

# RSA

21st century enlightenment

Journal Issue 4 2013

## Round and round

**John Kay** argues that economists' faith in inflexible, universally applicable models has blinded them to financial realities

**Alexander Stevenson** on how studying lust can lead to better policy

**William Davies** explains how we should not be slaves to data





**RDInsights** | The thoughts, feelings and opinions of the RSA's Royal Designers in recorded conversations with Mike Dempsey.

The series of podcasts reveals a variety of valuable insights from Thomas Heatherwick, Arnold Schwartzman, Roger Law, Gerald Scarfe, Peter Brookes, Georgina von Etzdorf, Anthony Powell, Betty Jackson, Nick Butler, Pearce Marchbank, Malcolm Garrett, Chris Wise, Margaret Howell, Dinah Casson, Sir Ken Adam, Timothy O'Brien, Robin Levien, Kyle Cooper, Sue Blane, Stuart Craig, Terence Woodgate, Sara Fanelli, Mark Farrow, Neisha Crosland, Sir Kenneth Grange, Ivan Chermayeff, David Gentleman, Nick Park, Alex McDowell, Sir Paul Smith, Michael Foreman, Richard Hudson, Perry King, Sarah Wigglesworth and Michael Wolff.

More will be added throughout the year. | **Wise words for leisurely listening.**

Downloadable free from the RSA website: [www.theRSA.org/rdi](http://www.theRSA.org/rdi)

RSA

Royal  
Designers



## “MODELS HAVE BLINDED THEIR PROPONENTS TO REALITIES THAT HAVE BEEN STARING THEM IN THE FACE”

JOHN KAY, PAGE 10

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# “WE WILL JUDGE OURSELVES ON IMPACT”



VIKKI HEYWOOD

*My first full year as Chairman has been hectic, but rewarding*

I spent much of the second half of 2013 out in the regions and nations, meeting Fellows and listening to your thoughts about the ideas and projects on which you think the RSA should be focusing. As the year closes, I am excited by a shared set of aspirations and intentions among RSA Trustees, Fellows and staff.

I visited 12 of our 14 areas – my apologies to those I did not manage to get to – and found the experience both educational and enjoyable. I want to thank everyone I met for their enthusiasm, goodwill and interest. To take just a few examples, whether it's Scotland's work on new forms of manufacture, Yorkshire's on food awareness and sustainability, or the West Midlands' on young people and identity, it is clear that Fellows are developing more and better projects and are making an important and growing contribution to the life of the communities in which they are active.

I learned about what is working best in the Fellowship, but I also heard two clear messages: first, there is a desire for greater clarity on where and how RSA Fellows should focus their efforts, and second, there is a strong wish for the Fellowship to be better connected.

Starting with the latter, Fellows want to be able to share their interests, expertise, activities and project ideas. This is the impulse behind the upgrading of our technology infrastructure, which will be fully in place by autumn 2014. A new 'personal portal' on the RSA website will allow users to share what they are up to with like-minded Fellows to enable discussion and collaboration. This portal will also enable us to tailor our online content to each Fellow's individual interests. The technology upgrade is going to be a real step change in how Fellows interact with each other, and the RSA with its Fellows.

In terms of clarity regarding our mission, 2014 will see the RSA focusing on how we can make real-world impact in everything that we do. We work on so much as a Society – and we will continue to put on our stellar public events programme, create stimulating and

award-winning videos and produce insightful reports – but we need to put an even greater emphasis on our ability to have an impact in line with our charitable mission. This involves a shift from measuring success as output to judging ourselves on impact. It involves being even clearer about our core mission and about the key changes we think the RSA can and should make in wider society.

These changes are being shaped through a strategic review, which will start to be implemented over the coming year. The review is the result of a great deal of work between the Board of Trustees, the RSA Executive and the Fellowship, and we will develop our approach throughout 2014.

Overseen by the excellent Fellowship Council, the Fellowship will always provide a mechanism for initiatives to emerge that reflect local issues and interests. But my discussions with active Fellows have underlined that most of you also want to feel part of a national (and increasingly international) programme involving research, innovation and events, in which Fellows' activities are an integral part of our model of influence and change. This programme will reflect our traditional strengths in areas like education, design and enterprise as well as newer issues to be developed over time.

The RSA's unique ability to connect and make a difference is down in large part to the vast amount of volunteer hours given up by Fellows. People want to get involved with project activity to various degrees at different stages of their life. If we make the RSA as an organisation more transparent, we can offer more opportunities for people to get involved at a level of commitment that fits with their situation.

Whether or not you are currently active in the Fellowship, we never forget that your annual donation is a large part of what enables us to be a successful, innovative and increasingly influential organisation. We are also very grateful for the additional support Fellows have given to our annual appeals – next year the focus will be on helping to recruit and support younger Fellows – and our successful foray into crowdfunding.

Thank you for all your support in 2013. I am determined and confident that 2014 will be an even better year for our great Society. ■



## AWARDS

## 2013 RDI WINNERS ANNOUNCED

Some of the best designers working in the UK today were recognised for their outstanding contributions to design and society by becoming Royal Designers for Industry (RDI). At a ceremony held at the RSA in November, seven designers were awarded RDI status, including Tony Meeuwissen (work pictured above) for his distinctive and innovative contribution to British illustration and serving as an inspiration to generations of children learning to read or draw.

"In a working life of nearly 60 years, I have been lucky enough to meet a number of remarkable people who thought for themselves and encouraged me to do the same," Meeuwissen said. "Nonetheless, the prospect of being included among such an eminent group of men and women as the Royal Designers is a daunting one. I shall do my best to live up to the honour."

Other winners included theatre designer Paul Brown, typographer Ian Cartledge, fashion designer Hussein Chalayan, costume designer Sandy Powell, lighting designer Patrick Woodroffe, and prosthetic product designer Saeed Zahedi. Two Honorary RDI awards – presented to designers outside the UK – were given to Dutch design forecaster and educationalist Lidewij Edelkoort and German-American consumer electronics pioneer Hartmut Esslinger.

The RSA established the RDI in 1936. It is awarded annually to designers of all disciplines who have achieved sustained design excellence, work of aesthetic value and significant benefit to society. There are currently 142 RDIs and 56 Honorary RDIs, including Vivienne Westwood, Thomas Heatherwick and Jonathan Ive.

Following the presentations, Malcom Garrett RDI, graphic designer and incoming Master of the Royal Designers, gave the 2013 RDI address, highlighting the value of design in education and industry. You can listen to the lecture at <http://tinyurl.com/MalcolmGarrettRDI>

## PROJECTS

## WASTED RESOURCE

The RSA's Great Recovery will launch its next phase of rethinking product and service design in the spring. Over the past 18 months, the programme has worked with designers, policymakers, academics, recycling and recovery experts, engineers and others to discuss and re-design the way products and services are handled.

A new two-year programme will begin with Resource, the first conference and exhibition that connects the whole supply chain to capitalise on the commercial opportunities of a circular economy, an industrial system that moves from the current take-make-dispose culture towards regenerative cycles. The conference will take place at London's ExCeL on 4–6 March.

The Great Recovery project will seek to continue to influence policymakers and provide educational services in closed-loop design and business. The project builds on the RSA's strength as a leading think tank and the Technology Strategy Board's desire to help reduce risk in these kinds of innovations.

The conference will be attended by organisations such as waste management company SITA UK. David Palmer-Jones, chair of the Environmental Services Association and chief executive of SITA UK, said: "We are committed to working towards a true circular economy, where the resources we discard and consume are recycled or recovered and directly fed back into the manufacturing process to close the loop.

"Resource presents a great opportunity to get designers, manufacturers, consumers and resource management companies together and talking about ways in which we can continue to deliver improvements that will make best use of these precious commodities."

[www.greatrecovery.org.uk](http://www.greatrecovery.org.uk)



TECHNOLOGY

## A DIGITAL RSA FIT FOR THE FUTURE

Many Fellows have fed back to us that they want to be able to connect with each other, sharing interests, expertise, activities and project ideas.

With that in mind, we are replacing RSA's existing technology with an up-to-date and fully integrated website that will provide better services for Fellows, staff and the wider public (including our global audiences) who visit our website, attend our events and engage with the work that we do.

At the heart of our new website will be a 'personal portal', where Fellows can record and display their interests, skills and activities, and selectively share them with other like-minded Fellows to enable discussion and collaboration on ideas, projects and events. You will also be able to select the areas of our work that you are interested in so that we can provide you with tailored information.

We aim to complete this phase of the work by autumn 2014, but before then we will be testing various aspects as we go along with Fellows (and non-Fellows), so please look out in our newsletters for requests to do so.

In conjunction with this work, we are updating the RSA website to make it easier for users to find what they want. We will continue to expand the functionality and add extra features beyond 2014 to ensure we keep improving.

We have a strong commitment to ensuring that the RSA is an enabling organisation where Fellows can interact with each other and share ideas, thoughts and initiatives. This project will be a big step forward in enabling that to happen.

**“YOU WILL BE ABLE TO SELECT THE AREAS OF OUR WORK YOU ARE INTERESTED IN AND RECEIVE TAILORED INFORMATION”**

REPORT

## RETAIL 2020

The RSA is examining the way successful businesses understand and shape their markets and how retail stores can address local needs as part of their sustainable business strategy to 2020.

This has included looking at how Asda's stores might act as 'community hubs'. Assets include space, footfall, data, and corporate resources. Asda is 18 months into a 'Community Life' initiative, which includes opening up its property to free community use and developing local partnerships to address community problems.

"This work takes place in the context of reduced spending on public services and anxiety about living standards," said Jonathan Schifferes, who is leading the project for the RSA. "Increasingly, consumers see high streets in transition and are becoming more critical of the way business generates growth and distributes rewards.

Supermarkets have been at the front line of a public debate on the impact of big business: their responsibility towards communities, supply chains and the environment."

Initial findings indicate that retail stores have a significant role in shaping social and economic opportunities at the local scale. Large supermarkets typically serve 50,000 local residents each week, which represents a huge opportunity to have a positive effect on people's lives. For example, there are opportunities to promote social interaction among customers and hundreds of staff, and ensure store services and activities are supportive to emerging forms of public service delivery.

"The fortunes of large retail stores depend on a thriving local context to trade," said Schifferes. "If they coordinate their business to support leadership and action at store level, retailers could be uniquely positioned to shape opportunities for their local population. As communications tools increase in power, and competition remains fierce, it's unlikely the public will expect anything less."

Published on January 14, the RSA's 2020 Retail report suggests how retailers can create a stronger social economy of place around their stores and assess the progress made by Asda.

For more information, contact Jonathan Schifferes on [jonathan.schifferes@rsa.org.uk](mailto:jonathan.schifferes@rsa.org.uk)

## CROWDFUNDING

### RSA PARTNERS WITH KICKSTARTER

Crowdfunding is a low-cost way of mobilising money and networks for new social innovations and enterprises. In September, the RSA launched an area on the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter to further support the most exciting Fellows' ideas. Within three months, six out of the nine projects that have crowdfunded with our support have been successful, together raising more than £35,000 from more than 650 people. RSA publicity has directly led to at least 25% of the money pledged, and our half-day crowdfunding workshops and ongoing advice support Fellows in building and running their campaigns.

In addition to Fellow-led ideas, projects from the RSA's Action and Research Centre also stand to benefit from crowdfunding. The Pupil Design Awards is the first such project, with the RSA Education team looking to pilot a version of the Student Design Awards in the RSA's Academies in the West Midlands. They are crowdfunding to give 60 secondary school students the chance to exercise their design skills in solving real-life problems and want the competition to eventually go national.

If you are interested in crowdfunding for your project or social venture, you can apply for crowdfunding support by completing the RSA Catalyst application form, available at [www.thersa.org/catalyst](http://www.thersa.org/catalyst). Applications for crowdfunding are considered on a rolling basis, so we will be able to communicate the decision within two weeks.

In 1754, the RSA's founders met in coffee shops to decide which entries would receive their cash 'Premium' award. We think that crowdfunding is a great way to bring together today's Fellows to choose the most exciting projects for social change, and show how the Fellowship can have a tangible impact on the world.

Find the Pupil Design Awards and other Fellows' projects on our Kickstarter area at [bit.ly/rsacrowdfunding](http://bit.ly/rsacrowdfunding)

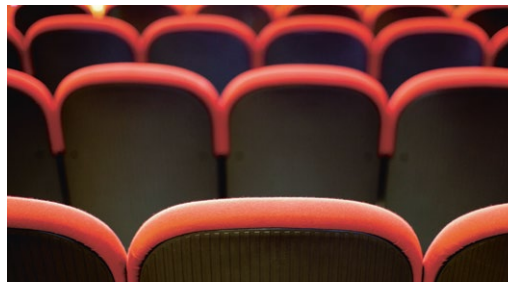
## PRIVATE SECTOR

### ANALYSING MICROBUSINESS

The RSA has partnered with Etsy, the ecommerce website, to launch The Power of Small, an initiative to examine the growth of microbusinesses across the UK. The number of firms with just one to nine employees has grown by 40% in the past decade and, since 2010, 500,000 microbusinesses have been created. These businesses now account for a third of all private sector employment in the UK and a fifth of its turnover. The Power of Small will look at what life is really like for microbusiness owners. It aims to find out how much of this growth is due to economic necessity and whether the trend will decline once the economy returns to full health. The partnership will also examine how government, business and civil society can capitalise on microbusiness' growth.

"We know surprisingly little about the motivations and hopes of people who run microbusinesses," said Benedict Dellot, Senior Researcher at the RSA. "How many, for example, run a microbusiness primarily because it gives them greater autonomy and the freedom to be creative, and how many are looking to make their fortune? We simply do not know."

The ultimate aim of the 18-month partnership is to use the findings to help government, supporting organisations and microbusinesses themselves understand how small-scale enterprise can contribute to a more creative society.



## STUDENT LEADERS

### LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE FOR ACADEMIES STUDENTS

At the end of November, RSA Academies hosted its second annual Student Leadership Conference for Year 12 and 13 students from RSA Arrow Vale Academy, Whitley Academy and RSA Academy in Tipton. The student participants had, in most cases, been elected by their peers to leadership positions in their schools. They fulfil varying roles across their school communities, such as head girl, head of the charities committee or head of the sports committee.

The RSA Academies Student Leadership Conference was set up to empower and involve these students through setting agendas, presenting and participating in workshops. In November, the students heard from some inspiring Fellows. Marie Nixon from University of Sunderland Students' Union, Duncan Piper from the Young Leaders' Consultancy, Rick Hall from Ignite and Asma Shah from Ladies Who Learn spoke about their own personal journeys as leaders and offered tips on how to make a difference in school and the wider world.

Whitley Academy's head boy and head girl, Prince Chivaka and Cynthia Ariana, spoke about effective leadership. They explained that communication is key, that leaders must develop confidence in the role and be assertive, yet considerate, in a team.

These students also understood the importance of thinking ahead and planning strategically; they advised setting an agenda for each half term and meeting with their school Student Leadership Group and principal. Prince and Cynthia also understood that with a leadership position comes responsibility, and as such they should encourage others to become leaders and act as a role model themselves.

You can also hear Prince Chivaka and his fellow students across the RSA Family of Academies speaking on *Frontline Voices*, a series of podcasts produced by Fran Plowright FRSA on what it means to be a young person being educated and growing up in uncertain and rapidly changing times. <http://tinyurl.com/FrontlineVoices>



## PREVIEW



### THE END OF POWER

Global power is shifting: from top to bottom, west to east, and large to small. Moisés Naim, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and former *Foreign Policy* editor-in-chief, offers insight into how individuals and leaders from all sectors can adapt to this new global reality.

**Where:** RSA

**When:** Thursday 16 January, 1.00pm



### THE COST OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In the most expensive higher education system in the world, debates about the future centre on asking graduates to pay even more. John Denham MP will argue that, instead of paying more for the current system, we should take a radical look at what and how higher education delivers.

**Where:** RSA

**When:** Thursday 16 January, 6.00pm



### CAN YOU MAKE YOURSELF SMARTER?

Is there a cognitive glass ceiling, or is intelligence fluid? Are brain-training programmes over-hyped and under-researched, or are we missing a trick? Award-winning science journalist Dan Hurley investigates the new field of intelligence training and asks whether we can really boost our brain power.

**Where:** RSA

**When:** Thursday 30 January, 1.00pm



### DOES THE NEWS DO US ANY GOOD?

It is a world of 24-hour news and we are bombarded with media alerts, updates, stories and photographs from every angle, every day. But is it doing us any good? Influential writer and public thinker Alain de Botton asks: what is it that we're really looking for when we watch or read the news, and how does it affect us?

**Where:** RSA

**When:** Thursday 6 February, 1.00pm

*Events and RSA Animate producer Abi Stephenson has selected the highlights above from a large number of public events in the RSA's programme. For full event listings and free audio and video downloads, please visit [www.thersa.org/events](http://www.thersa.org/events)*

FOR HIGHLIGHTS OF RECENT EVENTS, SEE PAGE 49

# CIRCULAR THINKING

*Models that offer universal descriptions of the world have led economists to repeat their mistakes*

By John Kay

**E**conomics and economists did not emerge well from the 2008 crisis. The most distinguished of many critics was the Queen, who asked on a visit to the London School of Economics why no one had predicted the failure of the global financial system.

Yet Her Majesty's criticism is not really telling. One bane of an economist's life – or, at least, this economist's life – is that most people think economics is about forecasting. They ask what will happen to the stock market, or whether the dollar will rise in value against sterling. They ask, but pay little serious attention to the answer.

Economists will never be able to make such predictions. Economic and business systems are non-linear and dynamic, meaning that small differences in initial conditions, or small disturbances, can have disproportionate consequences for outcomes. This 'butterfly effect' is what makes large weather systems unpredictable, and economic systems are unpredictable for similar reasons. Economic systems are also reflexive; what will happen is influenced by beliefs about what will happen. The dollar/sterling exchange rate is largely determined by expectations of its future value. If people had known Lehman Brothers would go bankrupt on 15

September 2008, it would have gone bankrupt more or less immediately.

But forecasts of stock market levels and future exchange rates are made because there is continuing

JOHN KAY IS ONE OF BRITAIN'S LEADING ECONOMISTS. HIS LATEST BOOK IS *OBLIQUITY* (2010, PROFILE BOOKS)

demand for such forecasts, despite the widespread and well-founded scepticism about their value. The desire to know the future is unquenchable. So forecasters are sought after for the same reasons quack medical practitioners and clairvoyants are sought after: the will to believe. And, like medical cranks and fortune tellers, they may be well paid for their services if they are well connected and have a persuasive manner. Still, amongst professional economists, economic forecasters today command little more respect than quacks and clairvoyants.

## FAILURE OF UNDERSTANDING

The criticism that should properly be levelled at the economics profession is more serious and harder to answer. Economists, by and large, failed to analyse or understand properly either the processes that led up to the 2007/2008 crisis or the problems that emerged from it. As a consequence, those in charge of economic policy were either misinformed, bemused, or both.

Jean-Claude Trichet, chairman of the European Central Bank through the crisis, presented this critique in a speech in 2010. Trichet began with the familiar observation that "macro models failed to predict the crisis", but went on to make the more telling observation that such models "seemed incapable of explaining what was happening to the economy in a convincing manner".

This is understatement. A year before the crisis, Timothy Geithner, then president of the New York Federal Reserve Bank, declared the strength of the global system. >>



“Financial institutions are able to measure and manage risk much more effectively,” he said. “Risks are spread more widely, across a more diverse group of financial intermediaries, within and across countries.” As events unfolded at the end of 2007, US Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson asserted that “deep and liquid US capital markets are playing a vital role in maintaining stability”.

In reality, the crisis reflected a systematic mismanagement, mismeasurement and concentration of risks that were directly attributable to the financial innovation Geithner applauded. This breathtaking degree of misapprehension did not prevent Geithner succeeding Paulson as Treasury Secretary to deal with the aftermath of the 2008 crisis under President Obama; a crisis that occurred because these ‘deep and liquid’ US capital markets dried up soon after Paulson’s speech.

Trichet went on to observe that: “As a policymaker during the crisis, I found the available models of limited help. In fact I would go further: in the face of the crisis, we felt abandoned by conventional tools. In the absence of clear guidance from existing analytical frameworks, policymakers had to place particular reliance on our experience.” As Trichet indicates, the response of finance ministers and central bankers to the crisis has been pragmatic, seeking temporary fixes to immediate difficulties. These responses owe little to any economic theory.

Adair Turner, appointed in the wake of the crisis to head the UK’s Financial Services Authority, summarised how “bad or rather over-simplistic and over-confident economics

## “THE KNOWLEDGE THAT EVERY PROBLEM HAS AN ANSWER MEETS A DEEPLY FELT HUMAN NEED”

helped create the crisis. There was a dominant conventional wisdom that markets were always rational and self-equilibrating, that market completion by itself would ensure economic efficiency and stability, and that financial innovation and increased trading activity was therefore axiomatically beneficial”.

### FALSE CONSENSUS

Policymakers may make speeches – or decisions – without regard to academic advice, and it is unlikely that their own academic training would have included the latest thinking. But Trichet, Geithner and Paulson had access to scholars of the highest reputation. Their institutions had for years recruited many of the best-educated economics graduates. Their statements above reflect the advice they had received: the conventional wisdom of the economics profession.

The unfounded complacency of economic policymakers reflected the dominant tone of academic commentary on events.



In his 2003 presidential lecture to the American Economic Association, Robert Lucas, doyen of modern macroeconomics, told his audience that “the problem of the business cycle has essentially been solved”.

The events of 2008 would demonstrate the falseness of this claim. Yet leading macroeconomists have responded with denial rather than apology. When, in 2009, *The Economist* reported critical comments on the performance of macroeconomic theory, Lucas angrily described the description as “caricature”.

In an extraordinary reassertion of economic orthodoxy in the face of public criticism, the Nobel Prize committee chose in 2011 to give its award to the leading figure in the development of Lucas’ ideas, Thomas Sargent. Sargent took the platform to declare that “criticism of modern macroeconomics reflects either woeful ignorance or intentional disregard of what modern macroeconomics is about”.

Another Nobel Laureate in this field, Edward Prescott, told a gathering of his peers the same year that “this is the golden age of aggregate (macro) economics”. Prescott uses this rather peculiar term in a linguistic denial that there is any difference between the methods of macro and micro economics. He intends to suggest that the only valid economic theories are based on descriptions of equilibriums defined by rational choices of individual agents.

These are the approaches that Lucas pioneered under the title of rational expectations and are now described as ‘dynamic stochastic general equilibrium’. In his Nobel Prize lecture, Lucas described his seminal model. In that paper, he makes the following assumptions (among others): everyone lives for two periods, of equal length, and works for one and spends in another; there is only one good, with no possibility of storage of that good, or of investment; there is only one homogenous kind of labour; there is no mechanism of family support between older and younger generations. And so on. Perhaps one reason that Trichet found the models his economist colleagues were using unhelpful in the crisis is that there were no banks in these models and, in most cases, no money either.

All science uses unrealistic simplifying assumptions. Physicists describe motion on frictionless plains and gravity in a world without air resistance. They do this not because anyone believes that the world is frictionless and airless, but because it is too difficult to study everything at once. A simplifying model eliminates these confounding factors and focuses on a particular issue. To put such models to use, you must be willing to bring back the excluded factors. You will probably find that this modification will be important for some problems, and not others. Air resistance, for example, makes a big difference to a falling feather but not to a falling cannonball.

But Lucas and those who follow him were plainly engaged in a very different exercise, as the philosopher of science Nancy Cartwright has explained. The list of unrealistic simplifying assumptions employed by their approaches is long. Lucas was explicit about his objective: “the construction of a mechanical artificial world populated by interacting robots that economics

typically studies”. An economic theory, he explains, is something that “can be put on a computer and run”.

## MODEL LIMITATIONS

Lucas has called structures like these ‘analogue economies’, because they are, in a sense, complete economic systems. They loosely resemble the world, but a world so pared down that everything about them is either known, or can be made up. Such models are akin to Tolkien’s Middle Earth, or a computer game like *Grand Theft Auto*.

The knowledge that every problem has an answer, even and perhaps especially if that answer may be difficult to find, meets a deeply felt human need. For that reason, many people become obsessive about artificial worlds, such as computer games, in which direct connections between actions and outcomes are observable. Many economists who pursue these approaches are similarly asocial. It is probably no accident that economics is by far the most male of the social sciences.

One might learn skills or acquire useful ideas through playing computer games, and some users do. If the developers are good at their job, as of course they are, the sound effects, >>

## FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

### DEMOCRATISING DATA

An RSA-backed initiative – Stat.io – has launched the world’s first search engine for socio-economic data. The company, founded in 2012, aggregates data from hundreds of different sources on a unique online portal so that anyone, from citizens to professional decision-makers, can assess the situation of any country, region or city.

Whether you want to find out what percentage of a country’s population has access to electricity or learn which London borough has the highest number of empty homes, Stat.io had the answers.

“More cities are releasing their data, including smaller cities and those in the developing world, but until now that data has remained disconnected,” said Nathan Boubli FRSA, co-founder and CEO of Stat.io. “By aggregating and systematically geo-referencing the data, we make it easy to navigate. That means we can arm people – citizens or professionals – with the facts so that they are better informed when they come to make decisions.”

The first Stat.io prototype has aggregated eight million socio-economic data sets so far and its short-term plan is to continue adding more to cover a greater number of regions and cities.

The RSA awarded Stat.io two Catalyst grants in 2012, enabling the portal – which does not intend to ever charge for access – to be developed. “The RSA has given us the funds to get going,” said Nathan, “while its credibility has helped get other partners on board.”

[www.stat.io](http://www.stat.io)



events and outcomes of a computer game resemble those we hear and see. These results can, in a phrase that Lucas and his colleagues have popularised, be calibrated against the real world. But that correspondence does not, in any other sense, validate the model. The nature of such self-contained systems is that successful strategies are the product of the assumptions made by the authors. It obviously cannot be inferred that policies that work in creating *Grand Theft Auto* are appropriate policies for governments and businesses.

Rigour and consistency are the two most powerful words in economics today. Rigour and consistency have undeniable virtues, but for economists they have particular interpretations. ‘Consistency’ means that any statement about the world must be made in the light of a comprehensive descriptive theory of the world. ‘Rigour’ means that the only valid claims are logical deductions from specified assumptions. Consistency is therefore an invitation to ideology, rigour an invitation to mathematics. This curious combination of ideology and mathematics is the hallmark of what is often called ‘freshwater economics’, the name reflecting the proximity of Chicago, and other centres such as Minneapolis and Rochester, to the Great Lakes. Freshwater economics is embedded in a broader view of the economic world that lauds the equilibration and efficient character of markets. It has provided intellectual support for market fundamentalism and helped shift prevailing political thought rightwards. The economic determinism and love of simple, all-embracing explanation of complex events – for so long characteristic of the political left – are today equally, or more fervently, embraced on the right.

Rigour and consistency are features of a deductive approach, which draws conclusions from a group of axioms and whose empirical relevance depends entirely on the universal validity of the axioms. The only descriptions that fully meet the requirements of consistency and rigour are complete artificial worlds, like those of *Grand Theft Auto*, which can “be put on a computer and run”.

But even the models of physics do not command this degree of comprehensiveness and universality, and those of economics certainly do not. The fallacy is well described by the philosopher Donald Davidson: “It is perhaps natural to think there is a unique way of describing things which gets at their essential nature, ‘an interpretation of the world which gets it right’, and a description of ‘reality as it is in itself’. Of course there is no such unique ‘interpretation’ or description, not even in the one or more languages each of us commands, not in any possible language. Or perhaps we should just say this is an idea of which no-one has made good sense.”

Economists have not made good sense of it either, but they have continued to try. “The first siren of beauty,” says another freshwater economist, John Cochrane, “is logical consistency.” It seems impossible that anyone acquainted with great human achievements – whether in the arts, the humanities or the sciences – could really believe that the first siren of beauty is consistency. This is not how Shakespeare, Mozart or Picasso – or Newton or Darwin – approached their task.

A large part of the problem is that economists, insecure about the intellectual status of their subject, aspire to an imitation of what they – inaccurately – perceive as the methods of

physics. For many people, deductive reasoning is the mark of science, while induction – in which the argument is derived from the subject matter – is the characteristic method of history or literary criticism. But this is an artificial, exaggerated distinction. Properly conducted science is always provisional and open to revision in the light of new data or experience.

The issue is, therefore, not mathematics versus poetry. Deductive reasoning of any kind necessarily draws on mathematics and formal logic; inductive reasoning is based on experience and, above all, on careful observation and may, or may not, make use of statistics and mathematics. Much scientific progress has been inductive: empirical regularities are observed in advance of any clear understanding of the mechanisms that give rise to them.

This is true even of hard sciences such as physics, and more true of applied disciplines such as medicine. Economists who assert that the only valid prescriptions in economic policy are logical deductions from complete axiomatic systems take prescriptions from doctors who often know little more about medicines than that they appear to treat the disease. Such physicians are unashamedly ad hoc; perhaps pragmatic is a better word. Ironically, Lucas holds a chair named for John Dewey, the theorist of American pragmatism.

#### **AGAINST ASSUMPTION**

But there are many other ways to approach economic problems. Another way of thinking, still determinedly mathematical, is to develop models in which behaviour is determined by rules and habits rather than by the economist's traditional conception of rationality – so-called agent-based modelling, which gives rise to the characteristic dynamics of complexity theory. This approach fits well with the new emphasis on behavioural economics, which adopts the radical perspective of basing assumptions about behaviour on observation rather than deduction from a priori assumptions.

But a more radical reformulation would discard altogether the idea that a universally applicable model, in which all key relationships are predetermined, can describe the economic world. Economic behaviour is influenced by technologies and cultures, which evolve in ways that are certainly not random but which cannot be described fully, or perhaps at all, by the variables and equations with which economists are familiar. Models, when employed, would therefore be context specific.

Similar thinking might restore the distinction between macro and microeconomics, which was the stock in trade of Keynes and of the generation that followed him. This involves searching for relationships that might hold at the aggregate level, but were not necessarily derived from assumptions about individual behaviour. This is what the generation of economists who followed Keynes did when they estimated a consumption function – they tried to measure how much of a fiscal stimulus was spent – and the ‘multiplier’ that resulted.

But you would today find it difficult to publish such an article in a good economics journal. You would be told that your

## **“ECONOMIC MODELS ARE NO MORE THAN POTENTIALLY ILLUMINATING ABSTRACTIONS”**

model was theoretically inadequate, that it lacked rigour and failed to demonstrate consistency. You might be accused of the cardinal sin of being ad hoc.

Yet economics is properly pragmatic and ad hoc. The subject is not a technique in search of problems but a set of problems in need of solution. Such problems are varied and the solutions will inevitably be eclectic. Applied to the 2008 financial crisis, such variety and eclecticism would involve not only interrogating some dynamic stochastic general equilibrium model that could be ‘put on a computer and run’, but also make reference to journalistic descriptions by people like Michael Lewis and Greg Zuckerman, who describe the activities of some individuals who did predict the crisis. The large volume of such material that has appeared suggests many avenues of understanding that might be explored. You could develop models in which some trading agents have incentives aligned with those of the investors who finance them and others who do not. You might describe how prices are the product of a clash between competing narratives about the world. You might appreciate the natural human reactions that made it difficult to hold positions that returned losses quarter after quarter in a world suffused by irrational exuberance. These are not things that students of economics typically learn today. Their education focuses on the central need for rigour and consistency, to develop economic theory as something that can be ‘put on a computer and run’.

This pragmatic thinking, employing many tools, is very different from the self-contained world whose topography is derived axiomatically from assumptions of rational choice. More eclectic analysis would require an understanding of processes of belief formation, anthropology, psychology and organisational behaviour, and meticulous observation of what people, businesses, and governments actually do. The notion that models are not just useful tools, but are also capable of yielding comprehensive and universal descriptions of the world has blinded its proponents to realities that have been staring them in the face. That blindness was an element in our present crisis, and conditions our still-ineffectual responses. Economic models are no more, or less, than potentially illuminating abstractions. Another philosopher, Alfred Korzybski, puts the issue more briefly than Davidson: “the map is not the territory”.

In an ironic twist, Alan Greenspan adapted Korzybski's aphorism for his book on the crisis and its aftermath. Economists – in government agencies as well as universities – had been obsessively playing *Grand Theft Auto* while the world around them was falling apart. ■

# GETTING ENGAGED

*A minority of us experience a fulfilling work life. Changing this will benefit employers and employees alike*

*By Matthew Taylor*

**P**aid employment occupies a dominant position in a society's self-conception. It drives the economy, offers the best route out of poverty and is central to social identity, self-esteem and wellbeing. Yet despite the importance we ascribe to work, there are huge problems with the pattern and nature of employment. Millions of people are either unemployed or underemployed – working part time when they want to be full time – and millions more are employed in work that fails to lift them out of poverty. Two-thirds of children in poverty live with employed parents.

These are vital issues that will no doubt feature in political party manifestos in 2015, but while the debate on jobs tends to be dominated by quantity and remuneration, quality is also crucial. True, overall levels of reported job satisfaction are reasonable, indeed improving. But we need higher ambitions if work is to play the role it could in making our lives better and the UK more successful. Work quality should be seen as an important policy issue.

When we look at a more ambitious definition of good work, particularly focusing on employee engagement, the picture is far from reassuring. In its most recent global survey of the subject, Gallup found that fewer than one in five UK workers felt engaged at work, while two thirds felt unengaged. We lead Europe for those actively disengaged: more than a quarter of UK workers, according to Gallup, “are not just unhappy at work; they are busy acting out this unhappiness”.

Researchers and businesses are increasingly seeing how central engagement is not only to

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organisational and economic success, but also a range of wider benefits. The first is productivity. The UK's performance has not been great for a long time and has got worse in recent years. Now, according to the latest data, UK workers produce 16% less per hour than the average across the G7.

Organisations from Serco and Sainsbury's to the NHS have found a strong correlation between employee engagement and employee productivity. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development estimates that disengaged employees take more than twice as many sick days as engaged employees. Estimates vary, but there is no doubt that reducing the number of actively disengaged workers, or increasing the number of actively engaged, could add tens of billions of pounds to the country's GDP.

The second benefit relates to fairness. Politicians across a wide spectrum of opinion recognise the problems of inequality. Over the past 30 years, overall wage inequality has grown and the top fifth of earners now earn 14 times as much as the bottom fifth.

Were employees to be given more information on the distribution of rewards in their company, if their views of these distributions were shared and if companies were required to recognise and respond to those views, the pressure for a more just distribution of rewards and other benefits within the firm – including access to training – might grow.

A third benefit is to health and well-being. We face an epidemic of depression and anxiety in society, bringing with it major costs for the welfare state. According to Gallup, workers who are actively disengaged at work are twice as likely as





engaged workers to say they feel stress and anger. Disengaged, de-motivated and over-controlled employees are more likely to become physically or mentally unwell.

In a free society, paid work should not be compulsory. There will be people who are unable to work or choose not to and accept the consequences. But for the rest of us, the social contract of work is broken. A new contract should have two clauses. First, if employment is essential for social inclusion and acceptance then employment should be available to all. Second – and just as important – if being a valued and respected person involves being in work, then being treated as a valued and respected person should also be integral to work.

### **ROUTES TO BETTER WORK**

According to the organisation Engage for Success, four factors make engagement more likely. There must be a strong strategic

narrative about the organisation and its purpose; engaging managers who give staff the scope to develop as individuals; an employee voice throughout the organisation; and organisational integrity, where corporate values are reflected in day-to-day actions.

These principles seem eminently sensible, but our aspirations for work have not turned into social norms and expectations. The critical barriers are cultural and institutional; we need to free ourselves from outmoded allegiances if we are to close the gap between aspiration and reality and start making work better.

Take the valuing of employees. In our data-rich world, if something cannot be measured, it tends to be undervalued. The conventions of accountancy describe money spent on capital investment as contributing to a company's assets, while money spent on people counts merely as a cost. >>



This way of thinking is a hangover from the era when mass manufacturing was the dominant industrial paradigm. In the modern knowledge economy, the majority of an organisation's assets lie in the knowledge and skills of its workforce, yet these assets are absent from the balance sheet.

Also we need to shift from an overreliance on technology as the site of workplace innovation to a greater focus on the way work environments are designed. Our work organisations are still heavily conditioned by the assumptions of industrial ways of working: hierarchical structure, job simplification and the division of labour; efficiency and execution over exploration and experimentation. A few radical work organisations have always existed at the margins, reminding those in the mainstream that work can be un-bureaucratic, purpose-driven, highly autonomous, multi-skilled, collaborative and deeply satisfying.

Unfortunately, the appetite for experimentation seems limited in traditional sectors, if not in the more creative sectors and among start-ups. We should be helping organisations question the way they work and support reform and innovation, and learning from organisations designed and run specifically to optimise work engagement.

### **A MISSED OPPORTUNITY?**

Over the past 30 years, power has shifted from employees to bosses and managers. Union density has fallen, particularly in the private sector. Employers have become globally footloose, willing to shift employment to lower-wage jurisdictions and there has been a trend toward more unequal remuneration.

There seems to be little desire today for a return to sixties-style industrial relations. But back in 2004 there was an opportunity to halt the decline of collective employee voices; to find a third

way between master-and-servant employment practice and old-style collective bargaining.

Prompted by the European Union, regulations passed into law in 2004 introduced processes to provide independent employee representation and rights to information and consultation. Based on agreement with the Confederation of British Industry and the Trades Union Congress – and perhaps reflecting business, trade union and governmental ambivalence about the whole idea – the regulations were highly voluntaristic in form. Measures only took force if employees or managers activated them. Key aspects of the system, such as the degree and depth of consultation and the support given to staff representatives, were in effect left to management discretion.

From the limited research that has been published on the effect of the regulations, two broad and connected conclusions can be drawn. First, its overall impact has been limited. It has not, as some feared and others hoped, opened the door to a shift towards more European-style worker engagement. Second, the key determinant of whether new arrangements are seen to be effective, particularly by workers, is the degree of commitment shown by management in supporting the process.

Yet while this opportunity has been missed and the tide of employee organisation has been on the wane, particularly in the private sector, a different type of employee engagement has emerged. The past 20 years have seen the growth in a variety of schemes emerge, such as Investors in People and Best Companies, which seek to improve employment practice.

The irony of the current impasse in employee engagement is that, arguably, in the more rigorous implementation of the 2004 Regulations and in the use of the most powerful tools for individual employee engagement we have the key elements of an agreed threshold for good employment in reach.

# “WE SHOULD BE HELPING ORGANISATIONS QUESTION THE WAY THEY WORK”

But it has proved difficult to knit together the two key strands of employee engagement. We have not been able to join collective representation, information and voice to individually focused measures of employee well-being and fulfilment.

## BREAKING THE FRAME

The answer may lie in a theoretical framework of three alternative and competing ways of thinking about change: the hierarchical in which change is about things like leadership, strategy and authority; the solidaristic, in which change is about belonging, community and shared values; and the individualistic, in which change is about competition, acquisitiveness and innovation.

From a hierarchical viewpoint, better employment practice, including employee engagement, could be seen as a more benign way for managers to get what they want: contented, compliant and hard-working employees. There is less enthusiasm for giving employees an independent voice for concerns and criticism. Too many managers think employee engagement is just for the good times.

From a solidaristic viewpoint, employee engagement can be supported in as much as it delivers genuine gains for workers. However, this idea is tempered given the assumption – often reinforced by managerial behaviour – that the ultimate interests of bosses and workers are in conflict.

From an individualist perspective, organisational arrangements and culture are all very well, but ultimately what matters is the scope for individuals to get ahead through their own efforts. Work is a means to an end and anything on top of that is a bonus.

The predispositions associated with these perspectives help explain the wide gap between rhetoric and practice. We need managers to aspire to pluralism, workers’ representatives to partnership and all of us to fulfilment at work.

To this end, an alliance could be forged between progressive employers, modern trade unions and employee engagement organisations. This alliance’s goal would be to define and promulgate a framework of basic provisions that would enable organisations to receive the designation of ‘Good Employer’.

Organisations seeking to attain this status could choose from a wider number of accredited organisations, from trade unions to HR consultancies. Thus, the framework would provide the basis for a lively marketplace in employment partners, but would not act as a meal ticket to any. Over time, Good Employer status could be something that, although entirely

voluntary, would be seen as vital to a company’s social licence to operate, influencing the choices of consumers and investors. If managers accept that robust employee engagement has to include representation and voice, and if the champions of workers recognise that most employees see no inherent conflict between their interest and those of their organisation, we may be able to aim for a full sense of engagement at work to be the experience of the majority, not just the lucky minority.

## VALUING WORK OURSELVES

But this framework should not overshadow the importance of individual aspiration or responsibility. Survey after survey shows that one of the key determinants of whether we enjoy work is the degree of autonomy and discretion we feel we have in our jobs. This may be one reason why we have seen a rapid rise in self-employment and in the proportion of young people who aspire to be their own bosses.

But most of us will continue to work in organisations. The least well-paid workers tend to have the least control at work, but disengagement is a phenomenon across the labour market. It is not for me to comment on the value of any profession, but we can hardly expect human dignity and fulfilment – which is ultimately the measure of better work – if we do not ourselves seek it. Reform and innovation will only come about if we as workers move beyond an instrumental or fatalistic attitude to our jobs. Good for us, good for organisations and good for our country: better work should be everyone’s business. ■

## FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

### RISE OF THE 50 FOOT WOMEN

50 Foot Women has come a long way since first appearing in the *RSA Journal* in summer 2012. It has a growing presence in large organisations and a number of its mentees thriving in the workplace thanks to the work of more than 20 mentors, the senior professionals that build relationships with female graduates. Its aim is to equip young women with the skills, confidence and networks they need to gain quicker and fairer access to professional life.

“We’ve had great feedback from mentees and seen a number of them get good jobs, while many want to become mentors themselves,” said Dr Catheriene Fieschi, founder of 50 Foot Women and director of Counterpoint, the company that set up the project.

Plans for 2014 include sharing the data that 50 Foot Women has gathered through research. “We’ve realised there’s a role for us to play in thought leadership, said Catherine, who is grateful for the two RSA grants that helped make the project possible. “Our first grant enabled us to learn what was needed, while the second enabled us to meet that need.”

■ [www.50footwomen.org.uk](http://www.50footwomen.org.uk)

# UNDERSTANDING DESIRE

*Misdirected lust costs billions and creates misery for millions. It is time for policymakers to take it seriously*

*By Alexander Stevenson*

**L**ust is powerful. It can drive us to do many wonderful things. It can also drive us to behave idiotically. Usually these idiotic actions will have minor consequences, but not always.

Take Bill Clinton. By common consent he is intellectually and emotionally the smartest of the smart. He is driven and ambitious not just to achieve power, but to wield it effectively, and gives every indication that he values his family. Yet it also appears that he has been repeatedly prepared to risk it all for sexual gratification.

Clinton's behaviour has often been explained not in terms of lust, but in terms of risk or power. Like many politicians before and since, so the argument goes, it was his love of risk or perhaps his deep-seated desire to demonstrate his power in some way. In this analysis, lust is just a bit-part player.

The Clinton experience illustrates two things: first, that lust has an overwhelming power to overcome even the best of us; and second, that we are bad at acknowledging and examining this power directly.

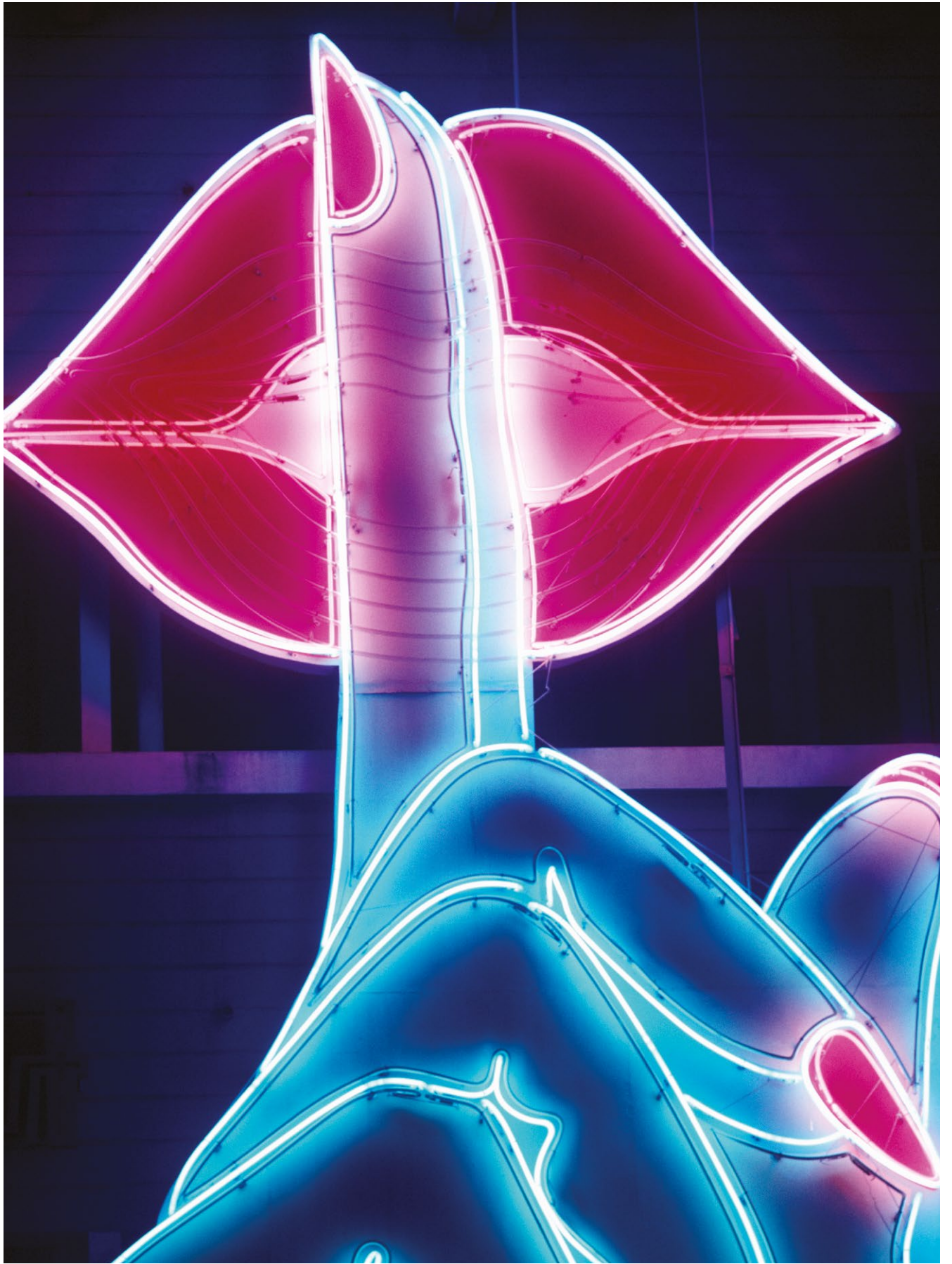
Such is the potency of the word 'lust' that it has lent itself to areas beyond the purely sexual. Some have a lust for power, others a lust for life. But for the purposes of this article, the definition is more traditional: lust is the feeling caused by experiencing sexual desire. This is, admittedly, a fairly baggy definition. For 'lust' you may equally substitute 'libido' or

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'sexual desire' or even 'arousal'. And it encompasses different types of lust, from the short-term lust to have sex immediately to the more languorous lust that might build over time. To some extent, this bagginess reflects a further recurring theme: that we know very little about lust and do not have common ways of analysing or talking about it.

We know that lust is connected with levels of testosterone and we know that these levels vary. But we also know that a huge number of other factors are involved. Lust can be triggered to different extents by images, words, drugs and, of course, touch. Then there are the more hidden triggers. These will be the feelings that individuals may have of love, of anger, of insecurity or the desire to procreate or control. These may also include the experiences of childhood, or the norms of the culture that people grow up in, the education they received, or simply their own genetic predisposition to certain behaviours.

Analysis of lust typically focuses on trying to understand these triggers. Studies of sexual violence, for example, will often focus on the perpetrator's perceived desire for control, which may have prompted the act of violence. This is logical – understand and deal with the causes and the symptom will disappear – but incomplete. It is like putting all our resources into finding a cure for the common cold without ever inventing Lemsip. So while we should continue thinking hard about the causes, we should also ask more directly whether there are better ways to manage the symptom of lust itself. >>





One noteworthy attempt has been made to understand the wider impact of lust. In 2005, academics Dan Ariely and George Loewenstein tried to assess how lust affects our ability to think straight. “Most appetitive systems in the brain, including hunger and thirst, are designed to increase motivation during times of opportunity,” they argued. “There is no reason to expect sex to be an exception.”

To test this hypothesis, they recruited 35 male students and asked them to answer a series of questions about their sexual behaviour. The twist was that some students answered these questions when they were sexually aroused, some when they were not aroused and some answered the same questions in both states.

The results supported their hypothesis. In a non-aroused state, 42% found women’s shoes erotic. When aroused, this increased to 65%. This pattern was repeated on more serious issues. When aroused, the students professed to be more likely (by a similar order of magnitude) to find a 12-year-old girl attractive, to slip a woman a drug to increase their chances of having sex with her and to keep trying to have sex after their date had said no.

It is a small sample and, as you can imagine (or may not wish to imagine) and as Ariely and Loewenstein themselves acknowledged, the research methodology is tricky to execute and open to challenge. However, it is the only reputable research I have been able to find in this area. Given the costs to society associated with misdirected lust outlined in the next section, this lack of extensive research is extraordinary.

### LUST’S COST

As something that is linked to many of the behaviours that profoundly damage our society, lust must be brought out of the bedroom to face the humdrum reality of public policy.

This requires that we set aside some of the things that get in the way; whether this is the preconception that lust is simply a private matter disconnected from social policy or, more obviously, our embarrassment.

In 2010, 400,000 women were sexually assaulted in the UK, of whom 80,000 were raped, and there were more than 20,000 sexual assaults on children. In the same year, there were more than 30,000 teenage pregnancies and more than 400,000 new diagnoses of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The cost of dealing with sexual assaults is estimated to be almost £10bn annually and dealing with teenage pregnancies every year costs the NHS alone £69m (this excluded housing and social service costs that may result). STIs cost £500m a year. The human cost of these episodes, particularly sexual assaults, is of course incalculable.

Misdirected lust can also be linked to the break-up of families. In 2011, there were 117,000 divorces in England and Wales. Of these, adultery was given as the reason for divorce in 17,000 cases and, we can reasonably speculate, may have featured in some of the 56,000 divorces granted on the grounds of ‘unreasonable behaviour’. Beyond this, there are many more people whose relationships have been haunted by the spectre of infidelity and sexual jealousy without the formality of marriage or the finality of a separation.

In all these areas, I am not suggesting that lust is the sole, or even the main, underlying cause of the negative behaviour; we cannot know either way. But in each instance what is clear is that the concluding act – the unprotected sex, the rape or the infidelity – is sexual. Lust, on some level, is involved.

In other areas, the role of lust may be less clear. Given its power, it seems sensible to ask what impact lust might have on apparently non-sexual behaviour. Just as feelings of



insecurity, envy or anger may contribute to sexual assaults, it is possible that feelings of lust may contribute to negative behaviour elsewhere.

Lust is particularly powerful – and often desperately unfulfilled – among young men. As a group, young men (aged 16–24) are the most likely to join gangs, commit crimes and be victims of crime. Might there be a link? And could there be more general links between lust and sexist behaviour, lust and excessive drinking, or lust and violence? It is difficult to say, partly because it is complicated to investigate such links rigorously and partly because little effort has been put into doing so.

### **POLICY VACUUM**

Without any robust research, societies have often struggled to know how to deal with lust. Many have adopted – and still do adopt – a policy of repression. There have been edicts about clothing, adultery and, of course, about contact between men and women. And societies can create more subtle expectations around, for example, the differences in what counts as acceptable sexual practice for men and for women. There is a case to be made (though not in this article) that attempts to control lust have played a part in moulding many of the legal and religious institutions that inform the way we live.

A more common response is education about the consequences of acting upon lust. In April 2013, the Department of Health published a report, ‘A framework for sexual health improvement in England’. This is a long and detailed document that is well worth reading for those with an interest in this area. The emphasis throughout is on education. For example, when it comes to reducing STI rates, the report sets goals for their policy, such as “Individuals

## **“WE MUST HELP LUST FACE THE HUMDRUM REALITY OF PUBLIC POLICY”**

[must] understand the different STIs and associated potential consequences” and “Individuals [must] understand how to reduce the risk of transmission”. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. Education can be a good strategy. Indeed, teenage pregnancies are at their lowest since records began at a time when the policy has focused on educating young people about safe sex and providing access to contraception.

But it feels as if part of the puzzle is missing. At no stage do these strategies offer advice on the management of lust. Remarkably, neither the word ‘lust’ nor its cover cousin ‘desire’ feature once in the report or the most recent Teenage Pregnancy Strategy. And I have been unable to find lust discussed directly or indirectly in any government policy documents.

In some areas of policy this absence is obviously bizarre. Consider, for example, the government’s ‘This is Abuse’ campaign. Aimed primarily at teenagers, the campaign is designed to help prevent abusive relationships, such as being forced into sexual acts by a partner. As well as support for the people being abused in such a situation (usually girls), some support is offered for the abusers. “You may not even realise you’ve done [the bullying],” the site advises. “But if you recognise the signs now you can stop yourself turning into someone you don’t want to be. Abuse can lead >>



to a loss of confidence and harm the futures of both people in the relationship. Most importantly, forcing or pressuring someone to have sex with you is illegal – always respect your partner’s wishes.”

This is helpful. But it is, again, incomplete. If there is one area, above all others, in which advice on managing lust would be useful, then surely it would be for ragingly hormonal teenage boys. And yet neither the potential abuser nor the person being abused receives any acknowledgement of the power of these feelings or help with how to deal with them, for example, by masturbating.

Similarly, in the area of adult relationships, advice about managing lust is sparse. Relate, the biggest provider of relationship support in the UK (and not a government body), does recognise the importance of sex for successful relationships and offers sex therapy. But managing lust does not get a mention in its online material. Even when addressing lust as directly as it is addressed anywhere in the context of relationships – on the issue of partners having different levels of desire – the proposed solution is discussion. “If you have different desires, then compromise and negotiation are the solution...When you commit to creating a tender, loving environment, sex is more likely to happen naturally.” Again, the advice is sensible, but indirect and incomplete.

These, of course, are the areas in which you would expect to find the most straightforward advice about lust and how to manage this powerful driver of behaviour. If even these areas fall short, then there is little hope for serious discussion about how to manage lust in less obvious, but

## **“IT WOULD BE HELPFUL TO MOVE TO A MORE PROACTIVE MANAGEMENT OF LUST”**

more damaging, areas such as sexual violence, family dysfunction and violence among young men.

### **BARRIERS TO DISCUSSION**

In our private lives, lust is a topic of enormous speculation, discussion and thought. This interest is reflected in the conversations we have, the films we watch, the books we read and the websites we browse. But this isn’t reflected in public policy.

There are some understandable reasons for this. For a start, lust is very personal and private. It is easy to see why policymakers may feel reluctant to be seen intruding on such an area. Politicians will likewise feel squeamish about discussing lust in public, sniffing the potential for ridicule and unwelcome attention.

It is also hard to talk about. On a practical level, we do not have the lexicon necessary to have a sophisticated dialogue about lust. At a research level, we do not have the evidence to understand what impact lust has or how it links to other behaviours. And at an experiential level, we do not know how others experience lust. Certainly, there are signs that



men and women experience lust differently. Vastly more men than women view pornography, visit prostitutes and report masturbating frequently. And some studies have suggested that men and women are sexually aroused by different types of images and words.

Such differences may be as much about social conditioning as genetics, but they are there and can inhibit serious conversation through a failure to understand other perspectives and, possibly, through embarrassment about exposing these differences. Incidentally, many of the people who I spoke to for this article remarked on the absence of straight men in leadership roles in organisations that deal with sexual health and sexual violence, or among academics who study it. Less anecdotally, of the 734 psychosexual therapists accredited by the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists, less than 20% are men. If men and women do experience lust differently then, in a reversal of almost every other area of public policy, we need to ensure that more straight men get involved in sensible conversations about it.

## GOVERNMENT'S ROLE

It is, perhaps mercifully, difficult to come up with policy proposals when the evidence base is so weak. Therefore, the top priority is to build this evidence base in three areas.

First, we need to understand more about lust itself: how we define different kinds, how we can measure it and how levels of lust vary between people, not least between men and women. We must understand how easy is it to identify these variations and which triggers are the most and least powerful.

Second, we must research the correlation between levels of lust and negative behaviour in directly sexual areas such as STIs, sexual violence, unwanted pregnancies and family breakdowns. The same must be done in less directly sexual areas, such as criminality, gang membership, alcohol and drug abuse, and sexist behaviour.

Third, we must consider the techniques and technologies that could help us influence lust more effectively.

It would be helpful to move from repressing lust, or simply educating people about the consequences of lust, to a more proactive management of lust. Very tentatively – and depending on what the research told us – this could take the form of one, or a combination, of three policy responses.

First, we might think about how to pre-empt lust. Could we be more restrictive about sexual images in the media in the same way as we are restrictive about images of people smoking? And, as drink-driving advertisements appear towards Christmas, could we target pre-emptive messages more effectively at relevant groups and at relevant times?

Second, we may provide the resources to help people better control their lust. In this area, more than others, we already have some techniques at our disposal. Sex offenders and sex addicts receive – with some success – courses in therapeutic treatment to help them cope better with their sexual urges.

Such support might be developed and made more widely available, perhaps even as part of general sex education. And we could get better at helping people assess their own levels of lust, their key triggers and the implications these factors may have for the life they lead and their relationships.

Third, we might make it easier to fulfil lust in ways that do not damage society. We could look at ways of making masturbation and the use of pornography more more fulfilling and less embarrassing. There may be new ways of using technology to give people sexually satisfying experiences. And perhaps there might be a case for changing attitudes towards promiscuity or having sex with prostitutes.

These suggestions are all speculative and proposed simply to show how policymakers might think practically about lust. The primary call to arms is for government to take lust seriously as an issue and invest time and money researching it further. We look back with curiosity and astonishment at the sexual practices and pruderies of previous generations. I suspect future generations will be equally astonished by our reticence in examining how profoundly lust affects our behaviours, both for good and for bad. And they will also be surprised that policymakers intent on developing policies designed to influence our behaviours currently exclude lust from their ruminations. ■

## FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

### EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE

Space Unlimited is working in partnership with the RSA to involve young people in regenerating urban areas. A social enterprise that operates across Scotland and beyond, the organisation runs projects designed to tackle social exclusion by teaming up young people with professional organisations to transform communities together. In partnership with Stuart MacDonald FRSA and his consultancy Creative Frontline, the charity is testing an initiative, New Urban Voices, which aims to empower young people in Dundee and Forfar.

“When it comes to regenerating urban areas, young people are often seen as a problem rather than part of the solution. In Forfar, we are working on the creation of a school-based community campus and have asked young people what will make the school a resource for the whole community,” said Space Unlimited's chief executive, Heather Sim FRSA. “You often find it's the people without the power who are much clearer about what works and what doesn't.”

Space Unlimited and Creative Frontline received RSA Catalyst funding of £2,000 on the proviso that this amount can be matched through Kickstarter crowdfunding by March 2014. If successful, it will allow young people to run pop-up exhibitions to showcase their work to wider audiences.

■ To help, email [heather@spaceunlimited.org](mailto:heather@spaceunlimited.org)

# A THIRD WAY?

*Unifying two long-opposed philosophical schools could have far-reaching practical implications*

By Michael Levenstein FRSA

**F**or millennia, thinkers of all allegiances have engaged in an interminable intellectual discussion as regards ‘the Good’ and how best to achieve the moral clarity it promises to afford. At the forefront of this dispute, two schools of thought in particular – deontology and consequentialism (namely in the guise of utilitarianism) – have captured scholars’ imaginations as viable candidates for a grand, unified theory of ethics. These theories have proved especially significant in the evolution of ethics and its application in the social sphere. From the development of religious custom to the content of modern-day legal codes, there is hardly a civic, political or economic institution not in some way affected by the precepts of their teachings.

There is, I believe, a way to unify aspects of these schools, which have proved incompatible for more than two centuries. The practical implications of doing so range from contemporary notions of social justice to the nature of incarceration.

First, we need a cursory description of this heated debate. Deontology asserts that the moral content of an act lies in its adherence to some fixed, universal rule, independent of the consequences that may follow, however potentially severe. Perhaps the most famous argument along these lines forbids coercively using an individual as a means toward some greater end, such as via conscription. Consequentialism, on the other hand, looks to the effects of an action in determining its moral worth. Utilitarianism, the most popular variant of consequentialism and the one examined here, specifically identifies ethical obligation in terms of whatever course of action will maximise happiness for the greatest number of people. This is expressed in terms of ‘utility’, best understood as the pleasure derived from the legitimate satisfaction of personal preferences (whether through the medium of material goods, social intercourse or even physical labour). What qualifies such preferences as legitimate is a mutual respect for others

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PHOTOGRAPHY: ALEXANDER KENT





## **“NOTIONS OF THE PUBLIC GOOD ARE ULTIMATELY INSEPARABLE FROM THE UTILITY GENERATED BY INDIVIDUALS”**

to do similarly (prohibiting, for example, a sadist from validly seeking pleasure at the unjustified expense of his victims).

Contrary to conventional wisdom, these approaches can be reconciled if we are able to strip away the obscuring means by which each argues its case.

### **OPPOSING IDEAS**

Deontology holds the uniqueness of individual consciousness as the ultimate boundary of ethical concern. It sees the individual ‘bottom-up’ as its reconnoiterer, viewing his reports as the basis of moral consideration. This is why deontologists forbid even hugely beneficial actions toward a worthy majority if they come at the expense of unavoidable harm done to a single innocent individual. They would argue that the harm faced by that one individual is not less significant than the benefit received by any one of the many, not least because the benefit received by the group could only be understood at an individual level. Because happiness cannot be aggregated between separate conscious experiences of the world, they adopt a view of the individual’s rights as being unconditionally inviolable.

Utilitarians, on the other hand, view individuals ‘top-down’; as competing interests rather than from any single subjective viewpoint. Their approach does not value the moral interests or rights of any actor in a given scenario over another. Its superiority as a moral theory over deontology is grounded upon its superb grasp of the reality of interpersonal social interaction: that individuals exist with competing interests amid a backdrop of scarce, yet valued, resources. The utilitarian approach is to identify an objective and impartial means by which these conflicting pursuits can be prioritised. Whereas deontology is often unwilling to engage in so tawdry an enterprise, utilitarianism is fortunately not so inflexible. It recognises that in an imperfect situation where all relevant moral interests cannot be satisfied, there must be a scheme employable that provides actionable resolution.

The treatment of individual rights is a major source of disagreement between these two schools. Whereas >>



deontology considers rights part of the inherent attributes of being human, utilitarianism tends to view them as useful rules that generally promote both public and private benefit. This latter view is more convincing, for while rights may prove a noble fiction – perhaps necessary to develop a common system of interpersonal respect that makes the stable administration of society possible – they are quite simply not part of the fabric of absolute reality. They are merely useful, man-made rules that can be overridden under exceptional circumstances, namely those in which not all rights may be satisfied, either due to their competing objectives or logistical constraints. Violations must not exceed the minimal extent required for the protection of the greater interest, such that a partial disregard of rights is preferred to an otherwise total disregard of them.

To this extent, deontology proves a specialised form of utilitarianism. Its edicts are generally sound, but collapse under the weight of extreme imbalances in the allocation of utility-producing resources necessary to justly resolve conflicts between parties. For example, the refusal of a small group of homeowners to relocate, despite the benefits conferred to millions by a modern motorway being built on their land, may satisfy deontological standards, but fail the utilitarian mandate.

The fact that there are no metaphysically ‘fixed’ moral rules does not prevent the existence of very real, albeit relatively useful, ones. The most prominent of these is justice, defined as utilitarian reciprocity, itself the balancing of the intentions of and outcomes for two or more parties.

Justice, therefore, is a median point upon a scale assessing the relative benefits and harms of interpersonal behaviour, centred between the two extremes of mercy (or undue reward) and cruelty (or undue punishment). It preserves an impartial

perspective, not morally favouring any actor in particular, and constitutes a baseline of moral obligation in its appreciation of the scarcity of utility-producing goods. This understanding of justice is based on the recognition of limited resources met by unlimited demand. These resources need to be paid for in some way (for example by labour, money or bartering) and to violate this rule – by stealing, for instance – is to exploit the rights of others by diminishing their own rightful access to such goods or services.

This is significant because these theories – particularly if they are to be useful when it comes to real-world policy questions – must be able to define a moral good capable of being experienced by humans. While the consequence-based approach of utilitarianism proves unproblematic in this regard, attempting to justify the merits of deontology upon this basis reveals a subtle but fatal error in its reasoning. For example, a prohibition upon physically injuring another person is only sensible to us in terms of the physical pain it seeks to avoid, implicitly assuming that the avoidance of pain is a good in and of itself. Thus, deontological rules, even those concerned with banning unjust treatment, are invariably justified according to consequentialist logic – that is, conferring a tangible benefit or avoiding harm. Introducing the notion of justice ensures that such exchanges are proportionate, that the moral interests of actors are taken seriously and (when applied to the realm of finance) that economic efficiency on a systemic level is maximised. These findings relate to fundamental notions of social justice, which attempts to equalise unjustified disparities between broad classes within our society.

Even if deontic and utilitarian logic can coincide, what comes next? What use are our ethical conclusions – even philosophy

## “POLITICS AND LAW ARE PUBLIC INCARNATIONS OF CHIEFLY ETHICAL AIMS”

itself – if not for the practicable advancement of human life and society? The implications are numerous because the resulting framework is one in which there is moral and administrative consistency on multiple levels, from the individual’s civil rights to the powers given to the state in times of emergency. Ultimately, the goal of ethics is human flourishing, whether this entails personal satisfaction, or the maintenance of social stability. Accordingly, social programmes and political agendas need to be tailored not only out of intellectual regard to the purity of moral aims, but also because their alignment necessarily creates a more prosperous community.

### THE PRACTICALITIES

Taxation is one of the more obvious manifestations of applied ethics within social policy and is broadly reflective of prevailing conceptions of the public good. If the preservation of justice is of central concern to both deontological and consequentialist morality, then progressive taxation may at first appear unfounded. Income is taxed regardless of commensurate usage of state services, violating the ‘utilitarian reciprocity’ defined above. To critics, such a system is unjust, not least because an unregulated market permits the freedom to most accurately appraise the value of the goods and services available to consumers. This analysis becomes suspect however, upon recognising that no economy is perfectly efficient and inevitably creates both income inequality and imbalances of labour at some level. An optimal progressive taxation scheme would strike a balance between minimising the hardship and social unrest caused by inequality, while ensuring that the more affluent are not punished for their relative industry. Funds aimed at equalising class disparity are most effectively directed toward welfarist provisions consumable by society at large, such as publicly funded healthcare and education.

Even social justice, however, demands a degree of socioeconomic stratification, itself based as much upon personal productivity as a natural aristocracy of talent. Notions of the public good are ultimately inseparable from the utility generated by individuals and, accordingly, a hierarchy of economic rights is formed relative to one’s economic output. This is the case not because greater wealth inherently translates into moral superiority, but rather because it is shorthand for possessing some valued skill or resource vital to societal flourishing. Thus, whereas the skills or resources contributed by individuals vary

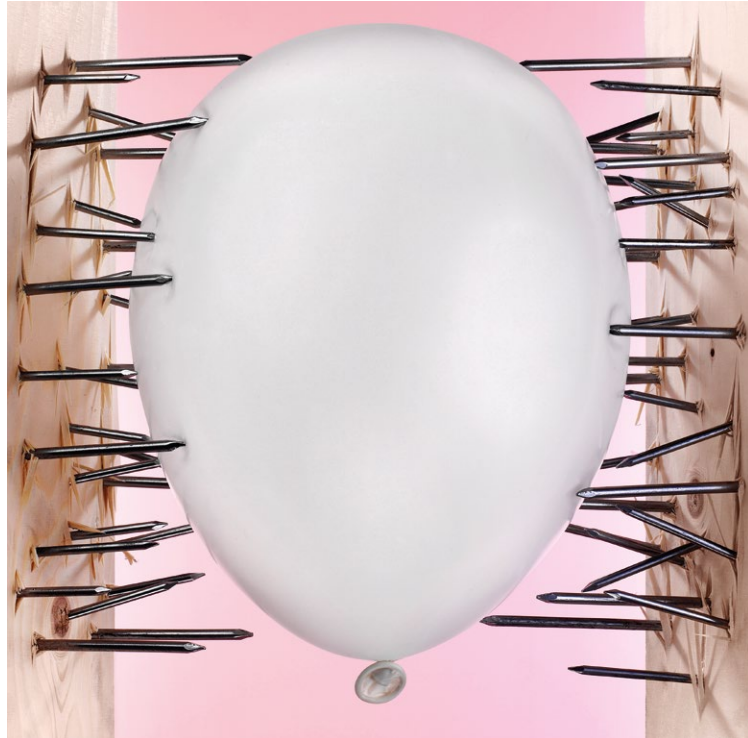
not only in their quantitative extent but also their qualitative nature, a just distribution of social goods requires an uneven allocation based upon such relative merit. Such a framework maximises the availability of collective goods, while facilitating an individual’s self-interest through an income proportionate to his specific labour output. Not only is this ethically sound, but practically necessary, for a perfectly egalitarian society without class stratification would be devoid of both social mobility and the incentives required for economic growth.

Policy examples of this thinking in action range from the elimination of positive discrimination schemes to the expansion of tax incentivisation for corporations that donate to approved charities. Recruitment of a certain percentage of cabinet ministers from academia or private enterprise, rather than elected office, would similarly ensure the highest standards of subject matter competence and relevant expertise came to the fore in the crafting of government policy.

Moreover, social mechanisms should be in place to maximise access to collective goods. Public funding of the arts and free access to museums (especially where such programmes target disadvantaged communities, which typically are least likely to benefit from such schemes) fulfil the utilitarian mandate of maximising benefits to society at large, while prompting a sense of cross-class solidarity in the consumption of common goods. Equally, penal policy should be shaped to fulfil both retributivist and rehabilitationist aims. Whereas the former avenges the rights of victims, the latter promotes public utility insofar as offenders are helped to conform to prevailing legal and moral norms upon their release.

Unification of these schools would help to further promote public understanding and clarity of the law, whose content is often confusingly influenced in equal measure by deontological and utilitarian considerations. By justifying its substantive morality on the basis of one framework, rather than two, the inconsistencies that arise (for example, between civil liberties and their marginalisation during states of emergencies) may be minimised, providing a more coherent and common set of values upon which respect for the rule of law may be strengthened.

Ultimately, both politics and law are public incarnations of chiefly ethical aims. Gaining clarity of the latter helps shape principled and effective policy of the former. Thus, ever may we strive toward a more perfect society in which public policy and morality act in unison. ■



# THE SQUEEZED MIDDLE

*Senior civil servants must embrace transparency and integrity to deal with pressure from politicians and the public*

*by Mike Farrar*

In the UK, the qualities valued in great public service leaders vary, from the military's courage in the face of overwhelming odds, to the vision and foresight of the great Victorian reformers. These echo wonderfully with the nation's pride at its great deeds and public service tradition. Yet for most public servants, who largely remain invisible even when in very senior positions, it is their conduct in office that is the touchstone for them and those they serve. Reflecting on my nearly 20 years as a senior civil servant and an

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NHS chief executive who led the £12.3bn North West health system, it is one specific element of my conduct – my integrity – that I think of and hold most dear when I reflect on my time at the top of the office.

Integrity, in my view, is about the ability to speak truth to power and be true to your own beliefs and values, especially at times of great pressure. Pressure, in the senior levels of public service, typically emanates from politicians, public anxiety and the media, who may wittingly or unwittingly feed the other two.

The ability to provide honest advice to ministers based on the available evidence and your own judgement of it, especially when contrary to one's immediate political instinct, is an acknowledged

## **“CAN YOUR STAFF AND THOSE YOU SERVE CLEARLY SEE THE ACTIONS THAT LIVE OUT YOUR VALUES?”**

test of a good civil servant. Equally, the responsibility – in the absence of political courage – to take the public platform and explain why changes to hospitals, community or primary health services would be beneficial for people is an example of something that tests NHS leaders. Both of these are examples from my own career that I reflect on and hope I did my best, even if my advice and explanations were rejected. That, of course, is the rightful nature of democracy.

But of late, the question of public service leaders in health and social care has been extended to their direct leadership of healthcare. Questions have been asked about the integrity of leaders in creating the context for nurses, doctors, care assistants and local managers to provide high quality care at the bedside. This suspicion of malign intent, typically identified with ‘bullying cultures’ and ‘cover-ups’, has been a prevalent open allegation or, worse still, kneejerk assumption in recent times following the report by Robert Francis into the terrible and unforgivable events at Stafford Hospital.

This has changed the dynamics and senior public servants are now in the same league as celebrities, sporting figures and politicians themselves. An absence of public trust is becoming the default setting. This is creating progress in rightfully bringing about more transparency and accountability in the health service, but it is also – worryingly – fostering an internal sense of injustice, imbalance in the public assessment of service standards and, increasingly, a major recruitment problem in health and social care leadership roles.

This is complex stuff and needs to be handled carefully. It needs political sensitivity rather than acrimony. If we get this wrong we may increase, rather than decrease, the risk of public service failure. There are three main ways in which this may be addressed.

First, public service leaders must revisit and re-establish their legitimacy to act by asking what the public wants from its public service leaders. Politicians can defend the stewardship of infrastructures that spend billions of pounds of public money on the grounds of their democratic legitimacy. Doctors taking a scalpel to us and undertaking major surgery can be legitimised on the back of a medical qualification and the Hippocratic Oath. But managers and officials are more exposed and can claim neither of these. Instead, we need to look to our professional qualifications, competencies and track records. We need to make

sure that everyone – those that use public services, the staff and local communities – know what leaders stand for as individuals. Systems of audit, regulation and declarations sit behind leaders as safeguards, not unnecessary bureaucracy.

Second, public service leaders must embrace transparency. Making the information on which decisions are based public, and communicating decisions taken and the variability of performance across public bodies better, can only serve to help leaders. The better ones are already moving in this direction. The most damaging allegations are rightly those of cover-ups, and much is made of creating safe environments for whistleblowing. In my experience, however, it is the proactive seeking of problem reporting and the open appraisal of performance – rather than merely blaming – that produces the right culture and climate of learning, and is the ultimate guarantee to the public of higher-quality services.

Third, leaders must look to themselves more often and ask the questions about their own integrity. Do you act in a way that could be explained from the standpoint of your own standards and in a manner that could be defended? Can your staff and those you serve clearly see the actions that live out your values? I often refer to ‘the person that sits on your shoulder’ as the presence to whom a leader is ultimately accountable. Public service leaders sleep better at night when they can answer honestly to themselves about whether they satisfied those internal expectations, no matter how they may be judged by their external audience.

I have made many decisions in my career and can defend all but one to myself. It is this one, where I failed by my own standards of integrity, that causes me most difficulty. I doubt I could have changed the actions at that time. In essence, I was the most junior person in the room, but I should have voiced my disquiet and I did not. This is the one decision that has the power to haunt me.

In difficult times, it is the combination of understanding your legitimacy, valuing proper and due process, and behaving with visible integrity that are most needed if public service leaders are to deliver both the best service performance and the most defensible actions in the face of an increasingly challenging political, public and media context. It is, in short, the key to the survival of our great public service tradition. ■

# MAKING JUSTICE SOCIAL

*RSA Transitions in East Yorkshire is harnessing the concept of recovery capital as it continues to work on new approaches to prisoner rehabilitation*

*By Rachel O'Brien FRSA*

**F**ew people think that the UK has got it right on reducing reoffending. While debate about justice services remains polarised – around hard versus soft approaches, sentencing and the size of the prison population – scratch the surface and what bothers us most is public safety. How many of the more than 80,000 people released from prison each year are likely to commit further crimes? And what of the far greater number serving sentences in the community? Governments have adopted a range of strategies, but the answers to these questions remain depressing and the problem seems intractable. The risk is that the easiest thing to do is revert to polemic, which stifles both innovation and progress.


Around half of all crime is committed by people who have already been through the criminal justice system. The cost to the taxpayer of reoffending is estimated to be £9.5bn–£13bn a year. Driven by statistics like these, the government launched its ‘rehabilitation revolution’ in the wake of the last general election. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has since embarked on Transforming Rehabilitation, a substantial shake-up of probation, prison and rehabilitation services. The policy creates a number of resettlement prisons, where prisoners held away from their home area will return for three months before release. It allows for the contracting out of much of the work currently undertaken by probation trusts to new prime providers, with a National Probation Service dealing with high-risk offenders and risk assessment. Prime providers will take

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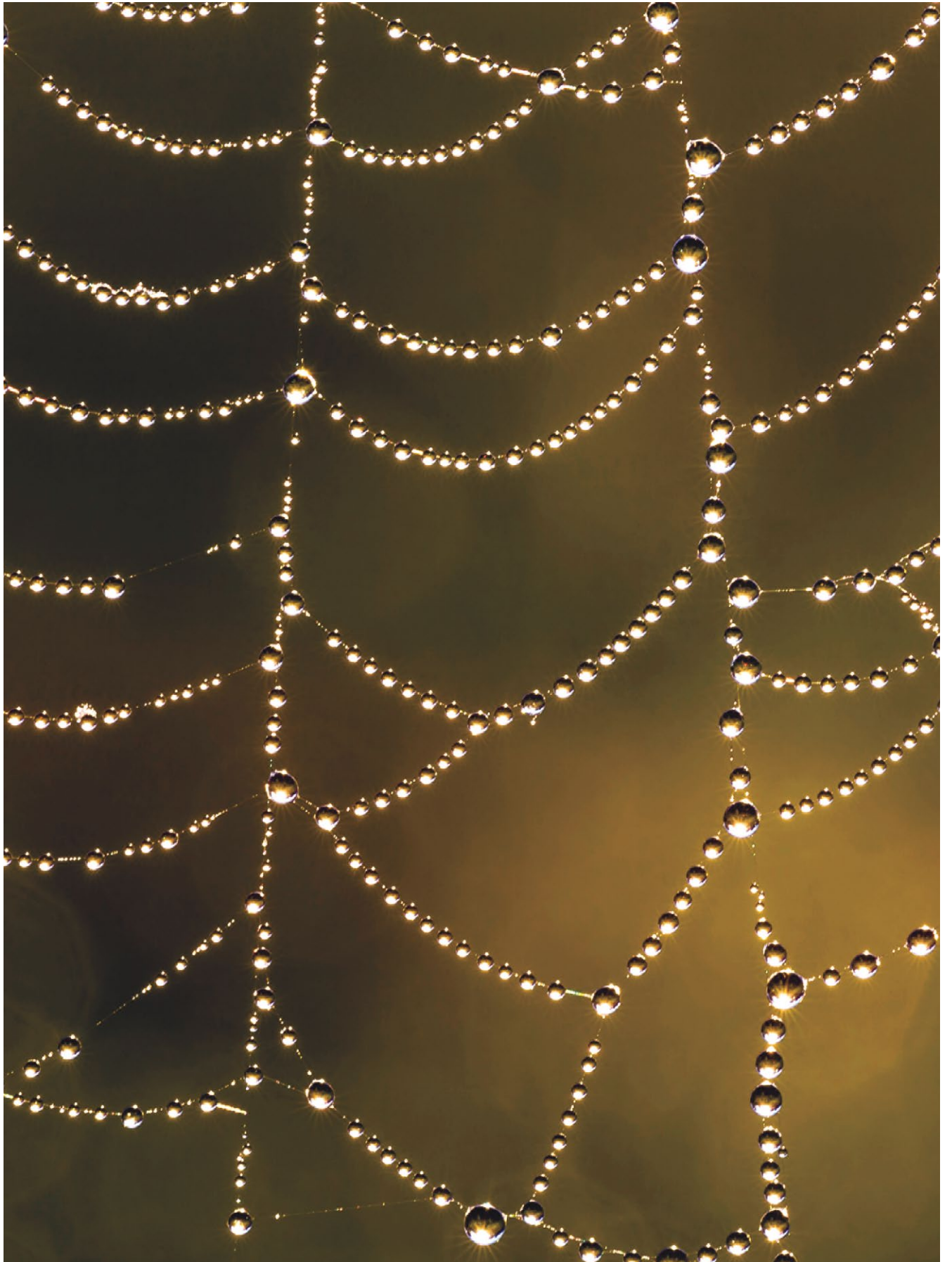
on the supervision of middle- to low-risk offenders and some services aimed at resettling people on release. Those receiving a short-term custodial sentence (less than 12 months) will be placed on licence in the community up to the full 12 months.

This challenge and its timetable (roll-out is due to be complete by late 2015) are daunting. The publication of a report in December 2013 by the prison and probation inspectorates heightened this feeling when it argued that a fundamental rethink of the 10-year-old offender management programme was needed if the government's flagship policy was not to be undermined. The inspectorates argued for holistic approach to sentence planning, a deeper understanding about routes to rehabilitation, and better links between providers of learning and skills and those leading on resettlement.

It is in this context that RSA Transitions reaches a critical stage. The project started in 2010 with a small group of Fellows asking whether there was a space for new approaches. The group developed the ideas set out in *RSA Transitions* in 2011. This report argued that, within the prison and wider justice system, there existed pockets of innovation that secured good outcomes by focusing on prisoners' capacities and not only their deficits; by using technology in learning and social enterprise approaches to skills and work; and by engaging the wider community, prisoners, officers and ex-offenders in design and delivery. It identified three related challenges.

First, the evidence base for impact on reoffending levels remained patchy at best, leaving funders and commissioners unable to compare the value-added of individual interventions, and the public without faith. This did 







nothing to ease the second challenge: the yawning gap between people's concern about crime, our rapacious consumption of crime fiction and frightening headlines, and the realities of the often more mundane, opaque and complex nature of the justice system. Third, those (largely uncelebrated) pockets of innovation often depended upon an enlightened partner, a (short-term) funder, or on an individual prison governor or officer 'going the extra mile'.

Transitions set out a vision for a 21st-century prison that could begin to address some of these challenges. What would happen if, instead of piecemeal innovation via stealth, the best approaches were brought together and the evidence base on impact strengthened? How could the public be brought closer to the realities of the prison system? In the context of reduced public spending, the focus was on unlocking potential assets: those within the prison system; those in the wider community, including the public, social entrepreneurs and employers; and the unused assets – buildings and land, often adjacent to prisons – owned by the MoJ but laying fallow. Geography matters, and providing a single co-location space for agencies and others to work closely alongside prisons, but from the 'outside in', would increase prisons' capacity and improve the resettlement offer on release.

### **HMP HUMBER**

Since late 2012, the RSA – with an advisory panel made up largely of Fellows – has been working with HMP Humber (a 'new' public sector, male resettlement prison resulting from the merger of two adjacent facilities in East Yorkshire) to refine and test the Transitions model. Once fully merged, HMP Humber will have capacity for 1,062 residents and will release about 1,000 people a year.

The prison is located in East Riding and sits on a large site owned by the MoJ. It includes 45 acres of parkland, Everthorpe Hall (built in 1871) and old farm buildings. The hall was used for many years as a staff social venue and training centre, but has been out of use for a decade. To develop our

proposals for the site, we consulted with stakeholders in the Humber sub-region, including prisoners, staff, employers, local statutory and voluntary services, civic leaders and the wider community. We have worked with the Humber Police and Crime Commissioner's office and with the Humber Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), ensuring the model speaks to both the sub-regional crime strategy and economic trends. The unemployment rate in Yorkshire and the Humber is higher than the national average and ex-offenders struggle to secure work, a key driver of rehabilitation. We need to ensure that our offer gives offenders the best chance of securing work or setting up their own enterprises.

The LEP's Skills Commission identified opportunities for the region, particularly in the area of renewable energy. Its recommendations included the creation of a major 'green' skills hub for the sub-region and a skills investment fund to up-skill the local population, including offenders. As well as resettlement services, Transitions in East Yorkshire is focused on sustainability, incorporating green technology industries – including sustainable construction and renewable energy – as well as 'softer' skills, such as sustainable land management, food growing and recycling.

Expert papers, workshops and surveys explored the particular relationships needed within the prison – and between the prison and the external world – to strengthen the chances of rehabilitation. We have engaged with national stakeholders, including the MoJ and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), and explored the relationship between national commissioning and local delivery.

Transitions is very much part of HMP Humber's vision and strategy. The aim is for each prisoner and all staff to clearly understand the conditions of progress through the prison, with a focus on additional responsibilities and choices at each stage and clear penalties for non-compliance. The aim is not to create 'good prisoners', but active citizens who have the best chance of desisting from crime and addressing the challenges they face. The project is complex but by focusing on key questions, it

seeks to build on what is already in place, ensuring the model has local support, is sustainable and is replicable. Changing people's behaviour requires a shared culture of rehabilitation, which focuses on the prisoners' journey from conviction through to community. Can Transitions boost prisons' capacity to influence culture and build the kinds of networks and relationships needed to support rehabilitation? Can it do so while involving and benefitting the local community and employers? And, if Transitions can work in Humber, can it be developed elsewhere, supporting the broader Transforming Rehabilitation agenda by providing spaces for innovation and collaboration?

### REHABILITATION CAPITAL

In addressing these questions, we have drawn, amongst other things, on RSA's Connected Communities programme, which explores practical social network approaches to social and economic challenges, with specific focus on how disadvantaged or marginalised groups might become more resilient and begin to identify and co-design their own solutions. This work is based on evidence that suggests our connections to other people, the context and nature of these relationships, and the extent to which we have networks of support, matter greatly in shaping our behaviour, life chances and well-being. These insights are generally not reflected in the way we design and run core public services, particularly within the closed prison system.

In particular, we looked to the Whole Person Recovery work, which seeks to improve recovery outcomes for people experiencing substance misuse problems and the emerging theory of 'recovery capital', which refers to the breadth and depth of internal and external resources that can be drawn upon to initiate and sustain recovery, and provides a more holistic foundation on which to develop collective strategies.

In their 2009 paper, *Conceptualizing Recovery Capital*, William Cloud and Robert Granfield posit four components to recovery capital. First, social capital is defined as the sum of resources that each person has as a result of their relationships, and includes both support from and obligations to groups to which they belong. Family membership provides support, but will also entail commitments and obligations to other family members. Second, physical capital is the tangible assets, such as property and money, which may increase recovery options (for example, being able to move away from existing friends/networks, or to afford services). Third, human capital includes skills, positive health, aspirations and hopes, and personal resources that will enable the individual to prosper. Fourth, cultural capital includes the values, beliefs and attitudes that link to social conformity and the ability to fit into dominant social behaviours. Cloud and Granfield argued that it is the meshing of these components that may be particularly important in assessing recovery capital at a group or social level.

Our contention is that a significant gap remains in understanding the role that an individual prisoner's networks – informal and formal – have on what we call here their

## “THE AIM IS TO CREATE ACTIVE CITIZENS WITH THE BEST CHANCE OF DESISTING FROM CRIME”

rehabilitation capital. This is, in short, the range of things – personal, social, community and cultural – that will make them less likely to commit crime. Likewise, those working within the prison system lack the external networks and freedoms they need to succeed in what they are, increasingly, charged with doing: reducing reoffending. As well as tight resources and sometimes poorly coordinated services, the particular challenges faced by many prisoners – a lack of positive networks and of disempowerment – are mirrored by the prison service.

These strands, with the addition of community capital (the resources in the community that are needed, such as housing, work and so on), have informed our consultation process. This has involved exploring how offenders and those working with them can aim to create the networks of informal and formal support where these are lacking. We have used the concept of rehabilitation capital in thinking through what services, activities, partnerships, skills and workforce Transitions should be developing. Inevitably, many of these reflect NOMS's existing seven resettlement pathways, which include employment, accommodation and health needs. But we believe that by explicitly focusing on networks and how to increase their breadth, quality and strength, could shape how the seven pathways are approached and help transform rehabilitation.

Too often prisons, their governors and staff are blamed for the wider failings of the justice system, as they struggle to respond to complex individual needs and a major stubborn social problem without the required social response in place. To say that making further headway in rehabilitation is too important to leave to prisons, justice agencies or top-down government approaches is not intended to do a disservice to those who work at the front line. Neither is it intended to imply that there is a magic bullet. Rather, it is to argue that a response to reoffending based on understanding and strengthening the broader networks needed to boost rehabilitation culture and capital is more likely to reap rewards. Rehabilitation is something that all of us want to see more of, but it eludes us; we believe Transitions offers one way of mobilising more of us into action. ■

■ *The Transitions feasibility study is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Tudor Trust, the Garfield Weston Foundation and the RSA. For more information about the project, please visit: [www.thersa.org/transitions](http://www.thersa.org/transitions) or contact the Transitions team on 01430 425406 or Rachel O'Brien on [racobrien@googlemail.com](mailto:racobrien@googlemail.com)*

# EMPIRICAL LIMITS

*Policymakers are mistaken if they think legitimacy is merely a question of being led by evidence-based data*

By William Davies

In October 2012, *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) published an article that imagined what management would be like once the promise of big data had been fulfilled. In the future, the authors mused, businesses will no longer rely on experience or senior judgement to authorise decisions. HIPPOs – the ‘highest-paid person’s opinion’ – will be dramatically silenced. In their place will be a simple question: what does the data say? In another article from the same edition, HBR announced that ‘data scientist’ would be the ‘sexiest job of the 21st century’.

To be a leader in this dawning age will mean clearing a space in which big data is free to speak for itself. Knowing how to pose a question will be a greater asset than carrying answers around in one’s head. Indeed, the human brain may come to seem like a second-rate version of the data cloud, where scientific data is more securely located and more efficiently searched for. The very nature of authority is transformed.

Big data arrives with big promises. At present, the promises are doing far more work than any algorithm. Polls show that managers and marketers see big data as something they would like to make better use of in future, but are sadly not up to speed with yet. But this delayed fulfilment may be in the very nature of big data. Its proposition is that, if only human beings can get around their pesky reliance on ‘theory’, ‘methods’ or ‘heuristics’ to acquire knowledge of their own social world, then the truth of human behaviour and culture will be

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revealed once and for all. The term ‘data’ literally means that which is simply given to us. We just need to be patient.

But apart from the sort of science fiction proposed by the HBR piece, in which decision-makers sit around the data, asking questions of it like some algorithmic Mystic Meg, very few organisations are set up to act with this radically empiricist mindset. Organisations exist to impose coherence on unruly situations. It contradicts their purpose to suggest they must sit back and wait for coherence to just appear.

These conflicts could come to characterise the age of big data. Just as market fundamentalists ascribe every failure of the market to the errors of government, a new cadre of ‘data fundamentalists’ is emerging, for whom every failure of knowledge can be put down to tired 20th century leadership patterns, which distort the truth contained in data. A more realistic view of how expertise may mutate in the years ahead would recognise the types of conflict that are likely to play out, the unintended side effects of seeking to trust data, and the types of institutional compromises that may be necessary to combine multiple forms of authority and expertise. And, in due course, this will afflict public policy.

Thanks to Edward Snowden’s revelations, the exuberance of big data messiahs was rapidly counterbalanced by some more paranoid political visions during 2013. Quite rightly, nobody will be as comfortable with the idea of government as data analyst as they are with the idea of Netflix or, to a lesser extent, Facebook tracking our behaviour *en masse*.

But for policymakers, the current appeal of basing government interventions on empirical foundations, >>



with data sets of several million people, could scarcely be higher. Austerity heightens the urgency of discovering which forms of government intervention succeed, and which ones do not. Just as advertisers no longer rely on a broadcast-and-hope model, in which they simply chuck messages at the public and hope some stick, policymakers are striving to avoid throwing money at things unless they can also discover the effects.

Randomised control trials (RCTs), which have been in use by pharmaceutical companies since the 1950s, are being trumpeted as the best means of evaluating a policy without prejudice or political interference. RCTs reinforce a variety of ‘data fundamentalism’ by suggesting that evidence can speak for itself, if only the damn theorists get out of the way.

### NUDGING FORWARDS

This new empiricism has brought a slightly wider range of scientific disciplines into government, though always on the condition that all parties are willing to convert their findings into cost savings measured in money. The much-celebrated ‘Nudge Unit’ (otherwise known as the Behavioural Insights Team) operates within the Cabinet Office, working to discover and test ways of altering behaviour through low-level, relatively costless interventions that yield disproportionate economic returns. This is ostensibly an integration of psychology into public policy, though a heavily restricted definition of psychology.

Questions regarding privacy and surveillance arise from this. But there are also cultural and political questions regarding the uses and limits of behaviourism more generally. These are less commonly addressed. We are living through a surge of optimism regarding the potential to understand and predict human behaviour, purely on the basis of observation and mathematical analysis. The notion that human decision-making and action is amenable to scientific analysis, in just the same way as the animal world, is the founding principle of behaviourism. The idea that there is nothing philosophically or politically problematic about this is a feature of what is (usually disparagingly) known as ‘positivism’.

The first thing that both the enthusiasts and the sceptics may wish to consider is that we have been through this before,

at least twice. A first wave occurred roughly between 1900 and the early 1920s, on the back of mechanical engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor’s workplace time-and-motion studies (the first instance of management consultancy) and John B. Watson’s application of animal psychology to human behaviour. It came to an end following the rise of social psychology and attitudinal research in the late 1920s, which yielded a less mathematical approach to management in the 1930s.

A second wave occurred between the early 1950s and the late 1970s. The Cold War led to vast investment in systems analysis and behavioural science, which soon made its way into social policy and management. The economic and political crises of the 1970s brought this wave to a close, however. Businesses came to rely more on a charismatic style of leadership, while policymakers discovered that statistics were no help in navigating the mounting culture wars.

That we are currently in another such wave is manifest in the rising authority of analysts from outside the social sciences altogether. Mathematicians and physicists now purport to have the best tools for studying society, already proven (though

scarcely with the best results) by the ‘quants’ working in investment banks, backed up by American journalist Nate Silver’s unnerving predictive accuracy as a polling analyst, and soon to be unveiled in a number of ‘smart city’ projects, where an urban area is run on the basis of automated algorithms. The problematic human dimensions of financial markets, democracy and urban living are, in each case, sidelined in the interests of better prediction.

Something, at some stage, will bring this phase of positivist exuberance to a close, just as something brought the previous ones to a close. This is not to say that Netflix will suddenly start to fail in predicting the next film I want to see, or that my risk of suffering depression will not be calculable by studying who I socialise with. It means that at some point prediction, based on observation, will no longer be the standard against which authoritative experts will be judged. The shortcoming of behaviourism, in all its guises, is that it strategically ignores



## “AUSTERITY HEIGHTENS THE NEED TO DISCOVER WHICH FORMS OF GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION SUCCEED”

(or suppresses) the capacity of experimental subjects to talk back and adapt their behaviour to being tested.

The fate of investment banks may be a reasonable weathervane in this regard. If the banks were the first to elevate data analytics and algorithms to the status of truth-tellers, they were also the first to discover how this can blow up. The fact that Barclays et al are now all scrabbling around in search of better ‘culture’ is a symptom of how behaviourism implodes, just as it did in the 1920s and the 1970s. Policymakers are ill-advised if they think that legitimacy is merely a question of being led by data. But how else can one conceive of expertise?

### DISCIPLINARY PLURALISM

A lesson of economics and its policy uses in recent years is that expertise is as much about practical procedures as it is about scientific validity. The tradition of welfare economics (from where terms such as ‘market failure’ and ‘externality’ derive) has become a lingua franca of Whitehall, with certain consequences for better or worse. This is because, via texts such as the Treasury’s Green Book and a certain common sense (namely, that people by and large should be allowed to pursue what they believe they want), neo-classical economics has become an effective form of soft constitution for government.

Inevitably, disciplines and methods get harnessed and abused in pursuit of specific agendas by politicians, lobbyists and NGOs. That is the nature of politics and the government has come in for particular criticism in this regard. But what disciplines and methods possess, which data fundamentalists seek to abolish, are certain relatively stable standards, procedures and measures via which different pieces of data are compared. Scientific methods have a social and moral dimension. Where the social world is concerned, they not only indicate how knowledge is to be arrived at; they stipulate what is worth knowing, how people should be judged and what matters in the first place. Understood in this way, methods and disciplines can be useful, even when the predictions they yield turn out to be false, as they occasionally must do.

Because disciplines and methods (unlike most algorithms) are publicly visible, they can of course be challenged, and alternatives offered in their place. *The Spirit Level*, a book

that argued that more equal societies were more successful, demonstrated the political potential of introducing an alternative mode of empirical evaluation into public debate, just as the social indicators movement has done for several years. But in each case, theory is not only there to get the data to ‘hold together’, but also to offer a premise on which debate should be focused. Pluralism of disciplines is a necessary complement to value pluralism.

One of the dangers lurking in the promise of big data is that we will be governed and managed with the assertion that everything is empirically valid, but without being able to know what premises or principles are at work in how data has been scraped or trials been conducted. The knowledge economy saw widespread privatisation of ideas and artistic content. The big data economy sees privatisation of theory itself, in the form of secret algorithms.

Against this, the fact that methods and disciplines possess their own cultural or political substrates needs to be made explicit. A society that purports to care about efficiency needs to implement and fund social sciences that work on the premise that efficiency matters. But the idea of doing social science with no premise at all – as fuels every wave of behaviourism, including this current one – will always be a vehicle for something covert. ■

### FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

#### RELUCTANT INNOVATORS

You do not need money or power to change the world, according to *The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator*, a new book by Ken Banks FRSA. It highlights the personal stories of 10 social innovators worldwide: ordinary people who stumbled upon problems and dedicated their lives to solving them.

One of the innovators is Laura Stachel, whose organisation, WE CARE Solar, designs portable solar-lighting kits for maternity wards. Travelling to Nigeria, Laura had planned to work on a different problem, but soon realised a simple lack of lighting was responsible for an unacceptable level of mother and child deaths. Solar Suitcases now save the lives of mothers and babies throughout the developing world.

“The book is all about helping democratise social entrepreneurship for young people, giving them belief that they can make a difference,” said Ken, who created a live text-messaging service that helps non-profits in more than 170 countries send critical messages to millions of vulnerable people. A donation from a US foundation, personal funds and a successful RSA crowdfunding campaign helped make the book possible.

■ [www.reluctantinnovation.com](http://www.reluctantinnovation.com)





# NEUROSCIENCE ON TRIAL

*We should tread carefully when assessing whether developments in the study of the brain can help make better policy, says Professor Nikolas Rose*

By Anjana Ahuja

While the ‘coming out’ on YouTube of Olympic diver Tom Daley dominated most British newspapers on 3 December 2013, *The Independent* lured readers with an alternative headline: “The hardwired difference between male and female brains could explain why men ‘are better at map reading’, and why women ‘are better at remembering a conversation’.”

Scientific research, the newspaper stated, showed that ‘structural connectivity’ differs according to gender; men have more connections within each hemisphere while women have more connections across the two hemispheres. *The Independent’s* heavily extrapolated justification of gender stereotypes, which was picked apart mercilessly in the days that followed, proved two things: that editors are hardwired to run any stories that can be moulded to fit readers’ prejudices; and that neuroscience rivals sex in its power to shift newspapers.

The recent placing of neuroscience on a cultural pedestal has been taxing the brain of Professor Nikolas Rose, the celebrated sociologist who heads the Department of Social Science, Health and Medicine at King’s College London. Pictures of the brain, he observes, are stamped all over popular discourse like a 21st century motif and, given that humans subscribe to the view that ‘seeing is believing’, we have come to regard every aspect of human behaviour

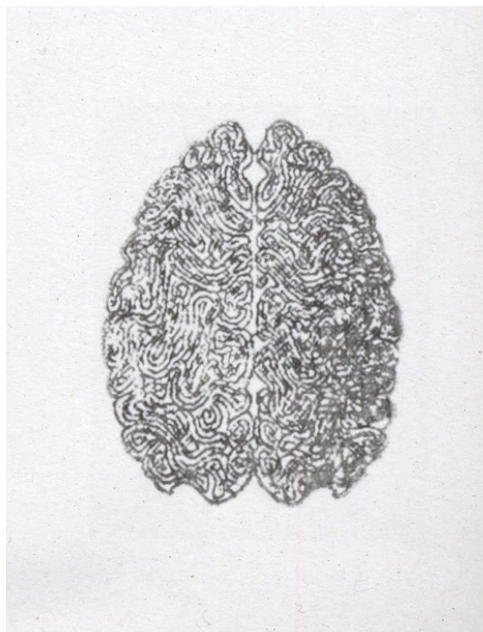
– from bad parenting to psychopathic murder – as explicable if only we look hard enough at the lumpen mass inside our skulls.

“Those pictures produced by fMRI [functional magnetic resonance imaging, where brain activity is charted] have become highly pervasive,” Professor Rose tells me, when we meet at his office in King’s College’s Strand campus. “Also, one sees in academic disciplines an increasing use of the prefix neuro: neuroaesthetics, neurotheology, neuropolitics, neuro this, that and the other. So there’s definitely a neuro fad going on here.”

That fad is documented by Rose and PhD student Joelle M. Abi-Rached in *Neuro: The New Brain Sciences and the Management of the Mind* (Princeton University Press). Neurolaw, for example, has seen defence lawyers sweeping into courtrooms armed with pictures of their clients’ supposedly malfunctioning brains; the government has marshalled similar images to argue that intervening early in problem families can prevent future deviancy.

But *Neuro* is much more than a scholarly map of where the brain sciences are heading: Rose has been quick to recognise that neuroscience (a term coined in 1962 by the American biologist Francis O. Schmitt) is intruding on territory previously owned by the social sciences. Where we once looked outwards to an individual’s social milieu – upbringing, education, experience, relationships – to explain conduct, we are increasingly looking inwards, at the biological level of neurons, axons and synapses. Both Europe and the US have eyed the human brain as the next major scientific frontier. Europe’s Human Brain project aims to build a supercomputer simulation in a bid to understand brain diseases, while President Obama’s

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\$3bn BRAIN (Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies) Initiative has the goal of plotting the activity of each of the brain's estimated 100 billion neurons.

Rose, who sits on the social and ethical steering committee for the European project, writes in the book that social scientists find the rise of neuroscience "profoundly threatening". He leans back in his chair as he elaborates: "Ultimately, most people from the social sciences think that the spontaneous philosophy of the neurosciences is a reductionist one: if the brain is involved in everything that we do – and there are few who would dispute that – then by that very fact the brain becomes the prime mover and shaper of all those things (that are valued by the social sciences, such as history, culture, language, experience and belief), and any explanation therefore has to start with the neural. That's what many sociologists and anthropologists would doubt."

If anything, neuroscience is confirming, rather than undermining, the importance of social factors. The relatively new field of epigenetics – which contends that the environment alters gene expression in individuals, and that such alterations can be passed on to descendants – suggests that biology is not immutable but subject to environmental context. Neuroplasticity, the constant rewiring of neural connections in response to experience, similarly points to the importance of social interactions in sculpting brain architecture.

*Neuro* is, in fact, a timely manifesto that urges the social sciences and the life sciences to ditch the mutual suspicion and start working together in a spirit of critical friendship. It is all the more powerful given Rose's intimacy with the life sciences: the 66-year-old trained as a biologist at Sussex University, dabbling in genetics under the tutelage of pioneering

evolutionary biologist John Maynard Smith. His older brother is the renowned neurobiologist Steven Rose, who has also railed against the reductionist tendency in modern science.

Rose, who quickly became disillusioned with biology and switched to sociology for his PhD, says: "I've tried to argue against the idea that the life sciences and the social sciences are two domains with two radical different ways of speaking, that can't talk to each other. It's really important for those in the social sciences to recognise that humans are embodied, embrained, fleshly, vital organisms, and that the kind of things that we've been so good at tracing out – the effects of poverty, deprivation, racism and exclusion – are written in the body. The neuroscientists need to recognise that if they are to fully understand how neurobiological processes get played out in our lives, then they've got to pay attention to everything we know about the effects of culture, of meaning, of experience, of history."

That's the friendship bit out of the way; now for the criticism. Rose takes issue with the perceived objectivity of functional brain imaging (MRI measures blood flow in particular areas of the brain while participants carry out mental tasks, and blood flow is taken to indicate brain activity): "Some take the view that life sciences, and the neurosciences in particular, offer a form of objectivity that the social sciences don't. For example, the belief is that you get a more objective explanation from neuroimaging than from an ethnographic study. That belief in the epistemic superiority of neuroimaging over ethnography is quite mistaken.

"Neuroimaging is a fantastic technology but it is based on a whole series of assumptions about what the pictures represent. Neuroscientific claims are pretty speculative and

based on extrapolations from very small samples in highly artificial situations.” And yet despite these limitations, he says, such findings continue to be accorded high value, a fact that reinforces the suspicion felt by social scientists.

Some observers have been more overtly damning of what we may call neurohubris: the American academic Stephen Morse devised the term brain overclaim syndrome (BOS) to describe the extensive neuroscientific attempts to explain criminal behaviour. Neurolaw has particularly caught the public imagination, and there are now university departments dedicated to exploring the possible neurological bases for wrongdoing (Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, for example, has a noted neurolaw department; it will publish what is thought to be the first Law and Neuroscience textbook in 2014). A former Vanderbilt academic, Professor Nita Farahany, now at Duke University in North Carolina, sits on President Obama’s bioethics advisory panel. In the same paper, Morse, only half-jokingly, identifies the cure for BOS as “cognitive jurotherapy”.

The medication is working. As Rose argues in one of *Neuro*’s most compelling chapters, the criminal justice system hasn’t generally fallen for the ‘my brain made me do it’ defence. While images of brain structure have become commonplace in civil proceedings, for example to substantiate compensation claims for brain damage after an accident, Rose says that even in the US there is resistance to the idea that deformed brains explain, much less excuse, violent behaviour.

“In my research for the book, which involved looking at the most serious crimes, such as murder, I did not see a single case where a brain scan demonstrating an abnormality of mind was successful in affecting the verdict. The court is not concerned at the state of a person’s brain now, which might be two years after he committed the offence. It wants to know that, at the time of the act, the defendant had a brain abnormality that was directly and causally related to the act that they carried out and it’s almost impossible for that causal chain to be demonstrated. The old fashioned notion of volition – that acts are the realisation of intention – still dominates.”

Verdicts may not be swayed by neurological arguments, but sentencing is a different matter: Nita Farahany’s analysis of about 1,500 judicial opinions involving neurolaw suggests death penalties are being downgraded to life sentences, and that convicted teenagers, whose immature brains are now seen as neurological hotbeds of recklessness and impulsivity, are being treated more leniently.

If a person’s biology does not fully account for past behaviour, can it be used to predict future conduct? That is the domain of ‘bioprediction’: both genetics and brain imaging have been fingered as methods of forecasting future behaviour. For example, mutations in the MAOA gene have been associated with increased aggression, and there is a patchy record of judges passing lighter sentences when MAOA evidence is admitted.

Rose is indeed worried about the use of biology in risk assessment, such as predicting antisocial behaviour among children or calculating whether a prisoner considered for

## “THERE’S DEFINITELY A NEURO FAD GOING ON HERE”

parole will reoffend: “There are multiple places in the criminal justice system where risk is assessed and where we know that psychiatrists are very bad at making predictions, because they are being asked to predict rare events. There’s a bit of a vacuum here and neuroscience may come along and say, ‘We can use biomarkers or our brain activity signatures to make those predictions’.

“It ultimately falls foul of the same simple problem that all screening falls foul of: the knowledge we have from brain research is probabilistic, just as it is from genetics. And it’s a statistical mistake to reason from probabilities to individuals.”

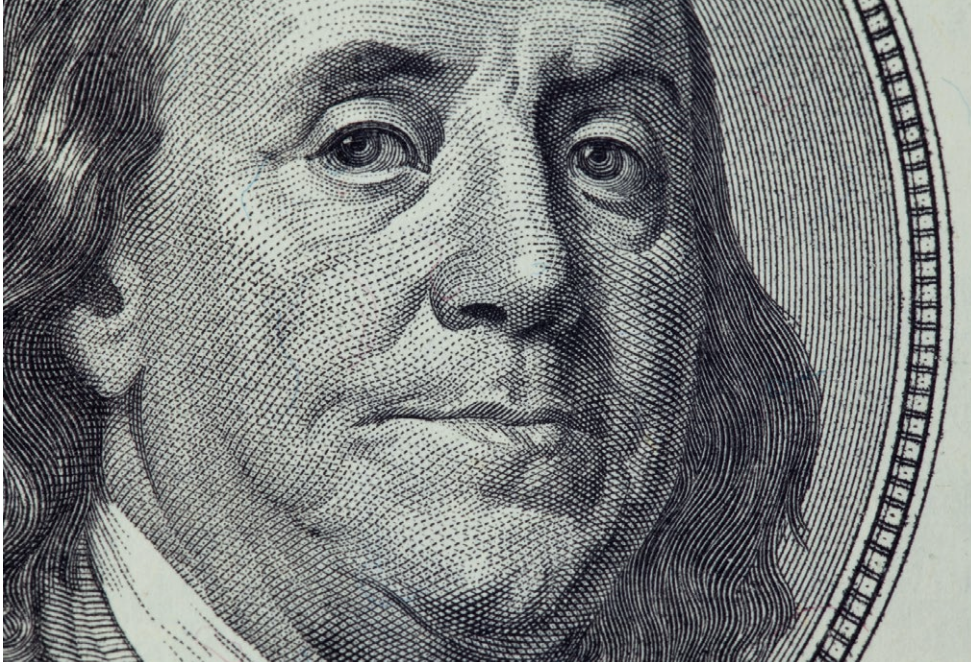
A child possessing a biomarker associated with adult psychopathy is doomed almost at birth by his biology, says Rose, with every episode of truancy and truculence recast as early indications of antisocial behaviour. “The people who push for early intervention say that we can divert the child from a path that will potentially lead to antisocial behaviour, misery and criminal behaviour, but I think we have little evidence for that, and some evidence that it might make things worse. And, later on, what if people say, ‘Because of your biomarker we are going to keep you in prison under a public protection order, or extend your sentence?’”

The appearance on the psychiatric landscape of sub-clinical conditions, such as mild cognitive impairment or first episode psychosis, feeds his fear that we are heading towards a dystopian future in which people are governed less on past conduct and more on perceived neurological propensities.

That, he says, exercises him more than murderers resorting to brain scans to avoid the death penalty: “The evidence [on milder forms of mental disorders] isn’t disputed in the same way as it is in the agonistic framework of the courtroom: professionals have a lot more authority and discretion and the claims being made are not subject to a sufficiently rigorous interrogation.”

It could be two or three decades before we know whether neuroscience can deliver on its promises: “I think we’re in the middle of something, to be honest, and it’s too early to say whether this neuroscientific understanding of ourselves will become as powerful in the 21st century as psychological understanding became in the 20th century.

“I hope people will remain excited about these huge advances in our knowledge of the brain but also recognise that the more we know, the more we know we don’t know. If we are going to grasp that aspect of what we are as human beings, it’s going to be a pretty long journey.” ■



# BEING INQUISITIVE

*In Enlightenment London, Benjamin Franklin was immersed in and influenced by the kind of thinking that led to the birth of the RSA*

*By Walter Isaacson*

**B**enjamin Franklin's ability to connect design, technology, the arts and governance came from his membership of the RSA. He was inducted in 1756 – before he actually moved to London as an agent of the Pennsylvania Assembly – and, for the many years he lived in England trying to hold together the British Empire, he was a very active participant in the Society.

Franklin is missed desperately these days, especially considering the recent political gridlock in Washington. From his deep understanding of the Scottish Enlightenment, which came out of the coffee houses that ended up creating the RSA, and the general scientific sense he gained through Newtonian mechanics and

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other disciplines, Franklin realised the importance of balance. Empirical studies and the sciences, he said, transferred not only to the arts – something the RSA understood – but even how to conduct government. If you look at the American governing structure, it is based on Enlightenment thinkers' notion of how you understand tolerance and humility in order to have the checks and balances of a good government.

Franklin went to England for the first time very early in his life. He was a 17-year-old runaway in Philadelphia when he decided to become a printer. He opened a print shop to create the Philadelphia Gazette, but first he had to go to London to get the necessary equipment. Even sailing across the ocean, he was unable to refrain from studying science, nature and the arts. Franklin brought a set of modified barrels, which he had created, with him on his voyage. He lowered them into the ocean at different depths and brought them up to measure the temperature of the water. At that young age,

## “ON HIS FIRST TRIP, FRANKLIN HUNG AROUND THE COFFEE SHOPS OF COVENT GARDEN, WITNESSING THE BIRTH OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT”

he was the first person to discover and chart the Gulf Stream.

Even more impressively, after seven voyages back and forth across the Atlantic during his life, on his last voyage at the age of 80, he stood out on the deck every morning and every afternoon, lowering the barrels so he could further perfect the charting of the Gulf Stream.

He had an understanding that nature explains beautiful things to us and, from that, we learn and apply it to other things. That was at the core of what the RSA does and at the core of Franklin’s philosophy.

On his first trip, not yet inducted into the RSA as he was a runaway apprentice, he hung around the coffee shops near the RSA in the Covent Garden area, witnessing the birth of the Enlightenment. He came back to America with volumes of Addison and Steele’s *Spectator* and taught himself to write by cutting up the publication’s great essays of the early Enlightenment, cutting up the paragraphs and trying to reconstruct the arguments in his own words.

Having watched the bubbling up of thinking in London, he started a new type of voluntary association that was for what he calls “we the middling people”. Like the London coffee shops, this was for an emerging middle class of what he described as shopkeepers, artisans and tradesmen; the people who wear leather aprons in the morning when they open their shop. And so it was called the Leather Apron Club, modelled on the associations that were opening up in London, including the RSA.

The Leather Apron Club looked at philosophical and scientific questions; ones that we study even today. One of the first questions it asked was ‘Is immigration good or bad for the economy of Philadelphia?’ The club would use empirical evidence, which was a concept Franklin had brought back from England.

Franklin did not stop there. He started the Free Library of Philadelphia and a hospital set up as a public-private partnership. There was a new sense of what government and people could do in terms of finding common ground. There was a street-sweeping society, night watchmen and, the thing that he loved most of all, his volunteer fire corps.

In Enlightenment London, Franklin learned the value of

tolerance, humility, compromise and how to respect people of different beliefs and backgrounds. During his lifetime, he donated to the building fund of each and every church that was built in Philadelphia. And at one point the city was building a new hall. If you go to Philadelphia to what is now Independence Hall and you look to your left, there is a building built in about 1765 that is still called the New Hall. Franklin wrote the fundraising document and he was also the largest individual contributor to the first synagogue built in Philadelphia. When Franklin died, instead of his minister accompanying his casket to the grave, all 35 ministers, preachers and priests of Philadelphia linked arms with the local rabbi and marched with him to the grave.

It was this spirit of enlightenment – that type of tolerance and belief that there are balances to be made, people to be respected, ideas that have to be brought together – that he learned from the RSA in the coffee shops of London. We’re still fighting for those values today. ■

THIS IS AN EDITED EXTRACT FROM WALTER ISAACSON’S SPEECH IN NEW YORK ON 8 OCTOBER 2013, WHERE HE ACCEPTED THE BENJAMIN FRANKLIN MEDAL

### FROM THE ARCHIVE

## BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND THE RSA

Having become interested in the Society, Franklin wrote to the RSA in the autumn of 1756 and expressed his desire to become a corresponding member (those that were not resident in Britain). Though no payment was expected from corresponding members, he enclosed a gift of 20 guineas, worth nearly £2,000 today.

Franklin corresponded with the Society and several of his letters survive in the archive today. He developed an enthusiastic interest in the Society’s competition/award scheme, which ran from 1755–1850. The intention of these competitions was to promote arts, manufacture and commerce by awarding prizes of money or medals for new inventions, discoveries and improvements, and for artistic merit.

He attended his first meeting in September 1757, having been sent to England by the Pennsylvania Assembly. He became one of the first members of the Committee for Agriculture in 1760; and took the position of Chairman for the Committee for Colonies and Trade in 1761.

The Benjamin Franklin Medal was instituted in 1956 to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Franklin’s birth and the 200th anniversary of his membership of the RSA. The medal is conferred on individuals who have made profound efforts to forward Anglo-American understanding in areas closely linked to the RSA’s agenda.

## NEW FELLOWS

### PROF. EVE MITLETON-KELLY



After 13 years in the civil service, Eve Mittleton-Kelly undertook a career change into academia following the birth of her son in 1980. "I did an IT course and found that I was not bad at all, so I decided to join the Information Systems department at LSE to do a master's and then stayed on for a PhD."

Her subsequent research has focused on complexity theory, which explains how complex behaviour arises through relationships and the consequences of those behaviours. "If I took a decision or action that affected you to such an extent that you changed your behaviour, that's adaptation," Eve explained. "Then, if your changed behaviour affected me so that I had to change my behaviour in turn, that's co-evolution. That is a very powerful dynamic and only one of the principles of complexity that we use to understand the behaviour of organisations as complex systems."

Understanding the underlying dynamics of social phenomena also helps to address difficult, problems. A recent project, working with a government agency in Indonesia, began to address problems of corruption, nepotism, and religious and ethnic division by identifying what Eve calls the 'multi-dimensional problem space', which includes the social, cultural, technical, physical,



political, financial and other dimensions. Within each dimension, a set of issues is identified, together with their co-evolutionary dynamics of how they influence each other. "Once you've understood the key clusters of issues," Eve said, "you can set up the enabling conditions that will help you address the problem."

She also explores catastrophic risks such as pandemics and is a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Complex Systems. This type of experience will benefit the RSA's projects, she believes. "I've been coming to various events on and off for a decade and can contribute something because the RSA does address complex problems."

### PHILIP SINCLAIR



As Senior Policy Advisor at the Cabinet Office, Philip Sinclair is establishing a growth and innovation function to lead inward

innovation in government. After a career in management consulting, corporate finance and law, he has found dealing with organisational change in the public sector fairly similar. "It's about culture and you get that with any large organisation," he said. "There are big command and control structures, established practices are hard to change, and risk appetite is quite small."

The project, which Philip has been working on for the past nine months, has reached the stage where a working model has been developed and piloted. The model takes a value chain approach, first identifying the core principle of what is needed and then consulting as wide a range of relevant people as possible – from the public and private sectors – before deciding what the best response to the need is.

Fellowship will help him bring in the kind of people to make this approach a success. "Fellows are neutral parties in all of this, so I know that they're going to give honest feedback. In many ways, government's aims are very similar to the RSA's, so there's a nice overlap. And we can introduce other Fellows to government and open some doors there for them."

## YOUR FELLOWSHIP – ENGAGE WITH THE RSA IN FOUR MAIN WAYS

### 1 Meet other Fellows:

Network meetings take place across the UK and are an excellent way to meet other Fellows. Check out the events taking place on the website.

### 2 Connect online:

Like the RSA on Facebook, or follow us on Twitter @thersaorg using #thersa hashtag. There is also a Fellows' LinkedIn group, our own network [www.rsafellowship.com](http://www.rsafellowship.com), and blogs at [www.rsablogs.org.uk](http://www.rsablogs.org.uk)

### 3 Share your skills:

Fellows can offer expertise and support to projects via SkillsBank using a form available online.

### 4 Grow your idea:

RSA Catalyst gives grants and support for Fellows' new and early-stage projects aimed at tackling social problems.

Explore these and further ways to get involved at [www.thersa.org](http://www.thersa.org)

## IN BRIEF

Here are a few more new Fellows who are working to drive social progress:

**Jocelyn Bailey** is the head of manufacturing, design and innovation policy at the cross-party think tank Policy Connect. She wants to develop her ideas around the use of design in rethinking political institutions.

**Clare Bamba** is the professor of public health policy at Durham University. Her research combines academic excellence with high policy relevance. She wants to use her research skills to support innovative social policies.

**Paula Reid** works as a policy officer at the charity Rethink Mental Illness. She was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to look at how law enforcement agencies in the US and Canada are improving their responses to people affected by mental illness.

**Stephen Brookes** is a senior fellow, public policy and leadership, at the University of Manchester Business School.

**Stephen MacDonald** is the director of Public Safety Associates Ltd. He previously spent 30 years in public service and now advises governments and organisations on modernising emergency services.

**Mark Littlewood** is director general of the Institute of Economic Affairs, a free market think tank in Westminster that covers issues, such as welfare policy.

## LEARNING LESSONS



Jennifer Bradley and Bruce Katz's piece ('Leading lights', Issue 3 2013) was very interesting, with a lot of assumptions being made about the potential of city-led policies creating growth, but there was no evaluation or confirmed outcomes.

We tried this with regional development organisations following cities initiatives and evolving strategies based on them here in Nottingham. Our RDA EMDA (2002–2012) spent £1bn with their regional strategies 'the place of choice' and 'a flourishing region'. When the RDAs were axed, there was little complaint as there were no outcomes and – to this day – no account of where the money went and to what end. Some of this money is part of the debt the country is struggling to pay off now.

Before we embark on similar strategies, should we not evaluate what happened last time we employed them before running up yet more debt?

— **Online commenter, [www.thersa.org](http://www.thersa.org)**

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## WHAT IS POWER?

7 November 2013



Norwegian sociologist **Stein Ringen**, professor of sociology and social policy at the University of Oxford, explains how power

is determined by the governed as much as the governor.

Power, say the political scientists, is the ability to get things done. That is why the traditional view in Britain is that governments should be strong: because then they have the power to get things done. This is a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of power and it is at the heart of the terrible predicament of misrule that has befallen Britain.

The distance from power to getting the thing done is long, twisted and full of impediments on the governor, which give others power. The governor has the right to make decisions that others are supposed to act on, but there is more to the doing than bidding it be done. Depending on how much power the governor has, what comes out at the end might be what he has intended, something else, something that doesn't work, something better, or nothing.

The power of others sits in the governor's dependency on the other for getting his decision pushed through so things can happen at the end of the process. A minister, for example, is dependent both on his officials doing what he puts to them and on people throughout the country complying. And those the governor depends on really have as much power over him as he has over them.

So the governor can either command or he can persuade. The more power he

can lean on, the more he can command. The more the power of others, the more he must rely on persuasion. Once we grasp the powerful intervening agency of others, we see that governance is mainly the business of persuasion.

What makes people accept persuasion is not power but authority, which is a very different commodity. A governor with authority can persuade reluctant others to go along with his wishes or even make them think and believe that what he wants of them is really what they want, too.

Authority is contained in the willingness of others to listen and be persuaded. No governor has any other authority than that which he is able to extract from others. The authority of a leader depends on his ability to trap reluctant others into seeing him as someone who deserves obedience. Although appearing to belong to the governor, authority is really the gift of those he wants to govern. The ultimate power of others is their ability to deny the governor the authority he needs to be able to affect them.

There is too much bad law and a propensity in our public policies for things to go wrong, but this is not the domain of any single government, but rather systemic. There is a misunderstanding about what power can give you and an underestimation of the degree to which governance is a people business.

Take the bedroom tax. Set aside whether or not it is well intentioned. This is a policy that is so badly designed that anyone with half an eye can see that it will fail. First, it puts an unbearable burden on the officials and social workers who are going to implement it; snooping round people's homes. When you have an army of officials who hate what they are told to do, they are not going to do it well. Second, it puts a terrible burden of compliance on dependents. They will be tempted – forced – into cheating because

rules have been imposed upon them that they will be unable to obey.

Governments cannot get anything they want done just because they have power. They cannot do more than they are able to persuade others to go along with. We have an excessive centralisation of power in the British system. And the result of that is a command-and-control style of management. When you try and command more than 60 million people from a few offices in Whitehall, you deny yourself the ability to persuade. The more power to the government, the less its ability to get things done.

## FREEDOM, EQUALITY AND A FUTURE POLITICAL ECONOMY

13 November 2013



It will take a little imagination to instigate the structural change we need, argues **Roberto Mangabeira**

**Unger**, the Brazilian philosopher, social theorist and politician.

The true object of transformative thinking and transformative politics is the mastery and the change of structure. By that standard, there is today almost no progressive politics in the world. We are shaped by the contexts of society and culture that we build and inhabit. To a very large extent, they make us who we are. Nevertheless, we cannot fully respect one another unless we disrespect structures, denying them the last word and keeping it for ourselves.

This problem of structure has its roots in the history of social thought. The conception that the regimes of society



## “TO PROPAGATE CHANGE WITHOUT CRISIS, WE NEED HIGH-ENERGY DEMOCRACIES”

are made and imagined was the central revolutionary insight in classical European social theory. This conception, however, was circumscribed and eviscerated by a series of necessitarian assumptions. These include the assumption that there is a closed list of alternative forms of social organisation in history (such as Marxism’s modes of production), or the idea that there are laws of change governing the succession of historical systems.

What kind of structural change do we then need? From a long-term perspective, we need structural change but cannot bring ourselves to subscribe to a definitive institutional blueprint. To acquire the imagination of structural change without falling into structural dogmatism, we must radicalise and generalise the experimentalist impulse in every domain of society and culture.

The objective in all this is to raise the lives of ordinary people to a higher plane. The instrument of this shared bigness is the cumulative structural transformation of society. There should be a relationship established between two competing goals for the progressives. One goal has to do with the defence of the majority against economic insecurity with a historical fear of dispossession.

But if this were the only goal of the progressives, they would have no more than a defensive or negative agenda. The other set of interests they should be devoted to has to do with energy, creativity and innovation for the majority. Whichever political force can most persuasively embody the cause of vitality commands the agenda.

If we seek to reconcile these two objectives, while refusing to hold the institutional background constant, we get something very different – a radically democratised market economy. It is not fastened to a single vision of itself, but supports alternative regimes of private and social property and offers a much



larger segment of the labour force access to the advanced sectors of production.

In the short term, the state should equip civil society so that it can participate in the experimental and competitive provision of public services. Second, we need a series of institutional, tax and regulatory changes that enlist finance in the service of the productive agenda of society. Third, we have a hierarchical

segmentation of the economy. We must innovate in the arrangements that associate the state with small- and medium-sized firms and allow these firms to associate with one another, cooperating and competing at the same time. Fourth, as the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of the society declines, the only adequate basis of social solidarity is to take care of other people beyond the boundaries of one’s own family.

Fifth, we want to propagate change without crisis. For that, we need high-energy democracies that promote a high level of engagement, resolve impasse quickly and combine democratic centralism with democratic devolution.

We need the kind of structural change that can address these fundamental problems of contemporary societies, left unsolved by the social democratic compromise of the past century. ■

### MORE FROM THE EVENTS PROGRAMME

**Adam Phillips**, one of Britain’s most renowned psychologists, joined **Matthew Taylor** for a conversation on everything from Freud to football; shadow foreign secretary **Douglas Alexander MP** explored the future of progressive UK foreign policy; environment secretary **Owen Paterson MP** and **Dame Helen Ghosh**, director general of the National Trust, discussed the future of Defra’s interactions with civil society; writer **Melissa Benn** and Labour MP **Stella Creasy** argued for a more equal and fair future for our young women; Nobel Prize-winning economist **Edmund Phelps** looked at how grassroots innovation creates jobs, challenge and change; influential

author of Emotional Intelligence **Daniel Goleman** asked what the preconditions for a compassionate society might be; and acclaimed songwriter and campaigner **Billy Bragg** discussed democracy, citizenship, power and responsibility in an exclusive RSA event.

*The highlights above are just a small selection of recent events from the RSA programme. All of these, and many more, are available as audio downloads at [www.thersa.org/audio](http://www.thersa.org/audio)*

*Full national and regional events listings are available at [www.thersa.org/events](http://www.thersa.org/events)*

For highlights of forthcoming events **see page 9**

# GOOD POLICY

*Win over the twin powers of the public and the media and you can be almost certain your proposal is a sound one*

*By Sir Liam Donaldson*

**A**fter 12 years in Whitehall and, for many years before that, working closely with a government department from a regional post, I found that health policy almost always stood or fell on the quality of implementation. The statement of policy intent was often straightforward, but it was never easy to reshape NHS care provision, nor, in health, population behaviour.

One of the major policy successes during my time as Chief Medical Officer was ensuring smoke-free public places and workplaces, more often called ‘the smoking ban’. This was ironic because the smoke-free pioneers in New York City told us that they would never have succeeded if negative language like ‘ban’ had been used. Even the US’s missiles are given names like ‘Patriot’.

When the smoking ban was adopted, implementation was relatively trouble-free. Despite predictions to the contrary, there were no rebellious smokers flouting the law, no defiant landlords and no marches in the streets for smokers’ rights. The trouble came with getting the policy on the agenda in the first place, as it fell into that territory politicians consider a reputational graveyard: the ‘Nanny State’.

On the evening of publication of my Chief Medical Officer’s Annual Report, where I first called for action, I watched the television news. On it, the political correspondent said that he had it on the highest authority that my proposals would never happen. But within three and a half years, no one in a pub, club, restaurant, place of work, or enclosed public place was able to smoke or had to breathe other people’s cigarette smoke. And the restriction was enshrined in law, not merely some voluntary agreement that could later be diluted or scrapped.

There are lessons in the way the policy seemingly came back from the dead. The route to securing a new policy like this is essentially a people-centred, not a technocratic, endeavour. Listening, explaining, answering questions, reassuring, advocating, creating a sense of higher purpose and, indeed, inspiring, are what matter.

These activities need to be led by those who are perceived as motivated by the public interest and not by

politics. They need to be people trusted in the evidence and statistics they quote. In addition to myself, a wide range of professional bodies (the medical and nursing Royal Colleges and Associations), public health organisations and non-governmental organisations (Action on Smoking and Health – ASH – the anti-tobacco charity, pre-eminent among them) were involved. Individual experts were also authoritative voices.

Regional directors of public health led public events around England with titles such as The Big Smoke Debate. It was important that this was happening outside government, in the country. It engaged a public that began to see and hear broad-based advocacy by independent health interests that did not usually come together with such strength of view. Polling started to show opinion was moving towards the proposal.

It helped, too, that the goal was simple and concrete. Indeed, it was something that people could see: clear air. Even when it comes to more complex policies, there are advantages to picking out one aspect to create a flagship that is clear, simple and resonates.

The media is crucial to the success of any controversial policy. Authoritative, defensible responses must be assembled for all key areas of criticism and the lead arguments must be clear. Scientific evidence on the harm caused by second-hand smoke, human-interest stories of health effects, rebuttal of claimed financial losses to the leisure industry, and the case for protection of workers were all cogently communicated.

Most difficult was the Nanny State accusation, which was once thrown at me at a press briefing. I had just been in California and asked a young woman bartender “How does this law fit with your country’s philosophy of individual freedom?” “Mr,” she said, “your freedom ends where my nose starts.” Telling that story had an almost palpable impact on the journalists I was speaking to, a reminder of the value of apt story telling in a process of change.

The policy then entered the political arena, where the intervention of the Health Select Committee was vital. Parliament, presented with strongly evidenced arguments, broad-based independent professional support, and an engaged and generally positive public, voted overwhelmingly for change. England would become smoke-free. Some say it was the most important public health measure for 50 years. ■

LIAM DONALDSON,  
CHIEF MEDICAL  
OFFICER FOR  
ENGLAND (1998-  
2010), IS  
PROFESSOR OF  
HEALTH POLICY  
AT IMPERIAL  
COLLEGE LONDON

## Case study: Student Makers Market

Lisa Oulton FRSA wants to train budding creative entrepreneurs to set up in market squares to give them the skills that they need to grow and sustain a business.

With a grant from RSA Catalyst she ran workshops to help the young people to run stalls in local markets to sell their arts and crafts. To build on the success of these stalls, she raised a further £2,250 from 60 backers on the RSA's crowdfunding area to put on a market of her own in Folkestone, South East England.

RSA Catalyst provided Lisa expertise about how to run a crowdfunding campaign through a workshop with Fellows to craft her pitch and plan the campaign, and then on-going peer support through an online group.

Find out more about Student Makers Market at <http://futurefoundry.org.uk>

Visit the RSA's crowdfunding area at [bit.ly/rsacrowdfunding](http://bit.ly/rsacrowdfunding)



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To find out more and apply for support, visit the Catalyst webpage: [www.thersa.org/catalyst](http://www.thersa.org/catalyst)

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