

## Reading UK 5-17

### Mayr-Sagan

50 billion species. Beetles, bacteria, large mammals. Humans a statistical blip last few 100 years. Mayr: The history of life on Earth refutes the claim that “it is better to be smart than to be stupid.” Ave life span: 100,000 yrs.

Modern humans emerged about 200kya. They are now engaged in a dedicated effort to establish Mayr’s thesis, an enterprise that that has been underway since the end of World War II. During this period, human intelligence has succeeded in conjuring up a perfect storm: It has created two huge sledgehammers poised to destroy us, while systematically eroding the most important line of defense against self-destruction, with particular dedication in the past generation.

The two awesome challenges to decent survival are, of course, nuclear weapons and environmental catastrophe. The best defense would be functioning democracy in which informed and engaged citizens join together to develop means to overcome the threats – as can be done. In crucial ways to which I will return directly, policy-making throughout this era has often enhanced the threats, for principled reasons, and has undermined functioning democracy by excluding the population from participation, even awareness. These dangerous tendencies have been significantly enhanced by the socioeconomic policies of the past generation, the neoliberal era. These policies have sharply concentrated wealth, hence political power, and have undermined institutions that might be responsive to the public will. They are well designed to diminish functioning democracy, with consequences that we see before us over much of the world, dramatically right now in the West.

It is as if the species is determined to prove that Ernst Mayr’s thesis is correct: that intelligence is a lethal mutation, and we have perhaps outlived our allotted time on earth.

Let me try to bring together various strands of recent history that intertwine, I think, to show that this picture of a perfect storm is all too plausible.

The end of WWII was one of the most important dates of human history. It was a moment of joy, and also of horror, with the dawn of the nuclear age. I remember well my own feelings when the grim news was announced on August 6: relief that the war was over, horror at the events and their import, and astonishment that so few seemed to care either about the enormity of what had just happened, or that we

had entered into what might be the final era of human existence, the nuclear age, in which human intelligence had created the means for terminal destruction.

It was not understood at the time, but the end of WWII also signaled the beginning of another era that threatens organized human existence: the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch in which human activity is dramatically changing the environment. There have been debates about its inception. The World Geological Society has settled on 1950, partly because of radioactive elements dispersed across the planet by nuclear bomb tests and also other consequences of human action, including sharp increase in greenhouse emissions. So nuclear age and Anthropocene coincide.

One index of the severity and imminence of crisis is provided graphically by the famous doomsday clock of the Bull of AS. Scientists, political analysts meet to evaluate the state of the world and to determine how close we are to terminal disaster, midnight on the clock. 1947, 7 min. 1953, 2 minutes. Oscillated since. 2015-6 moved to 3 min to midnight (early 80s, major war scare). Reasons: mounting threat of nuclear war, failure to deal with climate change, which had not been considered before. “The probability of global catastrophe is very high, and the actions needed to reduce the risks of disaster must be taken very soon.” That was 2016. At the outset of the Trump term, the analysts reset the clock, moving the hand closer to midnight. The reason, in their words, is that they found “the danger to be even greater, the need for action more urgent. It is two and a half minutes to midnight, the Clock is ticking, global danger looms” – closest to terminal disaster since 1953, when US-USSR tested H-bombs.

That earlier close brush with terminal disaster is worth attention: it tells us a good deal about policy-making and the nature of western democracy.

Obvious question: was it avoidable, and what efforts were made to avoid it?

Answer is startling, and fraught with grim lessons for today:

1950: US remarkably secure. Hemisphere, both oceans, opposite sides, overwhelming economic/military superiority, largely controlled major industrial states, which had been severely weakened or almost destroyed by the war while the American economy boomed: industrial production almost quadrupled, and the basis was laid for rapid postwar expansion. The US had long had by far the greatest economy in the world, with unusual advantages, but had not been a major player in world affairs, ceding that role to Britain and France. The war left the US in a position of power with no historical precedent.

Though the US was indeed remarkably secure, there was one potential threat: ICBMs, which would have nuclear warheads. They did not yet exist, but surely would. Bundy: “I am aware of no serious contemporary proposal, in or out of either government, that ballistic missiles should somehow be banned by agreement.”

Reread: seems to me one of the most remarkable and revealing statements in historical scholarship. In short, there was apparently no thought of trying to prevent the sole serious threat to the US, the threat of utter destruction. Security of population very marginal concern, even security from instant destruction. Rather, the institutional imperatives of state power prevailed. Furthermore, the potential victims, the population, were left completely in the dark – and still are. Though all of this is public, it is unknown.

Look further: Possibilities? Can't be sure, because apparent opportunities ignored. Stalin-1952. Unif of G, not join NATO, prospect of elections. Warburg. Ridiculed. Russian Archives: might have been serious. Bitterly anti-Communist Soviet scholar Adam Ulam takes the status of Stalin's proposal to be an “unresolved mystery.” Washington “wasted little effort in flatly rejecting Moscow's initiative,” he writes, on grounds that “were embarrassingly unconvincing,” leaving open “the basic question”: “Was Stalin genuinely ready to sacrifice the newly created German Democratic Republic (GDR) on the altar of real democracy,” with consequences for world peace and for American security that could have been enormous? One of the most prominent Cold War scholars, Melvyn Leffler, writes that scholars who studied released Soviet archives were surprised to discover that “[Lavrenti] Beria -- the sinister, brutal head of the secret police – propos[ed] that the Kremlin offer the West a deal on the unification and neutralization of Germany,” agreeing “to sacrifice the East German communist regime to reduce East-West tensions” and improve internal political and economic conditions in Russia – opportunities that were squandered in favor of securing German participation in NATO.

Real? Can't be sure. What we can be sure of is that what mattered was global power, not security for the irrelevant and uninformed population.

One of starkest and most consistent lessons of policy formation. There is much talk of security, but it is not security of population, at most a marginal concern: rather, security of systems of power, state and private. Too large a topic to review in detail, but let's proceed for a few more years into the '50s and '60s.

Khrushchev. JFK. Kenneth Waltz: Kennedy administration “undertook the largest strategic and conventional peace-time military build-up the world has yet seen...even as Khrushchev was trying at once to carry through a major reduction in the conventional forces and to follow a strategy of minimum deterrence, and we did so even though the balance of strategic weapons greatly favored the United States.”

Once again, the decision harmed national security while enhancing state power. Once again what happened was concealed behind the enthusiastic rhetoric of the Camelot years. And largely remains so.

The import of these decisions was revealed in Oct. 62. “most dangerous moment in history.” Facts are harrowing. Pres. Eisenhower had subdelegated authority to use nuclear weapons to commanders. Ellsberg, Chrome Dome pilots: indiv bomber crews could have launched nukes, ending human existence. Details of that crisis merit close consideration. Possible resolution: Letter from K. Trade. K refused: 1/3-1/2 nuclear war. Establish principle: we have the right to surround them with missiles, no reciprocal right.

Security of pop minor concern. Continues, right to present moment. When investigating foreign affairs and government decisions, we routinely discover that peaceful options exist, but are dismissed, though they might well avert disaster. No time to review the record, but let’s turn to today’s headlines.

Today, we are instructed that the great challenge faced by the world is how to compel NK to freeze its nuclear and missile programs. Perhaps we should resort to more sanctions, cyberwar, intimidation, anti-missile system that China realistically regards as a serious threat, even perhaps direct attack.

E another possible option that seems to be ignored: accept North Korea’s offer to do exactly what we are demanding. China and North Korea have proposed that NK freeze nuclear and missile programs, a proposal rejected at once by Washington just as it had been two years ago.

The reason for the instant rejection is that the Chinese-NK proposal has a quid pro quo: it calls on the US to halt its threatening military exercises on North Korea’s borders, including simulated nuclear-bombing attacks by B-52s, sent by Trump in one of his famous “signals.”

The Chinese-NK proposal is hardly unreasonable. NK's of course remember that their country was literally flattened by US bombing, and they surely have not forgotten the gleeful reports in American military journals of the bombing of major dams when there were no other targets left, the rejoicing about the exciting spectacle of a huge flood of water wiping out the rice crops on which Asians depend for survival – very much worth reading, if you haven't done so. A useful part of historical memory.

The Chinese-NK proposal could lay the basis for more far-reaching negotiations to radically reduce the threats and perhaps even bring the crisis to an end. Contrary to much inflamed commentary, there are reasons to think negotiations might succeed, as the record, well-known to scholarship, clearly reveals.

Nevertheless, the Chinese-NK proposal to freeze NK's nuclear and missile programs in return for an end to threats of destruction is unacceptable to Washington, and to commentators with impressive unanimity, even though the NK nuclear and missile systems are constantly described as the greatest threat we face. Again, a matter that merits some reflection about the state of democracy, and what it implies about prospects for survival.

Let's look further into how we are carrying forward our verification of Mayr's thesis.

Last March, the Bull of Atomic Sci's published a detailed report on the vast nuclear modernization program initiated by President Obama and now being carried forward under Trump. The report discusses how US nuclear force modernization is undermining the strategic stability on which survival suspends, by a slender thread.

The current modernization programs include “revolutionary new technologies that will vastly increase the targeting capability of the US ballistic missile arsenal. This increase in capability is astonishing—boosting the overall killing power of existing US ballistic missile forces by a factor of roughly three—and it creates exactly what one would expect to see, if a nuclear-armed state were planning to have the capacity to fight and win a nuclear war by disarming enemies with a surprise first strike.”

US submarines “now patrol with more than three times the number of warheads needed to destroy the entire fleet of Russian land-based missiles in their silos. US submarine-based missiles can carry multiple warheads, so hundreds of others, now

in storage, could be added to the submarine-based missile force, making it all the more lethal.”

All of this has “revolutionary impact on military capabilities and important implications for global security.” The implications are very clear. Russian strategic analysts are of course aware that the US now has to capacity to wipe out their deterrent. The Russians do not have our sophisticated satellite-based advance warning systems. With the deterrent at serious risk because of the nuclear modernization programs, at a moment of crisis – and there are many possibilities – Russian leaders may be tempted to undertake a preemptive strike just to assure survival – an act that would end organized human life on earth.

Once again, is a diplomatic avenue possible? It surely seems so. Is it being pursued? If so, it’s not detectable.

All relevant to Mayr’s thesis.

Turning to the second existential threat, global warming, anyone who is not living under a rock should be aware that the dangers are severe, and imminent. How are we reacting? Here’s a recent report from the US business press:

The oil boom is back: “The number of oil and gas rigs drilling in the U.S. has almost doubled since bottoming out at the lowest level in more than 75 years of records... While two dozen nations are coordinating to cut oil production and rein in the global supply glut, U.S. producers are moving in the opposite direction. Over the last four months, output increased by half a million barrels a day. If that rate of expansion continues, the shale boom will break new production records by summer. The U.S. now produces 9 million barrels a day.”

Illustrates crucial fact of current history: while the world is taking halting steps towards facing the existential challenge to survival, the richest and most powerful state in world history, the leader of the Free World, virtually alone, is racing towards destruction, with enthusiasm and dedication. That has been true since November 8 2016, another date of great historical significance.

Three significant events on that date: one impt, one extremely impt, one astonishing.

**Impt:** US election. **Xtremely impt:** Marrakesh: (WMO: “confirms that 2016 was the warmest year on record: a remarkable 1.1 °C above the pre-industrial period,” sharply above the previous record set in 2015, approaching the desired limit set in

Paris; other dire reports). Deliberations effectively ended on Nov. 8. Survive? Savior: China! Leader of Free World leading world to disaster, World looking to China to save it. **Astonishing**: Reaction. Silence.

No less astonishing is that while the richest and most powerful country in history, which enjoys incomparable advantages, is leading the effort to intensify the likely disaster, efforts to avert catastrophe are being led, worldwide, by what we call “primitive societies”: First Nations in Canada, tribal, aboriginal. Ecuador, with its large indigenous population, sought aid from the rich European countries to allow it to keep its oil reserves underground, where they should be. The aid was refused. Ecuador revised its Constitution in 2008 to include “rights of nature” as having “intrinsic worth.” Same in Bolivia, with an indigenous majority. In general, the countries with large and influential indigenous populations are well in the lead in seeking to preserve the planet. The countries that have driven indigenous populations to extinction or extreme marginalization are racing toward destruction. Perhaps something more to think about.

Practically every issue of science journals provides more grim forecasts. One recent paper in *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics* by prominent climate scientist James Hansen and 18 others compares today’s climate with that of 120,000 years ago, which had only slight warmer temperatures: sea level rise of 20-30 feet when much of polar ice disintegrated. Paper predicts in the near future killer storms stronger than any in modern times, disintegration of large parts of the polar ice sheets leading to melting of huge glaciers, and a rise of the sea sufficient to begin drowning the world’s coastal cities before the end of this century. Hansen says “We’re in danger of handing young people a situation that’s out of their control,” with precipitous rise in sea level not too far down road and other dire consequences.

A study by researchers at U of Bristol, published in the journal *Nature Geosciences*, found that the pace of environmental change is faster now than at any previous time in the Earth's history, possibly as much as 1000 times faster.

Last year, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> passed the symbolic level of 400 ppm (particles per million), considered a crucial danger point – first time in 4 million years, and possibly irreversible.

This is only a small sample of many such reports, appear regularly in science journals, sometimes making it to major media. Meanwhile, Republican wrecking ball is systematically dismantling the structures that offer hope for decent survival. The Environmental Protection Agency, established by Richard Nixon, is being

virtually dismantled. Far more imp't is Dept of Energy. Its Office of Science is scheduled to lose \$900 million, nearly 20% of its budget. DOE's \$300 million ARPA-Energy program eliminated completely. Along with deep cuts to the research programs at the EPA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and a 5% cut to NASA's earth science budget. Even mention of climate change is coming under a ban, while regulations are being dismantled and every effort is being made to maximize the use of fossil fuels, including the most destructive, like coal.

Not just Trump. Primaries. Local level. NC. Virtual unanimity among party leaders.

Some time ago I made the outrageous comment that today's Republican party in the US is the most dangerous organization in world history. I stressed that the statement was outrageous. More important, is it false? Has there ever been an organization so publicly and openly dedicated to massive destruction on such an incredible scale?

Even sea level rise more limited than what is anticipated will inundate coastal cities and coastal plains, as in Bangladesh → 10s of millions fleeing in fairly near future, many more later. Today's refugee issues will be a tea party: Chief env scientist in Bangladesh: "These migrants should have the right to move to the countries from which all these greenhouse gases are coming. Millions should be able to go to the United States." Just fits current mood in the West. Not just the US, which is extreme. Or Britain. Those who think it's better on the continent can turn to a recent poll showing that a majority of Europeans want a total ban on immigration from Muslim-majority countries.

In general, the idea is that first we destroy them and then we punish them for trying to escape from the ruins – calling it a "refugee crisis" while thousands drown in the Mediterranean fleeing from Africa, where Europe has a certain history. In fact, the "refugee crisis" is a serious moral/cultural crisis in the West.

Let's return to the other sledgehammer, the nuclear threat. The major nuclear powers, US and Russia, are both expanding arsenals, in quite dangerous ways, including tactical nukes that can be scaled down to battlefield use, with very likely rapid escalation. And flash points becoming more serious, particularly on R border – On the R border, not Mexican border, a result of expansion of NATO right after collapse of the USSR, in violation of verbal promises to Gorbachev that NATO would not expand "one inch to the East" – meaning E Germany – if G agreed to



unification of Germany within a hostile mil alliance, a pretty remarkable concession in the light of the history of the past ½ century. Recent archival work published in the MIT-Harvard journal *International Security* strongly suggests that Pres Bush I and Secy of State James Baker were consciously deceiving Gorbachev. His vision of a European common home, a security system from Brussels to Vladivostok with no military alliances, is a fading dream.

George Kennan and other senior statesmen had warned early on that NATO expansion is a “tragic mistake, [a] policy error of historic proportions.” It is now leading to rising tensions on the traditional invasion route through which Russia was virtually destroyed twice during the past century by Germany alone. To make matters worse, in 2008 NATO membership was offered to Ukraine, the Russian geostrategic heartland, efforts pursued later by Obama and Hilary Clinton.

With some justice, European historian Richard Sakwa writes that NATO’s prime concern now is “to manage the risks created by its existence.” All of which also perhaps bears on Ernst Mayr’s conclusion.

Let’s turn finally to the main line of defense: functioning democracy. We can begin with the leader of the free world, the model of democracy for centuries – though we might remember that Alexander Hamilton regarded the British system as superior to what he and his colleagues were constructing – and several million slaves might have agreed.

Let’s ask what might happen in the US if the voice of the people were heard. One possibility is that most popular and respected political figure in the country would have an influential role, maybe even be president. That’s Bernie Sanders, by a very large margin, so we learn from a poll by Murdoch’s Fox News.

Sanders’s campaign was the most remarkable feature of the 2016 elections. It broke the prevailing pattern of over a century of US political history. A substantial body of academic political science research establishes very convincingly that elections are pretty much bought: campaign funding alone is a remarkably good predictor of electability, for Congress as well, and also for decisions of elected officials. Research also shows that a considerable majority of the electorate, those lower on the income scale, are effectively disenfranchised, in that their representatives pay no attention to their preferences. As wealth increases, political representation does too, slightly, until the very top, a fraction of 1%, where policies are pretty much set.

The Sanders campaign broke sharply from that well-established model. Sanders was scarcely known. He had virtually no support from the main funding sources, the corporate sector and private wealth, was derided by the media, and even used the scare word “socialist.” And probably would have won the Democratic nomination had it not been for shenanigans of the Obama-Clinton party managers.

Suppose he had won, or even had a public platform today. We might then hear statements like this concerning labor rights: “I have no use for those – regardless of their political party – who hold some foolish dream of spinning the clock back to days when unorganized labor was a huddled, almost helpless mass... Only a handful of unreconstructed reactionaries harbor the ugly thought of breaking unions. Only a fool would try to deprive working men and women of the right to join the union of their choice.”

That’s not Sanders, however. It’s Dwight Eisenhower, when he was running for office in 1952: that’s conservatism during the days of the great growth period of regulated state capitalism, often called the economic “golden age.”

We’ve come a long way since then. Now we are on the verge of seeing the demise of public unions, about all that remains. The Supreme Court will soon take up a case that has been on hold, with a 4-4 split, but now, with Gorsuch on the bench, the case will probably be resolved in a way that will effectively undermine unions on fraudulent “libertarian” grounds called “right to work” in the propaganda system – meaning right to scrounge, to be represented by a union without paying dues. Functioning democracy would be quite different, so public opinion studies show.

Much the same holds for a host of other issues. One consequence is anger, frustration, contempt for the formal institutions of democracy, often taking very ominous forms.

In the US, as in Europe, the basic fact is that populations would never vote for the policies designed by elites, particularly those instituted during the neoliberal era of the past generation. Some simple figures give a good indication why.

Take the US, which has suffered less from these policies than most. In 2007, before the crash, at the height of euphoria about the grand triumphs of neoliberalism, neoclassical economics, and the Great Moderation, real wages of

American workers were lower than they had been in 1979, when the neoliberal experiment was just taking off. A primary reason was explained by Fed chair Alan Greenspan, when he testified to Congress on the wondrous economy he was managing. He informed Congress that “greater worker insecurity” was keeping wages and inflation low. Workers are too intimidated to ask for decent wages, benefits, working conditions -- a sign of health of the economy by some standards.

Social justice measures also deteriorated through this period – the US, in fact, ranks at the very bottom of the developed countries of the OECD in social justice measures, alongside of Greece, Mexico, and Turkey. But profits were booming, particularly in the largely predatory financial industry, which exploded during the neoliberal period, accounting for 40% of corporate profit right before the crash for which they were, once again, largely responsible. One motive for the neoliberal “reforms” – as they are called – was to reverse a falling rate of profit that was a consequence of popular activism and worker militancy in the ‘60s. That was achieved, so in that sense the “reforms” were a success – apart from the population. Under such conditions, democracy can hardly be tolerated.

Much the same has been true in Europe under the lash of neoliberal austerity programs, which even IMF economists listen to different voices – mostly those of the rich northern banks. And those are the voices that control the unelected Troika that determines policy the IMF, the ECB, European Commission.

Economist Marc Weisbrot has carried out a careful and revealing investigation of the political agenda guiding the destructive economic policies. He studied the reports of the regular IMF consultations with member governments of the EU, and discovered “a remarkably consistent and disturbing pattern.” The financial crisis was exploited as an opportunity to lock in the neoliberal reforms: spending cuts in the public sector rather than tax increases, reduced benefits and public services, cuts in health care, undermining of collective bargaining, and in general moving to create a society “with less bargaining power for labor and lower wages, more inequality and poverty, a smaller government and social safety nets, and measures that reduce growth and employment.” “The IMF papers,” Weisbrot concludes, “detail the agenda of Europe’s decision-makers, and they have accomplished quite a bit of it over the past five years.” An agenda that is quite familiar here and in fact wherever the neoliberal assault has proceeded.

In Europe too, populations would not vote for these so-called “reforms,” so democracy must be sacrificed on the altar of locking in neoliberal reforms. The device in Europe is straightforward: transfer decision-making to unelected bodies: the unelected Troika. At the ideological level, the idea that people should have a role in determining their social and economic fate is another victim of neoliberal doctrine. That was revealed with unusual clarity when the Greek government dared to ask the population whether they agree that Greece should continue to be destroyed by the so-called “bail outs” – which, in fact, pass through Greece to pay off northern banks for their incompetence in providing careless and risky loans, while Greece’s debt burden actually increases, relative to GDP, and the country is ruined. The reaction among European elites was utter outrage, particularly when the population voted the wrong way. And the Greeks were sternly punished for their illusion that democracy might have a place in neoliberal Europe, even in the country of its birth: the Troika conditions were made even harsher in reaction to this deviation from good order.

The public response in Europe to the neoliberal assault on democracy resembles what has been happening in the US. Centrist political institutions are discredited, public disillusionment, fear, and anger are running high, sometimes taking quite ominous forms. Those old enough to remember the 1930s, as I do, cannot fail to be alarmed at the rise of neo-fascist parties, even in Austria and Germany, of all places, and not only there. And bitter memories are not easy to suppress when a majority of Europeans call for banning all Muslims from Europe, and many want to reverse the real achievements of the European Union, such as free movement of populations and erosion of national borders – which would be quite consistent with strengthening of cultural diversity in liberal and human societies.

We cannot attribute all of these developments across the West to the neoliberal assault, but it is a common and significant factor.

There is also no guarantee that functioning democracy, with an informed and engaged population, would lead to policies that address human needs and concerns, including the concern for survival. But it is our only hope – and a hope that can and must be realized.

All of this brings us back to Ernst Mayr’s question: is it better to be smart than stupid? A question for you to ponder, and like it not, for you to answer. And without too much of a delay.

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Spring 2017

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