

Herodotus and Democracy

Currently, with the rise of populist parties, everyone is talking about a “crisis of democracy”. So maybe it is interesting to see what people said in the past?

While reading Tom Holland’s excellent book “*Persian Fire*”, I was alerted to the works of Herodotus (500 BCE) who mentions that, in a democracy (in contrast to an autocracy) “each individual wants to achieve something for himself” which explains why free, democratic city-states in ancient Greece outpaced autocratic empires in strength, prosperity, and military capability.

Isn’t that interesting: The key point about democracy is not that citizens can “vote for someone” but rather that each person has a “clear stake in society” ... with, I imagine, both the obligations and benefits which go with that.

So what do we have now? Yes, in theory we can vote for governments, but power resides more and more with transnational corporations which are not accountable to citizens, often channel their taxes offshore and are sometimes so nebulous that you cannot even identify who owns what.

So surely confidence in democracy will not return until citizens “own” their societies? I am not talking about anything radical here but obviously, when corporations force local manufacturers, professionals, craftsmen, shop-owners and farmers into bankruptcy, “participation” is seriously compromised.

The horrible irony here is that it is often fellow citizens, tempted by the slick advertising and cheap prices that corporations offer, who drive the nails into the coffin of a healthy “Social Contract”.

And let’s not forget that most of what we consume is being produced by near-slaves in low-cost countries on the other side of the planet. There is something VERY wrong with this!

Danish Postal: Abolishing the Analogue

Denmark has abolished their postal service in favour of electronic/digital communication. So I was reflecting on how sad that is: What is left of the personal touch when you can’t even send a birthday card without paying for a courier-service.

And what about those who are old or with physical or mental disabilities who can’t handle the “digital world”? They are completely disenfranchised. It is as

if we were to remove ramps and lifts from everywhere so that wheel-chair users are locked out.

And, indeed, if we abolish all analogue methods (e.g. become completely “cashless”), what happens if there is a “hiccough” such as a power-outage, a bug or a virus? Or even war! At that point we will dearly wish that we hadn’t “abolished the analogue”.

Flying

Tagesschau (21st May) reported that, because of the higher fuel-costs due to the war with Iran, the German government are lowering the “Ticket Tax” for air travel. Then, in my in-box, an email arrived from Ryanair, informing me that they are offering tickets for €16.99.

What are we thinking here? Surely, because of both climate-change and the uncertainty with oil-supplies, we should be increasing prices in order to wean people away from fuel-intensive activities.

Bio-fuel

Tagesschau (3rd May) reported that Germany’s agricultural minister, Alois Rainer, has demanded tax-exemption for Bio-fuel.

That sounds good but is it not so that crops for bio-fuel compete with food-crops? And that often bio-fuel crops use genetic manipulation or are grown in vulnerable locations (e.g. felled tropical forest)?

90%

In *Aljazeera*’s “Reframe” (28th April) Jason Hickel was talking about Capitalism and “modern colonialism”. It was a very interesting discussion which included analysis of whether Capitalism’s thirst for resources is fueling current wars. Indeed, yes!

Mr. Hickel mentioned that currently 90% of goods are manufactured or sourced in “The Global South”. To me that sounds very plausible as here in “The West” we don’t seem to make very much at all any more.

I believe we urgently need to ask ourselves whether we actually live in a “Slave Society” where one half of the world (The Global South) works as (wage-) slaves for the other half?

In the discussion they also touched on the point that, even though we may have “democracy” (in name) in The West, our economies are extremely undemocratic with big corporate players and the super-rich dictating what happens. I couldn’t argue with that!

Kenyan and Nigerian English

On 24th April *BBC News* reported on Kenya's President Ruto mocking Nigerian-accented English ... compared to the high quality of Kenyan English.

I can't judge this completely but, yes, most of the Kenyans I have met do speak very good English.

However, the thing which occurred to me is that President Ruto would certainly like multinationals to source more of their call-centre-staff in Kenya.

Such a thing would be most attractive to big companies (wages would be very low!) and to the Kenyan government as they would certainly receive appropriate "commission".

But what do we have here? Is this not very similar to 200 years ago when black chiefs delivered fellow Africans into the hands of white slave-traders? Yes, the main difference here is that "the exploited" do not actually leave their country. How convenient!

Tax Havens

On 29th April *Tagesschau* reported on various "raids" in North Rhine Westfalia where officials were investigating "letter-box companies" involved in evading tax.

All well and good and it is certainly correct to investigate such things. But it seems rather bizarre that these raids are publicised while official (national and EU-) policy allows most big corporations to cherry-pick their tax-locations (in Ireland, Luxembourg, etc.). Isn't that the same thing?

Green Messages

Somehow I have landed up on the mailing lists of several prominent environmental NGOs. A number of these are fronted by prominent people such as ex-commissioners and ministers.

It is certainly good that organisations push to defend the natural world. But the thing that gets me is that the ex-officials who are now so indignant about the damage to our planet were, just a few years ago, soft-pedaling on key issues and providing alibis and smoke-screens to the big polluters.

E-Bikes

I went on a cycling tour south along the Rhine from Bonn to Andernach: The weather was great and the scenery magical with beautiful towns and landscapes and vibrant spring colours everywhere.

But the path beside the Rhine was jam-packed full of retired people speeding along on their shiny new e-bikes ... normally with sporty outfits to match.

There was so much traffic that I had to concentrate intently. That was bad enough as a cyclist but what about those on foot? For them the (2-wheel) traffic must have really tainted their enjoyment.

As it was, the police were checking bikes which gave me an opportunity to get into conversation: The officer was interested in me because I was almost the only person riding a bike without a motor.

I mentioned that really those e-bikes should be licensed, insured and pay road-tax. The officer's response was that wasn't needed for bikes limited to 25km/h: That's the rule so he wasn't interested in questioning it.

Mine is a classic pedal-bike which weighs less than a half that of a normal e-bike. And many of the e-bikes that I saw seemed to be "extra-chunky" or "off-road". Certainly significantly heavier! And then you have e-cargo-bikes full of children and toys.

So let's consider an accident where a fully-laden e-cargo-bike hits a pedestrian or another cyclist at 25km/h. That will cause much more damage than a classic bicycle would do (with, anyway, classic bicycles traveling much slower than 25 km/h).

So, maybe, alongside maximum speed, weight should be a factor when deciding whether a vehicle should be licensed or not.

The policeman also mentioned that it is a good thing that people on e-bikes are not using their cars. But, by the look of those shiny, new, over-sized e-bikes, I doubt that they use them to go to the shops. I would be more inclined to think that they buy extra large SUVs or mobile homes in order to transport those heavy bikes to various "fun-cycling-locations".

Small Irritations

BBC Radio 4 ran an item on an EU-Commission project to identify "Small Irritations" which citizens experience. Certainly a valid field of research.

But it was the example given which blew my mind: The reporter mentioned the irritation experienced (and the time lost) clicking away "cookie banners".

Indeed, yes, I strongly agree with that. But let's remember that those banners appeared in response to the EU's "General Data Protection Regulation".

So what do we have here: The EU creating a problem and then, a few years later, trumpeting their intention to solve that problem.

It's a bit like "night trains": The EU's competition laws killed off the services which existed before and now the EU is patting itself on the back that routes are being implemented.

Once again, how weird is that: Creating a problem and then, later on, praising yourself for solving it!

And when it comes to "small irritations", most of mine come from frustrations which digitalisation (e.g. not being able to contact a "Real Person"). So I believe it would enormously help our psychological well-being if governments could guarantee, alongside "the digital, an "analogue path".

Cadmium

France Inter reported on cadmium in fertilizer and (subsequently) in foodstuffs (7th June). Apparently governments, submitting to lobby-pressure, are dragging their heels on tackling this problem and, in the meantime, this poison (recognised since the 1980s) continues causing cancer and heart-disease.

E-cigarettes and Vapes

German radio (WDR5) mentioned that several serious fires at recycling centres have been caused by vapes and e-cigarettes with lithium batteries which have been disposed of with general waste.

Indeed, yes, lithium batteries are known to be flammable and are tightly regulated in transport (e.g. postal, logistics and air-travel).

So, yes, it is certainly a good move to not have those vapes causing fires. But this all begs a number of further questions ...

1. Lithium is a rare resource so why are we squandering this in disposable (and re-usable) vapes and e-cigarettes? Surely it would be better for that person to simply smoke? Or not do either!

2. Our plan seems to be to base *The Modern World* around renewable energy. Which will come mostly from/via lithium batteries. Surely this can't be a good idea when we already know that these batteries can combust? With this being the case, we should not be surprised when our cars randomly burst into flames.

My suggestion here would be that we get off our lazy bums and either walk, cycle (without a motor!) or take public transport.

Population and Demographics

Aljazeera ran a fascinating report, "Baby Doomers", on population decline where one sentence stuck out: At Min. 22:15 Jessie Song mentions that "it is almost impossible for a guy to provide for his whole family. It needs both of the parents to work". Indeed, yes, and this, as Ms. Song mentions, puts extra pressure on the family (especially the woman). Something which, as Ms. Song says, makes starting a family unattractive.

EU directives are pushing to "close the gender pay gap" and, indeed, yes, the work each sex is equally valid. But surely, when it comes to demographics, we need to make sure that, whenever the woman needs or wants to concentrate on the family, the father is in a position to provide the finance for that.

The Pope and AI

The Pope (and others) have spoken out in favour of rules to govern AI. I strongly support that. But maybe there is an easy method to get a quick result on this front: Simply make sure (through taxation) that these companies pay an appropriate price for the electricity which their systems guzzle.

Fertilizer and the Strait of Hormuz

With the Iran-US/Israel war blocking the Strait of Hormuz, we learned that the transport of about 30% of the world's agricultural fertilizer is blocked.

That is certainly an inconvenience but, beyond the commercial issues, it tells us how much our food production is dependent on fossil-fuel based chemical fertilizer. That cannot be good either for the health of the soil (and the groundwater), of the population and of the planet.

So surely the solution should not be to bemoan this loss but rather to concentrate on returning (wherever possible) to more natural, less intensive forms of food production.

Ebola and Coltan

As the Ebola-crisis in eastern Congo subsides, we need to ask ourselves what we can do for the long-term well-being of that region ...

The most important thing would be to reduce our demand for Coltan and other rare earths used in our "gadgets". For example by not upgrading so often! This would start to remove some of the motivation for the conflicts (over the control of minerals) which have blighted the region for years. And which inhibit the provision of efficient health-services and disease prevention and control.