

[ANDY'S LETTER TO THE EDITOR (PUBLISHED 5/28/2016)]

Risk rewards in science

You note current efforts to harness the promise of genomic medicine aimed at sequencing more genomes, to understand labyrinthine genetic susceptibilities arising from variation in multiple genes ("Encore une fois", May 7th). However, it is also noteworthy that the initial sequencing of the human genome in 2000 enabled entirely new fields of discovery, including transcriptomics (the large-scale study of RNA molecules), proteomics (the same for proteins) and big-data science in biology. These innovations have revolutionised translational research and may now do the same for clinical medicine. Yet they would have been impossible without substantial funding for risky science, from governments, investors and philanthropic bodies.

Rather than failing to live up to their potential, the large-scale efforts to sequence the human genome, and the resulting "omics technologies", have yielded tremendous economic and scientific benefits for society.

PROFESSOR THOMAS VONDRISKA
David Geffen School of Medicine
University of California, Los Angeles

Suffer the children

It is not only a humanitarian imperative to help unaccompanied child migrants who arrive in Europe ("Under-age and at risk", May 7th). European states also have a legal obligation to do so, having ratified the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. Every child has a right to adequate shelter, to a caregiver and to an education. It is shameful that many of the world's richest countries, which see themselves as the cradle of human rights, deny children those very rights.

The children who arrive in Europe without their parents have fled their homes in fear of their lives. They have entrusted themselves to gangs of smugglers and put themselves at risk of abuse and child

labour. With borders closing around them, some are trapped in Serbia and Macedonia, with no way forward and no way back. Many have been illegally detained in Greece.

We all need to see those children for what they are: not as migrants, financial burdens or threats to society but as children in need of protection. They have rights and they deserve to be given a future.

VITO ANGELILLO
Director-general
Terre des Hommes
Zurich

Foolish academics

"It was the worst of times" (May 14th) marked 50 years since the start of the Cultural Revolution in China. Your article brought back memories of Western intellectuals at the time who supported Mao Zedong's eradication of old customs, culture, habits and ideas. I recall one of my fellow graduate students in London, an avowed Maoist, bursting into the college's common room to announce that in China mathematics teachers were now being sent to the land to labour along with the peasants.

In a challenging tone, he asked whether we did not think that was wonderful. "Certainly", responded one of our finest scholars with wide-eyed, possibly disingenuous innocence, "as long as the peasants reciprocate by going to the towns to teach algebra and calculus." They never spoke to each other again.

MICHAEL SINGER
Dickson Poon School of Law
King's College London

Mao believed that knowledge was too powerful a tool, leading to wisdom, thoughts and questions which could undermine his rule. Both my great-aunt and uncle were teachers at the Beijing Dance Academy. Both were denounced as intellectuals and sent to be reformed. What made it worse was not the forced hardship, but the confiscation of all the books, art works and other culturally related items they possessed.

They managed to hide some, but many more were destroyed. This is the real reason behind the atrocity. Purging his rivals at the same time was just convenient for Mao.

LOUISA VAN DIJK
The Hague

On the right track

There is a way for the new mayor of London to realise his objective of connecting the development of housing to public transport ("Going underground", May 14th). He could compulsorily purchase land to build rail connections and homes and then sell or rent the new homes in partnership with a developer to pay for the railway. Crucially, he should keep in public ownership any stations and other commercial properties in the area to provide ongoing rental income.

This is the strategy used by the Mass Transit Railway Corporation in Hong Kong. MTRC is 77% owned by the Hong Kong government. It already runs light-rail services in London and will operate Crossrail. It has also won a contract to extend Stockholm's urban network to the city's commuter belt by using the profit from rising land-values to pay for the railway. Its profits help pay for public services in Hong Kong by way of dividends.

We don't need to hand London's underground to the MTRC. We could leave it to Transport for London, allowing it in time to become a profitable business as opposed to one with a permanent public subsidy.

ANDREW PURVES
London

Tech cronies

The technology industry should have been included in your crony-capitalism index ("The party winds down", May 7th). Microsoft was innovative in its early years, but if it isn't now a monopolist, I don't know what is. You cited Google as a potential candidate because it is involved in anti-competitive litigation. But litigation is the wrong test. The

American government takes the view that there is a difference between a monopoly that is established through its own growth and one that is established through acquisitions. The government brings many cases against mergers that would have resulted in a company taking enough market share to extract rents, but fewer against those that gained their monopoly position through growth.

There is no reason why there should be any difference in the government's treatment of a monopoly. Yet there is, despite the lack of litigation. The fact that more anti-competitive cases aren't brought against such technology companies suggests that cronies have managed to convince government about the merits of this false distinction.

ANDY EDSTROM
Los Angeles

The great escape

Your review of Adrian Tinniswood's "The Long Weekend" asserts that the "English country house casts a long, rose-tinted shadow" ("Partying, hunting, shooting", May 7th). I think that's right. "Country House", a song released by Blur in 1995, comes to mind, describing the leisured life of a modern-day nouveau-riche on his landed estate who is "reading Balzac and knocking back Prozac".

RICHARD SPENCER
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