WN *Columns*

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What do you think?

Geoffrey Cannon



Rio de Janeiro, Juiz de Fora. Nautilus shells and chameleons, whose spirals are shown above, are exotic in most societies. So here is a bright idea which every parent and teacher can make come to life, in a garden in or out of the home. 'Today in the garden we went on a Fibonacci hunt, for spirals found in nature', I read on the internet. Thus:

> *Swirl by Swirl: Spirals in Nature* by Joyce Sidman tells of all the places in nature spirals are found, including how animals sleep, animal body parts like trunks, tails, shells, and horns, as well as ocean waves, tornadoes, and spiralling flowers, seed patterns, and stems. We discussed the purpose of various spirals: protection, grasping, movement, strength, and the power of the shape in waves and tornadoes. Students were then invited to explore the garden on a Fibonacci Hunt!

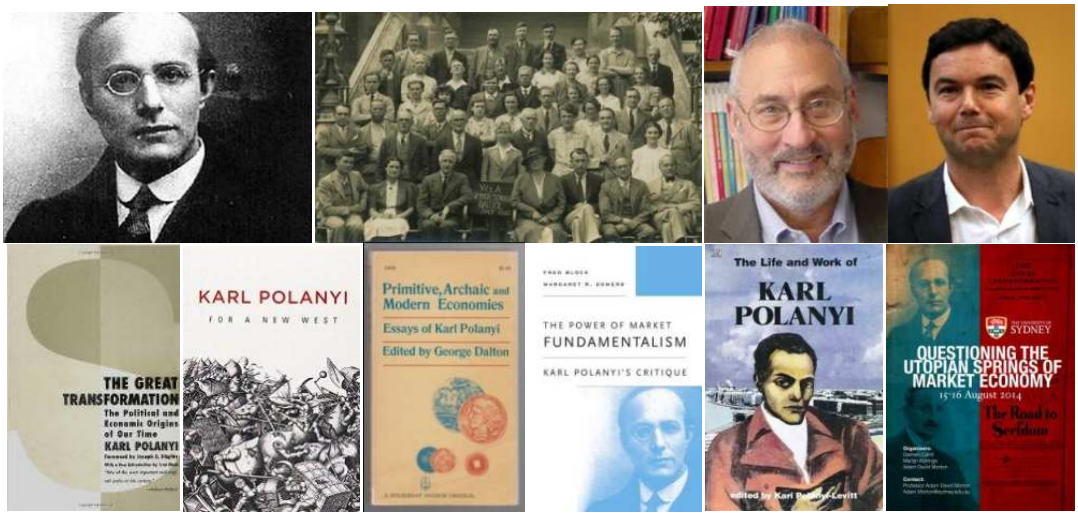
How good, that children are shown the shapes of nature and are encouraged to see the spiral as the secret of growth and life itself, later perhaps to realise that the straight line ideology of constant novelty is the enemy of nature and of life on earth.

The UK magazine *Prospect* recently published its list of the world's top 50 thinkers of 2014. The top two, Thomas Piketty and Yanis Varoufakis, have been inspired by my hero this month. This is the historian of politics, economics and society Karl Polanyi, my hero in this issue of *WN*. His *The Great Transformation,* published in 1944, records and foresees the catastrophe of unregulated capitalism.

After this feast, I proclaim that gastronomy is back in a big way. My example is the glory of black pudding, also known as blood sausage, which with bacon and eggs is a mainstay of the Great British Breakfast. Now we know that a calorie is not a calorie and are told that the half-century consensus on saturated fat and dietary cholesterol can be tossed in the trash, tuck in! Finally, I explain the affinity of Andy Warhol with Marshall McLuhan, and what they tell us about ultra-processed products.

Food and nutrition, health and well-being

What they believe: 16 . Karl Polanyi Ideas whose time has come



The man who is the most prescient guide to our times. Karl Polanyi as a young man in Vienna (above left) and (next, front row at right) at a socialist meeting at Balliol College, Oxford. Then two of his admirers, Joseph Stiglitz and Thomas Piketty (above, right). Below, some books by and about him

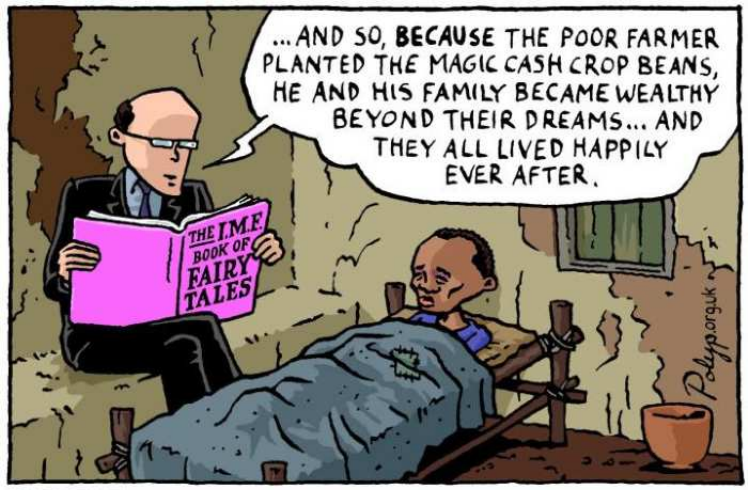
Capitalism is the title of a six-part documentary series filmed in 22 countries, first broadcast in late 2014. *Its final hour-long episode* displays the nature and meaning of unregulated capitalism now. It includes coverage of the popular uprisings in Greece which forged the current Syriza socialist government. It identifies one person as the best judge of what goes on, and explains and celebrates his thinking. In the film, Thomas Piketty and Yanis Varoufakis, voted #1 and #2 world thinkers of 2014 in the UK *Prospect* magazine, acknowledge him as inspiring their own thought and action.

As you see above, this is not Adam Smith, Karl Marx or John Maynard Keynes, or Milton Friedman or indeed Thomas Piketty. It is Karl Polanyi (1886-1964), the historian of politics, economics and society, whose masterpiece *The Great Transformation* was published 70 years ago towards the end of the war that devastated his native Central Europe. *Its 2001 edition* includes a eulogy (see Box 1) by Nobel economics prizewinner Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist at the World Bank.

How gratifying! Some time ago, having found *The Great Transformation* quietly cited in so much radical and progressive writing, I began to read this brilliant book. Karl Polanyi lets readers see why unregulated capitalism in its current form is a deadly disease, which among other evils is destroying reliable food systems and supplies, generating food and nutrition insecurity, and guaranteeing famine, hunger and disease. Meanwhile silence, through ignorance or complicity of so many who should know better. So I decided to make him one of my heroes. Now, he is an easy choice.

Box 1

Joseph Stiglitz on Karl Polanyi



'FAIRY TALE'

Joseph Stiglitz is a former chief economist at the World Bank. He has now recanted. Above is a reason. The idea that unregulated growth and flow of money is good for all, is a lie

This is from Joseph Stiglitz's foreword to the 2001 edition of The Great Transformation.

It often seems as if Karl Polanyi is speaking directly to us now. The issues he raises have not lost their salience. Among his central theses are the ideas that self-regulating markets never work; that their deficiencies, not only in their internal workings but also in their consequences (for example, for the poor), are so great that government intervention becomes necessary; and that the pace of change is of central importance in determining these consequences. Popular doctrines of 'trickle-down' economics – that all, including the poor, benefit from growth – have little historical support.

The myth of 'the market'

Karl Polanyi exposes the myth of the free market. There never was a truly free, self-regulating market system. He saw the market as part of the broader economy, and the broader economy as part of a still broader society; not as an end in itself, but as means to more fundamental ends. All too often, privatization and liberalization have been treated as the objectives of reform. Scorecards were kept on how fast different countries were privatizing—never mind that privatization is really easy – all one has to do is give away the assets to one's friends, expecting a kickback in return. But all too often no scorecard was kept on the number of people who were pushed into poverty, or the number of jobs destroyed versus those created, or on the increase in violence, or on the increase in the sense of insecurity or the feeling of powerlessness. Karl Polanyi attended to such values.

The disjunction between these basic values and the ideology of the self-regulated market is as clear today as it was at the time he wrote. Freedom to move capital in and out of a country at will is a freedom that some exercise, at enormous cost to others. We tell developing countries about the importance of democracy, but when it comes to the issues they are most concerned with, that affect their livelihoods, the economy, they are told: the iron laws of economics give you little or no choice; and you must cede key economic decisions to an independent central bank, almost always dominated by representatives of the financial community. Then, to ensure you act in the interests of the financial community, you are told to focus exclusively on inflation—never mind jobs or growth. As we seemingly empower people in the former colonies through democracy with one hand, we take it away with the other.

'Nothing makes sense except in the light of evolution' says *Theodosius Dobzhansky.* Indeed. 'Those who do not know history's mistakes are condemned to repeat them' says *George Santayana.* Exactly. What goes around, comes around.

The horrible state and prospect of human society now, including outrageous inequity, senseless wars, terrifying climate disruption, persistence of starvation, and now pandemic obesity and diabetes, is a new version of ancient and recent idiocies chronicled in Jared Diamond's book *Collapse.* Power corrupts. Rulers with unchecked power have always tended to generate deserts, famine, terror and despair and thus destroy their societies. But now the destruction to life systems is global. The entire biosphere is degenerating. This time 'we' really have gone too far. Here 'we' does not mean us. It means the 00.1 per cent of the 1 per cent of unelected people mostly in the US and Europe, debauched with money or power – top bankers, criminals, executives, officials, and other masters of the universe – who call and fire the shots.

The problem

Karl Polanyi was a democratic socialist. *His experience* in central Europe before, during and after the 1914-1918 Great War, of mass starvation, economic chaos, mass unemployment, and the ascendancy of dictators, confirmed his ethical, political and social beliefs. His grand aim was to find out what had gone wrong and why, and to propose solutions. His analysis has affinities with those of *Karl Marx* and Antonio Gramsci, but like his contemporary *John Maynard Keynes* he was not a revolutionary, and was not opposed to capitalism as such. What he diagnoses is the evil of the type of capitalism – in double-speak, 'the market' – in which corporations become global quasi-monopolies, evade regulation, over-ride national governments, and abuse their brute force of power and money. (See Box 2). His warnings are more compelling now, than they were at the time he wrote them.

Box 2

Karl Polanyi on 'the market'

Extract from The Great Transformation. To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment... would result in the demolition of society. The alleged commodity 'labour power' cannot be shoved about indiscriminately, or left unused. Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish from social exposure; they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation through vice, perversion, crime, and starvation. Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighbourhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted, military safety jeopardised, the power to produce food and raw materials destroyed. Market administration of purchasing power would periodically liquidate business enterprise, for shortages and surfeits of money would prove as disastrous to business as floods and droughts in primitive society.

Labour, land, and money markets are essential to a market economy. But no society could stand the effects of such a system of crude fictions even for the shortest stretch of time, unless its human and natural substance as well as its business organization was protected against the ravages of this satanic mill.

Box 3

Karl Polanyi on fictitious commodities

Edited extract from Michael Burawoy's presidential address to the International Sociological Association, July 2014

Pope Francis's theses on inequality are reminders of Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*. First published in 1944, it is a searing account of the threat posed by the over-extended market to the survival of society.

To understand the lived experience of marketization and the possibility of its reversal, Polanyi's concept of 'fictitious commodity' is especially useful…He argues that labor, land and money – three factors of production – were never intended to be bought and sold. Their unregulated commodification destroys their 'true' or 'essential' character. He presumes that they lived up to their essential character in pre-market societies.

When labor power is exchanged without protection against injury or sickness, unemployment or over-employment, or below-subsistence wages, the labor that can be extracted rapidly declines, and it veers towards uselessness. Equally, when land, or more broadly nature, is subject to commodification, then it can no longer support the basic necessities for human life. Finally, when money is used to make money, for example through currency speculation, then its value becomes so uncertain that it can no longer be used as a means of exchange, putting businesses out of business and generating economic crises.

Now, a fourth fictitious commodity is knowledge. Information technology is at the center of new modes of transforming nature (for example, in genetically manipulated crops). Knowledge is itself subject to commodification, as its production and dissemination is increasingly organized for those who can buy it. The university as a major locus for the production and dissemination of knowledge, is increasingly oriented to private rather than public interests, particular rather than general interests, immediate rather than future interests – a distortion that makes knowledge a fictitious commodity.

Karl Polanyi denounces the fanatical belief that capitalism in vicious forms must be enabled to rampage without checks and balances. This is the type of capitalism, or corporatism, from which we (the 99.99 per cent) all now suffer. It is a modern global form of the industrial revolution which turned most people in many European countries in the later 19th century into wage-slaves, and which led in the 20th century to the cataclysms of rocketing inflation, mass unemployment, crushing of democracy and the rise of totalitarian states, and two world wars.

Polanyi's genius is evident in his diagnosis, as summarised by Michael Burawoy (Box 3, above). The great mistake, he says, is the transformation of labour, land and money into commodities, and then the control of labour and land – and more besides, including food and thought – with money. A profound example is shown in the 2014 *Capitalism* documentary. Ur may be the first city, founded 20,000 years ago in what is now Iraq. Clay tablets show its system of accounts from around 4,000 years ago. At that time debt was to the state, and was cancelled whenever a ruler changed. This system used now would have prevented the debts to foreign banks that continue to cripple many African countries and that threaten the European project right now.

Box 4

Books by and about Karl Polanyi

The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time (1944. 2001 edition, foreword by Joseph Stiglitz). *Trades and Markets in the Early Empires* (1957). *The Plough and the Pen. Writings from Hungary, 1936-1956* (with Dukzynska I, 1963). *Dahomey and the Slave Trade* (1966). *Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economics* (essays, 1968). *Livelihood of Man. Studies in Social Discontinuity* (1977). *The Economic Thought of Karl Polanyi* (Stanfield R, 1986). *Karl Polanyi. The Limits of the Market* (Dale G, 2010). *The Power of Market Fundamentalism Karl Polanyi's Critique* (Block F, Somers M, 2014)

The Great Transformation shows that the rationale of the ideology of 'neo-liberalism', with its insistence on surrender of governance to rapacious corporatism, is a type of millenarian religion, whose god is the ineffable, invisible entity of electronic money, non-existent even as paper. The successive shocks of sudden mass privatisation of public goods cause mass misery, soaring poverty, and rises in crime and insanity. True, say the 'neo-liberal' priests, but these all show that the purges are working. Later, everybody will be healthy, wealthy and wise. Be happy in your misery, for all will be well, if not for you, for your children. Just have faith. These are the promises that advocates of bloody revolution make, to justify their forms of mass murder.

From knowledge to action

In his introduction to the 2001 edition of *The Great Transformation*, Fred Block says as follows. The quote marks are mine. What Karl Polanyi shows is that

> 'Market liberalism' makes demands on ordinary people that are simply not sustainable. Workers, farmers, and small business people will not tolerate for any length of time a pattern of economic organization in which they are subject to periodic dramatic fluctuations in their daily economic circumstances. The 'neo-liberal' Utopia of a borderless and peaceful globe requires that millions of ordinary people throughout the world have the flexibility to tolerate –perhaps as often as every five or ten years – a prolonged spell in which they must survive on half or less of what they previously earned. Polanyi believes that to expect that kind of flexibility is both morally wrong and deeply unrealistic. To him it is inevitable that people will mobilize.

At the time he wrote, Karl Polanyi's warnings were premature. Between the 1940s and 1970s capitalism was civilised by regulations like those that restrain the use of guns, drugs, and cars. By law, the rights of trades unions were respected, the biggest businesses including banks were publicly owned or at least restrained, vulnerable population groups were protected (less so in the US), and basic health care and education were often funded by general taxation. But beginning in the 1980s, and accelerating after the collapse of the USSR, all these restraints have been ripped up.

This is why Karl Polanyi is right, now. People not just in North Africa, Greece, Spain, but all over the world, are mobilising, now. We can help to shape what happens – and here, 'we' means us, who can include *WN* readers who are executives, criminals, bankers and officials who are now ready to repent.



WN *Hot stuff. Dietary guidelines*

In praise of black pudding



The great British breakfast. This version includes bacon, egg, black pudding, sausage, mushrooms and tomato. Variations include grilled kidneys, and buttered toast, fried bread or sauté potatoes

Seven of us sat down for breakfast early one morning last September in the lounge of the Randolph, the fanciest hotel in Oxford. All of us are engaged in public health and nutrition, one way or another. We could have chosen fruit, muesli and yoghurt, or a vegetarian option, but no. The picture above is an approximation to the 'signature breakfast' we ordered. It came complete with 'Macleod and Macleod Stornaway black pudding'. This as you may know is made from pig blood, oatmeal, onion, herbs and spices, and is also known as blood sausage. It is an ancient food, *mentioned by Homer* as one of Odysseus's favourite fortifiers. Plus wholegrain toast, freshly squeezed orange juice, and lots of fresh coffee. All that was missing were kidneys. It was all extremely delicious and satisfying, stimulated our discussions, and set us up for the day.

This Great British Breakfast would, had we been visitors at a stately mansion in the good old days, have been served buffet-style, with other dishes of pigeon, grouse, hare, venison and smoked fish. None of us made jokes about nutritional Russian roulette, or said 'better not tell anybody what we are eating'. This was perhaps because the paradigm has shifted – as they say. Meaning, that while although not all of us might yet be prepared to publish or lecture on the topic, we had one by one come to feel that the main dietary 'villains' are not dietary constituents such as fat, saturated fat and the mysterious cholesterol, irrespective of context and source.

Instead, coming from different parts of the world, we have all – or so I guess – decided that the bad guys are sugared food and drink products, and oily, sugary or salty packaged snacks. Further, we may also have decided that grandmother was right, and that freshly prepared meals mostly made from whole and minimally

processed food are healthy as well as delicious. No, this is not to prescribe feast food every day of the week. But fresh foods and meals are not habit-forming.

My confession

Here follows a confession. Your columnist is the author of a report put out in 1992 by Consumers' Association (now Which?) in the UK, entitled *Food and Health: the Experts Agree*. This is an analysis of 100 expert reports issued between 1961 and 1991 by UN agencies, national governments, and other authoritative sources, meant to prevent coronary heart disease, and then later also various cancers, obesity, diabetes, dental caries, gut disorders and other chronic diseases. A conclusion of my report, in which I sided with the experts and toed the nutrient-oriented line, was:

> The general healthy eating advice to everybody is: eat more complex carbohydrates and fibre as contained in starchy and other plant foods, eat less total fat and a lot less saturated fat, and thus dietary cholesterol, and also switch from saturated to poly-unsaturated fats; eat a lot less refined sugar and salt; and drink alcohol sparingly if at all.

That was the generally agreed advice then. Now though I have come to see that any position on public health – or anything else, for that matter – identified as 'consensus', signals that a lot of evidence has been trashed, along with dissidents who rarely get invited to become members of expert committees. Also a reliable rule of thumb is that sooner or later any 'consensus', like cookies, will crumble. It would be going too far to say that any 'consensus' view is therefore wrong. But anybody with experience of expert committee processes knows that these tend to be mere adjustments of agreements made by previous committees. Further, some may be half-way compromises that committee members with opposing views agree to live with, having been urged to finish the job by secretariats, and by governments and other organisations that pay for reports and want a result.

So while the experts agreed, it would have been more accurate to say 'the established experts agree'. But any sardonic note had no place in my labours, for I was in an obedient phase in those days.

My confession is that I was – in Christopher Hitchens' apt phrase – keeping two sets of books. Despite toeing the middle of the road line, I was also a founder of the Food Additives Campaign Team (FACT) which fought against chemicals as food product adulterants and contaminants, plus I was a committee member of the McCarrison Society, dedicated to 'the unsophisticated foods of nature'. My keenest energy as a journalist was devoted to attacking processed sugar and its satraps. And I was a heretic. I refused to use margarine or have it in the house, in the sensible belief that anything that looks, smells and tastes disgusting, is disgusting. 'Don't touch the stuff' I said to friends. So yes, I was confused, a sad case of *Leon Festinger's* cognitive dissonance, struggling to hold two opposing views at the same time.

Things fall apart

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Nobody would now write a tract claiming that 'the experts agree' about food, nutrition and health. The term 'expert' does not have such lustre these days. Also, what agreement? WB Yeats, quoted above, is right. The flush is busted.

Conventional nutrition, once majestic, is now in a state of confusion and chaos. Here I won't buzz-bomb you with citations, though I could. Item. The 'calorie is a calorie' mantra is identified as nonsense. Item. Cholesterol is in. The US government's official advisory committee has now decided that 40 years of expert warnings against dietary cholesterol have been based on dud science. Eggs are back! No more worries about prawns! Item. Sugar is out. The same committee has decided that a 10 per cent limit needs to be put on added sugar, after previously issuing a report seeming to say that anything goes, up to a whopping 25 per cent. Soft drinks, previously not stressed, are out, out, out! Item. The meat and dairy groups of foods are out, but butter is in – or is it – and margarine is out – or is it? Item. Dieting regimes cause the condition they are meant to cure – or do they? Item. Heart disease is yesterday's papers. Diabesity and the metabolic syndrome stop the e-presses now.

Help is at hand

Help is at hand. The established experts were wrong all along, and here is why. Albert Einstein rightly said 'you cannot solve a problem with the way of thinking that created the problem'. The starting point is not food chemistry, but understanding of evolution and history, and knowledge of agriculture, technology, and gastronomy.

The way to clear up the mess conventional nutrition science is now in, has been stated many times in *World Nutrition* and other journals, and now is also implied by the new *Brazilian dietary guidelines*. This is that the big issue with food, nutrition and health is not nutrients, and is not so much food as what is done to food before it is acquired and consumed. That is to say, *the big issue is food processing*. Thus, a main dietary cause of epidemic coronary heart disease never was saturated fat as contained in bacon and eggs or butter, it is saturated fat, *trans*-fats and also plant oils as contained in ultra-processed products, including margarines. The chief problem for obesity never was 'calories' or dietary fat as contained in whole foods and meals, it is largely oily or sugary snack products and sugared cola and other soft drinks.

A final thought, gearing up for a later riff. Conventional nutrition science ignores the fact that sugared products are not satisfying and that many of them are designed to be habit-forming. Appetite and addiction are not on the curriculum. By contrast, I report good news. In Oxford at breakfast at Keble College the next morning I did not yearn to abscond and sneak off to the Randolph and murder a Macleod and Macleod. Black pudding is extremely delicious. But it does not induce cravings.



***WN** Idea*

Well, what do you think?



Who is the man in blue? His identify and significance is revealed below. Clue. Tom Wolfe wrote an essay about him whose title included the thought 'what if he is right?' His ideas continue to nourish us

'There he goes again' critics of this column – and there are some! – may say, looking at this page. 'He starts with a picture of pictures of Andy Warhol, together with pictures of somebody else, goodness knows who. And now I suppose he is going to tell us who this other person is, and that he is a close personal friend, and what is the link with Andy Warhol, and then indulge in some abracadabra linking all this with the totally different topic of public health nutrition. Bah! Humbug!'

Such thoughts may have been in the mind of a very grand nutrition scientist from UC Davis, California, at the *Rio2012* conference. Chatting to her, I asked what is wrong with *WN,* a question I often ask to keep me and the editorial team on our toes. 'Your column' she said, emphatically. Well, at least she is a reader! She is welcome to explain her views why, in *Feedback*. One of our complaints though, is that with admirable exceptions – I think of Al Sommer and Keith West – our critics stay in the shadows.

Ideas have a life of their own

So here comes my riff on the theme of ideas and opinions. The founding document of *World Nutrition* states '*WN* respects facts, and at the same time it is mainly concerned with ideas'. Within *WN* therefore, following the usual convention, a

columnist has a license to be personal and a responsibility to uncover and explore and even once in a while to discover ideas. The best response to my critics – the colleague from UC Davis is not alone – is to include more columnists – with their own views and styles, of course – in *WN*. We are working on this.

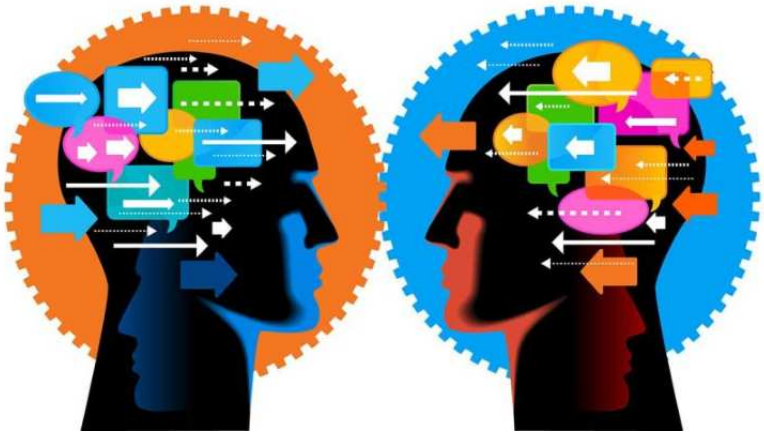
As to the 'there he goes again' sigh, well indeed, here I go again. The other man in the pictures above is Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian sage who invented the phrases 'the medium is the message' and 'the global village', and who is the 'patron saint' of *Wired* magazine. In the late 1960s I wrote about him in *New Society* magazine. In the early 1970s I met him at his home in Wychwood Park Toronto, spent Christmas with them complete with tree up to the ceiling, and during the 1970s met and visited him several times, and we became good friends. Being human, Marshall warmed to people who admired him, but of these, he most liked people who challenged him.

Now I come to the point which informs 'What do you think?' and helps to explain this title. Some readers may have read some of this story below before. There were six of us for lunch at Mon Plaisir in Monmouth Street, Soho: Marshall, Corinne his wife, and one of his daughters, together with Jo Durden-Smith, producer of *Johnny Cash at San Quentin* and *The Doors are Open*, and Michael Kustow, then director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts. We argued – well, us three did, with one another, and with Marshall, who batted back amiably. His womenfolk sometimes urgently asked us to hush, but we said Marshall was not intellectually fragile, and continued to talk and eat and drink and smoke and talk. It was a great occasion. Now here is the point of the tale. On the sidewalk outside, waiting for taxis and farewells, Marshall took me aside and said 'Geoffrey, there's a question I have always wanted to ask, and here it is. People seem to think that I agree with what I say. Why is this?'

Aha! This was a good and fair question, for Marshall always stated that his ideas were probes, or explorations. In effect they had a life of their own. They came to him, and he expressed them, with enthusiasm when he felt they were beautiful or profound or capable of flowering into a whole structure of ideas. Whether or not he agreed with them was another matter. Indeed, he did not think that the ideas he wrote or spoke were 'his' in a possessive sense. They were not so much 'by' him, as 'through' him. It could be said that he was a shaman, or playfully that he was a medium with messages.

Being more timid than Marshall, I do think it is best to give a sense of degree of attachment to ideas. There are plenty of ways to indicate this, ranging from 'it just occurred to me, probably nothing in it, but…' (a whim) to 'all my experience and judgement has convinced me that…' (maybe part of a system of ideas, an ideology).

My point here is that this column, as columns should be, is mainly not about facts but ideas. Ideas are different from facts. Thus last month I proposed that people who live in the countryside within nature, have a different sense of life and death from people who live in cities inside apartments. This seems obvious to me, is derived from long everyday experience of living in and then sensing the contrast with living outside cities, and is an idea to which I have a strong attachment.



A fun diagram of metrification, or how to quantify quality, and turn fish into fingers, using methods understood only by the masters of the research science universe. Expert shall speak numbers to expert

Taken seriously the idea has vast implications. Proper respect needs to be given to country people who by their nature are very unlikely to be politicians or economists, or – now that the family doctor is close to extinction – physicians. Powerful people typically live in sterile surroundings, bar pampered pets and pot plants. So, there it is – an idea. Could it be subject to metrification, by brainy methods humorously illustrated above? Sure it could. The idea is all yours now. There is no harm and only good in expressing it. Refute it, or embrace it! In the beginning is not the fact. It is the idea.

Straight talking

But now we are veering towards another area which may preoccupy my esteemed colleague from UC Davis. It is that this column does not take the business of nutrition research or scientific investigation in general, quite as seriously as do many of its practitioners. Cheeking my betters, the scientific priesthood as evidenced by the honorific initials after their names, PhD as the equivalent of The Rev., that's to say.

By analogy, I suppose this makes me and others – we are many! – modern equivalents of the ragged rascals who 500 years ago packed the back of churches and yelled at the ordained divines presiding over prayers 'stop intoning Latin, and speak to us the people in our language!' That of course led to a lot of extremely painful methods of officially sanctioned torture and murder, such as racking, *bastinado* and *strappado*, the wheel, impalement, and burning. These days official and other techniques to silence ragged rascal academics include no grants, no tenure, and character assassination.

Now I will bring this my riff to earth. A serious idea here, to which I am fervently committed, is that everything that is worth knowing can be stated or expressed in ways that all intelligent and attentive people can understand. The corollary is that anything expressed or stated in ways that such people cannot understand, needs to be translated so it is clear or, if it cannot be translated, is probably poppycock. You may be thinking now, nonsense, how could lay people understand the mathematics of economics or epidemiology, to which I reply, a pox on mathematical mystification!

Box 1

Marshall McLuhan on Coke

Columnist's introduction. You have been waiting for the connection between Andy Warhol and Marshall McLuhan, and here it is. Both were fascinated by mass advertising and marketing, including of junk food products. What follows is from Marshall Mcuhan's first book The Mechanical Bride. Folklore of Industrial Man (1951)



In *God is my Co-pilot*, the GIs agreed that what they were fighting for was, after all, the American girl. To us, they said, she meant Cokes, hamburgers, and clean places to sleep. Now, the American girl as portrayed by the Coke ads has always been an archetype. No matter how much thigh she may be demurely sporting, she is sweet, nonsexual, and immaturely innocent. Her flesh is firm and full, but she is as pure as a soap bubble.

Margaret Mead's observations in *Male and Female* are especially relevant to understanding the success of Coke ads. It is, she suggests, a result of our child-feeding habits that 'Mouths are not a way of being with someone, but rather a way of meeting an impersonal environment. Mother is there to put things – bottles, spoons, crackers, teethers – into your mouth'. And so, she adds, the American GI abroad puzzled foreigners by endless insistence on having something in his mouth most of the time. Gum, candy, Coke. *Time's* cover (May 15 1950) pictures the globe sucking a Coke. Love that Coke, love that American way of life. Robert Woodruff, Coke executive, says 'We're playing the world long'. That would seem to be a very small gamble, with the globe itself becoming a Coke sucker.

Columnist's comment. Here *Marshall McLuhan gets close to a radical idea, to which I have moderate to strong attachment. The one succour Margaret Mead does not mention is the mother's breast. Here comes the idea. It is this. The reason that US men are always putting things in their mouths is the same reason why they are compulsively fixated on huge breasts. As infants they were traumatised by premature snatching from their mothers' breasts, bereft of an instinctive gigantic source of nourishment, safety and comfort, and fed formula on demand from a bottle with a rubber teat. Bingo! Checking this idea out could keep a bunch of research centres busy. Some of the work could be a lot of fun.*

We do not need to master sophisticated statistics, any more than we need to learn Latin. A world in which the minds of those 'experts' and 'authorities' who master the political and economic universe are well illustrated by the fun graphic above, has gone wrong. What we need to know, is what impact specific political and economic ideologies have on our lives and the fates of nations. That can be expressed in plain language. So can all of public health and nutrition. That, in part, is my job here. Like finding out what really is in the Christian Bible, not what the men in robes say is in it.

A journal with attitude

By their nature, signed columns are and should be subjective, and yes as mentioned, we need more of these. Also as readers also see, we categorise many *WN* contributions. This one is flagged as *Idea*, a term which makes clear that its topic is beyond and above facts – though an idea is good when it makes sense of facts. Some contributions are now identified as *Hot stuff*, meaning that what's suggested, stated or claimed in the contribution is genuinely controversial, in the sense that it is or could be disputed by people whose views should be taken seriously.

Ideas can also be hot stuff. For example, the constant search for factual objectivity that typifies conventional nutrition science, seems to me to come from an aversion to and even horror of ideas, and the longing for absolute certainty that draws people to worship religion or mathematics. The result is either immersion in trivia, or else failure to grasp reality and to realise that the 'truths' revealed by sophisticated crunching of numbers are liable to be not just irrelevant, but misleading or catastrophic. Outside nutrition, the still-dominant econometrics and its creed of monetarism is an example. So is the equation of the quantity of growth with the qualities of health and well-being, which is reflected in many types of policies and practices, including those espoused by the still-dominant form of nutrition.

WN is a journal with attitude, we its editors like to point out. Ideas, and attitudes to ideas, are what give all sciences, and all constructions of any type, physical, mental or intellectual, their meaning. Part of the process of learning and creation, is having and trying out ideas. The ability to have ideas is one of the aspects of being human which marks us out from animals. We have ideas all the time, children and explorers most of all, and yes, *WN* is a journal of curiosity and exploration. Well, what do you think?

Status

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