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CONSERVATIVES, LIBERALS: A LETTER TO *THE ECONOMIST* (May 23, 2007)

I am not surprised to read that two teams of psychologists, one from the University of New Mexico and another from the University of California, have come up with contrary explanations of how conservatives and liberals are made ("Security Check," May 19, 2007). Focusing on early childhood of their research subjects, both teams differentiate between those with and those without secure childhoods with strong attachments to one or both parents and little stress. However, the former team concludes that early security goes with later conservatism, while the latter concludes the opposite. Although you are certainly right when you playfully suggest that more research is needed, the missing variable is obvious enough: the political environment in which research subjects find themselves at the time the research is conducted. Judging from my own experience, those with secure childhoods are likely to become liberal in conservative environments and *vice versa*, while those without secure childhoods would tend to conform to their political environments.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A LETTER TO *THE ECONOMIST* (May 22, 2007)

Your droll support of Zimbabwe's choice to head the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development ("Hot Seats," May 19, 2007), startling as it is, finds ample support in your review of the hapless country in the same issue ("Back to the Dark Ages"). No matter how skilful Robert Mugabe may have been in holding onto power, Zimbabwe is rapidly falling apart politically, socially, economically. Death and destruction are behind the corner. As your subtitle to the latter article envisages, "the last person to leave may not have any lights to turn off." Who knows, there might be some definition of sustainable development by which Zimbabwe will one day indeed be shown to have led the entire world. In the glorious end, there will be no lights to turn off anywhere around the globe.

AMERICA'S FEAR: A LETTER TO *THE ECONOMIST* (May 22, 2007)

As soon as I saw your front page and read the heading ("America's Fear of China," May 19, 2007), I thought of Japan. I remember the Eighties quite vividly. I was thus not surprised to read about Japanophobia in your main leader. But then I remembered Islamophobia of recent vintage, which you do not mention presumably because it has nothing to do with economics. Of course, Islam is about oil, and little else but oil, but you are forgiven. At any rate, America's fear may be shifting, but it is there all the time. Remember the fear of the Soviet Union? Fear is deeply embedded in the American psyche ever since the Americans have realized that the only way their empire could go is down. And that was soon after the end of World War II. Ever since, America is about fear. When one source of fear is brushed off, another one is dreamt up at once, lest the country gets anxious without fear. For it has become constitutional. To wit, the fear of China will pass, but to no avail.

WORLD HERITAGE (May 21, 2007)

The Croatian Ministry of Culture has recently put Motovun on the waiting list for UNESCO's World Heritage Sites. Without any doubt, this is the status it deserves. As far as I can gather, the administrative procedure may take a couple of years, but this is great news already. I have contacted the Ministry of Culture, and it seems the application has nothing to do with the county or regional authorities. It comes directly from Zagreb. It will take me a while to figure out what is going on, but it is likely that the local authorities are not very happy with these developments, for they cannot but interfere with their attempts to sell Motovun off to their own advantage. One way or another, the fate of our town is shifting. If it gets UNESCO's protection, the game will change for the better. Much better, too. It is a bit early to rejoice, but rejoice I nonetheless must.

STARS, FARTS (May 20, 2007)

The number of motorcycles in and around Motovun is steadily growing. Year by year, there are ever more of them. And I am not the only one who has noticed it, either. A growing number of my friends and neighbors has commented on this trend already. To tell the truth, it is difficult not to notice it, too. Motorcycles can be seen, heard, and smelled everywhere one goes. They are fast becoming a regular feature of Istrian town and country alike. When only I recall the bleating of the local newspapers, which do not

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miss a single opportunity to extol the virtues of Istria as a five-star tourist destination! Five stars, my ass. Five-hundred farts is much more like it.

THE GREAT BABAJI (May 17, 2007)

On one occasion Babaji's sacred circle in the Himalayas was disturbed by the arrival of a stranger. He had climbed with astonishing skill to the nearly inaccessible ledge near the camp of the master. "Sir, you must be the great Babaji." The man's face was lit with inexpressible reverence: "For months I have pursued a ceaseless search for you among these forbidding crags. I implore you to accept me as a disciple." When the great guru made no response, the man pointed to the rocky chasm at his feet: "If you refuse me, I will jump from this mountain—life has no further value if I cannot win your guidance to the divine." "Jump then," Babaji said unemotionally. "I cannot accept you in your present state of development." The man immediately hurled himself over the cliff. Babaji instructed the shocked disciples to fetch the stranger's body. When they returned with the mangled form, the master placed his divine hand on the dead man. Lo, he opened his eyes and prostrated himself humbly before the omnipotent one. "You are now ready for discipleship," Babaji beamed lovingly at his resurrected disciple. "You have courageously passed a difficult test. Death shall not touch you again—now you are one of our immortal flock."

From Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Mumbai: Wilco Publishing House, no year (first published in 1946), p. 299.

A LITTLE NAP (May 17, 2007)

I have been out of sorts the last few days, most likely because of the rapidly shifting weather. I wake up early in the morning, and I can hardly wait to go to sleep in the evening. To my annoyance, I feel sleepy all day long. It is the same day after day. And so I decided to take a nap this afternoon. As soon as I woke up, feeling all refreshed, I got cross with myself. "Idiot," I mumbled as I stretched my muscles, "why don't you take a little nap every single day?!"

RICH, POOR: A LETTER TO *THE ECONOMIST* (May 16, 2007)

The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned that the effect of climate change on Africa is likely to be much more severe than on any other continent. Uganda's president, Yoweri Museveni, has therefore declared climate change an act of aggression by the rich world against the poor one, and demanded compensation ("Drying Up and Flooding Out," May 12, 2007). "The moral arguments on climate change are even murkier than arguments on other wrongs done to Africa, such as slavery," you comment, "but Mr. Museveni may have hit on something." You betcha. After all, IPCC blames industrialization for climate change, and Africa boasts little of it. But the moral argument goes well beyond compensation: it is incumbent upon the rich world to curb the greenhouse gasses so as to lessen the adverse effects of climate change in the poor world, where millions of people are in peril. This is a moral argument *par excellence*, and there is nothing murky about it.

THE ONLY CONCLUSION (May 14, 2007)

The sun is so fierce today that I had to close all the shutters around the house. As well as most of the windows, which let in too much heat. And yet, the light that manages to come through is still quite wonderful. The whole house glows in it, as if lit by thousands of candles. Judging by the intensity of the sunlight, as well as by the heat that comes with it, one would guess it was late July or early August. It is only mid-May, though. The only conclusion that can be drawn from the weather is that no conclusions can be drawn any longer. Conclusions are for the birds, anyhow.

STRUTTING BY (May 13, 2007)

Almost every day, but especially when it is hot, I spend my early afternoons in the shade of the hotel terrace. Protected by buildings from all sides, there is no better place in Motovun when it is scorching hot. As I sit at my table, my eyes roam among the chestnut trees. Slivers of sunshine that penetrate through the canopy and the rustle of leaves round off the world in front of my eyes. And then I see a cat strutting by. It is the very same cat I see every day as it begs for scraps among the tables. I, too, feed it on occasion.

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This time it is different, though. The cat, the tree, the rustle, and I merge without warning. We become one. The world falls silent. Dead still. When the moment passes, and I cannot tell how long it has lasted, I find myself in tears. Even now, as I am trying to capture this divine experience in words, tears keep clouding my sight.

Addendum (May 14, 2007)

Early this afternoon I went to the hotel terrace, as usual. But everything was a bit different this time. I made sure my notebook was with me. And the best among my many pens, too. As soon as I sat down at the very same table, I looked around for the cat, my old friend. It was there, as well. Everything was just right. Everything was ready for another miracle. But it failed to come through, it goes without saying, even though I sat at the terrace much longer than usual. Maybe tomorrow, though.

THE PASSING GIRLS (May 12, 2007)

I am sitting on the terrace at Klaudio's together with a bunch of local guys. It is late morning. Tourists are streaming past our table, and we comment on them every once in a while. A gaggle of girls appears at some point. In their late teens, they are dressed to kill. Their tits and bums are all over the place. Shrill laughter completes the picture. "Hey," one of the guys at the table nods in their direction and then looks around with a big smile, "what do you say?" Everyone turns toward the passing girls. "To tell you the truth," I mutter as if to myself, "they scare the shit out of me." My comment kills the conversation. Chances are it is attributed to my tender age.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A YOGI (May 12, 2007)

A fortnight ago my beloved brought me a quaint book. Entitled *Autobiography of a Yogi*, it was written by Paramahansa Yogananda, one of the foremost early proponents of yoga in America. His photograph struck me as familiar at once, suggesting that I must have seen it before. Hardbound in fake leather, the smallish book boasts almost five-hundred pages. First published in 1946 by the Philosophical Library in New York, it was recently republished by the Wilco Publishing House in Mumbai. The year of the new publication is nowhere to be found, but the last year I discovered in a caption under a photographic plate is 2005. So, it must be at most two years old. My beloved said she was not sure about her acquisition, but she felt kind of sorry for the book, which she found in a crowded Zagreb bookstore. Unmistakeably Indian, it looked forlorn on the shelf. According to the caption, the last photographic plate shows the author an hour before his death in 1952. Born as Mukunda Lal Ghosh to a comfortable Bengali family in 1892, he is smiling peacefully. But why am I going on and on about my beloved's impromptu gift? Because it happened to arrive just in time to help me tidy up my life once again. Perhaps for the last time, too.

CUI BONO? (May 9, 2007)

Whenever I feel the urge to write something these days, I feel an equally strong urge to write nothing. The latter urge overpowers the former more often than the other way around, and thus I write almost nothing. More to the point, I manage to finish barely anything. The urge to write something is based on habit, I guess, but the urge to write nothing is kind of new, for it stems from a question that has been nagging on me lately: *cui bono*? The trouble with this question is that it cannot be answered. That is, it implies its own dismal answer. Once it enters your mind, this question is nearly impossible to exorcise, as well. Indeed, *cui bono*? Yourself? People like you? People in general? It is time to stop writing, I guess.

Addendum (May 10, 2007)

"I refuse to take you seriously," responded Bob Collén to this piece, which went to friends as an electronic postcard. "Attribute the slump to bio-rhythms." And then he reminded me of Marcus Aurelius, St. Augustine, Nietzsche, and Solzhenitsyn, who wrote "for the drawer" when all else seemed futile. "Well put," I wrote back. Although I felt uncomfortable about it, I tried to explain the pessimism that had gripped me. "I see terrible things coming," I confessed. "And I cannot see our species fighting the adversities with either intelligence or moral purpose." I concluded on a happy note, of course: "I am sure the funk will not last..." If for no other reason, I failed to add, then because I have friends like Bob. My rhetorical question answered.

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