

review the



Saloon Deck the malls of Wafi City

Big Idea Hamas comes to a three-way fork in the road

Books England's forgotten revolution

Last Word Shooting pictures of wrestling in Varanasi



Jason Larkin for The National

Salt of this sea

Jack Shenker reports from Karakalpakstan, where the greatest man-made ecological catastrophe of the 20th century has left chaos, illness and poverty in its wake **r4**

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BYI MUTATA PHIL
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Miracle on 34th Street – or Sheikh Zayed Road, as the case may be. Everett Collection

Claus before the storm

Kris Kringle stops by his Dubai office

One afternoon last week, Santa Claus leaned back on a folding chair in an unoccupied shop at Wafi City and ran his fingers through his grizzled beard. Claus had been making appearances at the mall every day since December 3, and was anticipating a busy week ahead. "Every year I feel a little bit older," he said. "I've been doing this a long time."

The store, not far from the higgledy-piggledy cottage in which Claus had entertained a parade of excitable children over the previous two weeks, had been turned into a makeshift break room. The floor was strewn with Christmas-related detritus: bits of tinsel, elf-wear, tags. Claus tilted his head back, revealing tendrils of off-white nostril hair, and began to describe his increasingly complicated life. "Ho-ho-ho!" he started out, unconvincingly.

Claus was wearing a red suit with white fur trim and a pair of heavy black boots. His hat lay on the table before him. While his eyes twinkled and his cheeks glowed, his words suggested a dark undercurrent. The 21st century, Claus revealed, has introduced challenges he could never have imagined back in the olden days, when he started his career. Global warming is melting the snow around his North Pole headquarters, while population growth is stretching his magic to its limits. "What to do?" he said.

Traditionally, Claus has remained an apolitical figure, but this, too, is starting to change. In recent years, he said, his home base has become the focal point of increasingly fervid geopolitical jockeying. "You know how governments are vying for mineral rights on the South Pole? Well, these same people are trying to claim Santa's Kingdom as their own," he said. "I've been telling politicians who are getting too uppity to watch out or they won't get any presents this year." So far, all but the Russians and the French have backed down.

Claus is also taking a harder line against copyright infringement. "I hate to say this, but there are people who dress like me, who use my image to sell things," he said. "We've been talking to the IP department of one of the larger law firms, looking into various trademark breaches." Claus is loath to become ensnared in messy global lawsuits, however, choosing instead to play – once again – the Santa card. "Mostly it just takes a quiet word: as soon as

people realise they won't be getting anything under the tree, they start to think differently."

At this point, a PR woman entered the room and offered Claus a bottle of chilled spring water, which seemed to cheer him up. "You know, I have the best job in the world," he said between sips. "Seeing the smiling faces of all those children makes everything worthwhile." When asked about the flip-side of this – the bad kids who receive a lump of coal – Claus frowned. "I don't encourage the use of coal, which is an inefficient, carbon-producing product," he said, choosing his words carefully. "We traded out that practice some years ago."

Overall, Claus continued, his operation is a lot more modern than people imagine. "It's all computerised," he said. "I'm fully wired." He also employs a state-of-the-art distribution system, which is overseen by a Danish firm that specialises in holiday logistics. "Let's say a child at Wafi gives me a letter. I can bring

Let's say a child at Wafi gives me a letter. I can bring that to Mrs Claus when I go back at night. She'll open a database, look at what that child got last year, whether they've been good or bad

Santa Claus

that to Mrs Claus when I go back at night. She'll open a database, look at what that child got last year, whether they've been good or bad, shoot the order down to inventory, where a senior elf will make sure we've got the stock, after which dispatch loads the sleigh."

In recent years, efficiency rates at his North Pole operation have allowed Claus to offset his expenses by subcontracting to toy companies. "We make a lot of toys under licence," he explained. "Financially, we're doing OK." Forfeiting his not-for-profit status, however, has come with a price – particularly in the area of labour relations. "Our elves are very well looked after, but we had a slight problem last month. They've seen what Obama's doing in the US, and some of them have been pushing for a National Elf System."

In the silence that followed this remark, you could make out the sound of nearby children, their chattering rising in pitch and volume. There would be a mass of these kids by now, all of them squirming with anticipation, each harbouring a list of Christmas wishes that, to Claus's ear, often sound more like demands. The PR woman appeared again, this time bearing nothing but a battered clipboard. "I'll be flat out until December 26," Claus said, putting his hat on. "After this, we'll do our customer satisfaction surveys, then we'll start planning for next year. In my line of work, there's very little down time."

In the room's unforgiving fluorescent light, you could make out the capillaries in Claus's rosy cheeks – the manifestations of exertion, stress and too much sherry. To avoid complete burnout, Claus does allow himself one holiday a year. "I like the Caribbean, which is nice and warm," he said. "What I do is, I'll put on a pair of psychedelic board shorts and a Grateful Dead T-shirt and tie my hair in a ponytail. This way, everyone thinks I'm an ageing hippie. It's the only way I get any peace."

For adult eyes only: Ian McKellar, 40, is CEO and founder of the Jugglebox, a Dubai-based company that specialises in educational theatre. He is also a comedy juggler, comedy keynote speaker and conference host. Originally from Australia, McKellar has been playing Santa Claus for the last four years. He really does love his job.

* Chris Wright

review

the week

the big idea



Hamas supporters attend a rally to mark the 22nd anniversary of the group's founding in Gaza City on December 14, 2009. Hatem Moussa / AP Photo

Coming of age

Hamas has catapulted itself into maturity in a stunningly short time, but adulthood finds the movement pulled in several different directions, writes Nathan Brown

Hamas, which recently celebrated its 22nd birthday, has grown up quite quickly: what began as a clandestine group of activists determined to form an Islamic resistance movement out of a previously quiescent Muslim Brotherhood is now a governing party in Gaza and a major focus of international attention. But having achieved such success, the movement's leaders now find themselves confronted with difficult choices about their priorities. Hamas's leaders have promised their followers that they can resist Israel, govern Gaza and reform Palestinian society along Islamic lines. But those goals increasingly pull the movement in very different directions. Since its startling triumph in Palestine's January 2006 elections and especially since its seizure of power in Gaza in June 2007, Hamas is showing signs of strain over which path to emphasise.

One set of goals emphasises the group's Islamist agenda. The Muslim Brotherhood, since its founding in Egypt 80 years ago, has always emphasised reforming the individual and society according to Islamic dictates. For many years, Palestinian members of the Muslim Brotherhood emphasised personal and social reform at the expense of politics and the national struggle; Palestine could be liberated, they held, only after it had become more thoroughly Islamic. Hamas was founded by Brotherhood activists frustrated with such passivity and tired of being taunted by secular Palestinian nationalists who accused the Islamists of contributing nothing to the liberation struggle. The founders of Hamas insisted that there was no need to postpone resistance: they could take direct action against the Israeli occupation while pursuing the Islamisation of Palestinian society.

Yet since it won the 2006 parliamentary elections, Hamas has given mixed signals regarding its Islamic agenda. Religious issues were deliberately played down in the electoral campaign, and the group did not use its parliamentary majority to rush through any religiously-inspired education. It kept the existing school curriculum, moving only to modestly expand the classroom time devoted to religious instruction. But since its seizure of power in Gaza in June 2007, some movement activists have become impatient: they seek to use the movement's dominant political position to bring Palestine's legal framework and public life in line with Islamic values and teachings. Some of their efforts – such as the formation of a morality police – have received international

attention, but much has taken place on a grass-roots level.

A second path for Hamas emphasises resistance – literally the movement's middle name (*Hamas* is an acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement). Hamas was born in an effort to participate in what Palestinians term their "revolution". While a latecomer to armed action, Hamas emerged from the Oslo process as the most prominent movement dedicated to continued resistance. Even during the second intifada, when other movements (including parts of Fatah) returned to violent activity, Hamas still stood at the vanguard of Palestinian resistance to Israel.

Yet as with its Islamist agenda, Hamas's pursuit of resistance has been uneven for the past three years. From March 2006, when it formed the Palestinian Authority cabinet, until June 2007, when the Palestinian Authority split in two (with Hamas controlling only the Gaza half), Hamas came under enormous international pressure to renounce violence. It responded with a half-measure: while it completely rejected the international calls in theory, in practice it held its own activities to a minimum. Since June 2007, this pattern has actually become more pronounced. Hamas has generally sought a ceasefire with Israel while disavowing any intention of

How can Hamas pursue resistance against Israel without endangering its ability to govern Gaza? Can it stress greater religious observance without making its rule more onerous?

reaching a permanent settlement or disarming. It has, of course, fired rockets from Gaza – but with the declared aim of securing a ceasefire on more favourable terms. And when an indirectly negotiated ceasefire prevailed, Hamas largely observed it; not only that, they enforced other factions' observance.

Hamas's third path is that of governing. For a normal political party, this would be the most preferred course of action: to run in elections, seek and win a majority, and then implement its preferred policy. But Hamas has not seen itself as simply a normal political party. Indeed, it dithered for over a decade before finally deciding to enter the parliamentary elections of 2006; after it won an overwhelming parliamentary majority, Hamas still sought to avoid governing alone (preferring a coalition government). Even when they took office, Hamas ministers still prided themselves for disavowing the perquisites of official position (ostentatiously taking public transportation to work on occasion, for instance).

And the reluctance to enjoy power was not merely expressed on a symbolic level. Hamas leaders present their movement as the un-Fatah in every respect. Fatah had become addicted to political power, mired in corruption, and unable to sustain itself with any coherence and purpose when the Palestinian Authority came under Israeli assault. Fatah leaders showed a proclivity for writing the law as they wished and then violating it when it did not suit their needs. While Fatah melded itself to the Palestinian Authority after it was formed in 1994, Hamas leaders in 2006 promised to follow a different path: they would reluctantly govern, but they would require that there was a distinction between party and government. Those accepting ministerial positions were required to resign any leadership role in the movement. The Basic Law – the Palestinian Authority constitution – would be scrupulously observed. Some senior ministers even went so far as to disavow statements by Hamas leaders outside the government, claiming that only the cabinet could speak for the Palestinian Authority.

But Hamas took a very different direction after seizing power in Gaza in June 2007. Suddenly the movement appeared far less reluctant to wield political power – it fought effectively and ruthlessly to retain it in the Gaza Strip. No longer the un-Fatah, Hamas has harassed political opponents, sought to stack NGOs or bring them under its sway, bent the law when it suited its purposes, and forgotten the distinction between

movement and government. Hamas has thus far avoided mirroring Fatah's record of venality and divisiveness, though it has shown some signs of internal strain and has not kept completely free of scandal.

Hamas has tried to date to follow all three paths at the same time: it has promised Islam, resistance and good government. But what to do when these pull in different directions – as they increasingly do? How can it pursue resistance against Israel without endangering its ability to govern Gaza? Can it stress greater religious observance without making its rule a bit more onerous – and exposing itself to international criticism and even embarrassment?

The movement's ideology as well as its structure would seem to suggest that governance is a means and not an end; the ends are Islamisation and liberation through resistance. But increasingly Hamas is behaving in precisely the opposite manner. Since its decision to enter the parliamentary elections in 2006, Hamas has chosen the path of governing whenever there was a fork in the road. It has downplayed Islamic law, for instance, held its fire against Israel, suppressed jihadist groups, and dug itself deeply into governing positions in Gaza.

For the self-styled "Islamic Resistance Movement", placing governing above Islam and resistance may seem to be a surprising choice – and indeed it is for many Hamas followers and observers. The movement's leaders seem to wish to show that they can rule Gaza efficiently and pursue international diplomacy even if it means postponing other parts of the group's mission.

The resulting tensions were briefly on public display in January when, under Israeli assault, movement leaders were deprived of their ability to co-ordinate their positions before speaking publicly. External leaders, government officials in Gaza, and members of the military wing all gave different indications on the terms for a cease fire.

For the short-term future, all indications are that the emphasis on governing will continue. But the constituencies for religion and resistance remain strong. Hamas leaders have shown an impressive ability to work out differences in the past and there is no reason to believe that dissidence about short-term goals will lead to schism. But whether the new-found interest in governing will transform and even tame the movement has not yet been decided.

Nathan Brown is a professor at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University.

the tangled web

Insurgents hack US drones

Militants in Iraq have used \$26 (Dh95) off-the-shelf software to intercept live video feeds from US Predator drones, potentially providing them with information they need to evade or monitor US military operations.

Senior defence and intelligence officials said Iranian-backed insurgents intercepted the video feeds by taking advantage of an unprotected communications link in some of the remotely flown planes' systems. Shiite fighters in Iraq used software programs such as SkyGrabber – available for as little as \$25.95 on the internet – to regularly capture drone video feeds, according to a person familiar with reports on the matter.

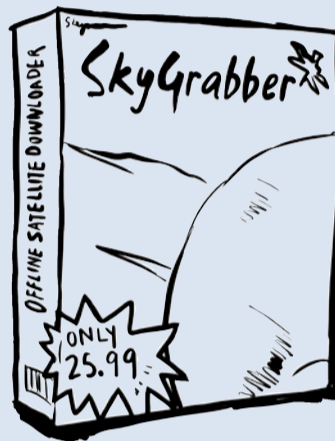
US officials say there is no evidence that militants were able to take control of the drones or otherwise interfere with their flights. Still, the intercepts could give America's enemies battlefield advantages by removing the element of surprise from certain missions and making it easier for insurgents to determine which roads and buildings are under US surveillance.

The drone intercepts mark the emergence of a shadow cyber war within the US-led conflicts overseas. They also point to a potentially serious vulnerability in Washington's growing network of unmanned drones, which have become the American weapon of choice in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Obama administration has come to rely heavily on the unmanned drones because they allow the US to safely monitor and stalk insurgent targets in areas where sending American troops would be either politically untenable or too risky.

The stolen video feeds also indicate that US adversaries continue to find simple ways of counteracting sophisticated American military technologies.

Siobhan Gorman, Yochi J Dreazen and August Cole
The Wall Street Journal
wsj.com



'Hack' may be too strong a word

"Hack" is a really strong word to use in this scenario. How do you "hack" a signal that's floating out in the atmosphere, unencrypted? Also, the word "hack" indicates you may have gained a level of control, and there's no reported evidence that insurgents have found a way to take over a Predator (a really scary concept, considering that many of these drones are armed). Incredibly, this video was not encrypted – meaning the US military had a lower level of security for this valuable video than you probably have for your wireless home network.

Finally, if you're using over-the-counter software to pull down unencrypted satellite video that's floating out there in the atmosphere, are you hacking something? Is listening to a police scanner "hacking"? Is short-wave radio listening (a back-in-the-day sort of hobby) "hacking?"

The technology behind all of this is simple, really. You, too, can grab a piece of cheap software, a PC and the right satellite antenna and you're ready to start scanning the horizon. The software just pulls in and records the data that it finds via the satellite antenna, and then you can go through that data at your leisure – be it a television programme, an audio stream or something a bit more nefarious.

Encryption is one solution to that problem, of course – a lesson that cable TV providers learnt a long time ago when they tired of having their signals lifted by non-subscribers. Yes, any encryption conceivably can be hacked – but that's hacking in the truest sense of the word, and there's not a lot of doubt about what's going on at that point.



Randy Lilleston
National Public Radio
npr.org

Not just drones

Tapping into drones' video feeds was just the start. The US military's primary system for bringing overhead surveillance down to soldiers and Marines on the ground is also vulnerable to electronic interception, multiple military sources tell Danger Room. That means militants have the ability to see through the eyes of all kinds of combat aircraft – from traditional fighters and bombers to unmanned spy planes. The problem is in the process of being addressed. But for now, an enormous security breach is even larger than previously thought.

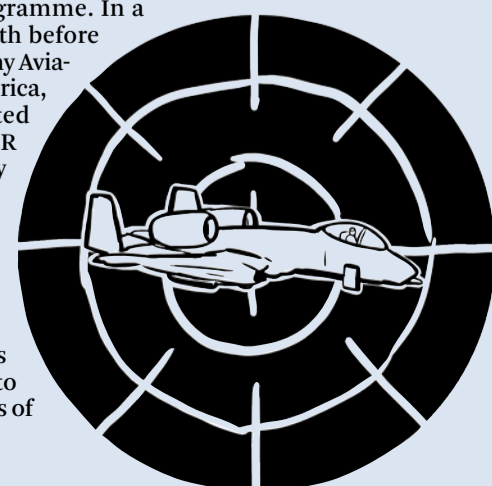
The military initially developed the Remotely Operated Video Enhanced Receiver, or ROVER, in 2002. The idea was to let troops on the ground download footage from Predator drones and AC130 gunships as it was being taken. Since then, nearly every aeroplane in the American fleet – from F16 and FA18 fighters to A10 attack planes to Harrier jump jets to B1B bombers has been outfitted with equipment that lets them transmit to ROVERs. Thousands of ROVER terminals have been distributed to troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But those early units were "fielded so fast that it was done with an unencrypted signal. It could be both intercepted (eg hacked into) and jammed," according to e-mails from an Air Force officer with knowledge of the programme. In a presentation last month before a conference of the Army Aviation Association of America, a military official noted that the current ROVER terminal "receives only unencrypted L, C, S, Ku [satellite] bands".

So the same security breach that allowed insurgent to use satellite dishes and \$26 software to intercept drone feeds can be used the tap into the video transmissions of any plane.

Noah Schachtman
Danger Room
wired.com/dangerroom

Illustrations by Sarah Lazarovic for The National



review
the

1932

Year the Karakalpak Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was established; in 1936 was absorbed by Uzbekistan

Empty quarter

In Karakalpakstan, an obscure corner of central Asia where the waters of the Aral Sea have turned to desert, Jack Shenker finds a nation fleeing ecological disaster and authoritarian rule. Photographs by Jason Larkin

Ziyo flies by night and hunts by day, with a polished Winchester shotgun tucked under one arm and a cigarette between his lips. The van he drives can fit 10 people, sometimes 12 at a push, and for the past 15 years it's nearly always been full for the border run. Under the cover of darkness Ziyo wends his human cargo out past hamlets of empty houses, weather-cowed and crumbling. No one talks. The desert watchtowers which mark the beginning of Kazakhstan are 13 hours away, and there is little to do but stare out of the window as the salty landscape rolls on by in the gloom, coarse and jagged as if it had been ripped through with an old razor. Ziyo will return here; most of his passengers will not. Tonight, as on so many other nights in this obscure corner of the world, a homeland is being emptied of its people.

No one knows exactly how many people have left Karakalpakstan, a former Soviet Republic nestled deep within the maze of ruler-straight lines and flamboyant squiggles that make up the map of Central Asia. Official figures put it at over 50,000 in the last decade – roughly 10 per cent of the population – though this figure doesn't include the passengers in Ziyo's van, or in the vans of other people-smugglers like him, who pay around \$500 (Dh1,836) each to obtain falsified passports from corrupt government officials and then slip out under the radar of the authorities, voyaging north to a new life. Although the magnitude of this exodus is disputed, the reasons for it are clear. Within a couple of hours of setting off from their departure point – a nondescript village in one of the southern frontier provinces near Turkmenistan – Ziyo and his companions will pass within a hundred miles of what scientists have called the largest man-made ecological disaster of the 20th century, a climate catastrophe so severe that it has devastated the economy, health and community fabric of an entire society for generations to come. Locals simply know it as the Aral Ten'iz – a sea which fled its shores.

On the way to the Kazakh border Ziyo's van will also pass a prim, neatly trimmed square in the Karakalpak capital of Nukus. There two flags flutter in the wind; one is that of Karakalpakstan, and the other is the flag of Uzbekistan, custodians of this semi-autonomous republic since the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The writing above the doorway of the nearby parliament building is in Uzbek first and Karakalpak second, telling passers-by everything they need to know about the balance of power within this uneasy coupling of nations. This story is not unique; the personal identity crises, communal resentments and violent backlashes that have flowed from Uzbekistan's iron-fisted control of its neighbour present a

familiar echo of countless other nationalist conflicts around the globe. Yet it's only here, in this overlooked slice of distant, desiccated farmland, where two of the biggest challenges looming over the 21st century – ecological change and fragmented, exclusionary nationalism – have become irrevocably enmeshed.

Deep within the delta of the ancient Oxus river, the largely bone-dry path down which Ziyo is now shepherding his midnight flock, Karakalpakstan may just be offering the rest of the planet a foretaste of its future.



Nukus is a stark, space-flooded city that magnifies the smallness of its occupants. Its central squares are spotted with trees and criss-crossed with paths wide enough to accommodate a military parade; they stretch off into infinity, only occasionally interrupted by signs of activity – a cluster of schoolgirls, the empty faded-neon aquapark, a clutch of corrugated-iron garages where a lone man is sorting through empty vodka bottles.

Sulton has lived in Nukus his whole life and knows its secrets; after sitting me down in his plain, white-walled living room, where a display case shows off the best family china and a single, dusty globe, he instinctively unplugged the telephone from the wall before talking. "Everywhere is bugged," he explained, jerking his thumb vaguely in the direction of Jasyk, a small town 320km away where a prison houses hundreds of the Uzbek president Islam Karimov's political enemies, some of whom have reportedly been boiled to death. It's only one cog in a much larger Uzbek security apparatus that ruthlessly suppresses domestic opposition and has established, according to Human Rights Watch, a "culture of impunity for torture". "If they catch me talking, I go there and don't come back," Sulton said simply.

Like most of the Karakalpaks I meet, Sulton is friendly in a detached, somewhat apprehensive way. At 44, he's old enough to have served under the Red Army and proudly recounts his experiences of guarding missile bases as far north as Siberia. By and large the universe beyond Karakalpakstan's borders remains shrouded in fog for its citizens, penetrated only by a few very specific torch beams. The opposite is true as well; outsiders can be afforded rare and enchanting insights into Karakalpak society, but mostly Karakalpakstan feels closed and private, dominated by a Soviet-era distrust of the other.

We headed out south to the cotton fields. On the way we passed numerous checkpoints; international journalists are effectively barred from the country, particularly sensitive areas like Karakalpakstan, and each time soldiers flagged down our creaking

Volga, Sulton gulped nervously. "It's like we're at war," he grimaced, "and they're winning." Karakalpaks are not the only recipients of Karimov's widely documented and liberally dispensed brand of political terror; Uzbeks themselves were mowed down in the hundreds by government forces after an anti-Karimov uprising in the eastern province of Andijan in 2005.

But here in Karakalpakstan there is a different current of fear, stemming primarily from the timeless insecurity of exclusion. Karakalpaks, a people who trace their roots back three millennia to ancient Aral Sea marsh-dwellers, are culturally and linguistically closer to their Kazakh neighbours than they are to Uzbekistan. They have their own language, customs and dress – "Karakalpak" literally means "black hat", a reference to their distinctive traditional headwear. Although today the modern republic of Karakalpakstan is populated by many more Kazakhs and Uzbeks than it is by Karakalpaks themselves, the nation has an identity entirely separate to that of Uzbekistan, which helps explain the overwhelming presence of soldiers and policemen on the streets and the undercover intelligence agents in every village. The Uzbek government in Tashkent is desperately twitchy about any hint of independent Karakalpak nationalism.

Just such a movement, known as the Khalk Mapi, emerged in the 1990s and was brutally crushed by Karimov's troops; many experts think the potential for instability in Karakalpakstan remains high, and that any conflict there would have huge repercussions across the region. A Radio Free Europe dispatch last year claimed a new separatist group was whipping up nationalist sentiment and accusing the Uzbek government of genocide against the Karakalpak people. But this report has never been corroborated and the story's main source has since been arrested. "Karakalpaks see themselves as physically and politically marginalised," says Reuel Hanks, a professor at Oklahoma State University who has studied Karakalpakstan closely. "The political geography is likely to remain mutable and fragile for some time."

For now Karakalpakstan retains the outward shell of an autonomous state and boasts its own flag, parliament and constitution – which theoretically allows for a referendum on secession from Uzbekistan at any time. But Karakalpak leaders are hand-picked by Karimov, the Uzbek army is everywhere and no one in Tashkent is in any mood to contemplate independence for their troublesome little brother. Since Stalin divided up the old region of Turkestan into republics based on "nationality", each territory has worked tire-

The story of Karakalpakstan starts and ends in cotton, with greed, forced labour and disaster stitched in between

lessly to construct a narrative of cultural and political unity in an effort to legitimise their claims to a "separate space" from their neighbours, a process which accelerated after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Breakaway enclaves pose a mortal threat to that fragile legitimacy; one doesn't have to look far in the shadows of the former USSR – South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Chechnya – to find local rebellions against the borders imposed from above. Karimov, a 71-year-old dictator who ruled Uzbekistan under the Soviets before improbably restyling himself as an anti-Russian freedom fighter, doesn't want a repeat performance in his own backyard. As the city's low-rise suburbs gave way to fields, I asked Sulton about opposition activists. "There aren't any," he replied flatly, staring out the window. "No demonstrations, no protests, no critical songs or books. Nothing."



The story of Karakalpakstan starts and ends in cotton, with greed, forced labour and disaster stitched in between. Chances are that most of the cotton in your wardrobe originated here; Uzbekistan is the world's second-largest cotton exporter, and the industry remains almost entirely in the hands of the state. The price paid to growers is fixed each year by ministers – 80 Uzbek som (Dh0.2 or \$0.05) per kilo in 2009, far below what it fetches on the open market across the border in Kazakhstan. Unemployment is rampant, and poverty – often delicately shrouded behind the paper employment offered by collective farms, many of which lie dormant for much of the year – is increasingly pervasive.

The fields were bleached-brown and dull, except when sprinkled with a riot of moving colour – the bright clothing of schoolchildren who, like their peers across Uzbekistan, spend every day of every autumn picking cotton. NGOs estimate that 50 per cent of Uzbek cotton exports are the fruit of child labour; for two or three months a year the education system – from schools to universities – shuts down as teachers lead their young charges out into the crops. Everyone from doctors to civil servants follows suit; when I went to interview the director of a prestigious Karakalpak medical institute, I was informed by the secretary that she was out supervising the cotton harvest.

We stopped at one field and struck up a conversation with the students. They had been working eight-hour shifts for 50 days now, but there were few outward signs of discontent; the harvest was a great opportunity to escape the classroom and play and flirt in the countryside. It took a while for the chinks to appear. I asked Sabina, a 16-year-old girl, about her plans for the future and a stream of broken English bubbled out as she

detailed her dream of being a transport dispatcher. Her teacher, standing behind her, shook his head sadly. "There'll be no job available when she graduates," he told me when she was out of earshot. "Not for her, not for anyone." I asked the pickers whether they knew anyone who had left Karakalpakstan, and every one of them nodded, including Sabina – her father had emigrated to Kazakhstan earlier this year. The group broke up as someone spotted a security officer from the local government swing down the dirt track towards us. Sulton and I beat a hasty retreat.

Cotton lies at the heart of the only thing ever to have thrust a reluctant Karakalpakstan on to the global map – the awesome and terrible sight of one of the world's biggest inland bodies of water disappearing into thin air. In the first half of the 20th century, the Aral Sea was Central Asia's baby blue pride; 42,000 square miles of saline waves, abundant fish and island resorts which attracted Russia's rich and beautiful for their summer holidays. There were also cotton fields fanning out from its shoreline, and these rolling acres of profit were to be the sea's downfall. In the 1940s work began on irrigation canals that diverted water from the sea's two main tributaries – the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers – into the fields, boosting the harvest but leaving less and less water arriving in the Aral basin. By the 1960s the Aral was losing up to 60 cubic kilometres of water annually; by the 1980s, the level of the sea was dropping almost 10cm a month. Geologists and environmentalists flocked to witness and condemn the decay, but the architects of this grotesque transformation were unmoved. "Nature's error" was how one Soviet engineer dismissed the sea, which has now shrunk to 10 per cent of its original size, leaving in its wake the world's most recently formed desert, from which 200,000 tonnes of salt and sand are whipped up by the wind each day and dumped over Karakalpakstan and other nearby regions. Lung-related diseases in the republic are three times higher than the Uzbek average.

The republic's Kazakh population has returned to its ethnic homeland in droves, attracted by a Kazakh government programme encouraging the return of its diaspora. In some villages I visited, entire Kazakh-language schools had shut down because every pupil had left. Those Karakalpak Kazakhs who depart for the Kazakh capital of Almaty are expected to rapidly discard their identity like an old jumper and pull on a new one. The very premise of this ingathering is that these returnees are reconnecting with a long-severed historical attachment with the Kazakh nation, even though many of them, just like their forefathers, have never seen Kazakhstan. Karakalpakstan's



Crossing what remains of the diminished Amu Darya river by pontoon boat.



A man in Nukus, the Karakalpak capital, gathers recyclables for money.



The brother of the human-smuggler Ziyo, out hunting for wild pheasants.

review

4.4m

Bales of cotton produced in Uzbekistan this year



Abandoned boats sit on the sand near what was once the shoreline of the Aral Sea near the town of Moynaq, on display as a memorial to the long-deceased fishing industry in Karakalpakstan.

environmental mutation hasn't just remodelled the ground; it has remoulded people's minds and recalibrated their histories.

For ethnic Karakalpaks, the choices are even harder. Many have moved east to Uzbekistan and stayed there; others use fixers like Ziyo, the people smuggler, to alter the ethnicity printed on their passports so that they too can appear Kazakh and escape across the border. When they make it to Almaty they often find that communal resentments are rife between the locals and the new immigrants; as "fake" Kazakhs, the ethnic Karakalpaks go straight to the bottom of the social pile, suddenly looked down upon by those who, back home, they used to call neighbours. Those left behind are struggling to come to terms with this transformation in Karakalpak society; are those that have fled traitors or trailblazers?

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Eldor was late. I'd been standing at a level crossing on the outskirts of Nukus for an hour when he finally showed, just as I was staring up at a propaganda poster that read "Uzbekistan has a wonderful future" in big stencilled letters, partly obscured by a montage of Western Union money-transfer adverts, aimed at those receiving money from relatives long-departed from the coun-

try. Eldor was part of a small but conspicuous breed of Karakalpaks who spoke English, were well connected and who generally landed plumb government contracts that cushioned them from the republic's economic woes. They hung out in places like Merlion, the city's plush eatery. It had dark red walls, fake marble tabletops and a Sinatra look-alike who crooned listlessly along to Uzbek pop tracks. It's where I first met Eldor and his friends. They all got their jobs through their fathers – a position in one of the Karakalpak ministries, a management role at a local asphalt company, a distributor for an Uzbek brewery – and they all issued blandly formulaic responses to my questions about Karakalpakstan's predicament. The Aral Sea issue is bad, but the water might come back. Political problems exist, but Uzbekistan's democracy is young and progressing steadily.

Some of this optimism was genuine – one suit-clad 22-year-old pointed to the return of several Kazakh émigrés and mentioned the opening of a new cannery factory in Qazaqdarya, suggesting that the long-dead fishing industry might now be struggling back to life. But for the most part these answers floated straight out of a bubble of elite contentment: with no free media in Karakalpakstan or Uzbekistan, ignorance and apathy are an easy

choice. In mid-conversation the restaurant lights suddenly disappeared and without warning lasers fired out from all sides of the room. Everyone abandoned their meals wordlessly and hit the dance floor for a surreal half-hour of pulsing, heaving energy. Then the lights came back up, Sinatra resumed his station, and everyone returned to their seats as if nothing had happened. "Why are they complaining?" asked a panting Eldor, in response to my earlier question about critics of the government. "If they worked a bit harder they would move upwards."

Now Eldor and I were speeding across rural Karakalpakstan to visit one of these critics. Our destination was a village in the Qazaqdarya region, and the route took us across the dilapidated Amu Darya, where a bridge had fallen in. We joined the queue for a tiny floating pontoon, already laden with a jeep, a minibus and 25 chatty revellers on their way to a wedding. This river was once the legendary Oxus, a passage so vast and fearsome that it took Alexander the Great's army five days to cross it. The pontoon, pulled along by a grizzled man clutching a rope, made the same trip in about 10 minutes.

Nazar was waiting for us in his village, which lay on the banks of a green canal in the middle of nowhere. It was a graceful little place, full of reed

and stick fences, grazing lambs and goats, and home-made barges floating softly back and forth across the water. It was also in the grip of gangsters, according to Nazar; he pointed some of them out to us as he led us to his family home. They were young, well-built men with caps drawn low over their faces, and were busy chatting to a couple of local government security agents who were known for extorting money from villagers.

Nazar is 38 and works as a public schoolteacher; his salary is \$120 (Dh440) a month, hardly enough to support his family, and his pay often doesn't come through at all. Nazar's parents, both ethnic Karakalpaks, left long ago for Kazakhstan, and Nazar is worried his four children will one day do the same. "I'll never leave, I'm a patriot – those that abandon their motherland are just second-class citizens," he said, his face suddenly brewing into a storm. He sighed, and his features mellowed: "But then again I can understand it. The kids in my school; their parents aren't paid on time, if it all, and they can't afford vitamins. I mean, we've had an ecological catastrophe here, the vegetables are bad and the water's bad and people need vitamins. But the kids don't get them. They get anaemia and kidney failure instead."

For the past few years, Nazar has been quietly agitating at work for

better rights for teachers; he was one of the very few people I met in Karakalpakstan who seemed willing to risk a degree of open hostility to the authorities. His experiences in the classroom have convinced him that Karakalpakstan must break free of Uzbekistan. He unfolded a huge map of Central Asia to draw a finger down the old borders of the republic. "These places belong to us and have been stolen. Our country is Karakalpakstan and our enemy is Tashkent." He spoke slowly and deliberately in Karakalpak, refusing to use Uzbek words. "I saw Ossetia rise up from nowhere and demand independence, now we must do the same. I tell my pupils every day: 'Our time is coming'. I'm not scared because I'm speaking the truth. We're fighting for our freedom."

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On my last day in Karakalpakstan I drove out to the shores of what's left of the Aral Sea. My guide, Viktor, was from Moynaq, a once-bustling port town that now resembles a ghost strip; empty tower blocks bordered by clouds of dust and rusting tractors, an unused stadium, a single child on a bicycle freewheeling in the dawn mist. Viktor, an ethnically Russian Karakalpak, lived in a disorientating time warp on what was formerly the Aral coastline; his garden was scat-

tered with relics of a lost era – a bust of Lenin the size of a satellite dish, a stagnant swimming pool dreadlocked with vines and an rusting anchor, the tail fin of an aeroplane used as a weather vane.

We stole out of town as the sun began peeking up through the sand, and Viktor told me about his late father, a fisherman who wanted his son to follow in the family trade. By the time Viktor grew up there was no water left, so he became a pilot instead. He talked of this with no nostalgia; indeed the only time he looked mildly wistful was when he pointed across to the many gas and oil installations craning across the landscape before us. Mineral wealth has been discovered under the Aral's old belly; where the sea has retreated, Russian and Chinese companies have advanced, drilling into the ground and piping its riches straight out of Karakalpakstan and towards Tashkent.

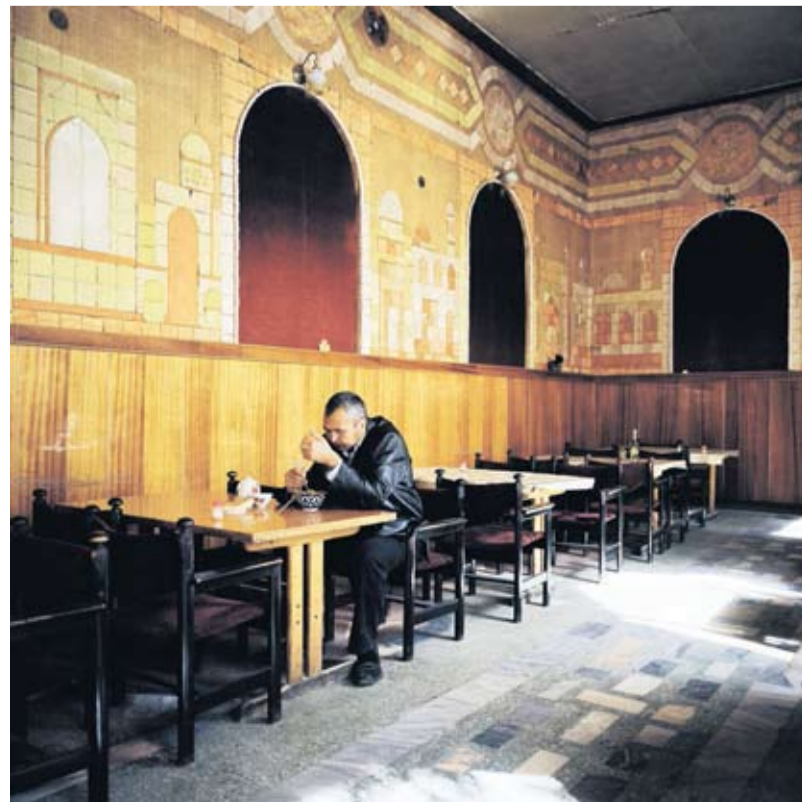
As we approached the cliffs overlooking the new shoreline, the landscape changed; the machinery was far behind us now, leaving dead wood that vapourised underfoot and crunchy soil that split into cakes with each step. Then, suddenly, the sea itself appeared below, abutted by a hypnagogic moonscape of grey dunes and smashed rock. It looked like a half-filled basin, with the water – baby-blue as ever – curving slenderly round the bowl. The wind was bitterly cold and there were no gulls, ice-cream trills or funfair jingles. In fact, there were no other humans or signs of life for what seemed like hundreds of miles. Down on the seashore itself specks of honeycomb foam tore off the waves in bunches before rolling and fluttering and chasing each other towards the cliffs. They looked like polystyrene balls tipped from a packing box. Beneath them lay the strangest terrain I have ever stepped over; neither sand, mud nor salt-crystals, but some chemically mutated mash-up of all three.

On the way back we passed one of the Aral's ship graveyards, a cemetery for old fishing boats unwittingly liberated from their ocean. Some contractors from Uzbekistan had been hauling the maritime corpses onto the back of lorries and were just finishing up for the day; the metal will eventually be sent to the Tashkent ironworks by rail. I asked one of the men what all this scrap would be used for, and he shrugged. "New ships, I guess, for a new Uzbekistan." Behind us the world's youngest desert stretched to the horizon. "The sea is coming back, you know," he added. "It has to. If it doesn't, there'll be trouble."

Jack Shenker is a Cairo-based journalist who writes regularly for *The Guardian* and has reported from Delhi, Gaza, Belgrade and New Orleans.



A woman sells bread from an old pram at the outdoor market in Nukus.



A customer at the Aral Sea Cafe in downtown Nukus eats his lunch.



Crossing the once-great Amu Darya now takes a mere ten minutes by barge.

review the books

All the Arab horses

A new diagnosis of Arab maladies buries the region's true problems under a pile of oversimplified generalisations, Max Rodenbeck writes

The Middle East is a troubled place, a prickly zone whose propensity for conflict fuels much noisy punditry. Yet, amid the racket of clashing opinions, agreement seems to have emerged about at least one source of regional woe. From left, right and centre, all concur that Arab governments are bad. Dim-witted, dictatorial and frustratingly durable, not to mention frequently venal and brutal, they are universally seen as a cause of the Middle East's relative backwardness.

Many have tried to explain this generalised shortcoming. Economists point to Arab governments' reliance on rentier income rather than taxes as a reason for their lack of accountability. Sociologists cite traditions of deference to patriarchal authority, reinforced by Islam, as a reason for the failure of mass protests to shake regimes, as in Eastern Europe. Historians say the fragility of post-imperialist borders and politics has prompted insecure governments to pursue state-building at the expense of citizens' needs.

For Lee Smith, none of this really counts. The Arabs, in his view, simply have the misfortune to be guided by something he identifies as the "strong horse principle": an apparently unique, ancient system whereby one tribe, nation, or

civilisation dominates the others by force, until it too is overthrown by force. The "strong horse", he says, represents the fundamental character of the Arabic-speaking Middle East. This is a perennially violent, xenophobic place where, in his words: "Bin Ladenism is not drawn from the extremist fringe, but represents the social norm."

Smith believes he has much to teach us about this corner of the world, a patch he covered, from Cairo and Beirut, for the *Weekly Standard*, the small-circulation flag-bearer for American neoconservatism, before landing his current perch at the right-wing Hudson Institute in Washington. His book, a mix of citations from primers on Arab history, bald assertions, and anecdotal populat- ed by a parade of mournful natives that Smith seems to have attracted in his travels, purports to be an expose of the true nature of the Arabs. It is meant as a corrective to the misty eyed romanticism of other journalists, scholars of the region, and such pitiable types as "Americans too young, confused or rich to love or respect their own country".

Yet despite the jarring apparition of occasional perspicacity, his 200-page effort at myth-busting is potholed with mistakes, misjudgements and lapses in logic. Right up front, for instance, Smith asserts that Sunni Arabs have crushed minority challengers and ruled "by violence, repression and coercion" for 1,400 years. Yet one might have assumed that Sunni rule would be natural here, considering that nine-tenths of Arabs happen to be Sunni Muslims. (And not the 70 per cent that Smith strangely proposes, a figure quite unattainable even if one throws in not just religious minorities, but ethnic ones such as Kurds in Iraq or Berbers in North Africa.)

More inconvenient still to this theory of an endless Sunni Arab reign of terror is the simple fact that during most of the years since the birth of Islam, the region's rulers have not been Sunni Arabs. Some have been Shia by sect, such as the Fatimid caliphs who ruled Egypt, the Hijaz and much of the Levant from 969 to 1171. Since that time most of the region's rulers have been ethnically Turkish, such as the Mamluk and Ottoman sultans who controlled the Arab heartlands uninterruptedly from 1260-1918.

If basic historical errors damage Smith's argument, so too does his shrillness. In one passage, he declares that there are only two rules of Arab politics: to seize power, and to maintain it. This is a system, he says, where survival is the sole objective. But surely, one cannot help thinking, such has been the main goal of politics everywhere since the dawn of time. It is hard to avoid the impression that in ascribing uniqueness to Arab approaches to power, Smith's real intent, despite his protestations to the contrary, is to convey a subtext, the essence of which is that the only language Arabs understand is force – and that force, therefore, should be America's policy as well.

Based on such skewed premises,

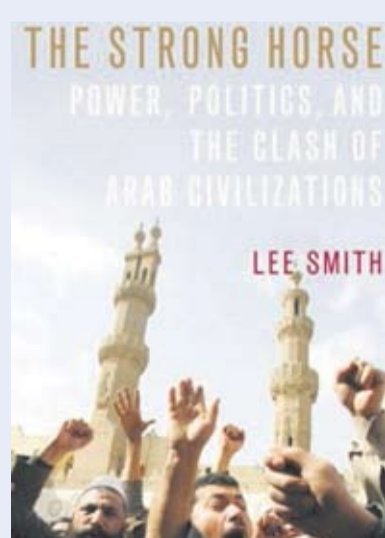


To Smith the Iraq war was a stroke of genius: "it wrecked a framework that had relied on jihadist terrorism to bolster Sunni Arab power". Jassim Mohammed / AP

Smith certainly draws some cockeyed conclusions. In one peculiarly acrobatic section, he attempts to show that it is Sunni Arab regimes themselves, and not social factors, nor claims of injustice, nor unhappiness with policy, that lie behind the phenomenon of jihadist terrorism. Thus, in his view, America could justifiably have attacked any number of Arab countries in retaliation for September 11 – when, he writes, "19 Arabs had struck the United States on behalf of Arab causes – Palestine, US sanctions on Iraq, US troops in Saudi Arabia, and so forth – supported by Arab rulers and the Arab masses alike." The necessary response, Smith writes, was "a punitive war against the Arabs" – and Saddam Hussein simply "drew the short stick".

Still, to Smith the invasion of Iraq was a stroke of genius, because it wrecked a regional framework that had relied on jihadist terrorism to bolster Sunni Arab power against such rivals as Shia Iran. According to this bizarre reconstruction, "The Sunnis' other way to deter Tehran was to back the same militant organisation that threatened to topple Arab regimes, al Qa'eda. Once the Americans deposed Saddam and dealt a withering blow to al Qa'eda in Iraq, the Arabs had lost both their local security pillars."

This is nonsense, and not simply due to the plain fact that al Qa'eda had never gained a foothold in Iraq before America's intervention. Whatever the complicity of some Arab governments, such as Syria's, in stoking violent resistance by Sunni Iraqis, it was the occupation itself that facilitated al Qa'eda's arrival, and which briefly boosted its popularity. Across the wider region, far from being a "security pillar" of Arab regimes, jihadists have devoted much of their energy to attack-



The Strong Horse: Power, Politics, and the Clash of Arab Civilizations
Lee Smith
Doubleday Books
Dh92

ing them. Smith fails even to mention the deadly jihadist bombings that have struck a dozen Arab cities and which have, by and large, now united regimes and their citizens in disgust with Bin Ladenism.

Smith explains elsewhere that although Arabs constantly bicker, "Perhaps the more serious concern is that the Arabs will not fight each other, and choose instead to bind together... in order to focus their energies elsewhere, like against the United States, again." That last word is what really gives pause. To what past event exactly is Smith referring? Might he mean that dark day when the joint Arab high command sent veiled storm troopers on black helicopters into Wyoming? Or is he just subtly reasserting his sweeping charge that the Arabs as a whole were responsible for Sep-

tember 11 – and hinting that they might do the same again unless America spansk them regularly?

This disregard for reality appears to be prompted by two things. One is an attitude towards Arabs that may be delicately described as anachronistic and patronising. How else can one explain lapses into what sound like 19th-century depictions of barbarians? In one departure from constant praise of Bush-administration policy, for instance, Smith sneers at its naivety in thinking democracy might have flourished here when this great American gift was presented, "like an iPhone left out for the Arabs to figure out on their own."

Elsewhere Smith informs us sagely that Arab women "hold men in contempt if they are not willing to kill and die for Arab honour." Arabs, we discover, regard any man who says he wants peace with his neighbour, "not a peace that comes through destruction and elimination, but a real peace," as a traitor. No wonder, for this is a people so tribally ferocious, he insists, that they hate Americans. "Not because of what we do or who we are but because of what we are not: Arabs."

Such pseudo-anthropological hokum would be bad enough, had Smith not ridiculed other writers, such as that perpetual bugbear for America's right wing, Edward Said, for his very own sin of using too broad a brush to paint his subject. "Said's work, inadvertently or not, lent itself to a monolithic definition of Arab culture," is Smith's deadpan dismissal of the author of *Orientalism*. One wonders if Smith may have succumbed to a malady he terms the default condition of the Middle East; namely, schizophrenia. This might explain why, rather like some Victorian voyeur, he admits to having found Beirut's Gemmayze dis-

trict, with its bars and saucy girls, manytimes more alluring than New York's East Village, "because it was in an Arab city pulsing with eros."

The other motive for Smith's smearing of the Arabs appears, predictably enough, to be political. From early in the book he sets out to prove that American policy, and in particular its support for Israel, has absolutely no correlation with America's unpopularity in the region. On the contrary, enthuses Smith, the Jewish State is not merely a great strategic asset, but a regional strong horse that the Arabs have grown to fear and therefore to follow. Suffice it to say that his resort to obfuscation, insinuation and cant reflects the extreme difficulty of making such assertions persuasive. As Smith seems unable to appreciate through the smoke of his own rhetoric, the Arabs' weakness is not so much the result of the instability that cripples their states and societies, but its cause. Whatever America's intent, its hapless indulgence of Israel does nothing to address this, and much to weaken even its closest Arab friends.

This book is saddening, and not only because unwary readers may swallow some of this Kool-Aid and conclude that America's proper role is to cudgel unruly Arabs. That certainly appears to be the author's purpose. It is saddening also because Smith, like the imperialists of old, is not completely wrong in his critique of Arab society. Yet to picture Arab faults as both sui generis and hopelessly beyond repair is no help at all. Had Smith argued with sympathy rather than contempt, and sought to understand rather than smugly condemn, he might have been worth listening to.

Max Rodenbeck is the Middle East correspondent for *The Economist*.

Length, in hours, of a television adaptation of the Mahabharata that aired in India from 1988 to 1990

Epics and ethics

Gurcharan Das looks back to the Mahabharata in search of ethical guidance for India in a time of galloping growth, explosive conflict and dizzying change, Ananya Vajpeyi writes

Most South Asians would immediately recognise a type of conversation, conducted among friends and family members, over chai or in the classroom, in which an elder draws an analogy between a situation in the present and an episode or character in one of the best-loved texts of the subcontinent, the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*. Turning to the epics to seek out the moral of the story, as it were, is a standard feature of South Asian talk. It should come as no surprise then that one such elder, Gurcharan Das, has devoted a book to a series of such observations, turning back to the *Mahabharata* as a way to understand the challenges of leading an ethical life today.

For Indians, the *Mahabharata* serves as a repository of prophecies, commentaries and analogies to help negotiate the political and live ethically in the world. The text says of itself: "What's here is everywhere; what's not here is nowhere." Indic cultures have taken it for its word for two millennia. Das continues what is both a perfectly commonplace practice and a hallowed tradition, rereading and reframing the epic in light of the here and now – in this case, the large-scale political and economic transitions that India experienced in the first decade of the 21st century, a time, Das writes, when "prosperity had begun to spread across India, but goodness had not".

The Difficulty of Being Good could have been written by my uncle, or your grandmother, or indeed you or me, as we think about and try to make sense of the many risks, the shearing dilemmas, the awful humiliations, the terrible defeats, the ethical conundrums and the complex machinations that always have and always will characterise politics – both in the public realm of power, law and violence, but also the private realm of incessant adjustment and interaction between individuals.

Those seeking evidence of the continuing presence of the *Mahabharata* need look no further than the daily newspaper, where Indian politics is still narrated in the tones of the epic: leaders with poor judgment are cast in the role of the blind king Dhritrashtra; over-ambitious and ruthless politicians likened to the Kaurava prince Duryodhana; and women over whom conflicts erupt compared to the Pandava queen Draupadi. Any reader will sense that behind the great drama of the present there is another ongoing narrative that everyone already knows, in which brothers vie for a kingdom, intelligent and proud women chafe under patriarchal norms, wily advisers make enigmatic pronouncements, rightful heirs go into exile, usurpers rule the roost, ambition is curbed by unaccountable fate, unexpected winners emerge, appetites are ever-insatiable, and the ultimate message seems to be that of our ineluctable mortality.

Is the tale of the *Mahabharata* an allegory of the world, or is the world an allegory of the *Mahabharata*? It's hard to say. This gigantic work, a "book of books" – as it was called by one of its greatest modern editors, VS Sukthankar – provides a lexicon, a repertoire of knowledge considered to be valuable in India. Like the life of Jesus or the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, the *Mahabharata* is a master text we are always familiar with but also never tire of learning from – a kind of "ancient Wikipedia," as Wendy Doniger called it in her book *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Indians treat it as "equipment for living", to borrow a phrase from the literary critic Kenneth Burke.

In his dual capacity as a pundit and a littérateur, Das could hardly have chosen a more relevant filter for the ethical questions before India in a time of galloping growth, explosive conflict and dizzying change. Das uses the *Mahabharata* to trigger his reflections on everything from corporate corruption scandals and Ponzi schemes, to affirmative action and reforms in higher education;



Schoolchildren dressed as the Hindu gods Krishna and Radha re-enact an episode from the Mahabharata in Amritsar. Narinder Nanu / AFP

from the future of Gandhian resistance to the fate of tribal communities in the face of rampant development; from the quarrels of industrialists to the personalities of politicians. Sometimes he takes a detour through American history, German social theory, Greek philosophy and English literature; at other times, he recalls moments from his own life and career in India.

A Harvard-educated former CEO of Procter and Gamble India, Das is now a well-respected novelist, playwright, columnist, globalisation guru and social commentator, the author of a best-selling book, *India Unbound*. He might have had plenty to say about the *Mahabharata* anyway, but he did his homework during what he calls "an academic holiday", going back to school at the University of Chicago to study Sanskrit with the world's leading scholars of ancient India.

Ironically, Das's efforts to really learn Sanskrit and the special discipline of how to read Sanskrit texts highlight a crisis in the study of Indian antiquity: Indians are losing the ability to read and understand their classical languages. Once that competence is lost, a dire eventuality that could come to pass within a generation, India will no longer have the capacity to decipher its staggeringly rich textual past. Thousands of works and inscriptions will become unreadable, and knowledge of Indian antiquity will recede to a few highly specialised departments in foreign universities. This sorry state of affairs in Indian letters explains why Das, who first learnt his Sanskrit at Harvard in the 1960s, had to go back to Chicago to polish it up 40 years later, why his book is written in English, and why *The Difficulty of Being Good* is a popularising rather than a scholarly effort. Das's work reminds us of the crisis in the classics, but does not provide a solution.

The book's subtitle, *On The Subtle Art of Dharma*, takes us to the heart of the epic's subject matter: *dharma*, an idea without which India cannot be understood to any degree of historical or conceptual accuracy, just as modern France cannot be deci-

phered sans "égalité", nor America without "liberty". When Barack Obama had to decide whether to send additional troops to Afghanistan, and if so then how many, he grappled with a problem of *dharma*. When developed countries do not take steps to address the climate change that their technologies have precipitated, theirs is a failure of *dharma*. When the Indian government augments its nuclear capability even while its population suffers widespread malnourishment, that too is a matter of *dharma*. When the Bush administration presided over the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib or denied them fair trial in Guantanamo, it violated the *dharma* associated with great power. Places such as Gaza and the West Bank, where conflicting moral claims give rise to violent military engagements, are theatres of *dharma*.

But when my friend must decide whether to keep his dying parent on life-support, that too is an engagement with *dharma*. It is clear that the term is complex and capacious, enfolding everything from "right" to "norm" to "law" to "duty" to "injunction" to "righteousness". All Sanskrit philosophical systems, and all the Indic religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism – stand on the foundation of this one concept, which in Indian languages also routinely translates as "religious practice" or "belief". In a way *dharma* is most apparent when it is most elusive: it is when we do not know what to do, that we think most carefully about what we ought to do. Moments of personal, political, moral and ideological confusion force us to consider our *dharma* most urgently. *Dharma* is notoriously "subtle" because as anyone who has lived knows, the answer to any ethical problem, however small or large, is never simple and straightforward. The *Mahabharata* is a civilisational reference manual to help us navigate the field of ethical choice that forms the terrain of our mortal existence.

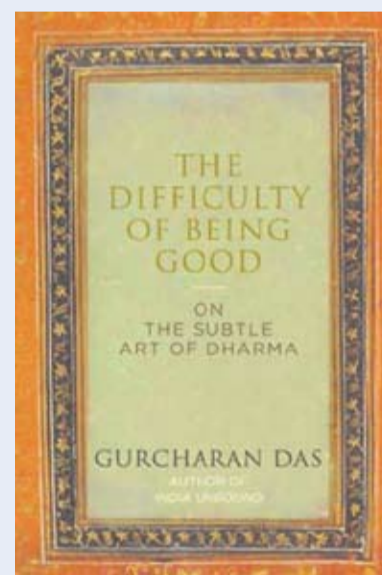
In the *Mahabharata*, sometimes *dharma* is manifested through death; at other times, it could be a dog or a stork; in crucial chapters it

is a game of dice. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the great dialogue embedded in the epic, it is the god Krishna who delineates *dharma* in its minutest and most magnificent forms, for the reluctant hero, Arjuna. In famous episodes, *dharma* lies at the bottom of a deep lake, in a burning palace, in an impenetrable phalanx of troops advancing into enemy territory, in a gathering of kings intent on dishonouring a queen, in a virgin's dalliance with the morning sun, in an old general's protracted dying discourse on a bed of arrows, in the womb of a young widow, in the death march of the survivors of an apocalypse, in halls and hearts, in war and in sex, in the beginning of the world and at its bitter, ashen end. The epic is a literary text; its poetic form – consisting of 100,000 verses in 18 books – is inextricably related to its substantive content, which is moral ambiguity. The multiplicity of meaning made possible by the language of poetry is exactly suited to convey the difficult, unstable and protean nature of *dharma*.

Though Das is both educated and thoughtful, his sensibility is prosaic. He is focused on drawing out the lessons of the *Mahabharata*, missing perhaps the truth which South Asian audiences have known for two millennia: the epic is meant as much to entertain as to edify; it doesn't just disambiguate life's tough choices, it also complicates our appreciation of human nature, and evokes in us the literary responses of wonderment and rapture. The plea of the disheartened and bewildered Arjuna to his divine charioteer, friend and adviser has a power that can only be described as poetic, as a single line brings together the almost unbearable dramatic tension in the plot, the launch of the most celebrated section of the text, known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, and an image of frailty and confusion that resonates in every reader's heart:

"Between the two armies
Halt my chariot,
O Krishna Inviolable!"

Epics in any culture are meant to orient our moral being. In 1939, Simone Weil, in flight within occu-



The Difficulty of Being Good
Gurcharan Das
Penguin India
Dh55

For Indians, the Mahabharata serves as a repository of prophecies, commentaries and analogies to help negotiate the political and live ethically in the world

ried Europe, wrote a long essay in French titled *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*, which gave her the wherewithal to address the catastrophic advent of Nazism. In re-reading the Homeric epic, she found a way to meditate on violence, suffering, defeat and retribution, the realities that were destroying Europe during the Second World War. Das compares the *Iliad* and the *Mahabharata* at length, dwelling on the warrior heroes. "The ethical impulses of Achilles and Arjuna are confused, ambiguous, and even pessimistic," he writes. "The battlefield is indeed a field of *dharma* in which there are no easy answers." For most of us, alas, no Krishna appears to show us the way, as we confront seemingly incommensurable and overwhelming prospects, fearful of defeat, flagging in our courage, torn apart by our attachments.

At the birth of the Indian republic, India's founding fathers turned one and all to the age-old question of *dharma*, to meditate on its subtle art, in Das's felicitous phrase. Mahatma Gandhi read and reread the *Bhagavad Gita*; Jawaharlal Nehru thought about the Mauryan Emperor Asoka, who gave up violence to propagate *dharma* in the second century BC; BR Ambedkar, the leader of India's untouchables and chairman of the committee that drafted the Indian Constitution, converted to Buddhism. Emblazoned at the very centre of the Indian flag is the *dharmachakra*, the wheel of *dharma*, whose turning signifies the political life of the new nation, and its perpetual engagement with the problem of ethical sovereignty. Through his reading of the *Mahabharata*, Das returns to the oldest themes that have preoccupied the Indian mind while he meditates on yet another passage in the history of the world's largest democracy – one that still endeavours to be a righteous republic as well.

Ananya Vajpeyi teaches South Asian History at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Her book, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India*, will be published by Harvard University Press.

The number of years between Indian independence (1947) and the Portuguese being evicted from the colonies of Goa, Daman and Diu

Empire records

António de Oliveira Salazar was a scrupulous authoritarian and a master manipulator. A new biography of the Portuguese dictator shows how small states can play great-power politics, writes Gabriel Paquette

Of the dictators who shaped Europe's 20th century, António de Oliveira Salazar, who ruled Portugal and its African empire from 1928 until 1968, is perhaps the least known and most misunderstood. This situation may be attributed to his understated demeanour, poor oratory, predilection for secrecy – and, of course, his nation's decidedly third-rank status. There are few books about Salazar in English, and the literature that exists is defined by an unproductive debate as to whether or not the man was a fascist. Some historians point to his elimination of the political opposition and destruction of Portugal's independent working class as evidence that he was a tyrant in the mould of Mussolini, Franco or Hitler. Others counter that, though Salazar was certainly a conservative authoritarian, he was primarily a relatively moderate nationalist who rejected violence as a means to transform Portugal, which largely lacked popular opposition movements to suppress, and did not have a full-fledged working class movement anyway. The debate continues, and Salazar's peculiar importance has remained largely unarticulated.

In *Salazar: A Political Biography*, the historian Filipe Ribeiro de Menezes draws extensively on unpublished papers and correspondence culled from Portugal's national archives to produce an impeccably researched, beautifully written, and admirably even-handed portrait of the ruler. It is surely the most astute treatment of Salazar's regime (and, for that matter, 20th-century Portugal) available in English. By complicating the simple fascist-or-not dichotomy, de Menezes is able to mine the story of Salazar's Portugal, rich in its own right, for resonant insight into last century's great power struggles, particularly the ability of small states to gain disproportionate leeway and influence in those clashes of titans.



The small amount of English-language literature on Salazar is defined by an unproductive debate as to whether or not he was a fascist. Rex Features

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Salazar's career followed an unlikely trajectory. Born to a rural family of modest means, he was enrolled in a seminary. From there, a combination of intellectual brilliance and good fortune landed him at the University of Coimbra, the seat of Portugal's most prestigious law school. He quickly scaled the academic ranks, rising to the position of professor at a precociously young age. From this perch, he was poised for a political career, and he didn't have to wait long. In 1926, a military coup overthrew the democratic republic that had been established only 16 years earlier. As a committed monarchist steeped in conservative Catholic thought, Salazar welcomed the toppling of the government, not least because of its virulent attacks on the Church.

Despite his civilian status, Salazar was appointed finance minister in 1928. Thanks to savvy and chance, he soon insinuated himself into the heart of the military government, shrewdly playing factions of the army against one another while implementing fiscal and monetary policies designed to shield Portugal from the worst effects of the Great Depression. The general success of these measures endowed him with prestige that he cannily converted into political capital. After becoming prime minister in 1932, Salazar used his credentials to argue that the state was the agency best suited to co-ordinate Portugal's economic relaunch. To this end he employed various strategies that had been beyond his authority as finance minister, including protectionism, increases in credit, and public investment in infrastructure. For Salazar, economic progress and social peace were one goal: it was the state's responsibility to turn Portugal away from wasteful economic competition and toward collaboration. To this end, his *Estado Novo* (New State) created guilds (*gremios*) and other corporate bodies to force

the co-ordination of farmers, merchants and industrialists.

Salazar – who was notorious for his obsessive approach to the minutiae of administration and his scrupulous refusal to use the state for personal profit – viewed himself as indispensable to the reformation of Portuguese society. So it is true that he very much wanted to implement a programme of gradual, moderate economic growth, guided by Catholic precepts, that promoted the harmonious interaction of all classes by avoiding the worst excesses of both capitalism and communism. But above all, he wanted to stay in power. Thus the preservation of order, obedience, and economic stability became the overriding objectives of Salazar's policies.

These goals meant that Salazar shared a great deal with the dictators who dominated Europe between 1925 and 1945. He enjoyed a close working relationship with Franco, having generously and enthusiastically assisted the National Front during the Spanish Civil War, and a photograph of Mussolini was prominently displayed on his desk until *Il Duce's* demise. But de Menezes convincingly argues that this mutual admiration had less to do with shared ideologies and more with common enemies: liberalism, democracy, socialism and, most importantly, Bolshevism. Russian Communism's hostility toward hierarchy, monarchy and religion was the exact antithesis of the traditional society Salazar sought to preserve. There were Portuguese fascists – according to de Menezes, as many as 30,000 “blue shirts” operating independently of the state as late as 1934 – but Salazar enticed them to demobilise and join the New State.

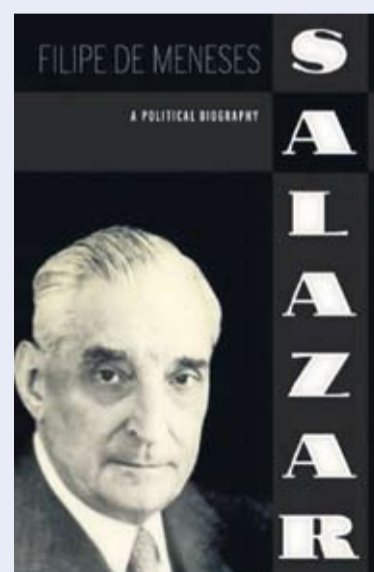
In any case, the Second World War exposed the unbridgeable gulf of Salazar's vision of Portugal and the one entertained by the Axis powers. Salazar was revolted by the Nazis' disregard for the rule of law,

and for the potential disaster its victory would entail for small, peripheral agricultural countries like his own, whose economies would be made subservient to provisioning the Reich. Moreover, Salazar foresaw how a Nazi triumph would imperil Portugal's African empire. He therefore laboured to keep Franco's Spain neutral, and even agreed to lease the islands of the Azores to the Allies as an airbase for strikes against occupied Europe and North Africa. For de Menezes, this serves as evidence that Salazar was a conservative authoritarian and arch-nationalist for whom ideology (fascism included) was a distinctly secondary consideration.

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Though Salazar undoubtedly emerged stronger as a result of being spared wartime occupation and keeping Portugal's empire intact, the economic dislocation caused by the Second World War had disrupted and retarded the development of the New State. Demand for Portugal's export commodities, none of them staples, shrank precipitously. As Salazar's close adviser and ultimate successor, Marcelo Caetano, told him in 1944: “The truth is that there is no corporate spirit, that the corporate apparatus is incomplete and discredited, and that we have forfeited the trust of employers, workers and the youth. Failure, pure failure.”

One of Portugal's chief problems in the late 1940s and 1950s was that the New State's economic architecture, largely anti-industry and prurient producer, was incompatible with raising living standards or supplying the heightened requirements of a modern state. Industrialisation and accelerated economic growth – two of the evils Salazar had railed against since the 1920s – were now imperative. They would, Salazar was sure, undermine Portugal's small-village ethos, Catholic morality, and historically informed



Salazar: a Political Biography

Filipe de Menezes
Enigma Books
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Despite his flaunting of the advice of the world's most powerful nations, and the financial strain of his colonial entanglements, Salazar clung to power

patriotism – and replace it all with a chaotic mixture of urbanisation, modernity and class conflict. But, faced with the prospect of helming an illegitimate regime, he reluctantly adapted.

This flexibility set the stage for a new kind of Portuguese engagement with the world. Although Salazar had always argued that Portugal's colonies should be retained, he had not always deemed them worthy of much in the way of attention and resources. After 1945, however, he sought to harness Angola, Mozambique and Guinea to solve Portugal's economic woes. In hopes of avoiding anti-colonial uprisings, he removed the word “empire” from the Portuguese constitution in 1951, attempting to define the country as a “pluricontinental” state in which a collection of territories marched together towards a “common goal”. Neither western nor Soviet observers thought highly of any of this, but Salazar pressed forward. Speaking to the British ambassador in 1958, he put it bluntly: “Without Africa, Europe cannot preserve itself.” In 1960, he rejected the suggestion of President Kennedy's ambassador that “Portugal adjust to realities in Africa” with similar indignance.

After suffering the embarrassment of listlessly watching Goa's integration by force into Nehru's India in 1961, Salazar became newly intent on combating resistance movements in Africa. In the 1950s, he had consistently underestimated the threat they posed, mainly as consequence of racist assessments of Africans' capacity for co-ordinated, sustained political action. By the 1960s, such a view was no longer tenable, as the African colonies were absorbing a quarter of the national budget, with nearly 90 per cent of that consumed by military expenditure. By 1967, 113,000 Portuguese soldiers were stationed in the colonies, fighting an increasingly bloody and indecisive war.

Portugal's providential mission – to spread European Christianity to the world – was at stake. Perhaps more importantly, so were valuable material resources that Salazar thought necessary to the survival of his regime.

Despite his flaunting of the advice of the world's most powerful nations, and the financial strain of his colonial entanglements, Salazar clung to power. The US stopped applying pressure after 1962, when the Cuban missile crisis made the country desperate to renew its expiring lease on the Azores airbase. Potential domestic rivals were swiftly eliminated, including the former presidential candidate General Humberto Delgado, who was murdered by Salazar's secret police in Spain. Meanwhile, Portugal's economy sputtered along, aided by the burgeoning tourist industry. But poverty remained entrenched: in the early 1960s, Portugal's per capita consumption of electricity was a mere 15 per cent of the average in member countries of the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation. Almost one million Portuguese emigrated between 1966 and 1973.

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Whether economic stagnation and colonial war would finally have instigated Salazar's overthrow is an unanswerable counterfactual; de Menezes wisely does not hazard a guess. The already ailing dictator became incapacitated in 1968. Though he regained consciousness and mobility, his return to power was never seriously contemplated, even by his closest associates. The New State, however, puttered along, with the same personnel and in pursuit of almost identical economic and colonial policies, until the 1974 Carnation Revolution toppled it, sued for peace in the colonial wars, and set Portugal on a course to liberal democracy and fuller European integration.

Thanks to de Menezes's exhaustive archival research and compelling, capacious explanatory framework, *Salazar: A Political Biography* will likely become the standard English-language history of the New State. Perhaps not surprisingly, it can also be read in terms of its frightening resonance for our own time. Salazar's self-interested manipulation of the Great Powers, swapping satisfaction of their acute, immediate needs for pledges of non-interference in Portugal's empire, produced horrendous consequences, providing the mildly authoritarian regime with a free hand in its 14-year colonial war in Guinea, Angola and Mozambique while paving the way for a further two decades of civil war in the latter two of those countries. How easily petty despots who control coveted resources can exact carte-blanche promises from superpowers, both in Salazar's and our own time.

But there are other, perhaps more sinister resonances as well. For Salazar's Portugal and the rest of post-War Europe, palpable decline inspired a last-ditch attempt to counteract diminishing geopolitical relevance through renewed colonial projects. The anti-colonial wars that finally dashed that misbegotten, belated dream were protracted and left behind asymmetrical legacies of destruction and distrust. De Menezes's biography reminds us of the similar strategies pursued by most latter-day empires. Sabre rattling and adventurism distract from, and try to revise, the main plot: the fact of declining power in a multipolar world. It was oddly fitting that when George Bush and Tony Blair, flanked by the prime ministers of Portugal and Spain, declared their intention to use military force against Iraq in March 2003, they did so from the airbase in the Azores.

Gabriel Paquette is a research fellow in history at Trinity College, Cambridge.

review

#2,000

Estimated number of coffee shops in London by 1700 – one for every 300 inhabitants

The making of the modern state

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 has long been consigned to the revolutionary B-list, dismissed as a bloodless back-room deal. A new history proves the event worthy of its name, writes Matthew Price

On the calendar of modern revolution, three great dates are marked: 1776, 1789, and 1917. From these three revolutions – American, French and Russian – the shape of the modern world seemed to have been formed; each proclaimed a new vision of state and society, made a radical break with the past, and claimed to stand at the forefront of history. America's founders established a republic and tested the viability of democracy; France's revolutionaries beheaded a king and promoted the rights of man, unleashing a revolutionary cycle that transformed Europe; Russian Bolsheviks proclaimed the dictatorship of the proletariat and the end of capitalism.

The English Revolution of 1688, which saw the Catholic James II overthrown by his son-in-law, the Dutch Protestant William of Orange, would seem to have no place in this datebook of social upheaval. This "revolution" founded no new state; it did not resound with slogans like *Liberte, égalité, fraternité*; and it certainly ran with less blood than did the streets of Leningrad. England's Glorious Revolution simply saw the swap of one king for another – hardly an unusual transaction in 17th century Europe.

This is not to say that King James II failed to provoke the discontent of his subjects: he was a heavy-handed ruler who placed Catholic allies in important posts, ran roughshod over Parliament and deployed a standing army across England, forcing his subjects to board them in pubs and inns. But whether his overthrow was worthy of the word "revolution" remains a matter of some debate. It has been described as a provincial happening, a back-room deal hashed out between aristocrats, a mild constitutional kerfuffle with a pleasantly bloodless resolution.

Edmund Burke – who in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* contrasted the sweet reasonableness of 1688 with the violent chaos of 1789 – helped establish the template by which the Glorious Revolution would be judged: a peaceable affair, even by English standards. Later historians buttressed Burke's contention that what really happened in 1688 was really no revolution at all. The *locus classicus* of a Glorious Unrevolution was put forth by Thomas Babington Macaulay: "To us who have lived in the year 1848," he wrote in his *History of England*, "it may seem almost an abuse of terms to call a proceeding, conducted with so much deliberation, with so much sobriety, and with such minute attention to prescriptive etiquette, by the terrible name of revolution."

Yet this apparently uneventful transfer of power concealed profound alterations in the relationship between the English crown and its subjects, and set into motion the formation of a new kind of modern state, whose characteristics – vigorous promotion of economic development, broad religious tolerance, and free competition among political interests – still define liberal democracies today.

In his magisterial new book (for once, this overused adjective is warranted), the historian Steve Pincus takes aim at the traditional narrative of the Glorious Revolution, and sets out to prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that it was more than worthy of the name:

a revolution that was contentious, sometimes violent and even bloody, that pitted two radical factions against one another and transformed England.

1688: The First Modern Revolution is one of the most ambitious works of history to appear in recent years – a radical reinterpretation of events that intends not merely to update and improve prior accounts but to vanquish them conclusively. The book is a marvel of scholarship: Pincus's footnotes bristle with references to a vast range of archival material alongside the latest research in European economic, religious and political history. His focus – too much so at times – is on how history is written, as much as on the events in question, and the result reads at times more like a dense work of political sociology than a narrative history in the mould of Macaulay. But Pincus, evidently obsessed with our need to rethink the events of 1688, has fired an invigorating shot into the otherwise docile realm of Stuart history. Though he too often abandons the subtlety of argument for the force of harangue, his deep learning, and his fearless questioning of received wisdom, more than redeem the book's flaws.

Pincus demonstrates that by the second half of the century, England was already a land in flux: commerce was booming, foreign trade was on the rise; the English were moving to cities, where coffeehouses buzzed with the latest intelligence from abroad. The country was modernising at a rapid clip, and the revolution, as Pincus describes it, was in essence a battle – a fierce one – over the terms of that modernisation. James II, who in the accounts of Macaulay and many other historians appears as nothing more than a mad Catholic tyrant, was in fact a forward-looking ruler with his own vision for England's future, one drawn from the absolutist rule of his cousin, France's Louis XIV. James, Pincus writes, "did everything he could to create a modern, rational, centralised Catholic state" – and he was ruthless in its implementation, cracking down on dissent and spying on his enemies, in effect creating "a very modern surveillance state".

When James first took the throne in 1685, he had the widespread support of the English people. What eventually roused his enemies, Pincus argues, was not simple anti-Catholicism, but opposition to his aspirations for a "universal monarchy" along absolutist lines. The origins of the Glorious Revolution, in Pincus's account, lay in a broader European debate over the meaning of liberty. "The struggle that did so much to define the thinking of the revolutionaries in 1688-89," he writes, "was a struggle to protect European and English national liberties against an aspiring universal monarch, not a war of religion." Rather than a provincial tussle over monarchy and religion in England, this was a conflict with a secular and international dimension, a revolution whose central plank was liberty for mankind, not merely for the English.

Alongside the lofty banner of liberty – or driving it forward – was a concurrent struggle over the economic direction of England, whose results would prove even more definitive for the shape of



William and Mary being read the new Bill of Rights before being formally called to the throne by Parliament in 1689. Corbis

the world to come. England's dynamic economy drove new political concerns into the open. "The political economic programme of the revolutionaries privileged urban and commercial values," Pincus writes, and gave rise to Lockean notions about the social contract, religious toleration, and a belief in the free circulation of information. James's opponents, as Pincus notes, came from a variety of backgrounds – from peasants to aristocrats – but it was the country's burgeoning commercial classes that played the strongest role in shaping the economic agenda after the revolution, pushing for "the possibilities of unlim-

● **The Glorious Revolution was the culmination of a long and vitriolic argument about how to transform England into a modern nation**

ited economic growth based on the creative potential of human labour." This was not a revolution *against* the state but one determined to harness state power in the pursuit of economic expansion. In place of the Gallic absolutism pursued by James, England's growing merchant classes and their political spokesmen turned their eyes to Holland and a "Dutch model" of economic innovation, commercial prosperity and political openness.

If what ensued in the Glorious Revolution was not quite an apocalyptic confrontation between world views, the clash of these rival programs was divisive



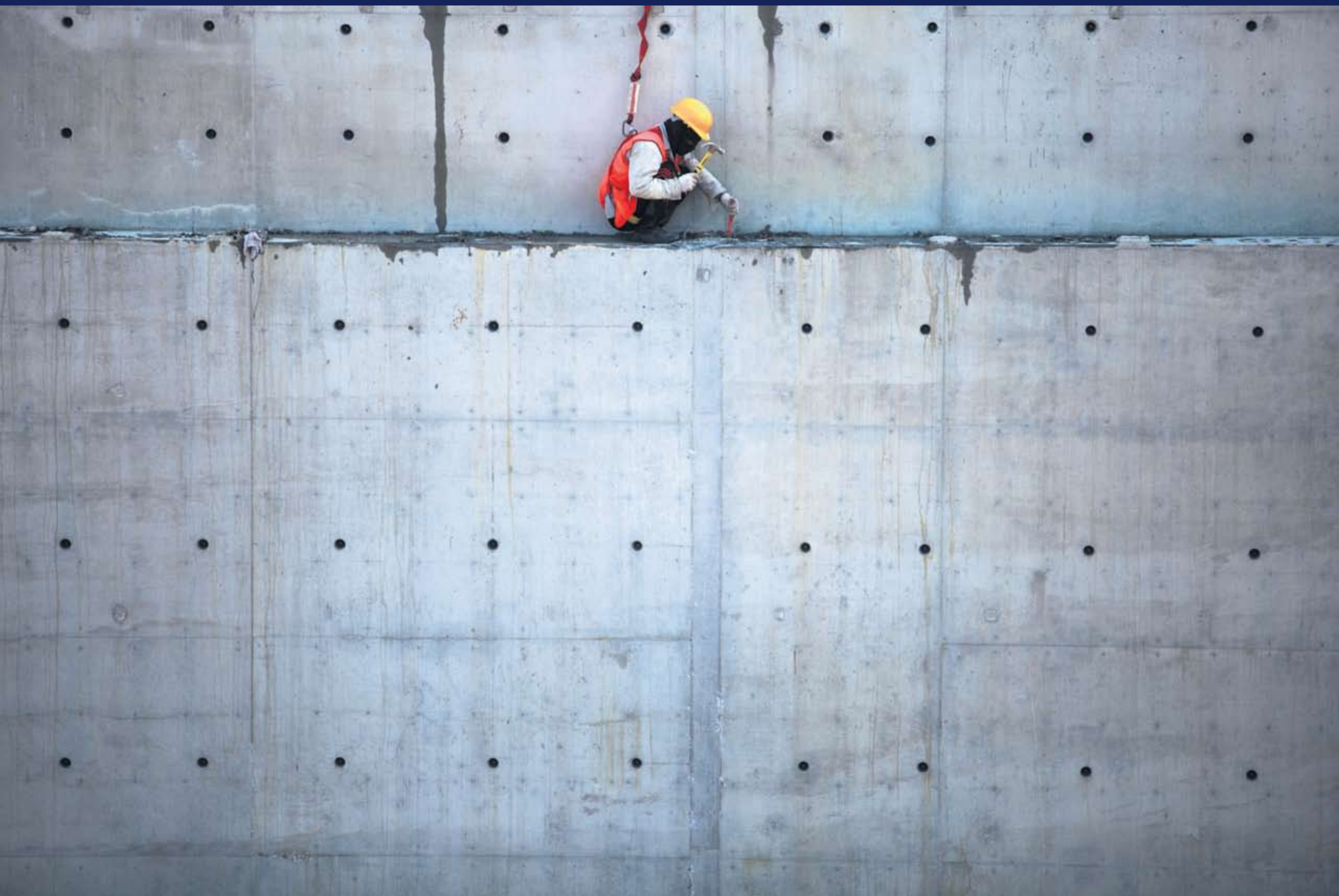
1688: The First Modern Revolution
Steve Pincus
Yale University Press
Dh164

and actually quite bloody. (In one skirmish between Williamite and royalist forces, more troops were killed than in the massacre of the Champs de Mars, one of the bloodiest episodes of the French Revolution). But that neglected violence is not what makes 1688 qualify as a "real" revolution in Pincus's mind. What justifies the term are the ramifications that unfolded in the decades to come, in which the Whigs and Tories jockeyed for position and contested the implications of the changes they had wrought, further reiterating one of the underlying principles of the revolution – the free competition of political interests.

A recognisable outline of the modern liberal state took shape in the aftermath of 1688. England fashioned a kind of parliamentary monarchy, enshrining explicit checks on the line of royal descent (no more Catholic kings) and controls on royal income. The ground was also laid for England's rise as a commercial superpower, with the establishment of the Bank of England, which expanded credit for the growing mercantile classes and financed England's wars against France.

"The Revolution of 1688-89 was the culmination of a long and vitriolic argument about how to transform England into a modern nation," Pincus writes. He suggests that later generations took the achievements of the Glorious Revolution for granted. With the passage of time, it boomed less loudly, and its effects were perhaps subtler. But the argument had hardly ended. The Glorious Revolution inaugurated a new phase in history, in which commerce supplanted landed wealth as the ultimate guarantor of economic success, and the "Dutch model" became the way of the world. Though the later revolutions in America and France would revise the terms of the liberal state – the first toward democracy, the second toward equality – the world made by 1688, as Pincus so adroitly demonstrates, is the one in which we still live today.

Matthew Price, a regular contributor to *The Review*, last wrote on Lawrence Samuel's *Future: A Recent History*.



Wall Tunnel wall of the Salam Street construction, Abu Dhabi, 2009 | Photograph by Galen Clarke

Let's get ready to pehlwani

Visiting Varanasi, India's city of funereal contemplation, David Eden ducks down an alleyway to watch a wrestling match

Days start early in Varanasi. By 5.30am hundreds of living bodies line the banks of the Ganga. Some are washing clothes, others hustling money from tourists or cleaning the previous night's *pooja* flowers from the polluted waters. Most, though, are assembled to offer prayers to the manifold deities of the Hindu faith and to bathe in the sacred river. Travellers look on from hired boats, seduced and mystified by the scenes around them, not least those at the two "burning ghats": the smoke and flame-cloaked spots where cremations take place and, according to popular belief, where the souls of the deceased achieve *moksha* – ultimate liberation from the suffering of the physical world – simply by virtue of their hosts having passed their final days in this strange and captivating town.

Here, in India's funeral capital, barely a quarter of any hour goes by without the sight and sound of chanting pallbearers carrying orange-shrouded corpses on gold-tasselled bamboo stretchers. As disconcerting to unaccustomed eyes as such visceral displays of mortality may initially be, after a while on these streets they gradually become reassuring; touching in their democratic finality. Death is not a taboo subject here. Far from being an inevitable and unpleasant side effect of existence, it is presented as the definitive transcendental goal. As a result, it is freed of its usual sinister connotations and painted as life's great leveller. For many outsiders, the opportunity to rethink such fundamental concepts provides incentive enough to visit the state of Uttar Pradesh. However, there are other attractions; facets of the region's character that are equally confrontational and equally connected to its cultural and spiritual life.

After a 10-minute skid through alleyways coated with a slick of bovine and human effluent, accompanied by Mohan, my guide and interpreter, I reach the already crowded, main marketplace. Mohan hurls himself into a cycle rickshaw, its decoratively embossed stainless-steel body juddering as he coughs, spits lustily from the first *paan* of the day, and directs the driver, through betel-stained teeth, with two words: "Bara Ganesh". Our destination is one of Varanasi's numerous *akhara*s: places where *pehlwani* (often referred to as *kushti* or Hindu wrestling), is learnt and practised. Thanks to its fearsome competitive reputation and its commitment to the preservation of the traditions of the sport, Bara Ganesh is one of the city's most revered institutions.

Tucked away on a narrow side street and nestled behind the temple to which the *akhara* is affiliated, the peaceful, bucolic nature of its training ground belies its purpose. Sun streams in through green leaves, birds flit through branches, colourful paintings of chimeric figures adorn white walls. The only clues as to the real use of these gardens are a dirt ring in their centre, and the cauliflower ears and crooked nose of a bearlike man of advancing years sitting shirtless on the grass. His name is Babu and he is the *akhara*'s guru. Once a great competitive *pehlwan*, he is now responsible for the philosophical and pugilistic education of younger practitioners, many of whom turn up every day to exercise and perfect their technique.

True to form, by 7am a group of men and boys, rang-

As this particular contest moves to the floor, *pehlwani*'s elaborate repertoire of chokes, holds and pins is also shown to be brutally effective. What were once two separate bodies become a single tangle of flailing limbs

ing from their mid-teens to their mid-thirties, are stood around the perimeter, curling fixed-weight metal dumbbells, lifting rocks, swinging outsize stone maces and twirling wooden clubs, all in accordance with a long-established regimen largely derived from the principles of hatha yoga. In addition to gruelling workouts such as this, *pehlwani* demands the achievement of a holistic purity of body and mind, the balancing of passivity and passion. Consequently, to counteract the *rajasic* (active) nature of their chosen pastime, its teachers encourage students to adopt *sattvic* (calm) lifestyles of abstinence, vegetarianism, celibacy and meditation. However, the days when a wrestler could dedicate himself to the sport absolutely are long past. If only in order to afford a *sattvic* diet (based around milk, ghee, chickpeas, almonds and fresh vegetables) in an increasingly dynamic national economy, contemporary *pehlwan*, largely lower-caste men in the first place, have to take outside employment. Meanwhile, the *akhara*s are funded by their temples and by voluntary donations from members and private individuals. Regardless of the encroachments of the modern world, a soothing air of ancient ritual and contemplation still seems to hang over this location.

The sense of tranquility is short-lived, though. At 8am, with the chime of bells and a fragrant waft of *nag champa*, the ring is blessed. Two men enter, dressed in bright red loin-cloths. One is aquiline and rangy, the other shorter and heavily muscled. Both kneel, toss handfuls of damp sand over themselves, then stand and face off. At no discernible signal, but at a point that seems perfectly apt, they clasp each other by the shoulders, leaning in to create an oppositional arch. After a brief period of exploratory pushing and shoving, the stockier of the two men forces his head down and gets underneath his opponent, driving forwards and sending clouds of orange dust into the air with his feet. In response, the taller one goes on the offensive, forcing the other man all the way to the other side of the arena. Then, in a split second, his rival reaches for his legs, whips them out from underneath him, lifts him upside down and slams him into the floor. Twin sounds mingle: one, a stifled grunt of pain, the other calling to mind the dull thud of a side of meat hitting a butcher's block.

Compared to boxing or many of the better-known East Asian martial arts, it is easy to consider wrestling

a relatively low-impact pursuit; more a two-person game of strategy and physics than anything genuinely damaging. However, the strength and agility of these men makes for truly punishing clashes. The power with which throws are performed in the many competitive bouts that occur predominantly during the "hot season" is, I am told, often bone-shattering. As this particular contest moves to the floor, *pehlwani*'s elaborate repertoire of chokes, holds and pins is also shown to be brutally effective. What were once two separate bodies become a single tangle of flailing limbs. As an older instructor – white-haired, bearded and dressed in a bright pink shawl – shouts advice and encouragement from the sidelines, I fire off a volley of shots with my camera, capturing blurs of motion, sprays of sand, contorted faces.

At first, it is difficult to work out who has the advantage, or even how wins are eventually decided, but after 10 minutes or so, the tide turns in favour of the taller fighter. Refusing to fall victim to obvious fatigue, he pins his adversary, grasps an arm between his legs and applies downward pressure. It's a classic arm bar, a move seen in fighting styles from judo to mixed martial arts – one that, if executed without restraint, can snap joints like dry twigs. This match is over, but the winner stays on and eventually reveals himself to be the most skilled wrestler in the *akhara*, taking on six more challengers, one by one, and dispatching them all in a similar fashion. It is thrilling to watch, terrific to photograph, and, most of all, oddly beautiful.

By the end of the training session I am drenched in sweat and covered in red-brown mud. After taking a few portraits, we all sit down to share a breakfast of sticky, sweet *jalebis* from a nearby bakery. Jokes are made, greetings exchanged and bottles of water passed from hand to hand. As I wipe my fingers on my jeans and begin to pack away my equipment, the day's victor claps me on the back and says, in stilted English: "You look like *pehlwan*." He then points to the ring and extends a light-hearted invitation to fight. I decline, but, standing in this serene and welcoming space, I can't help thinking for a moment that, even if only in the smallest of ways, I feel like one, too.

David Eden is an Abu Dhabi-based photographer and journalist.