

Big Events

BBC Radio 4 reported that the UK is working to implement a new law which, building on the experience gained during the 2012 Olympics, will make it easier to host big sporting and cultural events.

That all sounds good but I was disturbed when they mentioned that a key aspect of this law is to regulate advertising and commercial activities near the venue: For example food trucks and window decoration in pubs and shops. This would mean that a shopkeeper could be prosecuted for painting the Olympic rings in his shop-window.

To me this sounds very much like a big “bung” to corporate interests ... and another nail in the coffin for small businesses.

So whose side are our governments on? More and more they seem to put corporate interests far above those of citizens.

Charlie Wilson's War

I am a big fan of Tom Hanks so decided to watch his 2007 film “Charlie Wilson's War” (apparently based on true events!). Unfortunately it turned out to be a lot of jingoistic hogwash.

Mr Hanks' character is a sleazeball senator (which doesn't fit to Tom Hanks) who decides himself, through back-room committees, without the knowledge of Congress/The Senate to massively increase the funding and weapons-supply to the Afghan rebels fighting the Russians (in the 1980s). Thereby escalating the conflict.

There are scenes of the Russians strafing villages and reports of horrific Russian atrocities, with the characters played by Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts and Philip Seymour Hoffman repeatedly saying that they want to “kill Russians”.

Here it is interesting that the film was made at a time when the Americans themselves were in Afghanistan doing pretty much the same as the Russians had done ... including (later) dropping “The Mother of all Bombs” ... to obliterate Afghan rebels!

An exile Afghan friend of mine (who had lived through the time before the Russian invasion, then the Russian occupation and also the US occupation. He hated it all!) told me one anecdote that “when a Russian soldier killed an Afghan man or raped an Afghan woman, in order to prevent a blood-feud, he would be executed in front of the village. Whereas the

Americans, in similar situations, would just retreat into their fortified zones”.

The moral of this story is that we should not attempt to occupy a haughty, holier-than-thou, moral high-ground when it comes to current conflicts (e.g. Ukraine): I would say that “it takes two to tango” and that it is better to seek some level of understanding rather than to stoke the fire ... by supplying weapons to the belligerents.

Modern Times

This week I walked to the shops along a tree-lined boulevard near our home. In historic photos, you can see that, with the road-lanes being on either side, the central section, between the two rows of trees, had been a long “park” or promenade. Very nice!

But now that central zone is used for parking with cars on each side for as far as the eye can see! In recent years, a significant number of camping-vans have joined the cars. So, as I wandered past, I reflected on our choices: We have given up “the communal” (the promenade) for “mobile cocoons” (cars and motor homes). This does not bode well for the health of our society.

After that, I crossed the road and saw a mother helping her son to ride his bike. She was riding a large e-kiddie-cargo-bike with one hand, holding her son's arm with the other, while he wobbled along beside her. Several things occurred to me: 1.) He looked old enough to have long ago learned to ride: So had he, until now, been transported everywhere in the cargo-bike? 2.) Surely with the mother holding the child like that, there is far more chance of injury to her, to her son or to a third-party.

Then, when the pair stopped at a traffic light, the first thing that the child did was to reach for his mother's smart-phone which was in her back pocket.

So, in the space of about three minutes, I was privy to a panorama of some of the very weird trends and contradictions that we have our Modern World.

Women's Hour

On *BBC Radio 4's Women's Hour* (15th June) they were talking about bans on social media. Certainly an important thing to consider! However my young niece and nephew seem to access the “Video shorts” (clips of just a few seconds which show something shocking or violent) that they like so much, without logging on to any social media channel. Also some of the

approved games that they play seem to be pretty mindless and sometimes violent.

So maybe it would be better to regulate “screen-time” rather than access to this or that social media channel?

Also on *Woman’s Hour* they talked about sales of cut-flowers, saying that non-imported flowers have only 20% of the carbon footprint compared to imported. This is because imports are normally flown in. The point that they were trying to make was that consumers should choose non-imported flowers. This is certainly desirable but surely, if we value the climate, we should simply be banning (or heavily taxing) the air-freighting of such goods.

Jugend und Parliament

I have just finished Laurie Lee’s excellent book “As I walked out one Midsummer Morning” where he recounts his experiences walking across Spain in the 1930s.

The saddest chapter is the last one, when the Spanish Civil War breaks out and the small town where he is staying is devoured by hatred and factionalism resulting in violence, death and destruction.

On 13. June *Tagesschau* reported on an eclat which happened in the Bundestag where young people had been acting out / recreating parliamentary procedures in the “Youth and Parliament” project.

The project sounds like a great thing but it all descended into chaos with left-wingers hurling abuse at AfD representatives: Videos are available online.

I am not a supporter of the AfD but this shocked me. I am convinced that a main cause of the animosity is that both media and parliament seem to be endlessly chastising the AfD (a right-wing party) with the AfD either being excluded from debate or immediately “put down” when they do have a platform.

In my opinion, if we don’t tone down the aggression and abusive rhetoric (churned out by the supposedly “good guys”), we are heading towards the situation which Laurie Lee experienced in Spain.

FIFA and the Bakery

When I went to buy a current-bun for my morning break, I noticed that the bakery had some cakes with little football symbols on them. So I joked with the staff by asking whether those footballs had been approved? Otherwise, I said, the FIFA-Police would be coming by. The sales assistant joked back: Yes, to arrest us!

That was funny ... but, unfortunately, maybe not so far from the truth!

Ukrainians in Trier

Pretty much everywhere I hear Russian (or Ukrainian) being spoken. This was especially the case in Trier, when we visited a few weeks ago.

There, in a restaurant at the table next to us, were two men in their 20s speaking Russian. They were Ukrainians I assume, because one was wearing socks with the slogan “This is not Moscow” (in Russian).

It is certainly understandable that people (either Ukrainian or Russian) want to escape the war but why is it that affluent middle-class people are able to swan off to comfortable locations (Trier), while others are rounded up in the streets to be sent to the front?

Then EU leaders (for example at the G7 summit) are eager to cosy up to Selenskyj offering money and arms to help him “win the war”.

Of course it is terrible that Russia invaded Ukraine. But what are WE doing? Rather than pushing for diplomatic engagement and a possible compromise, we are encouraging the slaughter ... from our position of comfort and safety. I find that rather disgusting.

Artificial Intelligence

Everyone is talking about Artificial Intelligence with my worry being that we are mixing up (at least) two very different “beasts” ...

Let’s take for example “medical AI”: In this context medical- and IT experts create algorithms and feed data into AI models which then go on to, for example, identify cancerous tissue.

The other, currently massively hyped, form of AI is where these tools trawl the internet, gathering information to then present answers or make decisions.

In the computing world a key motto is “rubbish in, rubbish out” (paraphrased). So what do we have here? Certainly the input of doctors and experts is “good” ... but trawling through the garbage on the internet and expecting that to produce coherent results, seems to be total madness.

And let’s not forget that, even worse than the clearly incorrect answer, is the false result which appears to be correct and on which we might base life-critical decisions.

If we are stupid enough to go down this path, all I can say is ... “we deserve all we get!”