

Fair Observer

Monthly



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Fair Observer
Independence, Diversity, Debate

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Where Do New Dollars Come From?

Alex Gloy
August 01, 2023

In a modern economy, what money represents is not some quantity of gold but some quantity of debt. This is not only acceptable but desirable in a growth-oriented economy. Contrary to popular assumption, the vast majority of money is not created by central banks, but by private actors in the financial system.

Money makes the world go ‘round. It serves as the essential means of exchange, facilitating the exchange of goods and services by reducing friction. Money allowed billions of humans to increase their standards of living and wealth.

Despite its importance, very few could answer even the most basic questions about money: Where does it come from? How much money actually is there?

If I asked you how much money you own, you could likely determine the answer with a few clicks by checking your account balances. Store owners are aware of the dollars in their cash registers and in the bank. Any bank knows exactly how many dollars (or any other currency) are on its balance sheet. The government knows. The number of total dollars in circulation, then, should be a known quantity.

Here is an experiment you can do right now: google the question, “How many dollars exist in the world?” You will be puzzled by the result: a

wide range of different figures. For example, Wikipedia will tell you there are \$2.1 trillion in circulation, while the Federal Reserve Bank lists \$20.8 trillion as the monetary base just of the US. The Financial Accounts of the US mention \$95 trillion in outstanding public and private debt—to which we can add more than \$80 trillion in hidden debt identified by the Bank for International Settlements, bringing the total figure for American debt to over \$175 trillion. Surprisingly, the exact total number of dollars in existence remains unknown.

The lack of a definitive figure stems from varying definitions of what qualifies as money. Consider the unused portion of your credit card limit—does it fall under the category of money? Similarly, when two non-US banks engage in a cross-currency swap agreement involving US dollars, booked as potential liabilities off of the balance sheets, should that be considered money? These examples highlight the complexities and uncertainties surrounding the precise determination of the total amount of money in circulation.

What is money?

Money exists in diverse forms and exhibits varying characteristics. For instance, for a car dealer, the primary concern would not be the specific form of payment a customer uses to purchase a car. Whether the customer pays with a suitcase full of cash (money laundering concerns aside), obtains financing from a bank, or secures a loan or lease from the manufacturer's in-house financing arm, the main objective, from the dealer's point of view, would be completing the sale.

In the first scenario, the customer uses money created by the central bank, which is commonly referred to as public money.

In the second case, the customer relies on money created by the private banking sector, known as private money.

The third example involves the in-house financing arm bundling customer loans and selling them to investors in the form of collateralized car loan obligations. This practice exemplifies money creation by the shadow banking sector. (The term "shadow banking" refers to financial activities that fulfill similar functions to traditional banking but take place outside the scope of traditional banking institutions.)

These examples demonstrate the varied sources and mechanisms that create money, encompassing public money issued by central banks, private money generated by commercial banks, and even forms of money creation within the shadow banking sector.

In all three examples, debt plays a significant role as a method of payment. In our fiat monetary system, the creation of money is tied to the creation of an equivalent amount of debt. In other words, when new money is brought into existence, an accompanying debt is simultaneously created.

This means that one person's savings represent another person's debt. As a result, the total amount of money in circulation must match the overall amount of outstanding debt. This explains why, when searching for the number of dollars in existence online, it is common to encounter search results mentioning "debt."

The functioning of our monetary system can indeed be unintuitive. It can be challenging to grasp the notion that money we hold in our bank accounts represents someone else's debt and that when we transfer money, we are essentially passing on IOUs.

This lack of awareness or disbelief about the nature of money is not uncommon. Many people may view money as a tangible and independent entity without recognizing its interconnectedness with debt.

Where do the dollars come from?

I spoke about institutions that create money. "Isn't it the government that creates money?" you might ask. The reality is not so simple.

A country's central bank creates money in physical (notes, coins) and digital form (deposits credited to its clients, which are other banks). Both forms constitute a liability for the central bank. By examining its liabilities, the total amount of money created can be determined. In the case of the Federal Reserve, the US central bank, this amount currently stands at approximately \$8.25 trillion.

Of the over \$175 trillion of debt in the economy, the vast majority has not been created by the central bank but rather by the private sector. The US central bank accounts for less than 5% of total money outstanding. However, despite its small contribution, the central bank is often held responsible for the entire amount outstanding, despite this amount being 20 times greater than its own creation.

Central banks face criticism for their perceived role in "printing" vast sums of money seemingly out of thin air. However, as previously mentioned, their direct impact on the total amount of money in circulation is relatively small compared to the contributions of the private sector.

Instead of solely focusing on central banks, it can be valuable to recognize and appreciate the functioning of our monetary system. This system, despite not being backed by any physical commodity like gold, has been operational for several decades. The longevity and resilience

highlight the system's ability to facilitate economic transactions, support economic growth and maintain relative stability.

Why do we need private banks?

Money, as a medium of exchange, is a public good. However, private sector banks are permitted to create money, under strict regulations, through the issuance of loans. Why should the private sector be allowed to participate in money creation?

The reason lies in the nature of lending and the risk of individual loans. It is not feasible for average citizens to lend significant amounts of money directly to strangers for purchases like cars or homes. It would be impossible for individuals to assess creditworthiness and risk. Banks, with the help of equity buffers and deposit insurance, take care of that risk. This enables your neighbor to finance his house without you having to worry about his creditworthiness causing sleepless nights.

In theory, it is conceivable for central banks to undertake the lending function. However, central banks primarily have a public mandate to ensure monetary stability and implement monetary policy. Determining the creditworthiness of individual borrowers on a local level would require a vast network of branch offices, which could divert resources and focus away from the central bank's core responsibilities.

Private banks not only perform risk transformation, by shifting credit risk from individual depositors onto the bank, but also maturity transformation. This means that while banks provide longer-term loans to borrowers, depositors have the flexibility to access their savings daily. This maturity transformation allows banks to match longer-term loans they make with shorter-term deposits, ensuring the smooth functioning of the financial system.

Economic growth requires the expansion of debt

Most big-ticket items, like cars as mentioned in the earlier example, are financed rather than paid for in cash. As a result, availability and accessibility of credit play a vital role in facilitating car sales and driving economic activity.

A credit contraction, in which credit institutions tighten lending standards, leads to fewer loans and therefore economic contraction.

As the expansion of debt often outpaces economic output, debt service levels may eventually become overwhelming. This situation can result in borrowers being unable to meet their debt obligations, forcing banks to write off loans and thus triggering a recession. In cases where loan losses exceed safety buffers, banks may face the risk of closure. Fortunately, depositors can rely on deposit insurance schemes within certain limits, which is crucial to instill trust in private institutions despite the possibility of insolvency.

In addition to deposit insurance, trust in private institutions is also bolstered by the possibility of converting bank deposits, representing a claim against a private institution, into cash, which carries no risk of bankruptcy. However, this feature can trigger bank runs once the trust in a particular bank has been shattered.

The role of cash

Public money, in the form of cash, serves as a critical mechanism to maintain the uniform value of dollars, regardless of their issuer. Prior to the establishment of the Federal Reserve Bank System, a dollar note issued by a bank in Connecticut, for example, would be cashed at a discount to its face value when presented in New York City. Only the introduction of a central bank

ensured full fungibility of dollars regardless of their origin or issuing entity.

Bank deposits can be thought of as stablecoins, with deposit insurance and convertibility into cash functioning as the mechanism guaranteeing the 1-for-1 peg.

As we transition towards a cashless society, the role of public money (cash) as the anchor of our monetary system is undergoing a transformation. Currently, cash serves as the only means through which individuals can access public money, as only banks are permitted to hold accounts with the Federal Reserve.

This is where Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) comes in. With the eventual retirement of physical forms of money, CBDC will emerge as the sole means for central banks to directly engage with individuals.

CBDC can be thought of as tokenized cash, representing a digital form of central bank-issued currency. It retains the characteristics of cash in terms of being a liability of the central bank, ensuring its stability and reliability.

Keeping seigniorage alive

Central banks benefit from cash in circulation as cash represents interest-free debt, providing them with a significant source of income from investing proceeds in interest-bearing securities, resulting in profits known as seigniorage.

The US Federal Reserve, for example, has around \$2.3 trillion of currency in circulation. If these funds were invested at a hypothetical interest rate of 5%, the annual return would amount to \$115 billion, a sum greater than the military budget of any country other than the US and China.

With the disappearance of physical cash, the traditional source of such profits would cease to exist. However, the introduction of Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) presents an opportunity to sustain and continue generating seigniorage profits. Furthermore, public money is vital to support increasing sums of private money outstanding. The introduction of CBDC should therefore be welcomed.

A debt-based monetary system is a feature, not a bug

The current monetary system frequently faces criticism for lacking tangible backing and enabling unlimited issuance. In contrast, assets like gold and Bitcoin are seen as different because they do not represent any counterparty's obligation. However, while some proponents applaud this aspect, it can be viewed as a drawback rather than a desirable feature.

The absence of counterparty risk and limited issuance in assets like gold and Bitcoin can lead to a phenomenon known as hoarding. This hoarding behavior is reminiscent of medieval kings sitting on vast treasure chests filled with gold, rendering the gold inert and unavailable for circulation within the economy. Consequently, this results in a restricted monetary base in circulation, which hampers economic growth.

A fiat monetary system possesses the unique feature of allowing for the simultaneous creation of savings and debt, enabling economic growth even in the presence of accumulating savings. This characteristic is a significant advantage of such a system.

The potential drawback of a fiat monetary system lies in the temptation to create excessive debt or money, which can lead to devaluation. This factor renders fiat money less reliable as a store of

value, while it represents an excellent medium of exchange.

The stability and functionality of a fiat monetary system relies on individuals' willingness to hold their savings in fiat currency. While it is impossible for everyone to convert fiat into tangible assets, individuals still have the freedom to make such choices.

Despite its drawbacks, a fiat monetary system remains preferable to a system based solely on hard assets, which would create deflationary pressures and possible economic depression. The dynamic nature of a fiat system allows for central banks to make adjustments in money supply to accommodate economic needs.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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An Allegory About Unidentified Floating Objects

Ran Chakrabarti
August 04, 2023

With the recent headlines about UFOs, Ran Chakrabarti offers a playful reimagining of a civilization's encounter with mysterious travelers set in 16th-century Mexico.

With Congress recently hearing testimony from whistleblower David Grusch and retired navy pilots David Fravor and Ryan Graves in relation to strange goings-on in the skies and the alleged retrieval of crashed objects and “biologics” from other worlds, this author dug around in the archive to assess whether we’ve been here before; and what the potential consequences might be.

Tenochtitlán. Thursday, January 23, 1519.

Mayan fishermen have been reporting unidentified floating objects (UFOs) for quite some time now. These mysterious objects, often with pointed protrusions and white, flexible material have been spotted with increasing frequency by coastal dwellers on the eastern seaboard ever since the early part of 1493.

“We don’t know what they are, but they appear, often on the horizon for some time,” Ixpiyacoc, a fisherman from a small coastal town on the Yucatán peninsula told our reporter. “Then they disappear, like magic.”

“But it’s the stories of white men coming ashore with metal hats that really strike fear of the

unknown into our hearts,” he continued, looking visibly shaken.

Back in the empire, the Aztec government takes a very different view on the matter and denies the reports. “Unidentified floating objects are just a figment of people’s imagination,” said a spokesman for the Ministry of Defense in the capital, Tenochtitlán.

“These UFOs are total nonsense,” a leading scientist employed by the Ministry of Technology was quoted as saying. “We are alone on this planet, and it’s flat,” he continued.

But others are more troubled by the possibility that there could be life elsewhere on the earth and that it may be hostile. They have cautioned about the possibility of contact with other forms of intelligent life.

“Twenty years ago, we cast out a message in a clay pot from the shores of our land,” said Camaxtli, head of the Aztec Search for Terrestrial Intelligence. “Who knows whether it will ever be found by intelligent life? We just don’t know how vast the ocean is, and what’s at the other end of it,” he continued. “Whether it’s endless and stretches to infinity, we’ll just never know.”

But just what did that pot contain? “We spent a lot of time thinking what to write on the parchment and whether other forms of intelligent life would understand our phonetic glyphs,” Camxtli explained. “So we settled with pictograms of who we are and where we come from and the stars that we can see in the sky.”

However, there are those that are deeply concerned about the consequences of the pot-throwing act.

“Imagine, if someone finds it: they come; they might want our gold, our women, our men, our natural resources, our livestock. We could be

enslaved,” said a wise old man who spoke to us anonymously. “I think it was a pretty stupid thing to do, and who knows who might pick up the message?”

But the mystery doesn’t stop there. Mayan conspiracy theorists from the Yucatán peninsula talk openly about a recent meeting between their leaders and “them.” Some Aztecs have reported similar happenings.

“There are some who say that Aztec ruler, Moctezuma has already met with the strangers from elsewhere,” said an official in the Aztec government on condition of anonymity, fueling rumors that the Aztec government met with life forms from elsewhere on the beaches near the town of Cempoala.

“There are eyewitness accounts that Moctezuma met with six tall white men with beards. They rowed ashore from this strange wooden contraption called a ship, the likes of which we had never seen before,” the official continued. “Our delegation was in a state of total confusion and awe as the leader of their delegation gave them gifts and then demonstrated the power of an object that spat fire and metal balls.”

“It was extraordinary,” he continued, “The delegation took off their metal headpieces and spoke in a strange language that we could not understand and offered us a thing called ‘Christianity’ in return for our gold and silver.”

After the meeting, the Aztecs were promised one of these Unidentified Floating Objects (otherwise known as ‘ships’) and Aztec scientists are trying to reverse engineer the technology.

“Those who’ve allegedly seen these ‘ships’ just can’t believe the complexity of the engineering,” said the official. “How they manage to cross the ocean is just unbelievable.”

Many others regard these claims as completely preposterous. “If these white people exist, then why don’t they come down in front of the great pyramid at Tenochtitlán and show themselves to the world?” a skeptical Aztec elder said.

Others have a more sophisticated argument.

“Traveling beyond the speed of a paddle canoe is just not physically possible,” a leading witch doctor at the Center for Human Sacrifice went on the record as stating. “These ships just don’t exist, they can’t exist and it would defy the laws of nature if they did,” he dismissively asserted.

But some Aztec government insiders think otherwise. Internal documents seen by our reporters suggest that there could be up to 4 different species of ‘white man’ who organize themselves in what are known as ‘empires.’ While they look similar to us, they are much taller, speak in strange tongues and are obsessed with the extraction of natural resources.

Those few who allege a first-hand encounter with them tell stories that they ride on animals with four legs, which are up to five feet high.

“It was terrifying,” said an Aztec woman from the town of Texcoco to our reporter in confidence. “I was abducted by four of them who appeared from nowhere on these white four-legged beasts,” she revealed under hypnosis.

While many dismiss the phenomenon, leaked reports suggest that the Aztec government is taking the sightings very, very seriously.

“There are reports that have been leaked from the Ministry of Defense that a tall white man was found dead, washed up on the shores of the Yucatán peninsula,” village elder Quetzalxochitl told our reporters. “Nobody knows how he got there, but the rumor is that they found a strange

wooden object with a metallic barrel and a trigger mechanism.”

“They also allegedly found parchment with interesting shapes inscribed across it that potentially relate to our phonetic glyphs,” he continued “but nobody so far has been able to decipher what it means.”

Allegedly, the body of the man, the strange wooden object with the metal barrel and the parchment were rushed off to a secret Aztec research facility near Tenochtitlán and examined by a high-level committee comprising, amongst others, the Minister of Defense and the Chief Priest.

“We’ve seen a leaked transcript of the record of that meeting,” Tupac, an investigative reporter at the Tlacōpan Times, told our correspondents. “Apparently, opinion was divided. Some thought that the artifacts and the alien body were dangerous; others thought that they could be a source of great enlightenment and expressed amazement over the script on the parchment.”

“What’s really interesting about the transcript though,” Tupac continued, “was that the Minister of Defense thought that the wooden object with the metal barrel might somehow be useful against the Tlaxcaltecs.”

“It’s also clear from the transcript that the High Priest expressed reservations about the findings,” Tupac said. “The High Priest remarked, ‘What happens if this parchment leads to the erosion of our belief system and the structures that support it?’”

Others that we spoke to, however, stress that the transcript is a fake and that the event never happened. They deny that the Aztec government is in possession of the body of a white man and there

is any wooden artifact with a metal barrel or any parchment with strange writing on it.

“It’s all nonsense,” laughed General Tezcacoatl with a coy smile. “The leaked transcript is a clear forgery: you can tell by the error in the way that it is dated. It’s the wrong format. We use day, month, year, and not month, day, year,” he continued.

But notwithstanding the best efforts of the Aztec government to gloss over this strange phenomenon, the chattering classes seem to be hooked on the idea of these strange white men and how they might arrange themselves in society.

“It’s a discussion we often see in the marketplace when they go and buy their corn and beans,” local merchant Ichtaca told our reporter “But I think that these guys have just been drinking too much of that potent intoxicant, xocotātl,” he suggested dismissively.

“The implications are potentially enormous,” a professor at an independent educational institution said, on condition of anonymity. “Apart from the obvious stuff in relation to technology and security, we just don’t have a theory of knowledge that is flexible enough to explain change,” he mused. “For that, my hunch is that we are going to have to wait another 200,000 daily cycles of the sun, if (and it’s a big if) the prophecy of Thomas Kuhn writing a script called ‘The Structure of Scientific Revolutions’ is accurate,” he added.

“Just think what it would do to all our belief systems. It could turn people against the Aztec gods. If they started to think for themselves and question their own existence amongst other, more superior beings, it could be chaos,” he pondered further.

Meanwhile, the Aztec government continues to refuse to disclose their records on the matter,

saying that Unidentified Floating Objects don’t exist and are not a threat to Aztecs.

“Look, if these so-called ‘ships’ and ‘white men’ exist, and they can sail the vast oceans, they would have taken over us by now,” a leading Aztec prophet said to our reporters.

“Take a look around you, where are they?” he said, with total confidence.

Reporting by Tochtli and Ixtl on the ground

Edited by Icnoyotl in our Tenochtitlán bureau.

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[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Israel Moves to Round Two of Its Democracy Stress Test

Gary Grappo
August 07, 2023

Benjamin Netanyahu has set off alarm bells by curtailing the Israeli courts' ability to supervise the government. When legislative activity resumes in November, we will see if his judicial reform will continue as planned.

Having successfully overturned the supreme court's "reasonableness" doctrine, Israel's right-wing Knesset coalition now advances to the next round in its plan to re-write—and re-right—the rules of judicial authority in the Jewish state.

Opposition members having walked out, Israel's Knesset passed legislation last week by a 64-0 vote to eliminate "reasonableness" as a ground for the supreme court to overturn legislative and executive actions. A full range of Israelis, including members of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), former heads of Israel's intelligence and military services, the financial and tech communities and most secular Israelis, vigorously opposed the move. The initiative has sparked massive protest marches and demonstrations throughout the country since the beginning of this year, including perhaps the largest, on July 24, the day the Knesset vote took place.

Opponents of this latest law have vowed to continue their fight to blunt the action. The bill, ironically, has been submitted to the supreme court for judicial review. The court, which decided early this week to hear the case, will face the awkward legal conundrum of ruling on a piece of legislation

that limits its own authority—a classic battle royale involving a supreme court's power of judicial review if there ever was one. Think Israel's version of America's historic 1803 case, *Marbury v. Madison*.

That won't be the end of it, however. Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling coalition consists of an alliance between the traditionally conservative Likud party and an assortment of extremist fruits and nuts from Israel's far-right, ultranationalist, Jewish supremacist, ultra-Orthodox and anti-Arab parties. They have opposed several rulings of the supreme court, including those that struck down the government's efforts to annex West Bank territory and required Haredi Jews to serve in the IDF.

Having failed repeatedly to reverse the court's decisions on these and other matters, the coalition has borrowed a page from the American Republican party. When you can't win playing by the rules, change the rules. Only, the rules they intend to change form the bedrock of Israel's democracy: the checks and balances of the court against excessive power by the executive or legislature, which in Israel are virtually the same thing; Israel's unicameral, parliamentary democracy means the majority coalition of the Knesset names the prime minister, the head of government. (Israel's presidency is largely ceremonial.)

More anti-democratic moves on the docket

Notwithstanding the upcoming supreme court referral, the coalition plans two additional measures to circumscribe the court's authority. One would change the way justices are chosen, placing the appointment of new justices under the control of the Knesset. Currently, a Judicial Selection Committee nominates judges for the Israeli president to confirm. The committee is comprised of three court justices (including the chief justice), two Knesset members, two cabinet

members (including the attorney general) and three members of Israel's bar association. The coalition's stated reason is to place more friendly, i.e., more right-wing, judges on the court.

The other proposed "reform" measure would allow the Knesset to strike down a supreme court ruling by a simple majority. That plan would appear to fly in the face of a core principle of most democracies, which is separation of powers. But it would give the ruling coalition the power they have long sought to move Israel in the direction of a purely sectarian state where religious law and practices would effectively trump secular law. Additionally, it would allow for effectively unlimited land confiscation in the West Bank, if not outright annexation.

The Knesset will adjourn until October, and the prime minister has promised to hold off further judicial changes until November, setting the stage for a judicial and political donnybrook before the end of the year. Opponents have vowed an all-out effort to block further changes and even to turn back the first Knesset bill. Current polling suggests that more than half of Israelis oppose the reform measures and would prefer unity. Were an election held today, Netanyahu's party would likely fall to second place.

This explains why this coalition will tenaciously clench onto power—the prime minister more than anyone. It is improbable, given everything we've seen to date, that this right-wing coalition will back down. For most of the parties except Likud, this might be their last chance to forge an ultra-religious state from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. For Netanyahu, it is the only way he can remain prime minister, since even his own Likud party increasingly recognizes that he is dragging the party and the state into a political dead end.

Enter the Americans

The US may try to exert some indirect influence to turn this effort around and help its ally avoid driving into the political ditch. While we don't know the actual purpose of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's trip to Saudi Arabia last week, one plausible reason may likely have been to further coax Saudi officials and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the direction of recognizing the State of Israel and establishing formal diplomatic relations.

The caveats to such an eventuality in the near term are so many as to make the possibility remote. But one major Saudi condition would unquestionably be an ironclad, in-writing and binding commitment from Israel to forever forsake annexation of West Bank territory, absent an explicit agreement with the Palestinians. This, of course, would stick in the throats of Netanyahu's anti-Arab, pro-annexation, ultra-nationalist coalition members like an oversized date pit. For Netanyahu, however, the prize of Saudi recognition would earn him a permanent place in Israel's history (though I suspect that he already has, for other reasons).

Another Saudi condition would be a US-Saudi mutual security pact like those with NATO, Japan or Israel. This would have no chance of passing in the US Congress, where the Saudis enjoy little favor these days. Moreover, the chance that President Biden would even consider putting such an issue before Congress in an election year is close to zero. Nevertheless, the ineluctable lure of Saudi-Israeli recognition persists enticingly.

The future State of Israel

What is at stake in all of these measures is nothing less than the future of Israel. It has traditionally defined itself as Jewish (which isn't in question) and democratic. Implementation of the planned

measures and their likely fallout would cast Israel's democratic status in serious doubt. That weighs heavily on the minds of the majority of Israelis and, it would seem, on the minds of its closest and most vital ally, the United States.

These events reflect a growing disparity between the visions of two broad groupings in the Israeli body politic, the secularists and the non-secularists, or religionists. To date, Israel has largely been a secular society, which most Israelis, recognizing their diversity, seem to prefer. But that vision places limits on what the religionists see as Israel's true biblical and historical legacy: a Jewish state from sea to river. There may be room for some of the religionists' vision in a secularly-ruled state, but there is no room for a secularist's vision in a religiously ruled state. And certainly no room for Arab Israelis or Palestinians.

The issues, therefore, are both historic and existential. Were a visionary at the helm of Israel's ship of state, one could have hope. But Benjamin Netanyahu is no visionary. In fact, he's behaving much like a self-serving, power-hungry autocrat who seems to have lost all capacity for reflection. His lack of vision and increasing lack of leadership in curbing the reckless ideological passions of his coalition are leading Israel's vaunted democracy into grave danger.

But it isn't too late. There is adequate opportunity for Netanyahu to display genuine leadership, for example by steering his country and the Knesset to genuine consensus on judicial reforms. Many wonder, however, whether he has either the capacity or the will.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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FO° Talks: Make Sense of the 2023 Spanish Elections

Francisco Rodriguez-jimenez, Atul Singh
August 10, 2023

Spanish elections have failed to throw up a clear result and another election may ensue by the end of the year. National centrist parties have emerged stronger at the expense of far-right, far-left and regional parties. Yet none of the two national parties has the numbers to form a government at a time Spain will hold the rotating presidency of the EU.

On July 23, Spain went to the polls. This snap election failed to produce a clear result. No party won a simple majority in the 350-strong Congress of Deputies.

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's Socialist party won 122 seats, two more than in the 2019 elections. The center-right Popular Party (PP) won 136 seats, up from 89 in 2019. The far-right Vox party would support the PP leader Alberto Núñez Feijóo. Yet it took only 33 seats, in contrast to 52 in 2019. This would leave Feijóo seven seats short of an absolute majority of 176 in the parliament.

Spain had two elections in 2019 because the first one failed to produce a government. It has had

regional elections since, most importantly in Catalonia, Castilla y León and Andalucía. Now, it might have another election in 2023.

What is going on in Spain?

In Spanish politics, four main parties dominate. The Socialists, the PP, Vox and far-left Sumar are the main national parties. Regional parties in Basque Country and Catalonia form a fifth force. Their relationship with national parties and with Spain itself remains problematic. Both Basque Country and Catalonia have had issues with Madrid over independence. Carles Puigdemont, the leader of the Catalan Junts party, remains in exile.

In some ways, the regional parties suffered, particularly in Catalonia. The regions no longer seem to want independence. The far-right and the far-left declined too. Together, the two national parties were the big winners. Yet they are too ideologically opposed to come together in a Germany-style national coalition.

Many are calling for such a grand coalition. It would have the support of the majority of the Spanish people. However, party leaders fear that they will lose the support of their members if they negotiate with the other party.

Vox represents the legacy of General Francisco Franco, Spain's brutal dictator who held power from 1936 to 1975. Its leaders split from the PP about ten years ago in disgust at the party's softness towards separatists. If Vox supports the PP, there is a risk that no other party may join the coalition. The fall in popular support for Vox demonstrates that the far-right wave of Italy has not crossed the Mediterranean. The success of Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia has not been replicated in Spain.

Spain is experiencing the same polarization that we see in democracies like the US, the UK and Israel. By European standards, the Spanish economy was not doing too badly. Apparently, Sánchez's coalition failed to win not because of the economy but because of culture and identity.

Why do incumbents lose, and why is it so hard to form a government?

Until 2015, the Socialists and the PP were the two dominant parties. Charges of corruption damaged them with Podemos and Ciudadanos emerging as plausible alternatives. Vox did rather well in 2019, which might have led voters to back other parties to keep this Francoist party out of power.

Yet the incumbents have lost power. According to Carlos Meléndez, people have voted out 85% of incumbents over the last five to six years. This pattern of negative voting has produced governments that are very fragile and have little popular support, existing only because voters opposed the alternative more.

In the Spanish context, another issue adds to the anti-incumbent phenomenon. As prime minister, Sánchez does not enjoy within his own country the good reputation he has abroad. He won the party leadership by upending the traditional establishment. In 2018, Sánchez convinced other parties to vote together against Mariano Rajoy, who was then the leader of the PP and prime minister. This has been the only successful no-confidence vote in Spanish history, and many Spaniards think of Sánchez as a Machiavellian for initiating it.

Political commentators and analysts criticized the no-confidence move widely. They take the view that fresh elections were the more appropriate means to address Rajoy's alleged corruption. By working closely with regional parties, Sánchez became politically toxic. Many Castilian-speaking

voters, who form the vast majority in Spain, still demonize the Socialist leader.

While people may have voted negatively in Spain, they have not gone for the extremes this time around. However, they have not voted in a manner that allows for a stable government to form. Neither the Socialists nor the PP are likely to get the votes to reach the magic 176 mark.

In some democracies, horse-trading or the return of Puigdemont might be possibilities. However, Spanish politics is too ideological to forgive members of parliament who jump ship, and Spain's Supreme Court has issued a new arrest order for Puigdemont. Unlike the Italians, the Spaniards do not seem to form coalitions easily. So, the country may find it difficult to form a government.

This political instability comes at an unfortunate time for the country. Spain exercises the EU's rotating presidency until January 2024. Without a government in power, Spain is likely to squander its chance to set the European agenda and play a leading role in the bloc.

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FO° Exclusive: Make Sense of Israel's New Tumultuous Judicial Reform

Atul Singh, Glenn Carle
August 11, 2023

A coalition government comprising ultra-orthodox parties has brought in reforms to weaken Israel's judiciary, arguing it needs democratic oversight. However, thousands fear the government has made a cynical move to cling to power and protect the corrupt, damaging public life, rule of law and Israeli democracy.

On Monday, July 24, the Knesset, Israel's parliament, adopted a highly controversial law to limit the Supreme Court's powers. The Knesset has 120 members, and this legislation was passed by 64 votes to 0 because the entire opposition boycotted the final vote.

The legal reforms concern the power of the elected government versus the power of the courts to scrutinize and even overrule government decisions. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu's government argues that reform is overdue. So do some others who argue that the judiciary is leftist, elitist and unaccountable. They believe that the judiciary interferes too much with legislation, is biased in support of liberal issues and is undemocratic in the way judges are selected.

A large number of Israelis oppose these reforms because they fear that the country's narrowly elected governments in general and Bibi in particular will become far too powerful. A simple majority in the Knesset would change laws easily, leading to a lack of certainty and continuity in Israel's legal and constitutional system. This would damage public life, rule of law and long term Israeli interests.

What are these legal reforms?

At the heart of the reforms and the controversy is the so-called "reasonableness" bill. This removes the Supreme Court's power to cancel government decisions it deems unreasonable. Besides the "reasonableness" law, the government wants to:

— Weaken the power of the Supreme Court to review or throw out laws, enabling a simple majority of one in the Knesset to overrule such decisions.

— Have a decisive say over who becomes a judge, including in the Supreme Court, by increasing its representation on the committee which appoints them.

— Scrap the requirement for ministers to obey the advice of their legal advisers, guided by the attorney general, which they currently have to do by law.

The bill to overturn the reasonableness standard is part of a package of legislation unveiled by Justice Minister Yariv Levin in January. The reasonableness standard gained prominence later that same month, when Israel's High Court of Justice disqualified the Shas party chairman Arye Dery from serving as health and interior minister on these grounds, due to his conviction on charges of tax evasion, corruption as a public official, bribery and fraud.

Netanyahu's right-wing coalition

Currently, Israel is ruled by a coalition government consisting of six parties: Likud, United Torah Judaism, Shas, Religious Zionist Party, Otzma Yehudit and Noam. United Torah Judaism and Shas are Haredi religious parties. Haredis are characterized by their strict adherence to rabbinical halakha (Jewish law) and oppose modern, Western values. They form 13.3% of Israel's population.

Bibi formed his latest government on December 29, 2022, following the collapse of the coalition government led by Naftali Bennet and Yair Lapid. Israel's politics with its proportional representation system is known for fractious coalitions. This government is regarded as the most right-leaning government in Israel's history.

The Israeli Supreme Court disqualified Dery because it found his appointment to be "unreasonable in the extreme." The Shas leader had been convicted three times of criminal offenses and failed in his previous public positions to "serve the public loyally and lawfully." The decision and legal doctrine behind it sparked immediate backlash on the right and put Bibi, the longstanding leader of Likud, in the uncomfortable position of having to deny a ministerial position to a loyal and powerful coalition ally.

Dr. Amir Fuchs, a Senior Researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute, takes the view that the standard of reasonableness refers to a balance between political and public interests in decision-making. An "unreasonable" decision is therefore one which "disproportionately focuses on political interests without sufficient consideration for public trust and its protection."

Who is protesting and why?

Protesters have called for all the planned reforms to be scrapped and for Bibi to resign. Not only

Bibi's political rivals but also former top officials in Israel's military, intelligence and security services, former chief justices, and prominent legal figures and business leaders, amongst others, oppose the reforms.

Israel's Histadrut trade union confederation has threatened a general strike, and thousands of military personnel have vowed to not report for duty if the law is allowed to stand. First, over 1,000 Israeli Air Force reserve officers, including pilots, navigators and special forces threatened not to report for voluntary reserve duty. Then, another 10,000 Israeli Defense Force (IDF) reservists threatened the same.

Bibi's critics oppose the reforms because:

— Reforms will severely undermine the country's democracy by weakening the judicial system, the only tool for keeping the government in check.

— New laws might protect Bibi who is currently on trial for alleged corruption (he denies the charges) and help his government pass laws with narrow majorities for short-term political gain.

— The proposed system will change far too frequently, creating legal uncertainty and a lack of continuity.

— So-called reforms will weaken public life, rule of law and long-term Israeli interests.

Is this the end of Israeli democracy?

In some ways, we have been watching the slow suicide of the Israeli state for years. The exceedingly religious ultra-orthodox Jews have more children than their secular counterparts. They now comprise a larger percentage of Israel's population and have greater power in its fractious democracy. The religious extremism of these ultra-orthodox has been rising too. They now have the

numbers and the determination not only to play kingmaker but also to bend the state to their will. Bibi has gotten into bed with them in his single-minded pursuit of power.

In the first-past-the-post system of the US, the UK and India, the ultra-orthodox would not have such disproportionate power. Israel's proportional representation system sets the electoral threshold at 3.25%. The number of seats a party receives in the Knesset is proportional to the number of votes it receives. So if a party gets 5% of the votes, it gets six seats out of 120. Ironically, this increases the power of the smaller parties and their leaders who choose their lackeys to be members of the Knesset. So, upsetting Dery is not an option for Bibi if he wants to cling on to his crown.

This increased power of the Knesset to change laws by small majorities runs counter to the cultural DNA of Israel. In 1948, most Israelis were Ashkenazis who immigrated from continental Europe. Therefore, Israeli democracy has less in common with the British Westminster parliamentary cousin and is more akin to continental Europe. Israel has implemented Montesquieu's separation of powers with the judiciary keeping its unstable coalition governments in check.

Of course, there is an argument for more democratic oversight of the judiciary. It is strongly left-leaning and may no longer represent the values of Israeli society. However, the Bibi-led Likud and its allies are pushing such a major reform through in a hasty, heavy-handed way. Bibi has made a Faustian pact with the far-right and is doing away with checks and balances. He is bringing a more unitary system which is majoritarian and risks turning authoritarian. The fact that this reform favors politicians with criminal convictions or risk of such convictions is deeply disturbing. That is why thousands are turning to the streets.

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Spivs-in-Suits: Corporate Greed and Customer Abuse in “Rip-Off” Britain

Alan Waring
August 13, 2023

The UK’s cost-of-living crisis is exacerbated by significant companies flagrantly overcharging by 100% or more while claiming to be the perfect example of virtue. Who are these robber barons masquerading as upright businessmen, or as the British say, who are these spivs-in-suits?

Companies are entitled to profit in capitalist and mixed-economy countries. Provided that a particular company’s activities,

products, services, transactions, prices and customer care facilities remain reasonable, business is likely to remain profitable. However, profits must be made lawfully and not fraudulently. While most companies abide by corporate governance rules on across-the-board integrity and ethics, a substantial number do not. These companies have adopted a cavalier attitude towards extracting—if not extorting—money from customers, thereby earning such unedifying labels as “rapacious parasites,” “maggots” and “bloodsuckers.”

It is certainly not a valid, safe or foregone conclusion that all large companies will misbehave. So, what sets the bad ones apart? What characterizes those that cross over to the “dark side”? Why on Earth would they want to court disaster and jeopardize the company’s reputation and antagonize customers and propel them into the arms of competitors?

Answering these questions requires an understanding of particular branches of psychology (e.g., social, organizational, clinical, consumer and abnormal) and contemporary corporate ownership.

The impact of toxic leadership

Corporations that engage in predatory behavior against customers do not do so spontaneously. Toxic leadership is at the root of the behavior. It occurs by deliberate design and systematic application over time as part of what are known as “revenue protection” models.

Ironically, these models were supposed to protect the company against revenue loss from fraud and theft. Some companies use these models to “protect” revenue by dishonestly increasing it. They do this by grossly overcharging customers on their monthly direct debit billing, either with no advance notice or by mid-contract increases. To

this, they may add punishing early exit penalties or fictitious charges which they refuse to reimburse.

Despite all their rhetoric about “the customer is our number one priority,” such companies do not want to retain customers unless they are of the kind prepared to continue being bilked. These perverse “revenue protection models” rely on faster revenue growth by forcing out or “churning” once-loyal but disillusioned customers and replacing them with more naïve new ones. This is the “cheat-and-churn” reality.

Nevertheless, such wayward boards will typically exude great public-facing piety, with beaming, friendly, confident trust-me faces and reassuring mission statements. Is the considerable gap between espousal and enactment merely the product of boardroom delusions or deliberate lying? What circumstances drive this behavior?

Tremendous changes have occurred in recent years in the ownership chains of many large corporations. Gone are the days when a sector comprising several independent and direct competitors fought to retain and expand their respective customer bases. Typically, large companies are now owned by even larger ones and perhaps ultimately by private equity funds that will place tough return-on-investment criteria on these companies.

Ruthless profit extraction has become the de facto goal for executives. In addition, supposed competitors now typically take shareholding stakes in each other, changing competition into market symbiosis—meaning it matters much less which company or brand is leading at any given time. Companies expect customers to frequently “churn” or change from one provider to another, so companies feel they no longer have much stake in genuine customer care and retention. The move towards cheat-and-churn requires a controlling mind, typically the chief executive, probably

colluding with boardroom colleagues. Corporate leaders, not middle or junior executives, determine strategy and revenue policy operations.

Organizational psychologist Professor Michael Walton has spent several decades studying the dynamics of toxic leadership and what happens when the bad conduct of senior individuals can no longer be explained away or trivialized as assertiveness or drive. He defined toxic leadership as “behavior which is exploitative, abusive, destructive and psychologically—and perhaps legalistically—corrupt and poisonous.”

This does not mean that such individuals outwardly present as demented, ranting bullies, although some do, e.g. Robert Maxwell, the owner of Mirror Group Newspapers who defrauded his company’s pension fund of some £460 million (\$485 million) in the 1980s. They are more likely to present as engaging and charming personalities adept at convincing others that egregious conduct is fully justified to achieve revenue targets, shareholder and market expectations and, of course, director bonuses. Such motivations, patterns of thinking and behavior may normalize rapidly into a culture of amoral calculation.

Boardroom and executive psychopathy

Anti-Social Personality Disorders (ASPDs) come in many guises and degrees, ranging from mild and annoying to pathological and harmful. For example, narcissism appears frequently among leaders in corporate organizations.

Feeling essential and unique and claiming superior skills and attributes may benefit a corporate leader and the organization's success. As psychiatrist Professor Jerrold Post noted, some narcissists learn to positively channel their creativity, self-belief and ego, such as Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin Group. Others, however, demonstrate a super-inflated ego,

bombast and a tendency toward vengeful rage and malice against anyone suspected of outshining or challenging them. Former US President Donald Trump is a notorious example of such eggshell-ego narcissism, as profiled by Jerrold Post.

In business or politics, ill-informed and even reckless risk-taking is a frequent characteristic of toxic leaders whether in business or politics. The spectacular collapse of energy giant Enron in 2001 under the fraudulent direction of top executives Lay, Skilling and Fastow and the high-speed demise of Conservative leader Liz Truss in 2022 are examples of each. The compulsion to engage in high-stakes gambling with no concern about damaging the lives of thousands or even millions of people is characteristic of toxic leaders and indicative of possible pathological personality traits. Moreover, some toxic leaders may engage in criminal activity (as in the Enron case), so-called white-collar crime.

However, it would be false to either suggest or conclude that every CEO, board member or senior executive of every organization accused of atrocious conduct must be a psychopath or sociopath. So, although egregious personalities are indicated, what proportion of them are clinically diagnosable?

Among ASPDs, both categories, psychopathy and sociopathy, are under the general heading of psychopathy. Both display similar characteristics but differ primarily in origin. Psychopaths are regarded as products of a combination of genetic and social environmental factors, notably childhood and early adulthood experiences. Sociopaths, however, are deemed to be created solely by social environment and experiences, again mainly during childhood and early adulthood. Both disorders are difficult to treat, and prospects of a personality change for the better are not high.

Large-scale studies of CEOs and board directors by forensic psychologists Katarina Fritzon, Nathan Brooks and colleagues found that some 20% of subjects showed clinically raised levels of psychopathy. This contrasts with an expected level in the general population of some 3%. Why should there be such a higher concentration at the board level?

One suggestion is that such personalities typically share a compulsive desire to dominate and wield predatory power over others, like staff, customers and suppliers. The attractiveness of the power of board positions may explain why clinically diagnosable psychopathic personalities are seven times more likely to be represented in boardrooms than in the population overall. An increased prevalence would also likely exist among ambitious lower executives compared to the general population.

Snakes-in-suits: what sets pathological individuals apart?

According to the APA, Hirstein and Kiehl and Buckholtz, pathological personalities are characterized by a combination of:

1. Causing harm to others with either no self-recognition of their harmfulness or not caring about it.
2. Lack of empathy for those harmed, although empathy may be feigned.
3. Lack of conscience, remorse or guilt about their harmful conduct.
4. A ruthless end-justifies-the-means and “what can I/we get away with?” attitude and behavior.
5. For psychopaths, an inability to form regular emotional or social bonds, although these may be faked. For sociopaths, a limited ability to form regular emotional or social bonds (for example,

bonding with family and close friends but not more widely), although these may be faked.

While “spivs-in-suits” is a pejorative label commonly applied to corporate fraudsters and customer abusers, organizational psychologist Paul Babiak and forensic psychologist Robert Hare coined the label “snakes-in-suits” for corporate psychopaths and sociopaths. All too often, spivs-in-suits are also snakes-in-suits. To help identify individuals that have pathological personalities, various evaluation frameworks and checklists have been created. For example, Hare made a 20-item list of specific psychopathy indicators. The more indicators an individual signals, the more a psychopathy diagnosis becomes likely. Prominent signs in Hare’s checklist include:

- Showing a glib and superficial charm.
- Shallow and insincere emotions.
- Confidence trickery and manipulation.
- A propensity for pathological lying.
- Grandiose self-worth and narcissism.
- Scapegoating and blaming others for their own failings.
- Reacting to rejection badly and excessively.

However, applicable as such tools have become for psychiatrists and psychologists, they are not intended for use outside these professions or for amateur application. This caution reinforces the Goldwater Rule of not engaging in amateur “armchair diagnosis” of particular individuals.

Nevertheless, it is defensible to examine specific organizations and their conduct and to consider to what extent they match the known characteristics of psychopathy. A different question is which, if any, of their senior personnel might suffer from

one or more personality disorders. That question can only be definitively answered by clinically qualified individuals who have personally examined and interviewed the persons concerned.

Corporate abuse of customers in the UK

In March 2020, The Times published an editorial and a “name and shame” list of large UK companies allegedly guilty of deliberately blocking customers’ attempts to complain. They did so by removing company e-mail addresses from their websites, ceasing complaint handling by e-mail, forcing customers to engage with dysfunctional automated call centers, keeping customers on hold for two or three hours or more and failing to deliver or offer any redress. These are typically the same companies that boast about customers being their “number one priority.”

Regrettably, the number of such companies is so great as to make it impracticable to cite them all in this article. They cover all sectors: banks and financial services, supermarkets and large retailers, airlines and travel, healthcare, energy providers, phone/IT/Internet/social media and real estate.

For example, Britons’ domestic energy bills have more than doubled and in some cases trebled since early 2022 and are far higher than in other European countries. As far back as 1995, the then-CEO of British Gas, Cedric Brown, came under excoriating public attack in the media, in parliament and among institutional shareholders for his brazen attempt to inflate his remuneration to an obscene level. He was dubbed “Cedric The Pig” and, long before cryptocurrencies, a spoof currency of greed was named after him, “the Cedric.” The greed controversy still dogs BGas, in relation to its huge profits in 2023 during the UK cost-of-living crisis.

What is at play today is, perhaps, a 21st-century progression from the “unacceptable face of

capitalism” complained of by British Prime Minister Edward Heath in 1973 and the fat-cat conduct of corporate executives in the 1990s. The following dire case conveys the nature and scale of the contemporary problem.

EE Mobile—the cheat-and-churn supremos?

EE Mobile is one of the UK's largest mobile phone and internet service providers, with upwards of 23 million mobile customers as at June 2023 out of a total EE customer base (including fixed line) of some 32 million cited in August 2023.

EE, formerly Everything Everywhere, was purchased by Altice using British Telecom (BT) in 2016 and is now the central part of BT Group's Consumer Division. In 2023, Altice came under serious allegations against board members and senior executives relating to money laundering, fraud and corruption, with a number of formal investigations by authorities continuing in the US and Europe. Few people remember the original “Everything Everywhere” tag, while wags continue to assert that surely EE means “Exceptionally Egregious.”

Like many large companies, EE's website portrays glowing profiles of its CEO Marc Allera and his top executive team of ten directors with a line-up of flattering “butter wouldn't melt in their mouths” portrait photos. The CEO's proclaimed mission includes language such as, “so our customers trust us,” “top priority to provide great customer experience” and “making sure we do the right thing.”

Contrast these self-righteous virtues with all the overwhelmingly negative posts by aggrieved customers on Trustpilot. Of over 13,000 Trustpilot reviews of EE, 71% give the lowest 1-star rating, and only 20% provide the highest 5-star rating. The highest number of posts about EE complain about over-charging monthly bills, unilateral mid-

contract increased charge rates, unfair contracts with high early exit penalties and slow responses from EE customer service or being fobbed off or ignored entirely. EE has had an alarming history of overcharging going back to 2017 and 2018.

Complaining customers being fobbed off is commonplace across retail service corporations and highlights the policy of many of them to deliberately deter and block customers' attempts to obtain redress. Complaints by telephone get shunted into automated call center queues that often take hours to clear, even if the caller is not summarily cut off first. Online complaint forms typically receive evasive blandishments that fail to address the actual complaint. Complaint letters or e-mails to chief executives are usually passed to a customer service function to answer. As with online complaints, any response will likely comprise only evasion and blandishments.

These “customer complaint resolution” functions are clearly under instruction to evade and deflect every complainant—whatever it takes to ensure that the company denies any mistake or wrongdoing and so “justifies” giving no redress.

The curious position of EE's mascot, Kevin Bacon

For years, Kevin Bacon, the Hollywood actor, has been the public face of EE. He is the star of TV advertisements that extol the wonders of EE's mobile telephone and broadband services. Reportedly, Bacon has already received substantial fees for his EE work, well over £1 million (\$1.3 million). Bacon cuts an engaging figure and is popular in the UK as a movie star, so it is understandable why EE should employ him as a celebrity endorser of their brand and services.

Customer complaints about EE on Trustpilot have included some unflattering reviews about Bacon's association with the company. Whether he

is aware of all the criticisms of EE and of the growing backlash is unclear. It appears EE has been rather crafty in making Bacon their public face or, perhaps more cynically, their fall guy. Since EE's apparent anti-customer excesses have become such a national disgrace, aggrieved customers and the public now generally identify him as the only EE figurehead. Therefore, he is the ready target and lightning rod for their anger. He will likely pay the price in reputational damage, whereas EE refuses to recognize such damage.

Yet, according to a Deloitte 2014 survey, reputation accounted for more than 25% of a company's market value. Unchecked reputation risk was the single most significant cause of revenue and brand value loss. Some 87% of global respondents saw reputation risk as their number one risk concern. The 2021 survey report from WTW reflected similar concerns. What Altice and other institutional investors in BT Group, EE's immediate owner, think about EE's conduct is unclear.

Should Kevin Bacon tolerate EE's evident anti-customer conduct damaging his reputation and brand? A lot may depend on which he values most—his reputation or EE's fees.

As customers have noted, EE's alleged gross overcharging, unfair and punitive contracts and highly defensive responses to complaints appear not to be accidents but deliberate policy, without any evident conscience or remorse. EE executives' glib, superficial charm and what-can-we-get-away-with ruthlessness appear to underpin a cheat-and-churn culture. Whether they are mere spivs-in-suits, or more dangerously also snakes-in-suits, is open to conjecture.

Countering corporate anti-customer excesses

Many corporations currently appear not to understand their purpose. A radical new paradigm,

the “framework for the future of the corporation,” was proposed by the British Academy in 2018 to replace the present dysfunctional one:

Corporations were originally established with clear public purposes. It is only over the last half-century that corporate purpose has become equated solely with profit. This has been damaging to corporations' role in society, trust in business and the impact that business has had on the environment, inequality and social cohesion. In addition, globalization and technological advances are exacerbating problems of regulatory lag.

Similarly, 181 CEOs of major US corporations at the US Business Roundtable also issued a joint statement in 2019 redefining the purpose of a corporation to focus on benefitting all stakeholders and not just shareholders. Business press articles have also favored the theme.

As Peter Bloom and Carl Rhodes have examined in depth, corporations, frequently authoritarian ones, have now taken over everyday life in many respects. The worldviews of many corporations still focus on profit, personal greed, personal gratification, predatory unilateral competition and a belief that the only stakeholders to be protected are themselves and corporate shareholders.

Other observers, such as Joan Donovan and Shoshana Zuboff, argue that the totality of online platforms, social media and mobile telephone services are already enabling pathological corporations to make millions of users addicted to their products and services. Artificial Intelligence (AI) software will simply accelerate the abuse. Zuboff asserts that through “surveillance capitalism” users, who already hand over vast amounts of personal data to such companies, will soon find that their behavior patterns will be monitored by remote AI software to not only predict a user's general behavior but also to

subliminally predict and manipulate specific responses of individual users for commercial gain.

The new corporation paradigm inherently and explicitly rejects all characteristics of this kind of corporate authoritarianism, amoral calculation and malfeasance. Increasingly, shareholders will be expecting boards to adopt this model. This implicitly requires boards to curb, if not terminate, any director or CEO whose attitude and conduct smacks of the “old” paradigm.

Organizational, professional and peer group strategies

At an organizational level, several policies and strategies as part of corporate governance and risk management are available to counter authoritarian excesses. These would include such routine protections as:

— Separation of CEO and Chairman/President functions as two separate individuals to prevent a joint Chairman-CEO becoming too powerful, self-serving and beyond effective control if indulging in decisions and conduct damaging to the corporation.

— Appointment of fully independent non-executive directors to help steer executive directors away from potentially egregious or damaging decisions and conduct.

— Establishing an effective Board Risk Committee (separate from a Board Audit Committee) tasked with ensuring that the board address “all significant risks” to the business, including the organization’s own conduct.

— Requiring effective due diligence background checks (negative or positive vetting, as appropriate) on all staff appointments, staff promotions, contractor appointments, agent appointments, partnering and joint venture

contracts, licensing agreements and proposed mergers or acquisitions.

— Requiring a psychological evaluation for all individuals subject to positive vetting as an integral part of due diligence.

The requirements for an organization’s corporate governance and risk management are well established. Although the formal framework for corporate governance and risk management generally does work to prevent harmful conduct in corporations, there are numerous instances of failure.

Such failures arise from defective formal frameworks and weak or toxic leadership. As Clive Smallman has laid out, the characteristics of positive versus toxic leadership are precise and well-known. Ensuring that only positive leaders are appointed is another crucial aspect of due diligence. This emphasizes the need for psychometric and psychological evaluation and searching for tell-tale signs of offensive attitudes and conduct.

How fast the new model corporation is adopted is likely to depend on several factors, including the enlightened self-interest of corporate leaders. This is especially so in the context of the fragile global economy of the post-Covid era, the policy positions and codes of ethics of professional and sector/trade bodies, and how rapidly the overall management of higher education are reoriented to reflect the new model. However, potential push-back by determined old-model diehards is highly likely.

Persuading corporate delinquents to change

The prospects for beneficial change in a delinquent corporation boil down to three main kinds of persuasion:

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- Moral argument or enlightened self-interest.
 - Judicial and non-judicial punishments.
 - Market forces and risk management failures.

While all three kinds of persuasion may operate in any particular case, the moral argument or enlightened self-interest is least likely to be successful in hard-bitten old-model organizations.

Cheat-and-churn rogues are, by nature, “chancers” who think they are untouchable and invincible. Therefore, they are unlikely to acknowledge the argument and believe they can evade market forces as well as criminal prosecution, civil lawsuits and adverse publicity. Their feelings of superiority and entitlement to steal customers’ money may convince them they can get away with it.

The modern corporate spivs-in-suits are analogous to medieval robber barons. Customers, investors and markets may increasingly treat a company run by such spivs as a lost cause, and, ultimately, the business may fail. To lift the iconic slur against US President Richard “Tricky Dick” Nixon at the time of his downfall in the 1970s, “Would you ever buy a used car from any of these people?”

[[Lane Gibson](#) edited this piece.]

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Madonna’s Faustian Bargain for Fame

Ellis Cashmore
August 13, 2023

Madonna shocked audiences, stirred conversation, invited hatred and admiration, and above all changed the way we perceive celebrity. How did one woman’s transgressive sexuality rocket her into this kind of stardom?

Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone turns 65 on August 16—40 years and one month after the release of her first album, Madonna. Her presence in showbusiness is comparable to those of Sinatra, Elvis, the Beatles, Prince and Michael Jackson, but her impact on popular culture is arguably greater than any of these.

For many, she embodies a toxic environment that sexually commodifies and exploits women, but the fact remains that she has made it to the top in a male-dominated industry and, indeed, a male-dominated culture. She has been the subject of countless academic studies and jargon-packed analyses.

Why has this taboo-breaking provocateur, who enrages conservatives and radicals alike, occupied us for so long?

Succès de scandale

“Here’s what I’ve learned after four decades in music,” she has said. “If they call you shocking, scandalous, troublesome, problematic, provocative or dangerous, you’re onto something.” Exactly when this dawned on Madonna, I don’t know, but

I'm guessing it was June 1986. That was when her track "Papa Don't Preach" was released in the US and Europe and she realized she was onto something ... but what?

"Papa don't preach, I'm in trouble deep/Papa don't preach, I've been losing sleep/But I made up my mind, I'm keeping my baby," sang Madonna on a tune that many took to be an endorsement of teenage pregnancy and, as one critic put it, "a path to permanent poverty." Groups opposed to abortion interpreted it as a positive, "pro-life" song."

It really didn't matter what they thought: what mattered was that they differed, often violently, and were prepared to create a commotion. Meanwhile, all Madonna would say was: "To me, it's a celebration of life." The controversy blazed on for several months, unwittingly promoting sales and pushing the single to the top of the charts in the UK, UK and several other countries. The album from which it was taken also became a best-seller. (The song was written by Madonna and Brian Elliott. [View and listen here](#))

Mainstream entertainers had studiously avoided discreditable behavior and the disgrace and notoriety—not to mention malicious gossip and all manner of aspersion—that came from shocking the public for decades. Madonna, on the other hand, seemed to take her cues from the Rolling Stones and the Sex Pistols, neither of whom suffered collateral damage from their mischief in the 1960s and 1970s, respectively.

Madonna emerged without collateral damage, her reputation as social provocateur as well as chanteuse boosted. She appears to have learned a salutary lesson from the "Papa Don't Preach" episode. Actions that cause general public anger or indignation are precious.

Traditionally, the entertainment industry avoided them. An accusation of sexual assault, although later cleared, annihilated the career of Hollywood star Roscoe Arbuckle all the same; he died penniless in 1933. Mindful of his fate, stars and the studios that employed them were careful to contain any suspicion of scandal. With the exception of Elizabeth Taylor who, in the 1960s, conducted her romance with Richard Burton in public almost theatrically, stars kept as tight a lid as they could on their private lives.

The lesson wasn't lost on Madonna: do something that upsets, outrages and disgusts some people and gratifies others and they'll talk about you. And the media will pay attention. It really doesn't matter if they find you monstrous, just as long as you stay at the fore of their consciousness. Anywhere else and you stand a chance of being ignored and, worse still, forgotten. In show business, the kind of calamities that most people avoid are a valuable resource. Madonna discovered the meaning of *succès de scandale* and it seems to have hit her like a flash on the road to Damascus. This helps explain why she plunged headfirst into the kind of episodes that had ruined earlier artists.

Shameless

For succeeding decades Madonna seemed, whether by accident or, much more probably, design (and perhaps even fate), to be in a continual state of crisis, not to mention her inflammatory lyrics, demagogic videos, shameless films or risqué book called *Sex*. Once she found momentum, Madonna never slackened: every new provocation seemed to surpass the previous one.

And all this was happening in that liminal time before the smartphone or social media, but after people had acquired the appetite for salacious gossip and guiltless eavesdropping. Big Brother and other reality TV shows provided a peephole for the audience's new fascination with the hitherto

concealed practices of others. I wonder what Madonna made of Paris Hilton's 2003 sex tape, drolly titled *1 Night in Paris*. Or Kim Kardashian's analogous coup de théâtre. The stars of both videos were propelled to the stratosphere, yet neither boasted anything resembling talent, at least not talent in the accepted sense of the word. You could almost hear Madonna think: "Why didn't I think of that?"

Madonna never quite matched this shamelessness, but remember: she played a colossal role in creating the kind of culture in which it might otherwise have been dismissed as a cheap, vulgar and incendiary stunt rather than a major talking point and, in turn, a launchpad for two epic careers. Sex scandals are now a familiar trope of popular culture, though MeToo issued notice that the consequences can be as destructive as well as productive.

Open access

Today, anyone who aspires to be anybody in the entertainment industry has to enter into a Faustian pact. Like the German necromancer, they're required to surrender their soul in exchange for whatever they think the world has to offer them. Madonna's soul wasn't part of her deal: her privacy was. Even before her 1991 film *In Bed With Madonna*, she'd been unabashed about sharing intimate details. The movie just confirmed that she offered open access.

An inquisitive media and a probing audience soon got used to this and expected the same cooperation from other entertainers. Those who hesitated didn't make it, and we know nothing about them. Less inhibited wannabe celebs made it onto one of the alphabetical celebrity lists.

There is little in today's celebrity-fixated culture that Madonna hasn't either initiated, essayed or trespassed on in some way. Before tabloids started

taking a keen and prurient interest in celebrity couples, Madonna married Sean Penn. That was in August 1985, and, as if to provide the media with a foretaste of the performative aspects of coupledness that were to become familiar, she and Penn staged a *Grand Guignol* at an outdoor ceremony in Malibu. Paparazzi helicopters circled in search of a shot, while Penn fired a few shots of his own – his from a gun. The marriage imploded after two years.

Madonna endured the unwelcome attention of a stalker who threatened to cut her "ear-to-ear." She puzzled audiences about her sexual preferences by orchestrating an onstage three-way French Kiss with Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera in 2003. Her 2012 Super Bowl halftime appearance didn't upstage Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" but she managed to upset many of the 114 million TV viewers when she thrust a "swivel-on-it" finger at the camera. She was 53 at the time: "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale." Comparisons with Cleopatra are not baseless: they both remained fascinatingly attractive, not so much for their beauty but for their unpredictability.

Mother to the generations

The term "postfeminism" wasn't invented for Madonna, but it could have been. Her spirit of independence is an entrepreneurial rather than recalcitrant or rebellious spirit. Among the resources she's traded is her sexiness. Note: not sex, but sexiness—the quality of being sexually attractive or exciting. Wearing outfits that could have been taken from the clothes rack of a porn studio, simulating sex acts during concerts and portraying a variety of coquettish roles over a theatrically chameleonic career have not won her fans among first-wave feminists.

But Madonna became a mother to the generations. Over the decades, Madonna has

flouted gender protocol, but, according to some, in a way that secretes a sneaky reactionism. If there is a theme running through her career it's that she can do as she pleases, even—or especially—if her behavior upsets other women. Hers is a highly individualized approach to getting whatever she wants without necessarily considering the interests of other women. That makes her either a steely-willed, ruthless maverick prepared to trample on others, regardless of their gender, or a playful sexbot. Of course, she doesn't see it like this. "I am happy to do the trailblazing so that all the women behind me can have an easier time in the years to come," she wrote in an Instagram post earlier this year.

"Shocking, scandalous, troublesome, problematic, provocative ... dangerous." Madonna has been all these things. She probably won't be again. Who can say? Having changed culture in the 20th century, her influence endures. And, as she recognizes, she's still onto something.

[Routledge publishes [Ellis Cashmore's Celebrity Culture](#), 3rd Edition next month.]

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Japan and Australia Cooperate in the South China Sea

Saume Saptaparna Nath
August 14, 2023

Japan and Australia are pursuing greater interoperability between their militaries in response to the threat of an aggressive China. This summer, they conducted joint military exercises in the South China Sea. Cooperation between all of China's adversaries in the region, including the US, will continue to deepen.

Earlier this summer, the Australian and Japanese militaries conducted the naval exercise Trident 2023 in the South China Sea, as part of increasing cooperation between the two democratic nations. The image of a two-nation bloc patrolling in the waters together will send a unified message to China, which maintains a continual presence of hundreds of warships across the South China Sea to assert its claims in the area.

The drill was part of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's Indo-Pacific Deployment 2023. It was carried out by helicopter destroyer JS Izumo (DDH-183) and destroyer JS Samidare (DD-106), along with the Royal Australian Navy frigate HMAS Anzac (FFH150) and a Royal Australian Air Force P-8A Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) in the South China Sea. It emphasized tactical operations such as anti-surface and anti-air warfare.

The war games, which took place in strategically disputed waterways, focused on tactical operations such as anti-surface and anti-air warfare. Following a port call to Vietnam as part of an Indo-Pacific Deployment, the two warships

from the JMSDF participated in the bilateral training maneuvers.

The relationship between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) has never been stronger or more important, and the JMSDF will work with the RAN on interoperability and mutual understanding in order to improve the security environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

Tokyo and Canberra's bold Indo-Pacific strategies

The exercise is critical for continued strategic collaboration between Japan and Australia in the region and offers substantial strategic potential for promoting Indo-Pacific multilateralism. Australia and Japan regard each other as special strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific area. The two democratic nations share not only core principles but also strategic interests in a region increasingly threatened by China, which claims large portions of the South China Sea as its own territorial waters.

Japan and Australia vowed to oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force in the East and South China seas, a veiled allusion to Beijing's maritime aggression there. Japan and Australia vehemently oppose China's claims and activities that violate international law and norms, notably the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Against such a backdrop, the joint military drill will improve the partners' combined ability to maintain maritime security and readiness, as well as respond to any regional contingency.

Fumio Kishida and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison signed a bilateral reciprocal access agreement (RAA) in January 2022 to facilitate mutual troop deployment to each respective country for joint drills and relief operations. The

RAA is Japan's second official defense treaty with another country, confirming Australia's position as the country's second most significant security partner behind the United States, Japan's only treaty ally.

Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida debuted the new "Future of the Indo-Pacific" strategy during last year's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. In a word, the new strategy represents Japan's concept of global responsibility. According to Kishida, Japan wishes to offer "a guiding perspective" for a world on the edge of "division and confrontation." Japan's "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy, as it has expressed through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad), has grown in significance since 2016.

Japan has announced a significant increase in defense spending, which it aims to use to strengthen offensive capability platforms and counterstrike capabilities. Japan will spend \$324 billion over the next five years to bring itself up to par with NATO expenditure standards. Japan has already upped its defense budget to \$51.4 billion in the 2023-2024 fiscal year, a 26% jump from the previous year. Japan wants to purchase long-range missiles like Tomahawks, among other things, to improve its strike capability.

Australia too has outlined a more assertive defense posture in which the country will prioritize new technologies, such as maritime and long-range strike capabilities. In a declassified version of its new defense strategic review—the most significant in over 40 years—Australia determined that it must "re-posture," since it is no longer as shielded by geography and other nations' limited ability to project power. The country is set to spend an eye-watering \$368 billion (\$240 billion in US dollars) on nuclear submarines over the coming years.

Australia's priority is to strengthen its involvement and collaboration with Southeast

Asian and Pacific allies in reaction to China's rising assertion of sovereignty over the South China Sea and the danger that poses to the global rules-based order.

Japan and Australia part of a broader defense network

Military preparedness in the region has been ramping up. Japan and Australia are not expanding their military spending and cooperation in a vacuum. Both are close allies of the US, which has also increased its involvement in the region by signing the General Security of Military Information Agreement with Japan and India as well as the AUKUS treaty with the UK and Australia. AUKUS aims to significantly strengthen Australia's maritime capabilities with nuclear-powered submarines. The allies revealed the terms of the accord in March 2023, which included a second pillar on advanced technical exchange and force integration, as well as a substantial new role for AI-enabled platforms.

China, too, has deepened its involvement, for example by ramping up incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone.

China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam all claim areas of the disputed South China Sea. Beijing has constructed artificial islands and military outposts in the waters and has experienced similar conflict with Japan in the East China Sea.

The South China Sea has become a theater of strategic rivalries, especially following the Russia-Ukraine War and the crisis over Taiwan. The Indo-Pacific partners are jointly conducting military deals to counter the Chinese maritime ambitions called the "string of pearls."

Professional engagement and collaboration with friends and partners are the bedrock of regional

stability, which promotes peace and prosperity for all nations. The USS Momsen (DDG 92), an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, joined the JMSDF and the RAN in the South China Sea for multinational training that was completed on March 15. The coastguards of the United States, Japan and the Philippines, too, are cooperating in maritime exercises in the South China Sea, marking the first such maneuvers between the three nations.

Hence, Japan-Australia's joint military exercise is part of a broader movement of cooperation between China's neighbors, which are feeling the pressure of Chinese expansion. They aim to defend freedom of navigation in favor of a free and open Indo-Pacific. The Trident exercise and others like it, however, will also deepen regional tensions as China will be incensed by what it perceives as aggression in its backyard. Whatever happens, we can expect to watch increasing militarization in the region for the foreseeable future.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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France Grapples With the Painful Legacy Of Marshal Pétain

John Bruton
August 17, 2023

Philippe Pétain’s heroic leadership in the Battle of Verdun during World War I made him a French idol. Later he fell from grace for leading the Vichy regime that collaborated with the Nazis and was convicted of treason. A new book explores how the French, then and now, have interpreted their country’s actions during World War II.

I have just finished reading a truly excellent book, which I recommend to anyone who is interested in the history of modern France. Penguin Books published Julian Jackson’s *France on Trial: The Case of Marshal Pétain* this year.

The book describes the trial of Marshal Philippe Pétain, which took place only a few weeks after the war ended, and uses it to do two things: look back at the events that led to France’s humiliating defeat in 1940, and look forward to the present day to see how France remembers, and commemorates, its behavior between 1940 and 1945, especially vis-à-vis Jewish people.

Pétain was the great French war hero of World War I, especially due to his leadership in the crucial Battle of Verdun in 1916. Through this, he had acquired a godlike status. By the 1930s, Pétain had long been retired from the army, and thus he had no responsibility for the strategic error of the French High Command that led to the defeat of May 1940. This error was sending the French Army deep into Belgium when Germany attacked that country, which created a gap in French

defenses that allowed the Germans to encircle a large portion of the Allied armies from the rear in the vicinity of Dunkirk.

The consequences of this mistake discredited those who held office in France in the period immediately before the war. This included former prime ministers Édouard Daladier and Paul Reynaud. Both of these ex-prime ministers gave evidence in Pétain’s trial.

So did another ex-prime minister, Pierre Laval, who was later to be tried and executed for treason in 1945.

The author says that, for Laval, “no cause, however noble, could justify a war.” He had been prime minister in the 1930s and wanted reconciliation with Italy. During World War II, he said that he favored German victory, a matter on which Pétain wisely offered no opinion.

When the Germans surrendered in 1945, Laval escaped to Spain, but Franco did not want him. According to the author, Laval was then offered asylum by the Irish government, presumably on the Taoiseach Éamon de Valera’s instructions.

I have never read any exploration of this issue in books about de Valera. Laval could have proved an embarrassing guest for Ireland. In the event, Laval opted to return to France and face a trial which he must have known would sentence him to death rather than live peacefully in Ireland.

Pétain’s emergency leadership

Coming back to the dilemma faced by the French government in 1940, after the shock of the encirclement had worn off, the French army resisted the Germans bravely and effectively in central France. But the damage to public morale, caused by the initial defeat, was too deep.

Could the French Army have resisted long enough to retreat with their government to Algeria (technically part of France)?

Some of Pétain's accusers argued that he should have taken this option and ordered the army to fight on rather than seek an armistice from the Germans. Others criticized him for not joining the Americans when they landed in North Africa in 1942. Instead, he authorized the French Army in North Africa to resist the Americans. Many interpreted this as treason.

How did Pétain come to be in charge in late 1940 and thus be in a position to make these choices?

The previous French government, headed by Reynaud, had retreated from Paris to Bordeaux after the initial defeat in May 1940. But it needed a new leader. It turned to Pétain, as an untainted national leader, to head a new government.

It was almost as if the politicians gathered in Bordeaux felt they needed the "Pétain magic" to restore France. This was the hope on the basis of which the National Assembly made Pétain head of state, soon with unlimited powers. It was never a viable project.

If Pétain had thought things through, he would never have lent himself to such a dubious and hopeless endeavor. His vanity got the better of him.

Even if Germany had won the war, and had come to terms with Britain, the prestige of Pétain would not have sufficed to wipe France's humiliation away.

Trial of a once-hero

How informative were the proceedings at the trial?

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that some issues were explored too much in the trial and that others deserved more attention.

A big part of the prosecution's case was that Pétain had long been preparing himself for a French military defeat and plotting how to exploit defeat to grasp supreme power. There was no evidence to back this.

The issue that got too little attention in the trial, in light of what we now know, was the active involvement of the French police, and of the Vichy government, in the transportation of the Jews to the gas chambers.

Pétain's defense team argued that the regime had spared many French people, including French Jews, from the horrors of direct German occupation by taking over the administration of a large portion of the interior of the country from 1940 to 1943 and that this saved lives.

There is statistical evidence to back this up. The survival rate of Jews in France, at the end of the war, was much higher than that of Jews in Poland and the Netherlands, which were directly occupied by the Germans and where virtually every Jew was wiped out.

Another issue that could have gotten more attention was the Munich Agreement with Hitler which sapped French morale.

Many of the themes evoked in this book are current today.

Grappling with the past

What is treason?

Is it treasonable to make the mistake of backing the loser?

Where is the line to be drawn between bad political judgment and treason? Where is the boundary between making a legitimate political judgment, and betraying a cause that is, or appears, lost?

What constitutes a war crime? That had not been defined at the time.

Who should be the jury in a trial like this? Pétain's jury consisted of two halves: sitting National Assembly deputies and recently active members of the Resistance. This politicized the judicial system in a way that would not be allowed today.

Jackson's book also explores the emotions of the French people in the aftermath of an acute crisis. France has emerged as a strong democracy despite the trauma.

For the record, Pétain was condemned to death at the end of the trial. But the jury anticipated, correctly, that Charles de Gaulle would commute the sentence. Pétain died peacefully some years later.

The great merit of the book is the human stories it tells so well, prompting the reader to ask how he or she would have reacted if faced with the same dilemmas.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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How Latin America Should Handle the Lithium Boom

Alejandro Turino
August 18, 2023

Latin America is rich in deposits of lithium, a key input in the growing electric vehicle industry. The challenge is for governments to develop a sophisticated lithium industry that keeps the profits close to home. If they do not, they could end up becoming suppliers of raw material, enriching Asian manufacturers instead of their own citizens.

The electric vehicle industry is growing worldwide as economies transition to green technology. They will need lots of batteries for all of those cars, and those batteries require large amounts of lithium to manufacture. 60% of the world's lithium is in Latin America, creating a huge opportunity for the region—if they are able to capitalize on it. This won't be easy; historically, developing economies have found it very difficult to turn natural resources into wealth. Corruption and foreign influence tend to conspire to ensure that most of the money ends up outside of the nations that produce the resources.

To explain how Latin America can avoid this outcome, we must first explain how lithium goes from initial extraction to a consumer product. Then, we will discuss strategies for Latin American governments that find themselves at different parts of this chain.

The EV battery supply chain consists of four stages:

— Upstream: raw materials, like cobalt, nickel and lithium, are extracted in the form of ores or brines.

— Midstream: raw materials are refined and processed into battery cells.

— Downstream: battery cells are assembled into modules that automakers can use.

— End of Life: spent batteries are recycled or reused.

Currently, China, South Korea and Japan dominate the midstream stage. Latin America's largest producers—Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Mexico—mainly operate in the upstream stage.

The danger is that Latin American mineral producers will find themselves merely selling raw unrefined lithium on the global market for quick cash and thus miss out on all of the added value that occurs at later stages of production. While they have the lithium resources, they will need to develop industrial capacities farther down the stream to capitalize any further.

Not every Latin American lithium producer has made the same amount of progress on this front. Chile, the world's second-largest lithium miner, also has the most mature production capabilities in the region. Argentina, whose lithium supply is mostly managed by local governments, is speedily increasing its production. Mexico is slowly attempting to catch up, while Bolivia, hampered by political instability, is still taking its first steps into lithium exploration.

The US can be an investor and friend

In addition to large supplies of raw materials, Latin American countries have another advantage that they can lean on to develop their lithium industry: geographical and political proximity to the United States.

Current American trade policy prioritizes what US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen termed “friend-shoring,” which means reconfiguring global supply chains so that key manufacturing is located in politically friendly and reliable countries.

Another favorable policy is the Inflation Reduction Act, major legislation seeking to cut America's greenhouse gas emissions by about 40% by 2030. The US is the second-largest global emitter of CO2 and will need to make significant investments in EVs to meet this goal. The transportation sector is the largest emitter of greenhouse gasses in the US economy, which will need to replace 300 million fossil fuel-burning vehicles with EVs in the coming years.

The US needs EVs, and it doesn't want to make all of them in China. How can the Western Hemisphere work together to make this happen?

Lithium producers, from the relatively developed Chile to the fledgling Bolivia, should encourage investment that allows them to advance their domestic capacity beyond raw material extraction.

For Chile and Argentina, which have more advanced production operations than Bolivia and Mexico, this means motivating American companies to not only continue investing in upstream capabilities but also to invest in development of their midstream capacities. Current US policy provides both countries an opportunity to attract private-sector American investments that will allow them to develop refining and battery cell assembly facilities.

Chile's Free Trade Agreement with the United States makes it an even better candidate for US investment, given that the Inflation Reduction Act requires a certain percentage of EV battery minerals be extracted and processed in a country

with which the United States has such an agreement. Argentina's relationship with the US is not as friendly, although some overtures point to future cooperation between the two nations on green development in the future.

For Bolivia and Mexico, whose production operations are less advanced than Chile and Argentina, the goal should be to continue attracting investments to their upstream capabilities, which are still in the development stage. To exploit lithium deposits, Mexico just created LitoMx, a state-owned lithium company, less than a year ago. The commercial potential of Bolivia's 21 million tons of lithium has not even been determined yet.

Both nations have taken a state-led approach to production, with Mexico also making use of public-private partnerships where possible. Mexico's openness towards public-private partnerships, along with its automotive-centric Free Trade Agreement and neighborly ties with the United States, makes it a prime candidate for American investments in upstream operations. The Mexican government is just starting lithium exploration, but these factors offer it a significant edge in attracting investment that could rapidly advance its upstream production.

Although Bolivia's lithium industry is still in its embryonic stage, it too will need to attract outside investment to develop its upstream and, eventually, midstream capacities.

Despite their differences in approach—from state domination of production (Bolivia) to full reliance on private-sector collaboration (Argentina)—all four lithium producers will need to attract investment in order to develop multiple stages of the EV battery supply chain. This will allow the localization of production and, in turn, spur local economic development through spinoff entrepreneurship and supporting industries. The political will behind reshoring will not last forever;

Latin America must capitalize on the present opportunity before American companies turn back to relying on Asian inputs out of inertia.

If Latin American nations are not able to develop multiple stages of the supply chain, they will be doomed to simply be providers of raw materials without seeing significant benefits. If they are able to take advantage of the opportunity, however, they will balance Asia's dominance of the industry, help meet the growing global demand for EV batteries and ensure that production nodes stay within the Western Hemisphere.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Time Is Far More Odd Than We Think

Stephen M. D. Day
August 19, 2023

Although time is an everyday concept, it is surprisingly hard to define rigorously. In physics and neuroscience, time turns out to be several fascinatingly different, even bizarre phenomena. We have yet to discover all of the ways in which time exists in our universe and in our minds.

“**H**ow long is forever?” Asks Alice.
“Sometimes just one second.” Replies the White Rabbit.

— Lewis Carroll (aka Rev. Charles Dodgson),
Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. 1865.

In September 2021, I resumed my quest to better understand the answer to this question at our rented “Spindle” cottage in Maine at the edge of Somes Sound, America’s only fjord in the contiguous 48 States. Over the centuries, there has been no shortage of those who would probe this seemingly simple question, and yet for all this wrestling it seems any definition remains the equivalent of peeling a cosmic onion.

Circa 330 BC, Aristotle insightfully observed that time is the “number”—or measurement—“of movement in respect of the before and after.” The publican owner of my favored watering hole high up in the Pennines, above Rochdale, Lancashire, England, where I had my first job, used to bark out, “Time, gentleman, please!” as he struggled to politely evict the assembled drinkers (us) at that hour. Then, in the mid-1960s, as now, the

remaining patrons were marginally inebriated men. Time is our measure of movement, and it certainly governs our diurnal activities, but it is much more.

While long the plaything of sci-fi writers and philosophers, notably in H. G. Wells’s science fiction novella *Time Machine* (1895), our understanding of time became more complicated after Albert Einstein’s theory of general relativity (1915), which fused space and time. Particularly jarring was the arrival of his earlier theory of special relativity (1905), concerning the very nature of time itself—its reciprocity or symmetry. In his “Space and Time” lecture (1908), Herman Minkowski befuddled us further by introducing “proper time,” and its subsequent antonym, “improper time.” I always thought the latter was having fun flirting with a friend’s wife, when time seems to fly. It turns out it’s more complex than that, namely “the time interval measured by a frame where events occur at different places.”

Carlo Rovelli, in his profound yet readable book, *The Order of Time* (Riverhead Books, 2018), wrote that “proper time” depends not only on where you are and your degree of proximity to masses (e.g., that flirtatious woman); it depends also on the (relative) speed at which you move (in my case, quickly!). He went on to pronounce that “The idea that a well-defined ‘now’ exists throughout the universe is an illusion, an illegitimate extrapolation of our experience.” Foiled again.

In Rovelli’s opinion, “the difference between past and future does not exist in the elementary equations that govern events in the world.” Although time appears in most of this branch of the equations of physics (if only implicitly as the speed of light), Rovelli suggests there is no special variable time, or *t*. A universe without time? Wow, “Curiouser and curiouser,” Alice might have demurred.

If there is no special variable t , then an obvious problem is defining time. A common definition is something like, “the progression of events from past to present into the future.” However, this seems inadequate given what we currently know about quantum physics, human perception, temporal brain science, radioactive decay, unidirectional entropy, time dilation, plus human imagination, to name but a few.

So, let’s start peeling that cosmic onion.

When did time begin?

At first blush, this seems a rather fatuous question, akin to asking how many fish there are in Lake Geneva, as a close friend once asked me. However, it is generally accepted that the beginning of time, as we know it, was the Big Bang/Great Expansion some 14 billion years ago. There was no measurable time before that event. This understandably defies belief for many, but it is supported by cosmological analysis. Whether there were other universes with their own time horizons before this event is, by definition, an unknown.

Knowing that everything humans have observed scientifically has a life cycle, it is logical that our observable universe may not be exempt. The most common statistical distribution for life cycles on planet Earth is the Gaussian distribution, commonly known as the bell curve.

We don’t know yet where in its life cycle the universe is. However, there is empirical evidence through observation that our universe is beginning to dim. This is gleaned by comparing observable light emanating from galaxies closer to us physically (and therefore in time) and galaxies further away (and therefore further back in time). A study that observed over 200,000 galaxies, presented at the 2015 International Astronomical Union XXIX in Hawaii, concluded that the energy

emitted is about half of what it was 2 billion years ago. In a grand, speculative, Promethean leap, we may ask: what if this dimming signifies the universe is approximately halfway through its life cycle and follows a normal Gaussian distribution? In that event, it would suggest our universe has another 12–14 billion years to run, with a probability of >50%, as the universe accelerates towards “The Big Fizzle,” where only dissipated energy exists. Further cosmological exploration could bring us closer to understanding whether it follows nature’s Gaussian distribution or something more skewed e.g., sharply rising at the beginning, with an extended tail (“long normal” distribution).

Other estimates of the remaining time for the observable universe range into trillions of years. Our universe’s demise could include it decaying slowly toward maximum entropy (maximum disorder) or the formation of a singularity where the curvature of spacetime becomes infinite.

In terms of maximum entropy, the energy of the universe will have all moved from high energy concentrations to low energy concentrations, much like a match that burns out. The universe will simply exhaust itself and can do no further physical work. This is known generally as the “heat death” of the universe and is a bit different from a cold death where the universe expands forever. On the other side is the theoretical formation of a singularity, as in the “Big Crunch,” wherein the universe reverts to a pre-Big Bang configuration. These hypotheses are but some ways the universe, as we currently understand it, might end (or restart). To adapt a T. S. Eliot quote, we have no idea if it will end with a bang or a whimper. My guess, based on current observation data of an accelerating expansion of the known universe, is a Big Fizzle.

At this point, it is worth heeding cosmologist Carl Sagan's Baloney Detection Kit. I will quote him directly:

1. Wherever possible, there must be independent confirmation of the "facts."

2. Encourage substantive debate on the evidence by knowledgeable proponents of all points of view.

3. Arguments from authority carry little weight—"authorities" have made mistakes in the past. They will do so again in the future. Perhaps a better way to say it is that in science there are no authorities. At most, there are experts.

4. Spin more than one hypothesis. If there's something to be explained, think of all the different ways in which it could be explained. Then think of tests by which you might systematically disprove each of the alternatives. What survives, the hypothesis that resists disproof in this Darwinian selection among "multiple working hypotheses," has a much better chance of being the right answer than if you had simply run with the first idea that caught your fancy.

5. Try not to get overly attached to a hypothesis just because it's yours. It's only a waystation in the pursuit of knowledge. Ask yourself why you like the idea. Compare it fairly with the alternatives. See if you can find reasons for rejecting it. If you don't, others will.

6. Quantify. If whatever it is you're explaining has some measure, some numerical quantity attached to it, you'll be much better able to discriminate among competing hypotheses. What is vague and qualitative is open to many explanations. Of course, there are truths to be sought in the many qualitative issues we are

obliged to confront but finding them is more challenging.

7. If there's a chain of argument, every link in the chain must work, including the premise,—not just most of them.

8. Use Occam's Razor. This convenient rule of thumb urges us, when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well, to choose the simpler one.

9. Always ask whether the hypothesis can be, at least in principle, falsified. Propositions that are untestable and therefore unfalsifiable are not worth much. Consider the grand idea that our universe and everything in it is just an elementary particle—an electron, say—in a much bigger cosmos. But if we can never acquire information from outside our universe, is not the idea incapable of disproof? You must be able to test assertions. Inveterate skeptics must be given the chance to follow your reasoning, to duplicate your experiments and see if they get the same result.

My speculative life cycle estimate of the observable universe would fail Sagan's acid test (esp. numbers 1 and 5). However, this does not preclude more thought and discussion on the meaning and duration of cosmological time.

Physics of time

There is a dizzying array of theories on this subject. Concepts such as the direction of time, arrow of time, gravitational time dilation, proper and improper time, entropy increasing with time, quantum time entanglement, loop quantum gravity (predicting that elementary temporal leaps are small but finite as per Carlo Rovelli, who we will bring up later), radioactive decay, thermal time and time as the 4th dimension play a part in the

confounding physical complexity of time. All of this is before we begin discussing human perceptions of time, biological and psychological. For purposes of this inquiry, I intend only to examine a few of these, since books and copious scientific papers have been and will be written on these subjects.

Out of this potpourri of physical attributes of time, Herman Minkowski's 1907 theory of proper time, which led to measuring the consequences of time dilation, is in my opinion one of the more interesting. Simply put, he postulated the faster the relative velocity (between two entities), the greater the time dilation that there will be. In practical terms, two observers in motion relative to each other will measure each other's clocks slowing down. Simply put, velocity exerts an influence on time. For example, in the International Space Station after 6 months at a speed of 7,700 meters per second, an astronaut would age 0.005 seconds less than on Earth. Yes, time slowed down for that astronaut relative to the observer on Earth, and we have used two synchronized atomic clocks to prove it.

Gravitational time dilation is, however, not reciprocal—the clock closer to the center of the gravitational field will be slower. Both observers will agree that the clock closer to the center of the gravitational field is slower in rate and ratio of difference. This leads to the somewhat bizarre conclusion that the core of our earth is at a different 'proper time' than on the surface (~2.5 years younger than the crust)—and so on throughout the universe. Taking this concept to extremes, you could in theory meet your grandfather before you were born.

If you're starting to wonder "That's great, but what does it mean for me?" then you'll be interested to know general relativistic gravitational time dilation has an immediate impact on satellite (GPS) navigation, space travel and satellite time

synchronization at different altitudes. GPS needs to account for this time dilation.

As Wikipedia explains,

Time dilation explains why two working clocks will report different times after different accelerations. For example, time goes slower at the International Space Station, lagging approximately 0.01 seconds for every 12 Earth months passed. For GPS satellites to work, they must adjust for similar bending of spacetime to coordinate properly with systems on Earth.

The International Space Station is only ~254 miles from Earth and travels at a small fraction of the speed of light. Just imagine the gravitational time dilation for a spacecraft billions of miles from Earth traveling at a significant fraction of the speed of light where time dilation would amount to multiple years or centuries.

For those eager to calculate time dilation, the formula is

$$\gamma = 1/\sqrt{(1 - v^2/c^2)}$$

The equation relating proper time and time measured by an earth-bound observer implies that relative velocity cannot exceed the speed of light c (which is 299,792,458 meters per second).

A word on radioactive decay

Some things don't give a whit about relativity and act as natural chronometers. Radioactive decay is another physical phenomenon, namely the probability per unit of time that a nucleus will decay; it is constant, independent of time.

$$A = -dN/dt$$

where A is total (energy) activity, N is the number of particles, and t is time.

Again in Wikipedia's words,

Radioactive decay is a stochastic (i.e. random) process at the level of single atoms. According to quantum theory, it is impossible to predict when a particular atom will decay, regardless of how long the atom has existed. However, for a significant number of identical atoms, the overall decay rate can be expressed as a decay constant or as half-life. The half-lives of radioactive atoms have a huge range; from nearly instantaneous to far longer than the age of the universe.

According to an April 2019 study published in Nature,

Researchers measured, for the first time ever, the decay of a xenon-124 atom into a tellurium 124 atom through an extremely rare process called two-neutrino double electron capture. By measuring this unique decay in a lab for the first time, the researchers were able to prove precisely how rare the reaction is and how long it takes xenon-124 to decay. The half-life of xenon-124—that is, the average time required for a group of xenon-124 atoms to diminish by half—is about 18 sextillion years (1.8×10^{22} years), roughly 1 trillion times the current age of the universe.

Wow!

So, here we go again, with yet another measurement of time or timelessness. Geologic time suggests the earth is some 4.5 billion years old, as measured by its period revolution around our sun, itself ~4.6 billion years old and approximately halfway through its life cycle of ~10 billion years. It's rather quaint, but a calendar

year equals the elapsed time for Earth to circle the sun i.e., 365.24 days. To this we have added the accuracy of atomic clocks. The current international unit of time is the humble second, of which we gather 60 to form a minute and so on, and one second is defined by the electronic transition of a cesium atom.

Physics and time

Physics provides a variety of lenses to understand time. According to Rovelli, a well-defined “now” does not really exist; gravitational time dilation is real; radioactive decay is constant independent of time; quantum physics indicates particles can be entangled independent of distance (time); finally, cosmic entropy (the increasing physical disorderliness of the universe) may serve as a possible surrogate for the passage of time.

Einstein described quantum entanglement as “spooky action at a distance.” However, following recent observations, maybe we should append, “... without apparent time delay regardless of distance.” Perhaps there are two phenomena faster than the speed of light: (1) quantum entanglement and (2) human imagination—for example, picturing oneself on Earth's nearest star's planets (Proxima Centauri, 4.3 light-years distant) in a matter of seconds.

While we can look backward in time by observing galaxies and stars close to the 14-billion-year-ago dawn of the universe, we can't look forward with precision. However, with the use of supercomputers such as NASA's Pleiades, one of the world's most powerful supercomputers, it should be possible to fast-forward portions of the observable universe relative to current Earth time using various scenarios (not predictions, but probabilistic outcomes).

David Layzer, a Harvard cosmologist in the early 1970s, suggested that in an expanding

universe the entropy would increase, as required by the second law of thermodynamics, but that the maximum possible entropy of the universe might increase faster than the actual entropy increase. This dichotomy would leave room for an increase of order or information at the same time the entropy is increasing (e.g., biological systems, certain physical systems including crystallization, etc.).

Layzer inferred that if the equilibrium rate of the matter (the speed with which matter redistributes itself randomly among all the possible states) was slower than the rate of expansion, then "negative entropy" or "order" (defined as the difference between the maximum possible entropy and the actual entropy) would also increase. Claude Shannon identified this negative entropy with information—an intriguing idea at the time (proper or improper!).

Layzer called the direction of information increase the "historical arrow."

That's the physical angle. Now, it's about time for a biological look at time—and particularly humans' perception of time.

Human perceptions of time

Dean Buonomano, a professor at the University of California (UC), Los Angeles, whose research focuses on neurocomputation and how the brain tells time), explains that the human brain has multiple clocks, or mechanisms for capturing the passage of time. Not all of these clocks function in the same way: "The circadian clock doesn't have a second hand, and the mechanisms in your brain responsible for, say, timing the duration of a traffic light don't have an hour hand." This is why time might appear to be moving slowly while we are engaged in an activity, but appear to have moved quickly for us in retrospect after we have

completed that activity: we do not always experience time through the same mechanisms.

Buonomano might have added that not just the brain but the body has multiple clocks, since I'm feeling hungry right now—but that of course is a timed signal to the brain from my stomach or vice versa. Emilie Reas, who was at the time a neuroscience doctoral student at UC San Diego, explained much the same thing in an article entitled, "Your Brain Has Two Clocks." The hypothalamus with suprachiasmatic nuclei is responsible for our circadian rhythm. Then there's the amygdala and hippocampus, both of which play a part in perceived time. The dorsolateral prefrontal right cortex is considered the region most involved in time perception. Most older people perceive time moving faster in retrospect and slower in current time because fewer memories are laid down later in life in the hippocampus.

When neural activity increases via neural transmitters (including via drugs), time seems to expand. Conversely, decreased firings of differentiated neurons slow or shrink perceived time. Amusingly, our since-deceased dog Max and other dogs we know seem to have little temporal awareness (i.e., awareness of the passing of time), since we receive the same enthusiastic greeting whether returning to the house after five minutes or several days or weeks!

In 2018, Albert Tsao, a neuroscientist at the Kavli Institute for Systems Neuroscience of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, discovered a neural network that expresses a sense of time in experiences and memories. The studies demonstrated that, by changing the activities engaged in and the content of those experiences, it was possible to change the course of the time signal in the lateral entorhinal cortex—and thus the perception of time.

In 2014, one of Tsao's co-authors, Edward Moser, and his then-wife May-Britt Moser had received a Nobel Prize for identifying a GPS-like system in the medial entorhinal cortex of the human brain. Mercifully, the brain's GPS can now be supplemented with electronic GPS in transportation so that people who tend to get lost, such as elderly people (myself included), are less likely to do so.

Multiple sub-mechanisms in the brain perceive time, including subjective time, psychological time, experienced time, episodic time, mind time, etc., etc. These mechanisms of the human brain that retain and differentiate aspects of time are just a smattering of what we have studied to date. Needless to say, human time perception is complex, and much remains unknown.

And then there is transcendentalism, which I will illustrate with two quotations. The first is from Peter Matthiessen:

Zen is really just a reminder to stay alive and to be awake. We tend to daydream all the time, speculating about the future and dwelling on the past. Zen practice is about appreciating your life in the moment. We are beset by both the future and the past, and there is no reality apart from the here and now.

The second is from Gore Vidal. Howard Austin, his long-term companion, asked Vidal on his deathbed: "Didn't it go by awfully fast?" to which Vidal would respond in his memoirs, "Of course it had. We had been too happy, and the gods cannot bear the happiness of mortals."

Time flies when having fun, but it seems to slow when not—such as in the dentist's chair or waiting in anguish for a vacant Spot A Pot, as opposed to spending time with a favorite companion. The same time interval is recorded by our atomic

clocks, but perceived time is different. Gal Zauberaman at the Wharton School confirmed that perceived time moves relatively faster with inaction—but only in retrospect, the reason being repetitive behaviors and lack of new experiences. With age often comes inactivity and repetition. The elderly looking backward often marvel at how fast time seems to have passed.

If we accept that time perception is supremely variable—as in the apocryphal response of Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit to Alice, "I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date!" This suggests time is malleable and can indeed be stretched or shrunken. The mechanism to stretch time is to build in circuit breakers (aka memory anchors, separated by mental baffles) filled with meaningful, enjoyable activities and related memories—so that time in the moment does not seem to move faster due to inaction, particularly as we age. Stretching time is a mental discipline requiring conscious and subconscious separation of events, and an acute sense of the now, aka living in the moment—without being unduly obsessive about time. This gives the sense that more time can become available. In essence, perceived time has expanded because of those mental circuit breakers.

It's important to stretch the present before it's lost in the past or becomes part of the future—although after googling "stretching time," I found endless fitness centers, bodybuilding exercises, stretching lotions, dog walkers and highly creative adult activities.

This modest attempt to shed light on the mystery of time is neither conclusive nor exhaustive. Rather, it's a brief tour of the issue and some of the multiple towering contributors to the science—physical, biological and psychological. Many delving into the subject of the direction of time, aka the arrow of time, including Hans Reichenbach (1956) and Stephen Hawking (1988), concluded

that time is irreversible. I quote Wikipedia one last time:

The arrow of time, also called time's arrow, is the concept positing the "one-way direction" or "asymmetry" of time. It was developed in 1927 by the British astrophysicist Arthur Eddington, and is an unsolved general physics question. This direction, according to Eddington, could be determined by studying the organization of atoms, molecules, and bodies, and might be drawn upon a four-dimensional relativistic map of the world ("a solid block of paper"). The Arrow of Time paradox was originally recognized in the 1800's for gases (and other substances) as a discrepancy between microscopic and macroscopic description of thermodynamics / statistical Physics: at the microscopic level physical processes are believed to be either entirely or mostly time-symmetric: if the direction of time were to reverse, the theoretical statements that describe them would remain true. Yet at the macroscopic level it often appears that this is not the case: there is an obvious direction (or flow) of time.

But is this true for our imagination? In our imagination, we can bounce between past, present and future. After all, Einstein famously said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge—for knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution."

Time dilation, and its quantum implications, should convince us that time can be relative, absolute or perhaps even non-existent, depending on the definition, relative to the observer and observed. Quoting Carlo Rovelli again, "the idea that a well-defined 'now' exists throughout the universe is an illusion, an illegitimate extrapolation of our experience."

It's all a matter of defining "now, as it is with "time"—and it's now about time for my cup of tea.

[[Christopher Schell](#) edited this piece.]

***Stephen Day** has more than 40 years of rich business experience in American, European and Japanese markets. From 1991 to 2005, he was CEO and founder of International Ventures Associates, a private consulting and investment company providing strategic advice and investment support for telecoms, information technology and software industries.

The Hidden Gem of a Mid-Century Modern Church

William Softky
August 20, 2023

Half Moon Bay, CA, is home to one of the best examples of mid-century modern design in a Catholic church. Its swooping, curved lines capture the aesthetic of the age of aircraft. Sadly, this artistic history has little recognition, and it is in danger of being lost.

A fleeting but magnificent era of artistic history is the mid-century modern movement. It was an interlude of geometric simplicity and craftsmanship in the space between the stylishness of Art Deco of the 1920s-30s and the Jetsons-like space age vogue of the 1960s. It was the art of the era of aircraft.

Mid-century modern design is best known for furniture, among the best ever produced (like the curved writing desk, with a lip, at which I sit right now). Mid-century furniture flourished at the simultaneous peaks of aesthetic science, ergonomic design and new high-precision woodworking technology. Sadly, its slow death ensued with the plummet of profit margins and consumer discrimination. Designers like Charles and Ray Eames lost out to mass-produced furniture by Ikea and others.

Alongside furniture, however, mid-century aesthetics gave us amazing architecture and art—often both in one place. Every week I visit a stunning example, Our Lady of the Pillar Catholic Church in Half Moon Bay, California, affectionately known as OLP.

An unrecognized jewel

OLP is a mostly unknown, seaside country church with an intricate, curved interior of stained glass murals under a soaring aircraft-hanger roof. The choir at 10:00 AM Mass has only three people, of whom my wife Criscillia and I are two. I may be the only person there who recognizes OLP's unique artistic heritage, which is why I want to keep it as it is, and why I'm writing this.

Since OLP is unknown, let's compare it with an actually famous mid-century building, First United Methodist Church of San Diego. Here's what that church looks like inside:



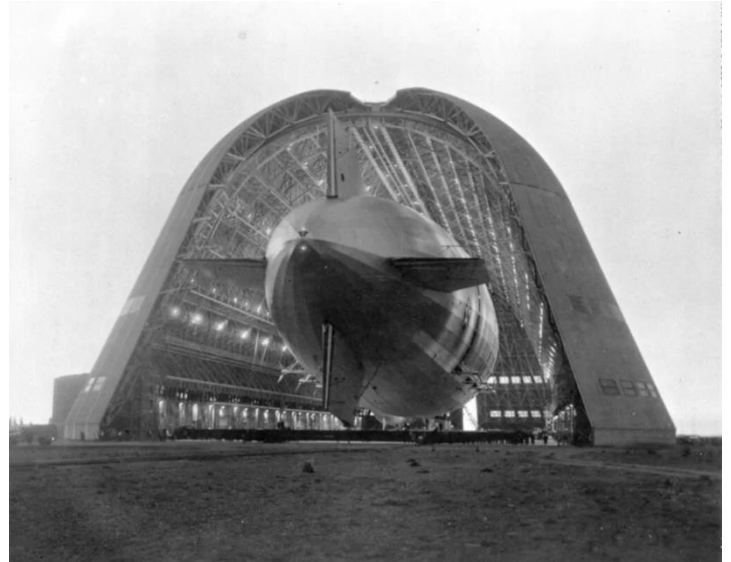
Note the curved barrel ceiling and angled supports, which bisect horizontal beams. The ends of the pews echo that parabolic art, as do the outlines of the chandeliers, shaped like rocket ships. In great buildings like this, as with those by architect Frank Lloyd Wright, motifs reappear across the floor, the furniture, the windows and the roof. Everything elegantly fits.

Now let's look at OLP. From the outside, it looks simple and boxy, a cross between a mission church and a high school gym (although the gardens are magnificent).



The inside of the church is a complete contrast. Curves dominate, a likely relation to the new age of aviation in the 1950s, when the church was built. At that time, San Francisco had just opened its international airport “over the hill”—this little town of Half Moon Bay, although just thirty kilometers south of San Francisco, was effectively isolated from San Francisco and the rest of the Bay Area by steep mountains. Half Moon Bay had gotten its own airport only a few years earlier, thanks to the Army and World War II.

Also south of San Francisco, but on the populated side of the mountains, was one of the largest buildings in the world, Hanger A at Moffett Field. The hanger was built in the 1930s to accommodate Zeppelins.



The angled sides and curved roof of this giant hanger resemble a smoothed-off trapezoid.

Now let's look inside OLP:



There are actually three kinds of curved arch here: the most boxy is the wall/ceiling shape, then the wider arch, then the narrower arch whose perfect half-circle centers on the circle of the Virgin Mary's halo. That narrower arch has the same shape as the one in San Diego, as do the vertical struts bisecting horizontal beams.

The same curves appear looking from the altar towards the entrance. From this angle, the circular Rose Window is prominent. It carried over from the older church which this one replaced.

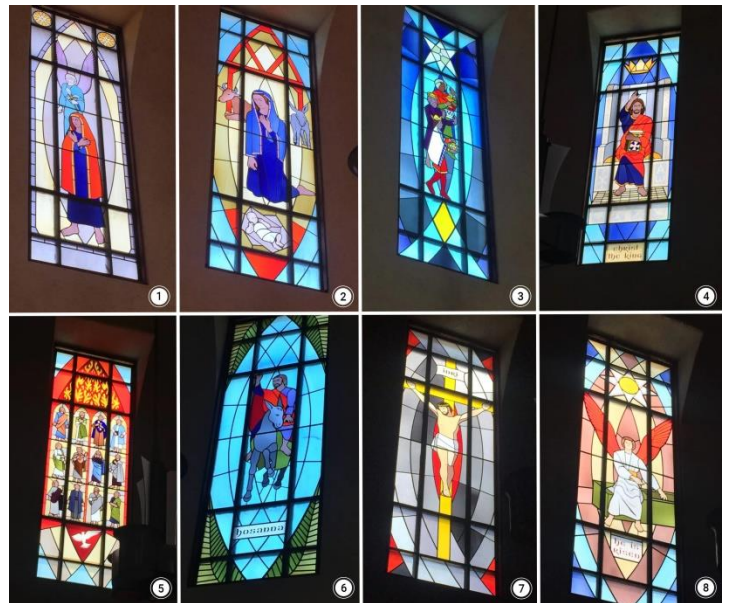


The chandeliers contain gentle arcs at their tops, echoing the arc motif seen in the roofline and the stained-glass windows. Unusually, the curved flares of the cylinders imitate aircraft-engine cowlings, a separate invocation of aviation in addition to the aircraft-hanger shape.



So it looks to my amateur eye as if this tiny rural church contains several of the key motifs of the famous San Diego church, in particular the angled support columns, aircraft-hanger roofline and matching aircraft/rocket chandeliers. But here's the catch: OLP held its first mass in 1954, a full ten years before the San Diego church was built. The little rural church beat out the big famous one and perhaps even inspired it.

But what makes OLP so spectacular is the cycle of stained glass windows portraying eight frames of the Christian narrative. The windows incorporate circular arcs in the cartoonish, abstract mid-century style, a style that rarely depicts human figures.



1. The Annunciation. The arcs here intersect above Mary, as if forming the roof-beam of a church.

2. The Nativity of Jesus. Here the arcs intersect above as the beams of the manger, and below to cradle the baby.

3. The Three Wise Men bringing gifts. Here the arcs intersect to form the Star of Bethlehem

4. Jesus enthroned as Christ the King. The arcs form his crown:

5. Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit descends on the Apostles.

6. The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The arcs here are palm leaves.

7. The Crucifixion. The arcs are asymmetrical, like a spiral.

8. The Angel of the Resurrection. The arcs form a sun:

Below, at eye-level with the congregation, is a very different view. There is a large stained-glass “mural” that depicts the Christian history of California and its missions. The same arc-shapes that appear in the upper windows reappear as dividing shapes throughout the mural, but in muted blues and golds which match the original rose window. Note also the metal decoration wrapping the angled vertical beam, part of the metallic aviation theme.



My photographs do not do this church justice, and my dilettante’s knowledge of art and architecture should not be the last word on this gem box of a church. I sincerely hope that others

more qualified will visit this beautiful place, to know what it is to sit, sing or worship inside a unified work of art.

OLP is a church, not a museum

But what if no one knows it’s art?

The photos above show the building, not the people. Lots of old people, yet enough newborns to coo together during service. Three different languages: English, Spanish and Portuguese. Rich and poor. And brought together recently through tragedy, when three church members were killed in a violent attack.

The congregation works hard on the church. A few years ago, when Covid first hit, construction-minded men jerry-rigged a giant tent in the parking lot so Mass could be held outdoors. It was held there for two years. The services were the only continuous services in the area. OLP people also share a love of neat, bright decoration. The gardens are pretty and thriving, the festive fabrics stunning, the flowers always vibrant.

And therein lies the problem. Those abstract modern chandeliers don’t have the bright and festive look most OLP folks like, and they’re the ones who worship there. Over the last few years, congregants have renovated almost every element: the church now has a freshly painted ceiling, a new carpet, a new altar, new pews, restored paintings. Those rusty, abstract chandeliers are now the dullest elements in the building.

Some parishioners want to replace those old chandeliers with these brand-new ones:



These sparky new things don't match the old aesthetic, but many parishioners like them. It's possible that OLP, a perfect example of a bygone form of art, like other art before it, will slowly erode its coherence to serve the people who use it now. It's not just their right, it's their obligation to worship as they want. The church belongs to them, not to history. But oh, what a wonderful history it is.

[[Throvnica Chandrasekar](#) and [Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***William Softky** is a biophysicist who was among the first neuroscientists to understand microtiming, and among the first technologists to build that understanding into algorithms. Thousands have cited his scientific work, his PhD in Theoretical Physics is from Caltech, his name is on 10 patents and two of the companies he inspired were acquired for \$160 million total.

The Great Omission: Why Don't Indians Talk About Africa?

Nishita Malhan
August 21, 2023

We have a problem worldwide with a skewed and innacurate representation of Africa in the media. Indian media are no exception. There needs to be greater exposure to authentic African stories to counteract these biases and recognize the continent's true significance.

I watched an Instagram Reel a few days ago where a college student was asked to name 5 countries starting with the letter A. One of her answers was "Africa." Now, while that may speak worse of the American public school system than of anything else, we still have a problem.

I'm an Indian teenager and have lived and studied in India all my life. I am ashamed to say that until I was 12, I also thought that Africa was a country. I likened it to the Australian situation, where the country and continent are more or less the same.

Could you blame me, though? Much of what I had read until then, whether in textbooks or the news, spoke of Africa as an undifferentiated whole, an exotic landmass roamed by wild animals and exotic people, all sporting face paint on a dark canvas. Sprawling savannahs and exposed ribs were the images associated with the continent, pitifully ridden with disease, poverty and civil unrest. I never once read something that referred to the thriving middle class that constitutes about a third of the African population or to the rolling beaches that the continent boasts, let alone an

individual reference to any of its 54 distinct countries.

The stereotype lives on

This very pigeonhole—or “shithole,” as Mr. Trump likes to say—of Africa as an outlandish jungle is what a 2019 New York Times want ad for a Nairobi bureau chief position invokes. When it announces the exciting opportunity to cover “unexpected stories of hope” from the “pirate seas of the Horn of Africa” and the “forests of Congo,” it reduces Africa to the very stereotypes that a correspondent reporting from Africa should aim to topple. The LAM Sisterhood, an African feminist content studio, posted a humorous dramatic reading of the advertisement online, mocking it.

However, the video wasn’t easy for me to find. At first, when I searched for it on Google I was not able to find it. Indeed, when I think about it, I haven’t encountered, as far as I can remember, any content online produced by Africans. Why are young Indians like me so unexposed to African voices? If we don’t learn about Africa from Africans, from where do we learn about the continent and its expansive culture?

The answer, as it turns out, is that we just don’t. And when we do, it’s almost always negative. While Western media are often criticized for their coverage (or lack thereof) of developing countries like Nigeria and Tanzania, Indian media are no different. Even today, the press of the world’s largest democracy tends to pander to well-established African typecasting—that is, in the rare instance that African news even makes it to print.

Western bias and pessimism

Prabhat Kumar and Dorcas Addo published a paper titled “A Study on the Coverage of Africa in Indian Print Media” which revealed that, out of the entire sample of 185 stories on Africa from the

Times of India and The Hindu, two leading English-language newspapers in India, only 62 were positive. Even these few optimistic human-interest stories were permitted only a small space in the newspaper.

The authors propose that the primary reason for this scarce and skewed representation is a lack of Indian media correspondents on the ground in Africa and a resulting reliance on Western media for African news and stories. Kumar and Addo’s study found that, from August 2014 to August 2016, all stories about Africa, except for opinion pieces and editorials, had been taken from Western sources such as Agence France-Presse, the Associated Press, Bloomberg and the New York Times News Service, among others.

Another interesting finding from the study was that the single country receiving the highest coverage in the newspapers examined, more than any of India’s neighbors, was the United States, which also featured in the greatest number of lifestyle and entertainment pieces.

The reality is that the US can fit more than 3 times into the continent of Africa. Why does it get disproportionately more representation in Indian media than our African friends?

In Indian media, the most intuitive reason for this distortion in coverage is that the media give the people what they want. As the media are nothing but a business setup following the principle of demand and supply, they only produce what sells, and they only churns out what their audience wants to read. So the underrepresentation of Africa in Indian media is merely a reflection of the Indian audience’s indifference towards and disinterest in African stories.

The most plausible explanation for this disregard is the average Indian reader’s fascination with the West, which as a result receives markedly

more coverage in Indian news. Maybe it's not unusual to look with awe upon more developed countries, eager to learn more about them to emulate the economic, military and sociocultural conditions that have earned them reverence and influence worldwide. It is likely an intrinsic human trait to mirror those one thinks are doing better than themselves. Or perhaps the Indian mindset's captivation with the West stems from a deep-rooted perception of Western superiority, a gem that colonialism has securely embedded into the Indian psyche.

None of these explanations, however, can do away with the importance of African news as a source of learning. Unless we start exposing ourselves to African narratives, we risk falling prey to the danger of a single story, the one of the West.

Africa is a landmass where the earliest known Homo sapiens emerged, teeming with natural resources and home to a panoply of cultural traditions and some of the fastest-growing economies in the world. The continent and the significance of its stories are not to be underestimated.

[[Lane Gibson](#) edited this piece.]

***Nishita Malhan**, a student at the Cathedral & John Connon School in Mumbai, India, possesses a profound enthusiasm for political matters and international relations, coupled with a strong affinity for writing. The intricate impact of media on our society intrigues her, fueling her aspiration to pursue a future in journalism.

Hostile Information Campaigns, Democracy and Free Expression in Finland

Joy Hyvarinen
August 25, 2023

Finland, now a NATO member, is a target for hostile Russian influence campaigns. Finnish authorities are looking for ways to combat foreign disinformation. While they do this, however, they must not lose sight of freedom of expression, a precious democratic right.

Finland's national security outlook has drastically changed following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The two countries share a long border, and Finland has now become NATO's newest member. Russian interference within Finland is a present danger. Finland is wary of hybrid threats coming from Russia, which may include cyberattacks, economic pressure, sabotage, political interference and hostile information campaigns.

Finland must protect itself against hostile information campaigns by combatting misleading narratives. At the same time, it must also do so in a way that does not infringe on Finnish citizens' legitimate right to freedom of expression.

Hostile information campaigns and free expression

Hostile information activities, such as deliberate spreading of false information and conspiracy theories, aim to destabilize and weaken states. Campaigns target democratic institutions and processes through activities such as election

interference and messages that aim to reduce trust in government.

The term “disinformation” describes deliberately shared false or misleading information, while misinformation is used to refer to false or misleading information that is shared without harmful intent. As Global Disinformation Index explains, even technically true information can easily be presented in a way that conveys messages that are false and harmful.

The threat is well-known. The Finnish Security and Intelligence Service has identified Russia and China as currently posing the most significant threat when it comes to state-sponsored influencing operations. Finnish authorities are preparing themselves. The country hosts the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, created in 2017 by the European Union, NATO and nine states including the US and Finland.

The threat is greater now than ever. The growing capabilities and availability of artificial intelligence tools have opened up new possibilities on an entirely new scale for hostile actors.

Responding to hostile information campaigns is challenging and includes the risk of response measures impacting freedom of expression. For example, the EU’s decisions to stop Russia Today, Sputnik and later other Russian media outlets from distributing content within the EU raised widespread concerns about state censorship of media.

A new government in crisis creates more risks

Finland’s April 2023 elections led to the formation of a new government. It has been facing difficulties that could provide more opportunities for hostile influencing activities.

The new government includes the anti-immigrant Finns Party, which successfully captured 20.1% of the vote. The Finns Party has been beset by racism scandals. The party’s leader, Minister of Finance Riiikka Purra, has been embroiled in trying to explain why her blog contains extraordinarily racist and violent statements. Economic Affairs Minister Vilhem Junnila had to resign following revelations about questionable “jokes” and his 2019 speech at a rally that included neo-Nazi organizations. Wille Rydman, his replacement, has had to defend his own extremely racist private messages.

The situation has led to calls for resignations and criticism of the prime minister and the parties that were willing to join the coalition with the Finns Party as a partner. It has sparked much-needed debate about overt and covert racism in politics.

The Finns Party often presents itself as a defender of free speech. As a consequence, some voters have begun to think of free speech as a right-wing, anti-immigrant agenda, rather than a constitutionally protected right that belongs equally to all Finns. The debacle may provide fertile ground for bad actors interested in deepening societal conflicts and undermining trust in democratic institutions.

The framing of debates about free expression

Public debates tend to be dominated by headline-grabbing media stories about opposing views and opinions from extreme ends of the spectrum. Stories and debates focus on issues such as hateful speech, provocative statements, victims and villains. Strong disagreements feature heavily. This environment makes it easy for hostile actors, agents provocateurs and useful idiots to drive disagreement and deepen divisions in society. Well-meaning ordinary citizens may end up

playing along with a hostile influencing agenda that hides behind a debate about free expression.

What gets lost in the debate is that freedom of expression is itself an essential component of national security. We must not attack freedom of expression out of a desire to attack disinformation. Free speech is a democratic right and benefits all citizens, not just those on the extremes who tend to dominate public attention.

The right to freedom of expression is fundamental for democracy. It protects the public debates and expressions of diverse opinions that are essential for democracies to function. But it also provides opportunities for hostile actors to influence and distort societal debates.

Finland is party to the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects freedom of expression. The convention allows states to restrict free expression only if certain conditions are met. The restrictions need to be based on law, and they must be for one of the purposes mentioned in the convention—for example, national security or protecting the rights of others. The restrictions must be “necessary in a democratic society” (Article 10).

In 1976 the European Court of Human Rights considered the right to freedom of expression in the case of *Handyside v. the United Kingdom*. The court found that the “necessary in a democratic society” requirement implies that freedom of expression applies not only to expressions “regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population.” The court added, “Such are the demands of that pluralism, tolerance and broadmindedness without which there is no ‘democratic society’.”

The case is a reminder of how essential freedom of expression is for democracy. Safeguarding

freedom of expression is part of national security, not opposed to it.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Will the New BRICS+ Be Able to Come Together?

Kanwal Sibal
August 28, 2023

Last week’s BRICS summit marked a historic moment as the five partner nations agreed to integrate six new members in January 2024. This will be a positive step in the trend towards multipolarity, but it also may prove a danger to cohesion within the group of rising nations.

Russia, India and China formed RIC in 2001. Together with Brazil, they formed BRIC as an informal grouping in 2006. BRIC became a more formal entity and began holding annual summits in 2009. BRIC became BRICS when South Africa entered the grouping in 2010.

This year's BRICS summit took place in South Africa from August 22–24. The most important outcome of the summit was the decision to expand the group. Six new members will join on January 1, 2024: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Argentina, Iran and Ethiopia. The original membership has just been doubled and this is a transformative outcome.

Originally, the RIC group was a response to the emergence of a unipolar world following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Then, the BRIC nations, four economically rising powers from three continents, shared an agenda. All four wanted to make the global order more democratic and equitable. When BRICS emerged, these powers wanted a greater role of developing countries in the new world order. At least three of the powers—India, Brazil and South Africa—sought to reform the postwar UN system, including its political and financial institutions. These emerging powers wanted to make the UN the centerpiece of a reinvigorated multilateralism.

End of the unipolar moment

This multilateral approach is becoming all the more important as the world exits its unipolar moment. Although the US remains the world's leading political, military and economic power, it is no longer able to unilaterally dictate the rules of the international system. It failed to change the Middle Eastern balance of power in its favor by military intervention in the Iraq War or by indirect means during the Arab Spring. The disastrous end of its War on Terror, exemplified by the retreat from Afghanistan, has reduced its international primacy.

The US now sees the need to strengthen its alliances in Europe and Asia to retain its global preeminence. This includes the reinvigoration of NATO in Europe, as well as the alliances with Japan, South Korea and the Philippines in Asia.

The US is pulling the team together as new tensions—with potentially dire consequences for global peace and security—have pitted it against both Russia and China. It has succeeded in getting its European partners to throw their full support into a common effort against Russia and acknowledge that China is a systemic threat as well.

Furthermore, the US has used its financial power to the hilt to isolate Russia and cause its economic collapse. Washington has also openly subscribed to the idea of regime change in Russia, a peer nuclear power. It is not only Russia but also China that lies in American crosshairs. The US now sees China as its principal longer-term adversary and is taking aggressive steps to thwart China's technological rise.

Tensions between great powers are straining the international system. Western sanctions on Russia have been draconian. In particular, the US has weaponized the dollar-based global financial system. The war in Ukraine has also had deeply disruptive effects on the supply of food, fertilizers and energy to developing countries. The equity of a global order based on rules set by the powerful is now in serious question. This order does not emanate from the collective will of the international community but is defined and determined by the West.

RIC, BRIC and then BRICS were all about multipolarity. These non-Western powers wanted a seat at the top table. Yet the dominant Western powers who champion human rights and democracy are not ready to cede control. In fact, the West imposes its agenda on these powers through championing supposedly “universal values” and does not want to give up its traditional hegemony. Naturally, the BRICS nations oppose this hegemony and want a redistribution of global power.

The West has been locked in a confrontation with Russia and China. Both these powers are responding by expanding BRICS. Hence, they have added six new members to the group. Some of them, like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Argentina have historic links with the US. Yet their joining BRICS demonstrates that they are willing to reduce their dependence on the West. These nations want a counterbalance to the US and seek a rebalancing of the global political and economic system, which does not have such punitive costs for transgression.

The inclusion of new members into the BRICS club is telling. Iran is already a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and close not only to China but also Russia. Iran has long been at loggerheads with the US and is subject to strong Western sanctions. Ethiopia is wracked by civil war and prolonged drought. Yet the country has made it to the club on the basis of its increasingly close relationship with China.

Clearly, the BRICS expansion sends a loud and clear signal. BRICS has welcomed powers that challenge the US and are close to China and Russia.

What were the criteria and what does BRICS expansion mean?

The entry of new members to the BRICS club raises a key question. What were the criteria?

Were they GDP size or growth prospects or population size or geographic location or regional influence or some combination of these factors? It turns out that, except for energy exporters Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the other new countries face serious economic problems. Egypt is the most populous Arab nation with the largest military in the region. Yet its economy is in an acute crisis. Argentina, the second-largest Latin American country, is in yet another economic crisis. Their

addition does not exactly strengthen the BRICS club economically.

Importantly, no East or South Asian country joined the BRICS club. Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE lie in Asia but are part of the Middle East. Indonesia withdrew its candidacy at the last moment. It seems to be betting instead on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). BRICS is a geographically dispersed club while ASEAN is a cohesive organization with shared interests. External pressure by the US might also have played a role in Indonesia staying away from BRICS.

When it comes to African countries, Nigeria would have been a more credible addition than Ethiopia. However, the country did not apply for membership. Neither did Mexico. Algeria applied for membership but does not seem to have gotten in.

Clearly, the expansion of BRICS has been lopsided. Ethiopia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran are clustered together geographically. Only Argentina seems to stand out.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa declared: “We have tasked our Foreign Ministers to further develop the BRICS partner country model and a list of prospective partner countries and report by the next Summit.” Yet it is unclear what are the criteria for the expansion. It seems that new members have been admitted to the BRICS club on an ad hoc basis.

While expansion may boost multipolarity, it risks making the new BRICS+ club less cohesive. India and China have deep differences. Their militaries are in a standoff at the border. Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran are not exactly the best of friends. Brazil and Argentina are rivals.

Furthermore, the commitment of various countries to BRICS+ is far from solid. Under Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil had less commitment to BRICS than current president Lula da Silva. Tellingly, South Africa could not welcome Russian President Vladimir Putin because of its obligations to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Ramaphosa might wax lyrical about BRICS+, but his government is still constrained by Western-made law of The Hague-based ICC.

It remains to be seen how BRICS+ shapes up but it is clear that the addition of new members and prospects of further expansion are an indication of a growing, if inchoate, trend towards multipolarity.

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