

CONVERSING WITH THE PRIVILEGED

Sex robots, to do away with messy human complications was his answer. Without a doubt he added, sex robots are where the future is. My question however was a genuine enquiry as to when is an economic crash recognised. Is it when the effects are felt by the privileged elite, the middle class masses, the new poor, or the standard poor?

He is a professor, a well-published economic historian and at best, I'm a two meal-a-day aspiring writer, come previous administration assistant of his having a rant of sorts about employment opportunities. He had recently published an account of economic disasters and I wanted to know why he wasn't joining the dots to see that the child born of inequity and greed during the Global Financial Crisis had already given birth herself, at a mere eight years of age. The signs are there for all to see and I know he knows about them. The markets are failing again, only this time around, so is society. Yes he is an historian, yet that's no free pass to turn a blind eye and say nothing about the here and now. In New Zealand, food, shoes, rain coats, hot showers, toothbrushes and a place to sleep were needed in 2016 by an unprecedented number of children going without access to these new 'luxuries'. Even with parents working two jobs, it is not enough to ensure housing, heating and healthy eating. Seniors are going to bed cold and neglected or serviced in rest homes by foreigners they can't understand or relate to. Many of these poorly paid carers bearing fake Anglicised name badges feel the disconnect just as acutely; they have left their elderly parents under the care of even poorer paid carers.

Samar Sen's research on the poor being the first to experience the inability to afford the basics to life, won him a Nobel Prize in 1998. His thesis was that natural and economic disasters were often

convenient scapegoats that corrupt or feckless politicians blamed for the suffering that occurred on their watch.

History is full of examples where the first signs of trouble were felt amongst the poorest and I wanted to know why the analysis of market conditions by economists, bankers and financiers was so blind to this and so focused on indicators that were A) slower to react and B) propped up under false conditions.

The miners of the 1900s opted for the use of canaries over mice. Mice were deemed sulky and in need of poking to identify if still moving. I was enquiring if he could see the analogy of economists poking sulking mice to identify conditions. The GFC started with an interest rate increase and a manageable number of home loan defaulters – the first to miss their loan repayments were the canaries of 2008 that no-one revived. They could have been helped with loan holidays or reduced payments over a longer term. Instead, as we all know, assistance was provided to the opposite end of the spectrum. The lenders were bailed out with no hope of them ever repaying what should have been a loan. It definitely would have been a loan had the other end of the spectrum been helped.

I asked him if the 'new poor' and the 'working poor' in New Zealand, a welfare state and the world's imagined utopia, were one in the same as the miner's bright yellow canaries falling from their perches. And as such, were they not a far more effective identifier of market conditions than pretentious talk around inflation, gold prices and fluctuating share values. Without giving him time to answer, I asked him how many people sleeping in his local park or begging on his morning commute would it take before his ilk, in a position to say and do something became uncomfortable enough to accept that the system is broken, the emperor is naked and the free market is no path to freedom. He didn't need to answer. We both know that effectiveness aside; the suits prefer sterile

spreadsheets to the fear of catching fleas from the poor.

I was irked that in his privileged position, he had given me the response that he did with no compassion. Just an explanation that in a capitalist society, reward comes to those who can offer what is in demand. To a point, he is right and I got his point... and that of Chairman Mao's – the arts are of no use in a hungry, over-populated world. It cuts, yet what will bleed given time, are the protected and well-padded; the deluded and self-entitled. The ones being paid far in excess of their actual value to society. The commodity traders, bankers, financiers, government gliders and apathetic academics who produce no practical good yet somehow, dine-out day in and day out.

To be fair, he also added that to succeed in a socialist society, one needs to think and speak a certain way. It was an honest observation that someone like me wouldn't find life any more enchanting on the 'other side'. That I would struggle to stay within the confines of the fold. Their satin silk sheets would have me slipping out one observation too many. In essence, the gravy train would soon boot me off, station or no station and he himself had no interest in being booted off. Life aboard the train is quite pleasant for those that can see, yet not see.

One of the perks of being a low wage earner is that we have so little to lose from speaking out about inequality and corruption. Gone are the days of burning our bras in protest - we aren't paid enough for that kind of carry-on. We're left with 'have internet, can write and have voice, will use it'.

Previous generations fought for women and the down trodden to vote and today we're fighting over the futility of voting. We're down to the realisation that we don't need to wait for change to finally come, we need only change ourselves. We can just say no and say it in numbers.

With my inferior education, I continued on to tell him that it is the harsh realities of capitalism for the poor and a subsidised living arrangement for the rich. I scroll through the ample online lists of tax payer funded Marsden Grants for academic research in the vicinity of \$800k per research project to investigate all manner of topics that don't sit well with what is in demand. I kid you not, a New Zealand academic was recently awarded substantial funds to investigate the first smell. I contemplate society's demand for scent sampling given the 'arrival doors' to life and consider replying to the Professor to point out a gaping hole in his theory.

For both our sakes, I opt for silence. His response may have been unrelated and perhaps more so a personal statement and frustration with a certain woman that is selfishly mucking him around. However he meant it, it is a red flag that the gulf between the have and have-nots has widened to the extent that each side is now unable or perhaps uninterested in understanding each other. I like him though; on the whole he has delightful manners, is interesting to talk with and remarkably respectful of women. Plus, when he lets down his guard, he is beautifully honest. When the moat is deep and the cannons in place, his honesty can be brutal, especially towards those in positions of privilege. There are so few left that will speak to 'the man' that it is to be encouraged yet he no longer has any desire to do so. He is himself, a white male in his late 50's. He's only ever swum *with* the tide, in a bay of plenty. I write to him about the end of plenty.

He can offer explanations that $A+B=C$ yet it doesn't equate in a world outside of his own. The ABC's to a good life have changed. It now requires a substantial reserve of K's. He can't see or doesn't want to hear that he has been riding with a tail wind in a white man's world. His aspirations are to publish one more book on mining and then comfortably retire. It's no-one's business but his, yet I am disappointed. He could speak out; he could join the dots to see that the next generation will have nothing left to mine. Moreover, that there won't be any precious metals left on planet earth to

create a harem of sex robots.

A generation of any given age can't change the harvest of the seeds sown by the prior generation. They can plant anew yet the new harvest may not bear fruit in their lifetime and there currently isn't sufficient enough of a cohort willing to forgo consuming what is left in order to meaningfully plant anew. The First World War gave birth to WWII and the terrorists of today are the children of the Iraq/Iran American-led invasion of the 90's. Said children have only ever known greedy and untrustworthy foreigners out to plunder the Middle East for oil. We can't blame them for looking on us as amoral infidels. The Great Depression led to the bailout actions of the GFC and the unfairness of the GFC in propping up the 1% at the expense of the majority, shares DNA with what is going on now. The current façade that all is OK has been built using printed money. Money that will return to its value as paper.

The foxes of our banking system have the hens fast losing trust in anything short of a revolt. History informs that a revolt by the people, for the people would be ideal yet it's more likely to be a revolting take-over by another breed of fox. Just prior to the fall of the Roman Empire, Julius Ceaser (interestingly pronounced then as Ju/ljus Kai/shar which was preserved in German as Kaiser, Russian as Tsar and in Greece as Czar) was paying gladiators ever increasing amounts for more and more outlandish chariot races and barbaric sporting contests to distract the masses. At the same time, there was a culture of excess with chefs reaching celebrity status for their gluttonous culinary feasts. Civilizations go through stages and after excess comes decline and then collapse/take-over or dispersal. We can scratch dispersal as an option - the places to run and hide have already started building fences and locking the gates. I look around and see over-paid sportsmen who think they are gods, needlessly cruel winner/loser TV shows and chefs galore. There is food and chef paraphernalia being promoted on every corner, in every post box and on every screen. History explains exactly

where we are at and what is going on. It isn't pretty.

For eons, humanity has witnessed the folly and futility of war to bring about peace. Yuval Noah Harari identifies in *Sapiens: A Brief History*, the lose/lose outcomes of participating in an arms race. He also identifies that the problem with money and the free market is that it doesn't make moral decisions. The free market exists to find the lowest price for x, y and z whilst priceless ancient customs and values fall by the wayside. The natural environment is an externality rather than something we are a part of and species, including our own, are turned into commodities. The market place is better off when we're unsatisfied enough to be on Prozac or out shopping for a new face, house and car. Who amongst us he asks, signed up for that?

The baton being passed on may be feral, yet we are Middle Earth. We could biff the baton into Mt Doom and be done with Sauron's five eyes. Hariri says we can't as we are now all so interconnected. He points out that when on the path towards an arms race, there is little hope for any such fanciful thoughts. Good O. He is though, by default, a man thinking like a man. If there were more women making the decisions, not just the strong ones that think and act like men, then the forecast would have a chance of changing. It's not that men are bad and women are good. It's that when men are put together in a room with competing interests, apart from the Athenian and Scottish Enlightenment, very rarely does much good come of it. The outcome is by in large, fairly predictable and we need new thinking to reverse our way out of testosterone alley, where fighting is a given.

The legacy of the departing generation is theirs to own. Their highly regulated 'free' market did not work, the promise of the trickle-down effect fed only their friends, their yes men and the easily contorted. The gated communities, in which the wealthy now seek to retire, will become their prisons. The places to hide secrets and money are fast running out. The corruptible 'friends' of the

well-heeled that enable them to get away with tax havens and dubious arrangements aren't known for their self sacrificing loyalty – when they fall, they will ensure they don't fall alone.

The innocent poor won't fall alone either. As each financial tier can no longer afford the basics, the next domino will fall as they aren't able to shop and participate. The shame of the 'new poor' will give way to anger and the wealthy will longer be able to feel safe. The plutocrat Nick Hanauer sums it up and does the math in his TED talk on greed: *“No free and open society can long sustain this kind of rising economic inequality. It has never happened, there are no examples. You show me a highly unequal society and I will show you a police state or an uprising. The pitch forks will come for us if we do not address this. It is not a matter of if, but when”.*

Norman Borlaug, father of the green revolution said if you desire peace, cultivate justice, but at the same time, cultivate the fields to produce more bread; otherwise there will be no peace. That rings true for the likes of India and Mexico where he did his field trials, however, in latitudes of 40° and less, it is warm housing that is needed in addition to sufficient food, in order to keep the peace. A meaningful job would go a long way too.

The old ways can guide us but they won't serve us. The age of the pale male at the helm is coming to an end. For now, they may see hope in Mr Trump to 'make being a white male great again' yet it won't last. Mr Trump has fired up a whole new generation of feminists that previously were in daze thinking 'things' were OK; that the boat didn't need rocking. The boat of men recoiling in horror at the prospect of equality might as well stay at sea and sail on. They have had their turn and in their wake is Merkel, May and Malala too. There's still Huffington and Helen and at a push, Hillary too. Park Geun-Hye has had her day and in her wake is Sandberg, Sturgeon and Aung San Suu Kyi.

Lagarde is on shaky ground, yet there is also Lynch and Lorde. Winfrey, Wojcicki and Indrawati. All women, all capable of thinking beyond war and beyond sex, yet perhaps wisely, not beyond sex robots. They could well be one of the solutions to free up millions more women for a chance to add their name to the list.

I never got to hear the official determinism of an economic crash and have a fair idea of why. The white man's economic and financial systems have never been fair and he doesn't want another earful from me. It doesn't matter that there is sense in improving prediction models by monitoring what the poor can't afford. The status quo is currently still working just fine for the average white male, post 50 - he is comfortable in his boat. It matters not that the oars are lost. Making waves by speaking out and questioning those in power, may tip the boat over and universities don't rescue or reward their staff for social activism. That's the job of the students with no funding at risk.

Universities are male-led institutions with male-based systems that corral their finest minds into competing internationally for the statistically unlikely odds of being published in a mere handful of journals (largely owned by American institutions with agendas of their own... as an added challenge for the competitors). The universities are publically ranked on their facilities, research and bank balance and the universities themselves, then in turn, rank all their academics so everyone knows exactly where they are in the learned hierarchy / savannah.

Unsurprisingly, the pressure to have an article published encourages many a bribe and game of gentlemen's golf. The journal editors that get to do the choosing are pandered to and unsurprisingly, they find themselves being offered opportunities and invitations that wouldn't otherwise have come their way. What is surprising is that the majority of them don't see it that way and genuinely believe they are being flown first class to speak at host universities because talking about their research is worthy of the expense to the receiving host. Throw in some dinner invites

with a nice hotel and both sides are ethically content to write it off as hospitality. All this respected carry on is mostly via the generosity of tax payers, too distracted to pay much attention. The students, notably the international ones, pick up a fair portion of the bill yet paradoxically, if university education was fair and free, there would be absolutely no incentive to give students the time of day. Under the current male designed system, it is publish or perish – the students need to pay, to warrant the time they distract from research. Remove the financial value of the student and for many, they would become time consuming parasites to be avoided and referred onto tutors. Even with high fees, this occurs. Those that are good teachers yet unsuccessful publishers are herded into administrative roles or shown the door. To be an academic, you must publish. There are very few brownie points for being good with students. As a lecturer, the only bar that need be reached is that complaints aren't made. Therein lies the solution.

No woman would come up with such a system. It is not of our nature to pit useful minds against each other in such a way that only a few individuals are doing things for us whilst an able cohort sit idling on the sidelines, fatigued by competing, if not by medication for anxiety and depression. If women were in charge, a long to-do list would be written up with ample fix-it jobs for everyone and the rewards would come to those that got the job done with the least amount of bickering. If run by women, the list would never be completed, there would always be improvement projects being added and moreover, they would likely be practical, peaceful and for the benefit of others. Such a system would also encourage collaboration as the chance for a slice of the pie by being quicker as a team, is better than no pie at all. Most importantly, no woman would ever hand over tax payer funding for research on the first smell. Not now, not ever.

The Professor and I are on different boats yet we're on the same dying sea. What matters is that we keep talking. He is a good man who merely wants to live a quiet life. He is not the problem and he is not the solution either. Neither is trying to pry or push him from his comfortable existence. When him and his ilk peer through their office blinds at the masses down below protesting about something or other, it barely causes any difference other than perhaps a change to their exit route and next dining location. What would cause a stir would be a brave move from one of their own. One dissenting voice from within is equal to tens of thousands of protestors. In that respect, kindness towards him is the only answer. Kindness and a good example of showing courage. This isn't that. Courage takes practice and writing barely registers on the spectrum. At the very least, he deserves a right of reply to be published in conjunction with this.

Here is a summary of his email response so far:

Dear Mandy

I'm not sure where to start. Universities are an industry and outside of subjects relating to big business and politics there isn't likely to be any interference. My experience of being a journal editor required a significant amount of extra work for very little reward, if any.

I replied with evidence of big mining and fracking companies paying bribes to journal editors to ensure no articles are published that would tarnish their industry. He himself has researched what cigarette manufacturers did to make doubt their product by hiring scientists willing to find what their funders wanted them to find. Then there is also the sugar industry so we can agree that the academic journal and publishing system is flawed. I think with tentacles far wider than first meets the eye and he is more circumspect. Is he ready and willing for there to be far more women making decisions? Yes, he is. Does he want to do anything about it? No. He wants to be left in peace.

-If you would like this essay turned into an A5 booklet with a cover themed to suit the recipient, it would be a treat to hear from you ;-)

-Email hello@recycled.co.nz and no trouble to include several blank pages so it can also be used as a notebook. Cost for a personalised booklet is \$25.

-Thank you for your time and consideration. Have a nice day 🍷