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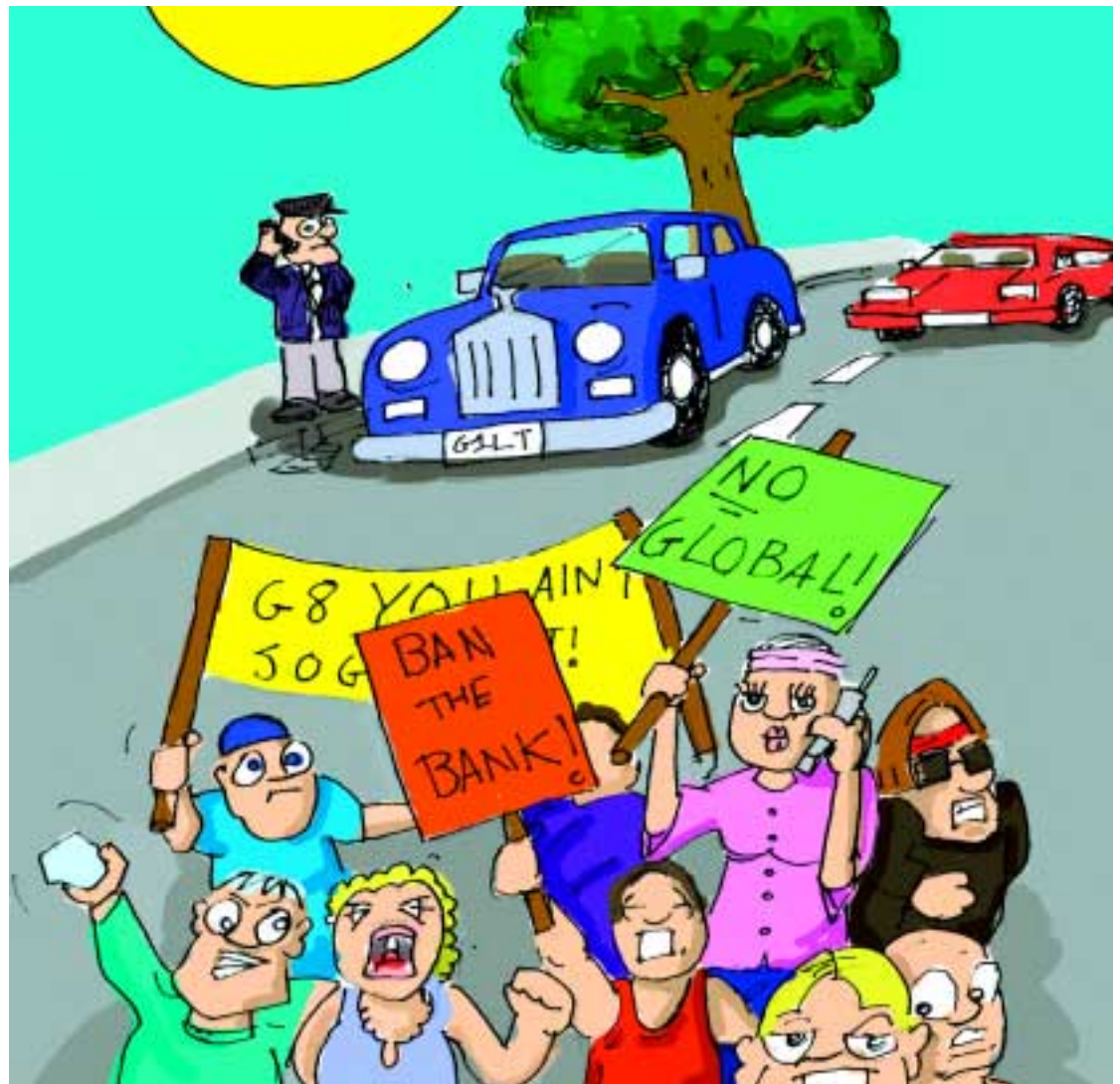
Does this problem have a solution?

Managing society requires the world to embrace randomness. Fat chance!

Have you ever tried a dialog with a convinced No-Global? They come in all manner of shapes, but most of them share a distinctive distrust for finance and have an unshakeable faith in easy recipes to set the world straight. Redeem the third world? Forgive the debts and pile in the cash as developing aid. Protect the poor in the western world? Do not allow the multinationals and the mantra of free trade to set the political agenda. The good-faith NGO worker, the college student who has not yet worked a day of his life for his living, the professional politician may not even share the same language, but that does not stop them from buying wholesale into the a set of self-contradictory beliefs with the same deep faith which allows Christians to accept the God of the Old Testament as the same God of the New Testament.

Stark contrasts

The human ability to accept and adapt contradictions has always fascinated me. The fast-changing modern post-industrial world co-existing with stone-age cultures in the same global village has increased the number and the permutations of such contradictions to a point where it is hard to understand how humanity, its rationality and



*"Jenkins ... mother insists on embarrassing me like this!
Why on earth did she have to send you to collect me in the runabout!? Go back and get the Maserati ..."*

its ethics can sustain the onslaught. Do you want some depressing examples?

Contrast the \$30m jury award to a US executive, who had been called “old and ugly”, with the few thousand dollars paid for a life wrongfully taken or with the lack of any recompense to the victims of African or Balkan genocides.

Contrast the mild sentence given by one judge for outright murder with the custodial sentence given by another judge for stealing an apple; and this in the same country, not even in different ones.

Contrast the millions of pounds paid from the public purse to protect a convicted criminal’s new identity with the lack of funds to protect the elderly from those preying on them.

Contrast the hundreds of thousands spent on keeping alive on a machine someone who would have never wanted to suffer such pain and indignity, while no cash is available to pay for some children’s basic dentistry.

Any hope that basic fairness or even common sense might be prevailing inside developed countries, let alone across the globe, must require a daily overdose of blind faith and optimism.

So, what do the people and the media do, faced with all this? The easy thing: fill pages with the scandal of CEOs overpaying themselves and dream up tabloids’ eye-catching titles about the latest idiotic sentence by a superannuated senile judge.

The lack of fairness and common sense however continues to increase and only the randomness is apparent. There is a pattern to this phenomenon and humanity is responsible for it.

J'accuse, ils qui accusent!

Of course it is easy just to blame the world of finance. It happens recurrently. Whether it was the Jews and the Lombards yesterday or Wall Street and the City of London today, it is much easier to blame successful minorities than to blame the kings and the politicians and all of us who put them there and kept them there.

Did you watch President Chirac’s carefully stage-managed, televised appeal to the people of France to ratify in the forthcoming referendum the new European Constitution?

I am not sure what shocked me most, whether

the obscenity of this head of state publicly claiming merit for having conspired with the German Chancellor to procure eight or nine billion euros of unwarranted subsidies for French farmers or the sycophancy of some of the orchestrators of the program or the fear of real life and total lack of self-confidence among the youngsters in the audience.

Is there anything to wonder if, faced with an unfair, nonsensical world people take refuge in self-contradictory prejudices, stop voting and fly in droves into the arms of established religion or esoteric cults, even if they choose to assume the mantle, but not necessarily abide by their tenets?

Randomness for me is deeply reassuring. If we believe some scientists, we owe to it all intelligent life in the universe. Even if they were wrong,

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we are well equipped, as humans, in dealing with randomness. It may affect, even destroy our lives, but it does not destroy the belief in humanity as essentially good, a postulate without which community life would be unbearable.

A global village instead, dominated by unfairness and man-made nonsense, is hostile and hard to fathom. It speaks of human entropy, it makes us worry about defense and survival, and it does not bode well for creation, imagination and generally for pushing forward the boundaries of human ambition. It favors the creation of ghettos, both physical and mental. Has humanity been there before? Spengler would like us to think so, in every post-imperial society.

And yet, what we are experiencing today in our global village cannot have been experienced before. At least no other society that we know of has reached this level of sophistication.

Sophistication brings contradiction, sometime even sophisms. Do you remember from your Sunday school how shocked were the good burghers of Judea and the Roman alike at Christ’s idea that you should forgive and love your enemy?

Over the centuries the whole construct of Judaeo-Christianity has embraced the idea of protecting the weak. Western enlightened thought overlaid onto this the credo of basic human rights, free speech, and the presumption of innocence and all the other well-known pillars of our modern culture.

Malthus vs Gauss

In small doses, all this is good and sound. If the weak are say one per cent of society, who could argue against protecting them? If human rights are sensible and affordable, if free speech is exercised with prudence and intelligence, if the innocents are the rule and the guilty the exception, then modern society is a model, to which all should aspire.

In statistical terms, one can deal with outliers. Outliers are useful, they are physiological, they help not only to understand where the boundaries of normality lie, but also that they facilitate change. They are society’s scouts into the wilderness. Sometimes they chart the march for the rest of us, sometimes they must be abandoned to their sad destiny, because they strayed too far.

But what happens when outliers are no longer outliers, when the normal distribution is perverted and society’s graphs develop very fat tails?

What happens when ten per cent of the population of a developed country is unemployed and another eight per cent claims disability benefits? What happens when human rights are fought over every day by armies of lawyers, but individual duties and responsibilities are largely ignored? What happens when organized crime or antisocial behavior dominates a community and/or you end up with a failed state? What happens when free speech is abused to promote pedophilia or to advocate the destruction of that very state that protects it?



What did Hitler, Stalin and Mao have in common? They were half-educated people

We tried totalitarian regimes and that failed. Just think about it. What did Hitler, Stalin and Mao have in common? They were half-educated people. Educated and charismatic enough to have the odd innovative idea or to steal it from their circle and to sell it to the masses as the remedy for all their worst fears. They were not educated enough to grasp the madness and helplessness of it all. Can you imagine an Einstein or a Galileo as a dictator? Not a chance. People who know how to ask questions cannot dream of possessing all the simplistic answers. Dictatorships are not about creating a fair or utopian society; they are about substituting institutionalized and organized madness to society's self-engendered madness.

We tried the export of the West's institutional framework. We did so with colonialism and are still paying the price. We did so with Germany, Italy and Japan after the war, but the jury is still out. We are trying now with Afghanistan and Iraq and the body bag merchants are still profitably busy.

Can it really be done when the exporting civilizations are themselves coping with a struggle against internal madness?

It was meant as a joke, when someone pointed out to me that statistically the streets of Baghdad are still safer than those of Washington, D.C.

That's a hell of a serious joke!

Asylum seekers

But who is it that created the madness? Elected politicians in Europe consider the death penalty for murder unacceptable, although the electorate broadly favors it; the unelected medical profession has decided that life should be prolonged as long as there are technical means to sustain it; Catholic clergy worldwide preach against the use of contraceptives although they themselves are not concerned, obliged as they are to practise sexual abstinence; trial lawyers in many countries abuse tort legislation and the

presumption of innocence rules to make an ass of justice; smoking in public places is banned, but longer hours are allowed for public consumption of alcohol, perhaps an even more dangerous drug; everything we consume must have silly, useless labels, but highway speed is not curbed to a level which makes traveling safe.

Is this what we call democracy? Is rampant organized crime, failing health infrastructures, classrooms dominated by a bullying minority and a bankrupt pension scheme what we call democracy?

I sometimes get the impression that politicians of every persuasion believe that the cure for whatever ails society lies in more, not less, pieces of legislation.

If it were so simple, why do they recurrently get it wrong? Why is the justice system the world over a sad joke? Why are personal safety, health and education truly affordable only by those who can pay for it?

I am afraid that this is a problem that currently does not have a solution. It is not how you fund it, e.g. whether you have a progressive income tax and low indirect taxation or whether you have a flat rate of income tax and high regressive excises. It is not even how much you fund it.

The essence of the problem is that the modern western state was based on two cornerstones: citizens' consensus achieved through democratic institutions and trust between the governed and the government.

When the tails of the distribution get too fat, the sequitur is not only difficulty at managing risk, it is impossibility at managing society.

I challenge anyone to demonstrate how any administration can provide full safety and justice, education and healthcare with taxation of less than 100 per cent of GDP to a society which has (a) 10 per cent of the population committing criminal acts (b) up to 25 per cent committing



occasional antisocial acts (c) 15 per cent of the working population unable or unwilling to be engaged in a productive economic activity (d) 5 per cent of school children requiring special attention for one reason or another (e) 100 per cent of those ill or involved in a serious accident who will be kept artificially alive regardless of their chances of recovery.

You can do the sums on the back of an envelope. Politicians, whether in good or bad faith, have banned smoking, but they have fed us loads of verbal opium.

The naked truth is that modern western democracy is bankrupt at the very time when we try and export it wholesale. Indeed it has become akin to a cult, which promises a better life, not after death, but after the next election.

The reality is that our dream democracy is affordable only if deviant behavior is curbed and unrealistic pledges are withdrawn.

Beware of those who think they can spend your money better than you and do good in so doing. Equally beware of those who think that you will be able to solve all your problems if only you are not parted from your money.

A private bodyguard is not much cheaper than a public policeman and you can be sure you might want one before you die, if crime continues to grow unchallenged.

The problem is not the economy, stupid. It is the statistics.

We can live with the outliers, but not when they become a very significant part of the population. Society is suffering from a malign cancer. Just periodically changing the doctor at election time will not cure it.