly to the diabolical. Modern leaders are supposed to exercise moral authority rather than the exercise or threat of force - but few understand what this even means. Supplanted about 2000 by the notion of "followership"!*

Learning organisation; *a view that the best way for organisations to keep up with social change is through valuing their own staff by delegation and strong ongoing feedback - not by commissioning external experts to conduct complex and irrelevant evaluations.*

Legislators; *the most despised group in any society (see "parliamentary power").*

Lobbyists; *people who make the laws*

Logframe; *the bible for the Technical Assistance world which - with a list of activities, assumptions, objectives, outputs and risks - conquers the complexity and uncertainty of the world and removes the bother of creativity. For a critique see [Lucy Earle's 2003 paper](#) on my website -*

Manage; *to make a mess of.*

Market; *a place or system governed by rules which sets prices through the interaction of buyers and sellers. Under severely restrictive assumptions it can produce what economists call "optimum" results. The most important of these assumptions are - scale (large numbers of sellers; perfect information; and absence of social costs). In the real world, few of these conditions exist. See also "quasi-market" <http://rwer.wordpress.com/2011/06/09/markets-are-us/>*

Minister; *etymologically "one who acts on the authority of another" - ie the ruler. In some countries they last some time (longer often than many civil servants); in others (eg UK) they last barely a year!*

Mentor; *someone whose experience has given them a high reputation - whose advice can be used to guide others. Sometime adopted as a formal role in organisations.*

Modernise; *to dismantle something which just required a touch of oil.*

Monitor; *a school prefect*

Neo-liberalism; *one of the deadliest ideologies*

New public management (NPM); the body of literature which has in the past 20 years replaced that of old public administration. It has borrowed its concepts entirely from private sector management and has encouraged governments throughout the world -

- to see the "citizen" as a "consumer" of services
- to reduce civil service skills to drafting of contracts; definition of service targets; and regulation for services which are managed at "arms-length" by the private sector, other state bodies or NGOs
- to set up reward systems and penalties to ensure targets are met

It slowly dawned even on the NPM zealots that such an approach is positively Soviet in its inflexible emphasis on targets - and that the reward systems undermine the teamwork and policy coordination which good policies require. But NPM's apparent "rationality" gives it a legitimacy which makes it difficult to budge...

OECD; the club of the rich nations - an apparently neutral body which was in fact one of the most important proselytisers of NPM

Open government; an apparent contradiction in terms - "governing" classically involves haggling, compromising, striking deals which will never look good in the cold light of public scrutiny. And even the publication of raw data can prove embarrassing to governments. But Freedom of Information Acts are being passed throughout the world - initially reactive rather than proactive and generally protective of "sensitive" information. Just a pity that this coincides with the run-down of investigative journalism - although a combination of citizen activists with new technology could ultimately prove a powerful combination. <http://www.foia.blogspot.com/>

Outcome; the wider societal impact which a policy seems to have.

Output; the immediate way in which the faithful implementation of a policy can be measured.

Parliamentary power; when exercised negatively (in the critique and adjustment of incoherent government proposals), something to value very highly. When exercised positively (as legislative initiatives) something to treat as "pork-trough or barrel" politics.

Performance management; the system which sets targets and rewards and penalises accordingly.

Performance-orientation; a concern for the results of inputs and spending - supposedly in improved customer satisfaction.

Policy; a statement of the intentions of government.

Policy review; the critical assessment of the outcomes and outputs of a policy field. This can be carried out within government - or by academic bodies and think-tanks and commissioned by various bodies including government.

Political party; *the last bastion of scoundrels*

Politician; someone elected by voters who is, in theory, accountable to them but in fact does what his party and its leadership tells him - since this is the only way to survive let alone climb the greasy pole to advancement. Rebels become mavericks.

Politics, "*A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage*" (Bierce - Devil's Dictionary)

Populism; movements which take democracy too far.

Post-modern; Anything goes "*The refusal to describe humanity's progress as a rational process whose principles can be mastered - as though historical progress were one more step on the way to heaven*" (from intro to *Postmodern Public Administration* by HD Millar and C Fox)

Priorities; "Gouverner", as the French say "c'est choisir". State bodies and services can never do equal justice to all the laws they are required to implement. Many new member states continue to churn out strategic documents which are checklists of good intentions - which brings the law into disrepute.

Progress; cars travelling slower in cities than 100 years ago;

Project management; *a good idea!* The religion of the new generation which operates from hand to mouth on external funding. See also "assumptions" and "logframe".

Public administration; a phrase which reminds us that state bodies serve the public - not the state!!!

Public management; something cleverer than public administration - which therefore warrants higher rewards and excuses shady behaviour.

Quality management; a fashionable term of the 1990s of which we now hear little.

Quasi-market; *a pretend market.* In the misguided attempt to introduce business systems into public services, governments have tried to get everyone to compete against one another. Naturally this requires a lot of paperwork and bureaucrats (disguised under the term "transaction costs") - which is, curiously, what the reforms were supposed to get away from! See also "side-effects".

Rationality; how many people remember the incredible debate in academic circles in the 1960s and 1970s about rationality, bureaucracy and politics - and whether it was ever possible to have significant policy changes as distinct from incremental fudge ("disjointed incrementalism" as Lindblom called it)? Now we seem to have the opposite problem. Sadly, few academics seem to be discussing it.

Reengineer; to take apart and build in a different way. A new term in the public sector for an interest that goes back to the zero-budgeting of the 1960s. Why is it I always think of Stalin's epithet for Soviet writers "Engineers of the human soul" when I hear the re-engineering word?

Reform: *to divert attention from core questions by altering organisational boundaries and responsibilities*

Regulation; as natural monopolies have been privatised, a vast system of public regulation has been set up to control the obvious consequences of private monopolies. See also "regulatory reform"

Regulatory reform: "reforming regulations that raise unnecessary obstacles to competition, innovation and growth, while ensuring that regulations efficiently serve important social objectives" (OECD)

Rule of law; the principle that no-one is above the law. See also "Law".

Sceptic; an aggressive agnostic - a quality which is greatly missed these days

Scrutiny; a political form of audit which became popular in the UK recently to give local politicians something to do after local government had been stripped of most of its functions.

Services; what the outputs of government activities should give us - but rarely does.

Side-effects; unanticipated and negative impacts of policy interventions - generally more powerful than the positive. Can lead to a fatalistic view of policy-making (see Hood)

Social capital; a term brought into the currency of think-tanks and government by the combined efforts of Robert Putnam and [the World Bank](#). Most of us understand it by the simpler trust 'trust'.

Society; what used to bear the responsibility for public services and is now being asked again to take them over (see "Big Society")

State; [a bad thing](#) - at least for worshippers of NPM

Strategy; a statement of how an organisation understands the environment in which it is working; what problems or opportunities it sees as priority to deal with - and how it proposes to do that.

Strategic; *what I consider important*

Strategic management; a proactive style of management

street-level officials; a term used to describe those officials who are in close contact with the members of the public and have to exercise discretion and judgement in their behaviour (field; front-line). Its positive sense is that they often have a better sense of what the public needs than senior management. Its negative sense is that, distant from control, such officials can more easily engage in self-serving behaviour.

Subsidiarity; a term used by the Catholic hierarchy which is now part of EU rhetoric - can be used to legitimise the further stripping of state functions. Its origin lies apparently in Thomas Aquinas and the justification for government action only where private initiative is insufficient or lacking.

Sustainable; *a word which, by being placed in front of development, has lost its meaning*

Systems approach; an approach to management which appreciates the complexity of the environments in which interventions take place and invites teams to invent their own solutions based on a systematic definition of the problem facing the customer.

<http://www.thesystemsthinkingreview.co.uk/index.php?pg=18&backto=1&utwkstoryid=257>

Targets; what those in power use to measure the performance of - and to blame - others

Teamwork; *a word to beware!* Generally used by those in power to get their way while seeming democratic. While true that decisions taken as a result of joint discussion can be often better (and more robust) than those imposed, a lot depends on the manner in which the discussion is held - whether it is structured in a way designed to elicit problems and ideas or, rather, to sanction a dominant view (see groupthink). See Belbin for details of team roles and structures

Think-tank; *the shock-troops of neo-liberalism.* Apparently neutral bodies (funded, however, by big business) which marketed the products for the transformation of the rational-legal state into a state of neo-liberal governance.

Tools of government; the various ways government tries to make you do what they think is good for you. Laws do not implement themselves. Their implementation requires a commitment to change which cannot be taken for granted in societies whose populations are struggling to survive and whose new rulers - many uncertain of how long they will survive in office - are subject to temptations of short-term personal gains.

In such contexts, is it realistic to expect policy-makers and civil servants to have an overriding concern for future public benefit?

To explore that question requires us to look at the wider issue of motivation. The table sets out **seven different motivations** which can be found in people - and some of the policy tools which would be relevant for such motivations.

Legalism, for example, assumes that people know about laws and will obey them - regardless of the pull of extended family ties (eg for recruitment). Training and functional review assumes that people simply need to understand in order to take the relevant action.

Other tools assume that man is basically a calculating machine. And so on....In 2008 the British National Audit Office commissioned [a study on sanctions and rewards in the public sector](#) - the only such government review I know

However, as Colin Talbot points out in his new book on theories of Performance, the assessment is based on discredited rationalistic theory of behaviour

Table; Motives and tools in the change process

Motivating Factor	Example of tool	Particular mechanism
1. Understanding	Training Campaigns Counting and comparing - league tables	Rational persuasion Appeal to common sense Questioning when one's body compares badly
2. Commitment	Leadership Consultation and cooperation Training	Legitimisation; inspiration Shared vision Pride (in behaving professionally)
3. Personal Benefit	Pay increase and bonus Promotion (including political office) Good publicity Winning an award	Monetary calculation ambition Reputation; Psychological Status
4. Personal Cost	Named as poor performer Demotion Report cards	Psychological (Shame) Monetary pride
5. Obligation	Law Action plan Family ties	Courts Managerial authority Social pressure
6. Peer influence	Peer review Bribery Quality circles	Pressure from colleagues
7. Social influence	Opinion surveys	Feedback from public about service quality

Source; an earlier version of this originally appeared in Young (EU Tacis 2005)

Governments trying to improve the performance of state bodies have also made increasing use of "league tables". This involves audit bodies, for example, collecting and publishing comparative information about the performance of individual schools and hospitals in an attempt to persuade senior managers to address the problems of poor performance (1.3 in table). This can also act as a market-type force - bringing the force of public opinion against the organisation (4.3 in table).

Training; *"surgery of the mind"*. A marvellous phrase an old political colleague of mine used to describe the mind-bending and propaganda which goes on in a lot of workshops.

Transparency; an EU buzz-word - meaning exposing the outside world to the tortuous procedures and language of the European Commission. The reaction to the coverage which Wikileaks gave to the leaked US Embassy cables shows how skin-deep is the commitment to transparency.

Trust; *something which economists and their models don't have and which, therefore, is assumed by them not to exist within organisations.* As economic thinking has invaded public organisations, everyone has been assumed to be a "rent-seeker" - and a huge (and self-fulfilling) edifice of checks and controls have been erected

Whistle-blower; someone without authority who blows a whistle - and brings everyone down on them for the chaos they cause.

Invitation

Feedback on definitions would be much appreciated - as well as further reading and references

6. Floating in words, metaphors and language

In 1979 some British citizens became so incensed with the incomprehensible language of official documents, letters and forms that they set up a campaign called "The Plain English Campaign". It was its activities in making annual awards for good and bad practice that shamed most organisations - public and private - into reshaping their external communications. Their website www.plainenglish.co.uk contains their short but very useful manual; a list of alternative words; and lists of all the organisations which have received their awards.

But they have seem to have worked in vain - since, in 2007, the Local Government Association felt it necessary to [recommend that 100 words be banned](#) (not the same thing as book burning!!), And two years later it had [expanded the list to 200 words](#). Some of the words have me baffled (I have not lived in the UK for 20 years!) but I find this is a quite excellent initiative. I have a feeling that it may not - in the aftermath of a General election and massive public cuts - have been taken seriously enough. The offensive words included -

Advocate, Agencies, Ambassador, Area based, Area focused, Autonomous, Baseline, Beacon, Benchmarking, Best Practice, Blue sky thinking, Bottom-Up, Can do culture, Capabilities, Capacity, Capacity building, Cascading, Cautiously welcome, Challenge, Champion, Citizen empowerment, Client, Cohesive communities, Cohesiveness, Collaboration, Commissioning, Community engagement, Compact, Conditionality, Consensual, Contestability, Contextual, Core developments, Core Message, Core principles, Core Value, Coterminosity, Coterminous, Cross-cutting, Cross-fertilisation, Customer, Democratic legitimacy, Democratic mandate, Dialogue, Double devolution, Downstream, Early Win, Embedded, Empowerment, Enabler, Engagement, Engaging users, Enhance, Evidence Base, Exemplar, External challenge, Facilitate, Fast-Track, Flex, Flexibilities and Freedoms, Framework, Fulcrum, Functionality, Funding streams, Gateway review, Going forward, Good practice, Governance, Guidelines, Holistic, Holistic governance, Horizon scanning, Improvement levers, Incentivising, Income streams, Indicators, Initiative, Innovative capacity, Inspectorates (a bit unfair!), Interdepartmental surely not?), Interface, Iteration, Joined up, Joint working, level playing field, Lever (unfair on Kurt Lewin!), Leverage, Localities, Lowlights (??), Mainstreaming, Management capacity, Meaningful consultation (as distinct from meaningless?), Meaningful dialogue (ditto?), Mechanisms, menu of Options, Multi-agency, Multidisciplinary, Municipalities (why?), Network model, Normalising, Outcomes, Output, Outsourced, Overarching, Paradigm, Parameter, Participatory, Partnership working, Partnerships, Pathfinder, Peer challenge, Performance Network, Place shaping, Pooled budgets, Pooled resources, Pooled risk, Populace, Potentialities, Practitioners (what's wrong with that?), Preventative services, Prioritization, Priority, Proactive (damn!), Process driven, Procure, Procurement, Promulgate, Proportionality, Protocol, Quick win (damn again), Rationalisation, Revenue Streams, Risk based, Robust, Scaled-back, Scoping, Sector wise, Seedbed, Self-aggrandizement (why not?), service users, Shared priority, Signpost, Social contracts, Social exclusion, spatial, Stakeholder, Step change, Strategic (come off it!), Strategic priorities, Streamlined, Sub-regional, Subsidiarity (hallelujah); Sustainable (right on!), sustainable communities, Symposium, Synergies, Systematics, Taxonomy, Tested for Soundness, Thematic, Thinking outside of the box, Third sector, Toolkit, Top-down (?), Trajectory, Tranche, Transactional, Transformational, Transparency, Upstream, Upward trend, Utilise, Value-added, Vision, Visionary,

And what about coach, mentor, drivers, human resource management, social capital, tsar ?????
Anyway - a brilliant initiative (if you will forgive the term)

And in 2009 a UK Parliamentary Committee actually invited people to submit examples of confusing language which they then reported about in a report entitled [*Bad Language!*](#)

I suppose if post-modernists have done anything, they have made us more aware of language. After all, they spend their time deconstructing texts! And they have been active in the field of public administration - [*Postmodern Public Administration*](#) (2007) is one taken at random - The trouble is that they play so many word games amongst themselves that what they produce is generally incomprehensible to the outsider. Despite their critiques and claims, therefore, I do not consider them helpful companions.

Before the post-modernists came along, M Edelman's book [*The Symbolic Use of Politics*](#) was published in 1964 but then ignored - not least by myself.

I have never found Chomsky an easy companion - but books like his [*Language and politics*](#) (1988) are highly relevant to this theme -

One of the most insightful texts for me, however, is Gareth Morgan's *Images of Organisation* - a fascinating treatment of the writing about organisations which demonstrates that many of our ideas about them are metaphorical : he suggests the literature uses eight "images" viz organisations as "political systems", as "instruments of domination", as "cultures", as "machines", as "organisms", as "brains", as "psychic prisons", as "flux and transformation" and as "instruments of domination".

<http://www.civilservant.org.uk/jargon.pdf>

<http://www.thepoke.co.uk/2011/05/17/anglo-eu-translation-guide/>

6. The role of international agencies in creating La Pensee Unique

The World Bank is not allowed to engage in political activity and promulgated various words (governance; social capital) to conceal the fact that they were engaged on a highly ideological mission to privatise the world and to "hollow-out" government. The OECD has perhaps been an even more effective proselytiser through the way it brings practitioners together with researchers and issues publications selling NPM.

7. The importance of satire

Satire has long been a powerful weapon against the pretensions of power - Voltaire's *Candide* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* are well-known literary examples. Ralph Steadman and Gerard Scarfe are modern caricaturists in the tradition of Hogarth; and the Liverpool poets (McGough) sustained the protestors of the 1960s. British people are not so familiar with the Bert Brecht's City poems or the savage anti-bourgeois paintings of Georg Grosz in the 1920s and 1930s.

A more recent powerful satirical essay "Democracy, Bernard? It must be stopped!" was penned by the author of the *Yes Minister* TV series and exposes the emptiness behind the rhetoric about democracy and government. It is available only on my website at -

http://www.freewebs.com/publicadminreform/key%20papers/Democracy%20_Yes%20Minister_.pdf

In 1987 Management Professor Rosabeth Kanter produced "[*Ten Rules for Stifling Initiative*](#)" which I have often used to great effect in Central Asian training sessions.

1999 saw the appearance of *The Lugano Report; on preserving capitalism in the twenty-first Century* which purported to be a leaked report from shady big business but was in fact written by Susan George.

Management guru Russell Ackoff's great collection of tongue-in-cheek laws of management - [Management F-Laws - how organisations really work](#) (2007) As the blurb put it - "They're truths about organizations that we might wish to deny or ignore - simple and more reliable guides to managers' everyday behaviour than the complex truths proposed by scientists, economists and philosophers".

An added bonus is that British author, Sally Bibb, was asked to respond in the light of current organizational thinking. Hers is a voice from another generation, another gender and another continent. On every lefthand page is printed Ackoff and Addison's *f*-Law with their commentary. Opposite, you'll find Sally Bibb's reply. A short version is [13 Sins of management](#). A typical rule is - "The more important the problem a manager asks consultants for help on, the less useful and more costly their solutions are likely to be".

Robert Greene's *48 Laws of Power* may not be satire but it is a very salutary counter to the thousands of unctuous management texts which attribute benign motives to senior management.

A spoof on the British Constitution produced recently by Stuart Weir is another good example of the power of satire - http://www.democraticaudit.eu/download/Unspoken_constitution.pdf

8. The way forward (or back?)

Ever since my acquaintance with Uzbek President Karamov's philosophy of incremental "step-by-step" change, this metaphor of steps has always amused me. As I would mischievously say to the officials I met in training sessions, simply putting one step in front of the other can often take us round in circles! As I've worked on these words - and been reminded of various key texts which have, over the centuries, tried to puncture the pretensions and deceits of the powerful and the guardians of "knowledge" which sustained them - I have realised how rare this endeavour has been. Only the specialised cognoscenti have the knowledge and authority to undertake the effort - and they have too much to lose! Of course the discipline of economics, for example, is now subjected to a lot of criticism and adjustment (at least on its edges) - and post-modernists have cleverly dissected bodies of knowledge - but hardly in a reader-friendly language!

But we are overdue a text which will give the average interested citizen the incentive to understand just how weak are the intellectual justifications for so much of the behaviour of modern elites - and satire and ridicule will probably be important elements in such an expose.

9. Further Reading

In addition to the texts quoted in the introduction above, I would add the following as useful companions in the search for understanding -

The Art of the State - culture, rhetoric and public management; Chris Hood (2000)

The Future of Governing - four emerging models; B Guy Peters (1999)

Market-driven politics - neo-liberal democracy and the public interest; Colin Leys (2003)

How Mumbo-jumbo conquered the world; Francis Wheen (2004)

<http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/sokala/wheenf.htm>

Books like *Great Planning Disasters* (Peter Hall 1982) and *Seeing Like a State - how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (James Scott 1998) showed us how bad centralised decision-making could be - and Tony Travers (*Failure in British Government; the politics of the poll tax* 1994).

Christian Wolmar (*The Great Railway Disaster* 1996) and Allyson Pollock (*NHS plc*) showed us how wasteful the private end of the spectrum was. For the effect on transition countries see <http://beyondthetransition.blogspot.com/2011/01/polish-railways-failure-of-deregulation.html>

Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of hope - reliving The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 1994); Robert Chambers (*Whose Reality Counts? - putting the first last* 1997); and Tony Gibson (*The Power in our Hands* 1996) are all important inspirations for those who believe in putting the ordinary citizen in the driving seat. Mintzberg's *The management of government* (2000) is one of the most thoughtful contributions to the question of how we should organise government.

Daniel Dorling's recent *Injustice - why social inequality persists* gives us not only a lot of useful material but, even more importantly, the suggestion that 5 belief sets sustain contemporary inequality - that elitism is efficient; greed is good; exclusion is necessary; prejudice is natural; and despair inevitable.

[Deconstructing Development Buzzwords](#)

No Comment

Historians like Arthur Schlesinger and theorists like Albert Hirschman have recorded that every thirty years or so, society shifts - essentially, from the public to the private and back again. The grass, after a while, always feels greener on the other side. The late 1940s to the late 1970s was a period of the public, the late '70s to now, the private. Now the conditions are right for another turn, to a new common life and the security and freedom it affords, but only if we make it happen by tackling a market that is too free and a state that is too remote

Compass Think Tank 2011

Decade	Themes of intellectual discussion	Key names
1930s	The managerial revolution End of capitalism	J Burnham J Strachey
1940s	Keynesism Meritocracy New world order	JM Keynes
1950s	End of ideology Revisionism Private affluence/public squalour	D. Bell A. Shonfield; Tony Crosland JK Galbraith
1960s	Worship of scale Modernisation of society Participation critique of professionals	Peter Berger Pateman; Ivan Illich
1970s	Costs of economic growth Collapse of welfare state Small is beautiful Change corporatism	EJ Mishan Buchanan E. Schumacher; L. Kohr S. Beer; A. Toffler; D. Schon Cawson
1980s	Deindustrialisation Privatisation Pursuit of excellence ecology decentralisation globalisation	Blackaby; Dyson Consultancies; World Bank Tom Peters James Lovelock OECD Stiglitz, Martin Wolf
1990s	End of history Flexibility and reengineering Reinvention of government; NPM Climate change The learning organisation Washington consensus	Fukuyama OECD Scientific community Senge World Bank
2000s	Good governance Neo-liberalism and its limits Environmental collapse Migration and social integration state building	World bank; OECD Naomi Klein Scientific community ? ?
2010s	Migration The financial system Breakdown of society Injustice	everyone Stiglitz Dorling

About the author

Ronald Young lived the first 48 years of his life in the West of Scotland - 20 of them as an aspiring academic and innovative politician in local, then Regional, Government.

The last 25 years have been spent as a consultant in central Europe and central Asia - generally leading small teams in institutional development or training projects.

Since summer 2007 he has divided his time between a flat in Sofia, a flat in Bucharest and a house in the Carpathian mountains.

In 2009 he started a website which contains the major papers he has written over the years about his attempts to reform various public organisations in the various roles he has had - politician; academic/trainer; consultant.

"Most of the writing in my field is done by academics - and gives little help to individuals who are struggling to survive in or change public bureaucracies. Or else it is propoganda drafted by consultants and officials trying to talk up their reforms. And most of it covers work at a national level - whereas most of the worthwhile effort is at a more local level.

The restless search for the new dishonours the work we have done in the past. As Zeldin once said - "To have a new vision of the future it is first necessary to have new vision of the past"

He started a blog - called [Balkan and Carpathian Musings](#) - initially to try to make sense of the organisational endeavours he has been involved in - to see if there are any lessons which can be passed on; and to restore a bit of institutional memory and social history - particularly in the field of what used to be known as "social justice".

"My generation believed that political activity could improve things - that belief is now dead and that cynicism threatens civilisation. I also read a lot and wanted to pass on the results of this to those who have neither the time nor inclination - as well as my love of painting, particularly the realist 20th century schools of Bulgaria and Belgium".

He now has a new website - [Mapping the Common Ground](#) - which is a library for articles and books he considers useful for those who - like Brecht - feel that "So ist die Welt - und muss nicht so sein"!

About the photographs

One of the things I enjoy about the blog is selecting the titles and images for the various posts.....the latter of (generally Bulgarian) paintings or woodcuts from artists such as Frans Masereel... But, for this book, I decided to use as many images from my own collection of artefacts I can justify

I always knew I loved and needed books - although hardly counting as a collector....

The point at which I became an art collector was fairly clear for me - sometime in 2008 when I had realised what a (largely hidden) treasure trove Bulgaria offered and when I bought my 10th painting or so.



But it took me somewhat longer to realise that I had also become a collector of artefacts.

Early in what became a seven-year sojourn in Central Asia, I started to return with first rugs then superbly painted plates, wooden jewellery boxes and silk scarves.

Ceramics, terra cotta figures, samovars and Afghan silk carpets soon crowded the Bucharest flat and Carpathian mountain house; then susannas (Uzbek) and Persian tapestries and the swirls of Kyrgyz design. Even hats - skull and girls' - and a couple of ornamented coats!

Glassware and silks came from a short visit to Damascus; wood carvings from Romania (as well as Bulgaria - where I also acquired old rakia glasses and modern sculptures. A Chinese wall

divider is a much appreciated delight in the attic...

LIST OF Author's PUBLICATIONS

[The Global Crisis - Telling it as it is](#)

[Crafting Effective Public Management](#)

[The Bulgarian Realists - updated edition](#)

[Introducing the Romanian Realists of the 19th and early 20th Centuries](#)

[Mapping Romania - notes on an unfinished journey \(2014\)](#)



[Introducing the Bulgarian Realists - how to get to know the Bulgarians through their paintings \(2012\)](#)

[The Search for the Holy Grail - some reflections on 40 years of trying to make government and its systems work for people 2012](#)

[Just Words](#) - a glossary and bibliography for the fight against the pretensions and perversities of power (2012)

[A Draft Guide for the Perplexed \(2011\)](#)

[The Long Game - not the log-frame; \(2011\)](#)

[Administrative Reform with Chinese Characteristics \(2010\)](#)

[Training that works! How do we build training systems which actually improve the performance of state bodies?](#) (2010) Even altho I say it myself - it is one of the best papers on the subject

[Learning from Experience - a Bulgarian project \(2009\)](#)

[Building Municipal Capacity \(2007\)](#) an interesting account of an intellectual journey

[Roadmap for Local Government in Kyrgyzstan \(2007\)](#) this is a long doc (117 pages. I enjoyed pulling out this metaphor - and developing using (in workshops) the diagram at pages 76-77

[Building Local Government in a Hostile Climate \(2006\)](#)

[Overview of PAR in transition countries \(2006\)](#) This is the paper I drafted for the European Agency for Reconstruction after the staff retreat the EAR Director invited me to speak at in June 2006 in Skopje, Macedonia. The best papers are always written after the event!

[Transfer of Functions - European experiences 1970-2000](#) I learned a lot as I drafted this paper for my Uzbek colleagues. I haven't seen this sort of typology before.

[Case Study in Organisational Development and Political Amnesia \(1999\)](#)

[In Transit - Part One](#) (1999) The first section of the book I wrote for young Central European reformers. I find it stands up pretty well to the test of time

[Annotated Bibliography for change agents](#) - For quite a few years I had the habit of keeping notes the books I was reading. Perhaps they will be useful to others?

