Everything is Connected to Everything Else

101 stories about 21st century Geography

by

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Towering ambition.

I would have liked to tag along with acerbic author Will Self when he walked to ‘The World’ in 2009. ‘The World’ is the artificial archipelago created off the coast of Dubai to approximately replicate global land masses. It competes to be the greatest absurdity of this city-state, although the competition for that dubious honour is stiff.

The Dubai authorities should have been wise to Self and cobbled up some reason not to grant him a visa, for it was a foregone conclusion that such a ramble would unleash Self’s excoriating wit upon this folly – the dream of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Prime Minister of Dubai and chief architect of much that is grandiose in this desert Emirate. Self is a prominent practitioner of psycho-geography: a delightfully anarchic strand of geographical musing that predominantly involves wandering about without a pre-determined aim. Psycho-geometry is a splendid way to re-think everyday realities, but it is nothing a geomorphologist would recognise as geography. On this trip Self subverted the form a little by clearly having two pre-determined aims: to get to ‘The World’ and to royally stick the boot into the hydrocarbon mirage that is Dubai.

Fawning in the slipstream of Will Self would have cramped his ‘grumpy old man’ shtick but I would have been systematically exposed to the furthest shores of the English language. A typical styling of Self sets the scene.

“The Dubai boom, which had seen this Lilliputian country push up Broddingnagian skyscrapers with Promethean alacrity, had never been anything save the most glaring example of Guy Debord’s society of the spectacle.”

Now I enjoy all this literary badinage and I even know all about Debord and his ‘society of the spectacle’ but it was Self’s remorseless critique of Dubai that really chimed with me. What a bloody ridiculous place. He skewers it with gleeful obstreperousness.

I have never been to Dubai, and I am fast facilitating the possibility that I never will, but from any objective standpoint it is hard to grasp the logic of building the ultimate expression of urbanism and wealth on a strip of coastline assailed by summer temperatures edging towards 50°C with the balm of only 25

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days of rain a year. It is a coastline which some experts predict will be inundated by rising sea levels by 2100\(^2\) and, with 90% of the nation’s infrastructure no more than a couple of metres above sea level, construction in Dubai is an intriguing punt worthy of one of the world’s greatest owners of thoroughbred racehorses, the good Sheik Mohammed.

The night time skyline view of Dubai from your beach lounger at the Royal Ocean Beach Club in Lebanon is spectacular. Lebanon is the only one of ‘The World’ islands so far colonised; although work is starting on Germany very soon.\(^3\) Lebanon’s neighbour, Syria, awaits a developer so the view starts with an artificial sandbank being gently eroded by lapis waves. But have vision, cast your eyes skywards and there thrusts the Burj Khalifa, currently the world’s tallest man-made structure, 830 metres of ambition and vainglorious folly. Does anybody know what goes on in this building, or what its functional purpose is beyond people simply staring at it?

Why be so hard on Dubai? This little country was propelled into the future on the back of oil revenues. The transition from Bedouin trading port to playing a fully integrated role in the modern global economy has been staggering. They are just trying to find their way in the world, build themselves a legacy from the bountiful riches of hydrocarbons. I guess that is unarguable: but it is the way they are going about it, full of swaggering machismo and swept up by the idle accumulation of wealth and prestige. One can barely imagine what Wilfred Thesiger, the great English explorer who wrote about the desert Bedouin in the 1940s would have made of Dubai today.

Back then Thesiger stated:

“In the deserts of southern Arabia there is no rhythm of the seasons, no rise and fall of sap, but empty wastes where only the changing temperature marks the passage of the year. It is a bitter, desiccated land which knows nothing of gentleness or ease.”\(^4\)

Fifty years ago the population of Dubai was 40,000: today it is 2.1 million. Dubai was always a cosmopolitan port with traders from Persia and India moving there in their thousands during the 19th century. Not a country as such at that time, Dubai came under the military control of Britain whose ‘Trucial States’ protectorate – encompassing all the United Arab Emirates – came into play in 1820 and lasted until independence in 1971. Today 400,000 of Dubai’s population are Emiratis. A majority of the population, 80%, are from every other corner of the world: half are from South Asia, predominantly India. About 100,000 Britons live in Dubai permanently, many more own property that they may or may not ever visit. It is a favourite haunt of Premiership footballers to stash their wealth.

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‘The World’ may only consist of Lebanon at present but ten miles down the coastline a more advanced project, hailed by its Emirati owners as ‘the eighth wonder of the world’, is far closer to fruition. This is the Palm Jumeirah. Already 4,000 high net worth residents are living the ‘dream’ in ‘The Palm’ with dolphins imported from the Solomon Islands, beaches groomed daily and air conditioning bills that make you break out in a sweat.\(^5\) Is this development? Is this the city of the future? A global melting pot fuelled by hot capital and built by indentured labour from the teeming cities of India? The god of Dubai may nominally be Allah but everybody knows Mammon pulls the strings.

As Guy Debord, that irascible French philosopher might have put it: Dubai is concerned with constructing a representation of real life in which the act of consumption replaces real social relations. Dubai really is Debord’s society of the spectacle. It is a place where social life is not about living, but about having, image is all-important.\(^6\) You might muse that Dubai is all about that fundamental precept of consumer capitalism that you must be seen to consume.

That is Dubai. It demands you bear witness to its wealth through a portfolio of jaw dropping images of modernity and capital. Here man has truly tamed nature by throwing as much money and energy as possible at a wilderness in order to bring it under absolute control.

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Debord gets globalisation even before we start talking about globalisation.
Now some 250,000 live in this gridiron vision of the future. It aspires to be a proper grown up city but it doesn't need to because it is in fact a county, Britain's smallest county.\(^7\)

For all the scorn that the original inhabitants of the area poured upon the idea, Milton Keynes has grown up to be a well planned, successful and economically dynamic place. As it ages Milton Keynes is even starting to imbue some character, something it was singularly lacking in its early days.

Milton Keynes is based upon the idea of ‘community without propinquity’, or blocks of housing knitted together within a logical, grid road system which links all the different urban functions: residential, retail, employment, entertainment and environment. For decades I have found the growth of Milton Keynes fascinating, ‘Sim City’ writ large.\(^8\) Once, decades ago, I could have passed myself off as a bit of an expert on new towns. In those days I considered pursuing a career in urban planning.

Soon many others will have the potential to reflect upon how fields become asphalt, brick and concrete – and how quickly this happens. We have, in the UK, a need to replicate Milton Keynes many times over. Here is the maths. The Office of National Statistics released in October 2011 its most recent population projections.\(^9\) It is estimated that the population of the UK will rise to 73.2 million by 2035. Most of this increase, 10.9 million, will be in England.

Now whatever way you look at it England will be a substantially less green but hopefully still pleasant land. Even allowing for infilling existing urban areas with higher densities of housing and tacking on new estates to the edges of existing urbanisation it still appears a given that some new towns, even cities, are going to have to be developed. The scale of this is to be debated but considering that according to the 2011 census average household size is 2.3, 10.9 million more people will require 4.739 million more homes either built, refurbished or brought back into occupation between now and 2035. That is 221,000 more homes a year for the next 21 years. There is no plan in place for this.

Actually this isn't a revelation that has jumped out of nowhere. We have known about this challenge for quite some time. There is even the beginnings of a mini-housing boom with the pickings being sufficient to interest German building contractors.\(^10\) All the main political parties know there is a problem. The Conservatives snipe about the pressures placed on their rural heartlands whilst acknowledging the need to

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\(^8\) Just in case that you are not aware Sim City is a computer game about building a city.


meet pent up demand in the housing market. The Liberal Democrats have few hard policies in this area apart from the admirable commitment to bring back 250,000 homes into occupation (such is the scale of under-occupation in contemporary Britain – or houses used as stores of wealth). However, in the spring of 2014 the coalition government started to talk up the idea of new towns again – led of course by private developers. No spades are near the ground as of yet.

Labour meanwhile continues to pursue the interventionist tradition of building planned new settlements. Their big idea in the 2010s was ‘Eco-towns’, self-contained settlements of around 20,000 people underpinned with the latest in sustainable design. With four sites chosen from 15 potential locations this project now is hanging on by its teeth with one project outside Bicester, Oxfordshire, still on the cards. The Master Plan, set out over 40 fields northwest of the established market town of Bicester, was unveiled on the 6th December 2013. It is a long way from built. Anyway when it is built it will make but a small dent in the long-term demand for housing in England.

Ed Balls, the Labour Party Shadow Chancellor hasn’t given up on extending such thinking for the future. In late November 2013 he told the National House-building Council that in order to fulfil his party’s commitment to be build 200,000 homes a year he would revive development corporations like the one that set in train Milton Keynes. New towns, new cities even, were on Labour’s agenda. Where? Now that was a question as yet unaddressed.

The future is – peering through the political muddle – one that certainly involves more urbanisation in England, particularly in the southeast. We will become more crowded, infilling cities, building up, building out and building anew. Cumulatively England needs to build a Milton Keynes every year for two decades. But here is something worse: this still might not make housing anymore affordable for anybody under 30, whether renting or buying. All we will do is keep apace with demand, if that. Affordable: now that would really take some political will and it would have to leave the market behind as the key determinant of price especially if we are to avoid the ‘ticky-tacky’ housing that presaged modernity in the aspirational 1960s.

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11 The minutes of a feisty 2012 debate on ‘Planning and Housing Supply’ give a good contemporary flavour of this issue. With the emphasis on localism MPs queue up to condemn new developments in their constituencies whilst acknowledging there is a problem. Access at via Hansard at http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/cm131024/halltext/131024h0001.htm#13102452000002


Houston, we have a problem.

Deep in Texas is a nightmare, a dystopia of the now. It calls itself a city and with 91,000 residents you might think so as well. Yet visit its city centre and what do you find? Car parks. This place is called Pearland.

I had never heard of it either until I swept my digital eye across the sprawling suburbs of Houston. Houston, an oil city with a population of 2.1 million people, is one of the fastest growing urban areas in the United States. It is home to oil multi-national Conoco-Philips, war outsourcer Halliburton and the Johnson Space Centre, the control centre for the Apollo missions to the Moon.

Yet the lessons for the future we can learn from Houston do not concern space. Houston can show us something fundamental about how not to live on earth and Pearland is a perfect example to illustrate this point.

Pearland occupies 47.5 square miles compared to 34 square miles for the county of Milton Keynes. For comparison these two urban areas, both set out predominantly with the car as the default way of getting anywhere, have huge differences in population density – 6,764 people per square mile in Milton Keynes and 1,915 in Pearland. Barely room to swing a car jack in Milton Keynes.

Pearland’s centre is an all-America affair: Macy’s, Hollister, Victoria’s Secret, Burger King and Robert Kratschmer MD, Plastic Surgery all vie for your dollars in its neat, functional mall. However over 50% of the land area of Pearland’s centre is car parking. There are pavements, they just happen to be empty. You can drive your car right up to the store entrance, if there is a space.

Surrounding the town centre of Pearland are prairies of suburban cul-de-sacs whose relative socio-economic status can be determined by how dense the individual houses are clustered together and how many swimming pools can be seen in back gardens courtesy of Google maps. In some estates you would need binoculars to see your neighbour’s house.

Then there is Google’s street view. You can go for a digital ramble: down Trinity Bay Drive, swing a right into Biscayne Bay Drive and on and on. Everything is neat; well-clipped, well-painted. Everybody has a garage; no cars are parked on the road. Houses are detached, some sizeable – executive homes we’d call them in the UK. Four bedrooms is the norm, and at least two bathrooms. Only about 15% of Pearland’s households have an income below the UK median household income of £23,200 ($38,048). This is the American dream floating on a raft of multi-trillion dollar borrowing. This level of detached consumerism exists because Houston is awash with cheap

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14 The amazingly detailed US Bureau of Census local fact finder has a full breakdown of household income in Pearland- or anywhere else in the USA for that matter. Access at http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_11_5YR_DP03
energy. Cars take its residents from air-conditioned house to air-conditioned mall, to air-conditioned cinema, via air-conditioned ‘Gringo’s Chilli Shack’ and from heated swimming pools in a tropical climate.

Way back in 1989 environmental scientists Peter Newman and Jeffrey Kenworthy spelt this all out in a simple graph (see figure 6.1) that has been much replicated. US cities such as Houston used far more energy per capita than their European counterparts to enjoy a not too dissimilar material lifestyle. Not only that but the price they paid for this was substantial.

The vast majority of Houston’s citizens drive to work (71% according to the last census) along 739 miles of freeway. However it is far from a hassle-free experience. In fact the average Houston car driver spends 52 hours a year sitting in traffic jams with a cumulative cost to the city (lost productivity, wasted fuel) of $3.12 billion. That is over 2 days a year spent, on average, stationary in traffic jams. Then there is the pollution. Houston has the 7th highest levels of low-level ozone in the United States according to the American Lung association.

There is a fundamental truth to be considered here. We will not have cheap oil forever, not even Texans can believe that we will. The petrol age will be a relatively short epoch in global history.

In the future we may still have cars and we certainly will have the legacy of cities designed for cars. What we cannot consider is a continuation of this ‘carmageddon’ whether it is on car jammed freeways of Pearland Houston, or in the exponentially growing highway system of China. Nor can we countenance the urban sprawl that desperately tries to address the desire for your own personal idyll within a functioning city. This is a lesson that must be considered when thinking about how and where an additional 10 million plus people are going to live in England. Atomised suburbia linked through the wasteful burning of a scarce resource simply is not sustainable.

Houston’s time is up, well, some time soon... maybe.

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Figure 6.1

URBAN DENSITY AND TRANSPORT RELATED ENERGY CONSUMPTION

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Chapter 6 – A Global and Urban World

**URBAN DENSITY AND TRANSPORT RELATED ENERGY CONSUMPTION**

Figure 6.1

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URBAN DENSITY AND TRANSPORT RELATED ENERGY CONSUMPTION

Transport related energy consumption (Gigajoules per capita per year)

Urban density (inhabitants per hectare)

Figure 6.1

URBAN DENSITY AND TRANSPORT RELATED ENERGY CONSUMPTION

The endless city.

When Deng Xiaoping, the ‘paramount leader’ of the Chinese Communist Party from 1977 to 1992 announced, in 1980, a first Export Processing Zone in the small southern city Shenzhen – just across the border from Hong Kong – he could have had little idea of what he was unleashing on the world.

No doubt he wanted a positive economic impact from this coy flirting with western capitalism – market socialism he coined it. Yet what has happened as a consequence of this development on the Pearl River Delta can only leave you rubbing your eyes in disbelief. From 200,000 people in 1980 Shenzhen is now a city of 14 million. It sits at the heart of a continuous urban region of 120 million. This is the world’s largest mega-urban region, something that has been dubbed ‘the endless city’. Houston seems almost quaint and bijou in comparison.

Flying into Hong Kong International Airport, jutting out into the South China Sea from the island of Lantau, it takes a further two islands and three substantial bridges before the mainland of China is reached. Here the option is to head east into Hong Kong (population 7 million) or north, through the 2.4 mile long Tai Lam Tunnel into the heart of the Pearl River Delta mega city. Shenzhen looms vertiginously once out of the Tai Lam tunnel and is rapidly reached via a wide toll motorway zipping past the substantial and connected New Territories towns of Shek Kong and Yuen Long.

Sticking to the eastern edge of The Pearl River Shenzhen is skirted by the motorway linking the industrial cities of Bao’an and Nanshan (both a million strong). The continuous urbanisation stretching northwards from Shenzhen encompasses such well-known cities as Shajingzhen and Houjiezhernen before 8 million strong Dongguan rises out of the smog. Here Samsung make your TVs, Nokia your phones, Dell your laptop and the world’s largest photovoltaic cell factory drives down the global price of solar energy.

This endless city is far from spent. Westwards is Guangzhou (13 million), once known as the port of Canton and epicentre of Britain’s pernicious trade in opium to China. I can personally testify that little of historical interest remains in this teeming city. Its neighbour is Foshan (7.1 million) and southwards back down the western side of the Pearl River delta towards the South China Sea is Zhongshan (4 million) before the twin surprises of Portuguese chic and mega casinos which define the compact colonial city of Macau (a mere half million, albeit packed in like sardines at 20,497 people per square kilometre), surrounded, as Macau is, by the 2 million inhabitants of the city of Zhuhai. I think we’ve scratched the surface of the endless city.
A substantial number of the population of the South China ‘Endless City’ are migrants from all over China. They lack basic residents rights as a consequence of the ‘Hukou’ permit system. Hukou is the long-standing system of household registration that has been used to try and control rural to urban migration in China. Rural migrants in Chinese cities tend to live at the edges of mainstream society, drawn by the work and willing to live in very sparse living conditions, often dormitories. They provide the cheap labour that makes your Samsung TV affordable.

Up to 75% of the population of many of the cities in the ‘Endless City’ lack a Hukou permit that confers upon them full residency rights. They fulfil the criteria to be considered ‘the precariat’ a newly proposed sub-division of social class who are characterised by the precarious nature of their economic well-being.18

It is not surprising that such insecurity, family displacement and gender imbalance due to migration result in a ‘Dickensian’ society that, although Gradgrindishly ‘workful’, is also one suffused with a seedy, criminal and corrupt underbelly. The Hong Kong based South China Morning post describes the city of Dongguan as “an industrial sweatshop, the mainland’s sex capital and a hotbed of crime.”19 Britain’s Daily Telegraph goes further claiming that 10% of Dongguan’s migrant population are in some way involved in the city’s sex industry with 300,000 sex workers supporting a dizzying array of massage parlors, neon-lit karaoke bars and old fashioned brothels.20

If we are drawn to think of the city in terms of interconnected complexities as writers like Leo Hollis and theorists like Professor Geoffrey West argue21, 22 then the ‘Endless City’ of the Pearl River Delta is the dizzying pinnacle of human ingenuity and complexity. It is multi faced and layered, stretching from the downtrodden precariat to the elevated captains of industry who have insulated themselves from the productive realities of their endeavors behind a wall of luxurious chintz and consumption excess. In that sense Dongguan is not unlike mid 19th century Sheffield with its industrialists peering down through the smog from their mansions on the hill to the choking proletariat in the teeming valleys below. However Dongguan today has better life expectancy and better welfare than the mid Victorian Sheffield slums.

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18 As Geography Professor David Harvey says in his 2013 book ‘Rebel Cities’: “The important and ever expanding labor of making and sustaining urban life is increasingly done by insecure, often part-time and disorganized low paid labor. The so-called ‘precariat’ has displaced the traditional ‘proletariat.’ The original use of the phrase ‘precariat’ is attributed to British economist Guy Standing in his 2011 work ‘The precariat – the new dangerous class.’


21 Hollis, L (2013) ‘Cities are Good For You.’ Bloomsbury London

There are other areas – globally - of merging urban conurbations developing their own sense of the endless city. Some might argue that London and the southeast of England are exhibiting attributes of such hyper-urbanity. It may also be pointed out that the same sharp socio-economic divisions that act as the architecture of such cities are already prevalent in London. The ‘Endless City’ is a signifier of man and his relationship with his planet in the 21st century.

Hustle and bustle.

To live in a city is to live cheek by jowl with other humans. This is how most humans live today. Daily I see hundreds of different people. Some are just a passing glance, a barely conscious presence, others we intensely share our lives with. Most fall somewhere in between.

I’ve seen purported facts which claim something like the average New Yorker sees more people before their first coffee and bagel than the average medieval peasant saw in a life-time, or some such. I figure that anything that suggests this as a ‘fact’ is in reality an educated guess at best. However, I guess the general gist of such statements have some broad credence. In the past populations were both smaller and less dense and so you met fewer people.

Urbanisation has really opened up thinking about how our species, in a relative short space of time has adapted to living in conditions of extreme proximity to so many others. Is there an optimum density for living? Is there such a thing as over-population from a social perspective? This is the domain of social psychologists but many other disciplines have had their say and what we can deduce about this should have a significant impact on how we adapt, plan and re-configure the world’s urban spaces.

There is of course a plethora of ‘common sense knowledge’ and research into the impact that proximity or population density may have on human wellbeing. Broadly higher population densities are thought to be a less desirable thing. Psychologists talk about territoriality, the sense of personal space and the need for defensive protection of such space. We have even reached the stage where experimental designs using avatars competing for scarce resources can be observed and tentative conclusions can be drawn about territoriality.23

Furthermore many of the ‘ills of modern society have been laid at the door of high-density living. Ever since scientists started cramming rats into packed cages and observing aggression, infanticide and infant neglect, a whole range of social pathologies have been laid at the door of high-density living.24 Back in 1979 American geographer Barry Boots set out the charge sheet of high density urban living: starvation,

environmental pollution, slums, disease, increased crime, economic stress, mental illness, increased levels of addiction, family breakdown and a reduced quality of life.25

Whether density per se can be said to accelerate these urban ills is doubtful. Some of the wealthiest places on earth have some of the highest densities. Singapore (7,669 people km\(^2\)) Manhattan (26,668 km\(^2\)) and Monaco (18,668 km\(^2\)) come to mind. Ponder the fact that Paris (21,196 km\(^2\)) has a higher aggregate population density than Mumbai.26

It is increasingly acknowledged that high density living in large urban areas can actually be a positive force. A quick refresh of the graph in the ‘Houston, we have a problem’ story will demonstrate that it is broadly the high-density cities that have the lowest per captia energy use.

The idea that human behaviour, the complex social, economic and environmental interactions that are enacted within urban space can be reduced to mathematically modelled theories is something that appeals to a particular mindset. Geoffrey West is a British physicist who spent much of his early career getting to grips with string theory and then trying to persuade the scientific community that a simple mathematical relationship linked energy and mass in the animal world. This idea, not universally accepted, argues that the metabolic rate of an animal is equal to its mass taken to the three-fourths power which translates into acknowledging that larger species need less energy per kilogram of flesh than smaller animals.27

West on arriving at the multi-disciplinary Santa Fe Institute in Arizona, USA, turned his attention to the idea that cities could be ‘mathematised’. That is that the broad dynamics of urban living could be reduced to algorithmic formulas.28 The most heralded assertion made by West was that the larger a city became the wealthier its inhabitants became. A doubling of city size will increase wealth by 15% as a consequence of greater interactions and trade.

26 All population density data taken from a mixture of Wikipedia linked sources particularly http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cities_proper_by_population_density
At the heart of West’s thinking is that proximity confers a greater degree of human interaction leading to innovation through the exchange of thinking and ideas. Many of our connections are what are sometimes asserted as being ‘weak’ – not regular, nor with a high degree of mutual reciprocity – but even these provide us with the opportunity to forward our development. The crowd on the streets is a crowd of opportunity both negative and positive but on balance the positives outweigh the negatives.

If such thinking has any substance it may result in the ‘endless city’ of China increasingly becoming the global centre of technological, social and cultural innovation. It may require something beyond simply size.

**Precarious lives.**

US military planners are less confident than Professor Geoffrey West that a city can be organised, quantified and understood. In 2004 the US Army War College declared: “The future of warfare lies in the streets, sewers, high-rise buildings, and sprawl of houses that form the broken cities of the world.”29 In the Aerospace Power Journal serving US Air Force Captain Troy Thomas reiterated the point stating that “rapid urbanization in developing countries results in a battlespace environment that is decreasingly knowable since it is increasingly unplanned.”30

According to the US military, 90% of conflict casualties in the past two decades have been sustained in countries that could be broadly said to be in the under-developed ‘Global South’. One of the key concerns facing military planners in the US is that poverty is being increasingly urbanised. Once insurgency was a rural phenomenon. Today it is the chaotic, unplanned housing of the burgeoning urban poor in growing cities like Karachi, Kinshasa and Nairobi where insurgency, rebellion and revolt is most feared by the powers that be. The slum remains a place of great political fear for the powerful of the world.

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Perhaps the fears of US and European military planners should be a little more focused closer to home. Although the unplanned chaos that characterises the ‘urban slum’ is never as full throttle in the cities of the developed world such areas – housing the increasing precarious, uncertain and dispossessed urban poor – have the potential to set in train a social and political conflagration anywhere in the world. Witness Cairo, witness Bahrain, Bangkok, Madrid, Athens and Sao Paulo. In 2013 all of these cities have seen their dispossessed assert themselves in the street. Some governments have been resilient, others have teetered and some have collapsed. It has been so since cities first began to proliferate. The dynamism and potential of the city have drawn the world’s poor and dispossessed. For many it is the only place they can go to extend even the most tenuous of finger-holds on some semblance of survival. The city is a place where even the most meagre of scraps can keep a person alive with human resilience and ingenuity tested to the full. It is not a place where subsistence can be drawn from the soil; to survive it must come from life itself.

Over time cities have produced some of the most despoiled and dispirited lives ever lived. When the 24-year-old Freidrich Engels produced his withering account of the Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844 he began his geography of poverty right in the heart of London. Engels described the ‘rookery’ of St Giles, right in the heart of London, (we would know it as Soho today):

“...The houses are occupied from cellar to garret, filthy within and without, and their appearance is such that no human being could possibly wish to live in them. But all this is nothing in comparison with the dwellings in the narrow courts and alleys between the streets, entered by covered passages between the houses, in which the filth and tottering ruin surpass all description. Scarcely a whole window-pane can be found, the walls are crumbling, door-posts and window-frames loose and broken, doors of old boards nailed together, or altogether wanting in this thieves’ quarter, where no doors are needed, there being nothing to steal. Heaps of garbage and ashes lie in all directions, and the foul liquids emptied before the doors gather in stinking pools. Here live the poorest of the poor.”

Today this description could pass for Dharavi, the mighty slum of Mumbai, or Kibera in Nairobi. Around the world over a billion people live in slums. It is unhelpful to think of a slum as a single homogeneous solution to housing the poor of the city. There are many variations upon a theme. In his relentless and faintly apocalyptic book ‘Planet of Slums’ Mike Davis provides a considered typology of slums. The city centre provides seven types from ‘pavement dwellers’ to ‘hand me down colonial tenements’. The urban periphery provides a further seven types. Some slums are so old that they are an accepted part of

the urban fabric; others are transient almost existing as ‘pop up poverty’, clinging to the most marginal of niches in the city until pushed on by regulation, repression and revulsion.

You do not have to cast your eyes to distant lands to see the ingredients of the slum coalescing. In the cities of Britain the precarious existence of poverty sits like a warning at the bottom of society. In cities like Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and some parts of London multiple deprivation levels cover 50% of the population. There has been a 26% fall in available affordable housing. In 2013 17.1% or 3.5 million of UK households had no member of working age in any form of paid employment. These workless households are spatially concentrated in the most rundown neighbourhoods of our cities. That is obvious.

The idea of a precariat, a social class that is not necessarily workless but characterised by economic uncertainty, ‘anomic attitudes’ and a lack of social solidarity is perhaps an even clearer signal of the tenuous existence of many of the global urban class. As a conceptual idea the precariat has been framed by the work of Guy Standing a Professor of Development at the School of African and Oriental Studies, the University of London. Much debated the precariat has a clear global reach.

Whether it is the underemployed of Cairo, the indentured graduates of Sheffield or the PhDs working as nannies and Starbucks' baristas solidity, security and optimism about the future are increasingly in short supply. Cities are increasingly repositories for not just unerring poverty but also an angry and disillusioned population who can see a fall into poverty tangibly all around them. The poor are their neighbours, the people they share their streets with; it could be them.

If urban size can increase wealth by 15%, as the ‘quants’ of the Santa Fe Institute suggest, then it might not be unreasonable to think that a similar scaling could occur for social radicalisation and far from being ordered and predictable it may be an unpredictable terrain mediated by the spatial fluidity of the digital age; nihilistic and violent at times; creative and constructive at other times. Diffused and dangerous. Difficult to game an insurgency war, but US military planners have realised that already.

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33 Department for Communities and Local Government. 2013. 26% decline in all affordable property available in the UK 2012 to 2013.
36 See the critique here at The New Left Review as an example of the debate surrounding the idea of the precariat. Access at the website of the New Left Review. http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/we_are_all_precarious_on_the_concept_of_the_precariat_and_its_misuses
37 The PhDs working as a nanny and Starbucks barista are a central story line in Doonesbury cartoon, syndicated in The Guardian December 2013.
Getting a toe-hold.

It was in a suburban garden in south-east Oxford. Not quite dreaming spires territory but have you seen the price of property in Oxford today? OK it was bijou, and wooden, oh and not heated but hey what do you expect for £450 a month in Oxford. It was a garden shed.38

Before being unmasked by the Daily Mail, Mr Farkas of ‘nice location near Florence Park’, Oxford had received up to 20 enquires about renting his shed. True it was new, had a splendid newly skimmed concrete floor and you could avail yourself of the facilities in his home – a mere cold shod shuffle across the driveway. Asked who had come to look at the property Mr Farkas revealed:

“Some were students currently living in Oxford but many were professional people with full-time jobs who just can’t afford to live in their current properties.”

Multiply this scenario by 10,000 and you have the new slums of West London. Try the streets north of the Uxbridge Road going through Southall in the London borough of Ealing. Zoom in on Googlemap and get your eye in and there at the back of most houses are flat-roofed constructions: garages, sheds, homes. Considering the scale of this recent addition to the London cityscape it is not surprising that a fair amount of media energy has been expended on this story. A Chris Rogers-led BBC investigation in February 2012 exposed the sheds as little more than hovels populated in the main by the most marginalised of recent migrants into the UK. This, the investigation implied, was exploitation by relatively wealthy 2nd and 3rd generation Punjabi migrants – the home owners - of recent Punjabi newcomers – the shed dwellers.39

In March 2013, Ealing Council were given £270,919 by The Home Office to help them ‘take action’ against unscrupulous landlords in their borough.40 You would be surprised if such an amount of cash could transform this blight in any way beyond the slightest of dents and the relatively efficient harvesting of illegal immigrants to massage quota figures. In a city like London where affordable housing in close proximity to the centre is effectively being squeezed out by both the public and private sector, solutions are thrown up that an unfettered market outside of regulation grasps.

39 ‘Sheds with beds’ are London’s modern day slums.’ BBC News 27.02.2012. Access the full news story at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-17185294
It is the same in much of the rest of the world. Mike Davis, in his book ‘Planet of Slums’ sets out a wide range of evidence concerning the proliferation of landlordism and unregulated rental markets in a disparate range of cities.\textsuperscript{41} Research by Diana Lee-Smith in Nairobi\textsuperscript{42} confirms the observations of World Bank researchers Marianne Fay and Anna Wellenstein that the sub-letting in low-income areas is a core way any potential equity can be monetized but often ‘in an exploitative relationship to even poorer people.’\textsuperscript{43} Every space counts.

Such examples aren’t confined to places we would automatically recognise as being a slum such as Kibera in Nairobi. Hong Kong has the sixth highest per capita income in the world, $50,936 in 2012,\textsuperscript{44} yet it has hundreds of thousands of citizens crammed into cubicles and rooftop shanties. On the other hand many who rent off the government sub-let their own home in the private market or have bought additional property in the private market. Speculative landlordism, where property is divided into the smallest functional space, has been a feature of the city for decades. In Hong Kong thousands of properties are empty whilst many sleep on balconies.\textsuperscript{45}

In the 1990s I stayed in a room in Hong Kong with barely room to fit a bed, a wall mounted TV and a door that half-opened. It was in the infamous Chungking Mansions. One evening a fire broke and I watched air-conditioning units pinging out of smoke shrouded windows. With a murky rain it felt like I was living in the 2019 Los Angeles of Blade Runner.

Everything is relative. The rickshaw owners slumped in the back of their place of work and construction labourers huddled under tarpaulins stretched across pavements, both common sites in Indian cities, are just solving their own personal accommodation crisis. They need to live where they work and thus they live in the cracks within the urban structure. They live beyond regulation. To them 35 square metres in a newly built Dharavi flat is luxury and at £90,000 it is priced as such.\textsuperscript{46}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{WorldBank2013} World Bank 2013.
\bibitem{Holland2013} Holland, T (2013) ‘Just enforcing the rules could end Hong Kong’s housing shortage.’ South China Morning Post 31.10.2013.
\bibitem{McCloud2010} In the excellent 2010 two part TV series for BBC TV ‘Slummin It’ presenter Kevin McCloud visits a newly built flat in the heart of Dharavi, consisting of 2 rooms and a toilet, about 35 square meters on the market at 50 lakh rupees. You do, McCloud observes, “get a cornice”.
\end{thebibliography}
In Los Angeles up to 100,000 homeless people camp on downtown streets, parks or amongst the landscaping that edges the multitude of freeways. In the way that Americans do make such claims Skid Row in Los Angeles is often cited as the world’s oldest community of homeless people. I’m not sure whether they have suggested this on tourist brochures, yet.

Skid Row is not a street as such but an inner city district less than 2 kilometres southeast from the glass skyscrapers of financial downtown LA. A recent piece of photojournalism in The Huffington Post paid tribute to its enduring magnetism for California’s dispossessed, waifs, strays, drug addled and mentally ill.47

Wherever you are in the world’s cities there are those whose occupation of space is precarious, they have but a toehold on existence. There is nowhere else to fall. All of this is normally in plain sight of the rich but more importantly in plain sight of those whose existence is not Skid Row but whose uncertainties and precariousness make Skid Row a potential reality if not as a place but as an idea.

Shard enfreude.

Everything about London’s 306 metre high ‘The Shard’ screams power. It is not a public building. It is the private space of the wealthy that can look down upon all others. Across London hundreds of the homeless catch a sparkling glimpse of its vertiginous spires as they stretch out on their cardboard beds.

Actually that is not entirely true, ‘The Shard’ isn’t completely private. You, me, we can visit ‘The Shard’: we simply require £29.95 and a head for heights. But in the main the hotel, restaurants, private companies and residential tenants that call The Shard home are the moneyed in society. Let’s not beat about the bush, the rich.

To some extent the wealthiest in society have always attempted to isolate themselves from the hoi polloi, the many. Palaces, country estates, fortified castles all have served to keep the powerful away from those over whom they exert power. This is an idea that has enjoyed a great deal of ‘trickle down’ over the ages. Now we encapture whole urban districts and set them apart from the rest of the city so that the wealthy can live their lives unencumbered by those less fortunate than them. We fence and secure these areas, we bring in private security and beyond these confines the fear sets in. The biggest fear being ‘what if we had to live on the other side of the fence?’ Looking at the less successful, insecure lives of others can convey a sense of pleasurable security in your own good fortune. The Germans have a word for it.

At the southern edge of the Los Angeles conurbation sits the district of Laguna Woods. It is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2014. Laguna Woods claim to fame is that it is one of the oldest gated communities for older people in the world. In the 2010 US census the median age of its 16,192 residents was 77. Average household size was 1.41. Most of the houses are large. It will not surprise you that for every 100 women there are only 55 men.

Apart from the attractive location in Orange County, LA, proximity to beaches and wide selection of suitably expensive property one of the key attractions is the 24-hour gated security. Each of the 13 entrances is ‘policed’ by a private security firm, regular marked and un-marked patrols trawl the streets and even internet security advice is given. Unsurprisingly for a ‘town’ of elderly folk violent crime rates are low. I suspect they probably would be without all that security but you can never be safe enough. Actually it isn’t perfect. Between 2007 and 2010 as US crime rates fell nationally they rose in Laguna Woods, albeit from a very small base. And this was after 2006, a year that kept the local crime correspondent

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48 Price for one adult on 31.12.13. £29.95. Information from http://www.theviewfromtheshard.com/#plan-your-visit/booking-and-tickets. Advance tickets are £5 cheaper
49 All data from 2010 US Census Census report DEC_10_SF1_PCT15
50 Laguna Woods Village website details of the ‘Security umbrella’ can be accessed here http://www.lagunawoodsvillage.com/section.cfm?id=503
of the Laguna Times nose to the grindstone. There was a murder, a rape, six robberies, two assaults and 79 thefts. Total insulation from the vagaries of life is not possible. Nobody was arrested for the manufacture of crystal meth but drug use was high, eleven pharmacies exist within the gated area.

Sometimes all that security simply isn’t enough. On the gated community of ‘The Retreat at Twin Lakes’ in the suburban town of Sanford in Miami, USA, on the 26th February 2012, a young black man, Trayvon Martin, was shot dead by George Zimmerman. Zimmerman was keen on law and order: he was an insurance fraud investigator and had enrolled on a criminal justice degree. His ambition was to become a judge. He judged Martin to be a miscreant with no reason to be in the gated community and after an altercation he shot him dead. Self-defence he claimed. Martin was an unarmed schoolboy returning to his father’s girlfriend’s house within the same gated community after going to a local store to buy some snacks. However you can never been too careful, what was a young black man doing in a gated community? This wasn’t his place in the city.

Such gated communities exist in my hometown, Sheffield. One is a mere ten minute walk from my house. I’m scared of going into it (even if I could get past the keypad entry and solid metal gates) you never know what law and order vigilantes you might find, fearful of people like me. My elder daughter thinks it is the domain of divorced middle-aged men, scared of their ex-wives. I have yet to cross its threshold some fifteen years after it closed (opened) its gates. Part of the development used to be the Victorian poor house.

Increasingly across the world what was once urban public space is now private space. Even city centres like Liverpool’s ‘One’ shopping mall are privately ‘policed’ and you try carrying out a GCSE Geography survey in Sheffield’s Meadowhall Shopping Centre and your feet will not touch the ground as security escort you into the endless prairies of its surrounding car parks. Still, no beggars either.

Whether it is the fortress-like communities of South Africa that kept Oscar Pistorious’s girlfriend safe or the sanitised suburban housing communities of Bengaluru that keep the world’s IT professionals away from the rest of this great Indian city, living in an urban bubble is becoming yet another way to set yourself apart from everybody else, particularly the unfortunate ones who you both fear and pity.

52 There is so much detail on-line about this infamous case but Wikipedia does itself proud with a very detailed and fully referenced account. Access at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Trayvon_Martin#Background_of_the_shooting
53 Monbiot G (2014) The Guardian 07.01.14
The rich of Niger and the poor of Norway.

In 1990 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) adopted the thinking of Indian Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen and the Pakistani economist Mahbub ul-Haq. These two friends devised a measure of overall development that moved us away from a narrow, reductive economic measure of wellbeing – GDP per capita – towards a more holistic measure. A central idea in their thinking was “people are the real wealth of a nation.” They came up with the Human Development Index (HDI) an amalgam of educational, health and wealth based data. A league table was born.

Currently Norway is the most developed nation in the world and Niger comes in 186th, and last. Britain is a credible 26th.54

Increasingly much of the rich world must seem like a ‘gated community’ on a continental scale to the poor of sub-Saharan Africa and no doubt in countries such as Niger what wealth that has been accumulated by that country’s economic elite (I suspect probably the same as the country’s political elite) will be possessively defended, probably behind high walls or slipped out of the country to a numbered bank account in Jersey.

But who might the rich of Niger be? Does the world’s least developed country have such a group? It certainly has inequality. The World Bank accords it a Gini co-efficient of 34. This measure of inequality within a society reflects a pattern of relative wealth distribution in Niger not dissimilar to that in the UK.55 So we know there will be a relative economic elite.

Whoever it is they have a mighty country in which to enjoy their gotten gains, Niger is Africa’s largest country at 1.27 million square kilometres. OK 80% of that land is taken up by the unrelenting aridity of the Sahara desert and in respect to that geographical term ‘the periphery.’ Niger is the periphery of the periphery. The edge of everywhere.

Although far nearer Europe than any of the colonial baubles of Asia the area we now know as Niger didn’t really count for anything other than a big empty space on any maps prior to the 1800s. We have one Mungo Park, a contemporary and friend of the great Victorian plant-hunter Joseph Banks, to acclaim as the first European to make an exploratory dent on the lands now encaptured by the state of Niger.56 Obviously Niger has a long pre-colonial history but in the way of things it didn’t really ‘exist’ until it had been ‘discovered’. It was one of the last parts of Africa to be claimed by Europe when the French took colonial control in the 1920s. Niger gained independence in 1960.

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54 All data for the current UNDP HDI assessment 2013 can be found at https://data.undp.org/dataset/Table-1-Human-Development-Index-and-its-components/wxub-qc5k
Mungo Park was another footloose Scot with a penchant for the gospel and incredibly arduous travails. He made two trips to Niger. The first, between 1795 and 1797, saw him reach the upper reaches of the Niger River. The second, in 1805, saw him drown in the Niger River.

Modern ‘heroes’ of geography can now be awarded the Mungo Park Medal if they have made an ‘outstanding contribution to geographical knowledge through exploration and/or research’ especially in, ‘potentially hazardous physical and or social environments’. He set the bar high but today it tends to be awarded to people who survive hazardous environments.

Niger remains hazardous, mainly to the locals. Life expectancy is low at 56.1 years and the country’s population pyramid is the textbook shape of a steeply rising, short, peaked pyramid beloved of geography teachers demonstrating how the poor breed like, well the poor. Very few people die of cancer because malaria, birth trauma, low birth weight and influenza get them first.

In Niger average national income in 2011 was $390 per person with 60% of the population living below a staggeringly low poverty line of $156 per person per year in urban areas. It is lower in Niger’s rural areas. As the World Bank observes “agriculture, on which 80 percent of households depend, is extremely vulnerable to erratic and declining rainfall and periodic drought.”

The only significant export of Niger is uranium accounting for 72% of the country’s export earnings. This is a commodity that has seen its world price decline 70% between 2007 and 2013 as demand has fallen due as much to increasing efficiencies in uranium use as nervousness about future nuclear power programmes.

Even within such unremitting poverty the opportunity to accrue great wealth remains. Aliko Dangote, the Nigerian who is Africa’s richest person with an estimated fortune of $20 billion is investing $350 million to build a cement plant on the edge of Niger’s capital Niamey. Cement is how he made his first fortune in Nigeria. The plant will have its own power station with excess power sold into what exists as the electricity grid in Niger.

But the question remains: who are Niger’s rich?

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57 Royal Scottish Geographical Society. Awarded since 1930.
58 A full range of demographic data and health statistics for Niger can be accessed at http://www.worldlifeexpectancy.com/country-health-profile/niger
Similar continuums of wealth and wellbeing such as the Human Development Index exist within countries. To see where you fit in an economic league table if you live in the United Kingdom those knowledgeable folk at the Institute of Fiscal Studies have produced a calculator that can place any citizen of the UK on a distribution graph of household income.\textsuperscript{62} My family and I come in on the 39\textsuperscript{th} percentile. 61\% of households in the UK have greater economic wealth than us. Sounds about right, I am a public sector employee. In the past this would have been called working class. Globally I am in the top 20\% of the world’s wealthiest citizens. Do I look up or down?

At a global level if I am looking up I am looking towards Norway. Norway has the highest HDI score in the world and the 4\textsuperscript{th} largest per capita GDP income, some $65,640.\textsuperscript{63} Still it isn’t all-perfect in Norway. I know it is hard to believe but even Norway has poverty, of a kind. In May 2011 it was announced that nearly 10\% of the population of Oslo were living in poverty.\textsuperscript{64} The definition of poverty in Norway is 50\% of the median wage in the local authority area. In Oslo the threshold to be officially living in poverty in 2011 was anybody living on less than $24,399 after tax (£14,622). Those that found themselves in this position in Norway were more often than not recent migrants to the country and those afflicted by drug dependency or mental health issues.

Poverty is a relative measure. To compare the poor of Oslo with the poor of Niamey would be a pointless exercise. The precarious nature of poverty is something shared by all those on the margins of society but comparing the rich across the world is not so difficult. The richest individual in Norway could relate to the richest in Niger, for them there is far less difference.

\textsuperscript{62} Institute of Fiscal Studies website. Access at http://www.ifs.org.uk/wheredoyoufitin/


Buying the world.

On January 8th 2014 everybody in Norway became a millionaire. Steady those gasps because that is a Norwegian Kroner millionaire. 5.1 million Norwegians had managed to stash away in their government pension pot 5.1 trillion kroner. Collectively this pension pot owned just over 1% of all private global equity.66

If you want a sense of perspective try this. If the British government had engaged in such a programme of investment with the profits of North Sea oil and gas, because that is where the lions share of this Norwegian money has come from, and they achieved an identical citizen to wealth ratio the UK would have a global investment fund of £6.3 trillion, or £100,000 for every man, woman and child in the country.

What did we do with the profits of North Sea hydrocarbons? Mostly we privatised them. By 1987 the UK government had sold its remaining shares in British Petroleum. This privatisation, at the height of Margaret Thatcher's political power, was a greater long-term loss to the British exchequer than even Gordon Brown's ill-timed sale of 395 tons of Britain's gold reserves between 1999 and 2002. That came out as a potential loss of £9.4 billion by 2011.

In the five years from 2008 to 2012 BP made pre-tax profits of $139.84 billion. OK so we scooped up £24.35 billion in tax from BP in that period but even a 50% shareholding in BP over that same period would have given us a tidy investment return of another £20 billion, plus the tax of course.67 Would we, could we in the UK have built up a fund to rival Norway's? They only started seriously investing in 1996.68 The UK could have been at this since the early 1980s.

The most startling aspect of Norway's sovereign wealth fund is its global reach. It truly is a global wealth fund. It holds 2.25% of all quoted share equity in EU markets. Lets start with the UK. The Government Pension Fund Global (GPFG) has 447 UK investments of a value approaching £49 billion. These include everything from Aviva (1.78%) to Xstrata (2.91%). Just looking at supermarkets the GPFG holds 2.43% of Morrisons, 4.91% of Tesco, 2.28% of Marks and Spencer and 2.32% of Sainsbury's.69

67 All figures are calculated from data on BP Financial returns found at http://www.marketwatch.com/investing/stock/bp/financials and http://quotes.wsj.com/BP/financials
It may the case that my calculations are imperfect, I think not, I have checked them but if you beg to differ contact me and explain why. You might be correct.
68 The history of Norway's Government Pension Fund Global (GPFG) can be found on this PDF file from the Norwegian Ministry of Finance. http://www.regjeringen.no/pages/37984857/FactSheetGPFG_3Q2013.pdf
Globally the GPFG holds everything from Egyptian government bonds, £2 billion worth of Apple shares (OK only 0.74% of that company’s value but still) and 0.28% of Facebook. It is hard to imagine that there is a private global oil company that the Norwegians don’t have some stock in. The USA sees 2,455 investments worth £107.2 billion and India a mere £2.1 billion in 125 investments. I could go on, and on, and on. It is a breathtaking portfolio. The Norwegians are buying the world.

And it is not just them. Saudi Arabia have invested £412 billion, The United Arab Emirates £382 billion but the big daddy sovereign wealth fund is China with £794 billion stretched over three different funds. Even Libya with £39 billion and Angola with £3 billion have government wealth funds with portfolios of global investments. All told £3.7 trillion of investments are held worldwide by national governments in Sovereign Wealth Funds.

The United Kingdom does not have anything that even remotely resembles a Sovereign Wealth Fund. We sold many of our previous public assets to other nations. Like British Petroleum (2.7% owned by the people of Norway.)

**Contain yourself.**

The richest man in Norway used to be John Friedriksen. I say used to be because he is now a Cypriot citizen. Back in 2006 he decided that Norway’s tax system was too punitive and he took his loot to Limassol. Only it is a bit more ambiguous than that because he owns a rather splendid town house just off the Kings Road in Chelsea, the Old Rectory. It is thought to be worth north of £100 million. The Sunday Times rich list made Friedriksen the 6th richest man resident in Britain in 2013 worth a cool £8.8 billion.

Now I have no idea how the Sunday Times makes such a calculation but if they are to be believed he increased his net worth between 2012 and 2013 by a third, accruing £2.2 billion additional wealth in a single year, just over £6 million a day. And you thought Wayne Rooney was well paid.

So how did he do that?

Well, Friedriksen is the Onassis of his age: he owns the world’s largest oil tanker fleet. Trying to explain the structure of his economic activities is beyond my ability. It is complex. Basically a company based on the seafront in Limassol called Seatankers Management Company manages a business empire stretching from Singapore to Bermuda. The sharp end of the business

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71 Unless you want to pay to get into the Sunday Times Website your best appraisal of this annual jamboree of wealth is at Wikipedia. Access at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunday_Times_Rich_List_2013
is a tanker fleet operated by a company called Frontline 2012 registered in Bermuda but listed on the Oslo stock market. The main shareholder is a company called Hemen Holdings, another Cyprus-based entity and entirely owned by Mr Friedriksen. There are lots of other maritime interests and a labyrinthine ownership structure. For example his fleet sails under the flags of different countries – the Bahamas, Liberia, Singapore, Norway and Panama.

It is impressive stuff a fleet of large oil tankers 48 strong. Without doubt if you drive a car in Europe you will be a beneficiary of the incredibly complex logistics that this tanker fleet is engaged in; bringing oil from there (predominantly the Gulf States) to here. Just looking at one tanker in this fleet is indicative of the complexity of maritime economics and the transport infrastructure that facilitates globalisation.

The Front Eminence is a beast of an oil tanker. Built in 2009 by Daewoo in South Korea it has a dead weight tonnage of 321,000. At the moment it is basically doing the Angola to China oil run, each time carrying $250 million worth of the liquid gold. Although owned by Frontline this tanker is managed and crewed by other companies. Front Eminence’s homeport is Majuro, the largest coral atoll in the Marshall Islands. No super-sized tanker has ever despoiled the petite harbour of this rather remote place. Some home. When I last looked the Front Eminence was just off the Comoros Islands on Africa’s east coast, destination China. Look it up and see where it is now.

Clearly if you know what you are doing (and Mr Friedriksen does) and you can construct the most tax efficient business edifice stretching across the more amenable tax havens of the world you can make some serious money. You can enjoy that wealth in London – with Harrods a stroll away, some of the finest restaurants in the world and even enough money to rent a box at Chelsea FC a mere Saturday jaunt from your front door. Mr Friedriksen could be the face of globalisation. His whole being is wrapped up in globalisation.

More commonly the humble shipping container has been used to explain the logistics of globalisation. These metal boxes traverse the world carrying the ‘stuff’ that the manufacturing industry generates. Some of the ships carrying them are even larger than oil tankers.
The shipping container can tell us many things about the state of the global economy. For example the relative trade imbalances between the USA and China have produced a massive build up of shipping containers in the USA. The global shipping line Maersk spend $1 billion a year moving empty containers back to where they can be filled up. Unsurprisingly for an object that spends 56% of their lifetime sitting idle and empty in some portside stack innovative ideas for utilising containers heading back east from Europe have been tried.

The Emma Maresk, the world’s largest container ship with an 11,000-unit capacity was dubbed SS Santa in November 2006 when it arrived at Felixstowe port in the UK for the first time. It was laden with the manufactures of China that would have found their way into Britain’s Christmas stockings. On its return journey the empty containers were filled with 170,000 tonnes of mainly plastic solid waste that was delivered to the port of Lianjan, part of the Pearl River ‘Endless City’. It is claimed that the UK exports 1.9 million tonnes of waste to China a year.

The reality is that what mainly arrives in China in ships are commodities like iron ore, coal and oil: what leaves are manufactured goods. This involves two different types of ship. The world is increasingly criss-crossed by empty ships going back to pick up a new load. In this it reflects contemporary trade imbalances.

Furthermore considering the idea of filling them with rubbish to be recycled, and thus lowering the demand for raw materials from the Chinese market, may not actually be economically viable. It is probably cheaper to just steam back to China empty; the fuel costs will be lower and the containers do not have to be cleaned. Basically what can be charged to transport waste across the world to be recycled is lower than the cost of doing it. In the USA only 5% of containers arriving from China were immediately sent back to China filled with US manufactured goods.

Sometimes the geographical infrastructures that pin together our globalised world, the stuff that makes our lives happen, are mind-bogglingly complex. Globalisation is an extension of organisational complexity at a planetary level. Too big to grasp and explain with beguiling simplicity.

Sometimes you just want to escape. Get away from it all. Embrace the simple life.

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75 Information from John Churchill of A.P. Moller – Maersk.
Lonely planet.

Have you ever been truly alone? Neither seen nor spoken to anybody for days, no sign of human habitation, no phone signal, no radio or TV, no books or papers? No, nor have I.

I have been to many lonely places often with my trusty Lonely Planet guide in my hand. However, to get there I have availed myself of complex transport and communication networks, been processed by large security bureaucracies and chewed up substantial energy resources. It was, however, much easier to ‘get away from it all’ a few decades back.

In October 1988 I found myself standing in a place called Kagbeni. I was in a vast landscape, the Kali Gandaki gorge in the Upper Mustang province of the Nepali Himalaya. It had taken me six days to walk here from the nearest road, across makeshift bridges spanning raging rivers, climbing over frozen ridgelines beyond 10,000 feet and past ancient villages whose inhabitants dreamt about electricity.

On that isolated rooftop above me were more stars than I had ever seen in my life, at ground level not a flicker of light for 360 degrees. I wasn’t alone. Below cold trekkers from a number of different nations pawed the pages of their Lonely Planet guides whilst trying to avoid drinking the Tibetan tea proffered by our sociable hosts.

But at that moment I really felt alone, just me on a rock spinning through space. Don’t often get that feeling.

Today I can drive to Kagbeni and the lodge I stayed at all those years ago is reviewed on Trip Advisor, with people moaning about the intermittent power supply meaning they couldn’t charge their laptop would you believe. Still the stars will still be out.

After that two-week trek into the heart of the Himalaya I was excited to get back to Kathmandu because there I had mail waiting for me at the city’s poste restante. This was the only way I could keep in contact with family and friends. I wrote a lot of letters on thin, blue airmail paper. Some people wrote back to the next poste restante I mentioned that I would be visiting. After Kathmandu it would have been Calcutta in a months’ time.

However even cast adrift in the Himalaya I could still pick up the BBC World Service on my trusty short-wave radio, a live commentary of a top English football match followed by John Peel on a Saturday night. In 2014 I would have far fewer limitations, mobile phone networks are amazingly global, the Internet is creeping into even the furthest reaches of the planet and Skype brings us face to face regardless of the miles that separate us.

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The global growth of mobile telecommunications in the last two decades has been breath-taking and it will continue to be so. CCS insight a telecommunications market analysis company predicts that by the start of 2018 there will be 6.6 billion mobile phones in the world of which two-thirds will be internet-connected smart phones. If we include tablets there will be more telecommunications devices being used than the global population by 2017.80

That mobile phone use is not restricted to the affluent in any society was amusingly revealed to me in 2011. Out in rural Kerala I dropped into conversation with some local toddy tappers shining up towering palms barefoot. After a minute a man dressed in nothing but a loincloth reached under the afore-mentioned garment and pulled out his mobile phone to take some pictures. At home he didn’t have running water and only had intermittent electricity at best but his Nokia was his pride and joy.

In Kenya phones have not just transformed communications but also banking. Justin Greening, the Rotherham born UK Secretary of State for International Development takes up the story.

“Look at Vodafone and the hugely successful M-PESA mobile banking phone service. DFID match-funded Vodafone’s initial investment and there are now 17m users in Kenya and a third of Kenyan GDP is expected to pass through the M-PESA system. A mobile bank account essentially for millions who otherwise wouldn’t have one. One that they can do business and trade with.”81

It is all true. The use of mobile phones for banking in Kenya (and Tanzania) has transformed that country’s economy. It is also true that the development of this technology was partly funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), in conjunction with UK telecommunications transnational corporation Vodafone, although not on Greening’s watch. Without government support this initiative would not have got off the ground.82 Mobile communication is one of the most significant aspects of globalisation, it has shrunk the world in our minds.

If I reflect on the progress in telecommunications that I have seen and experienced over the past 14 years since I got my first mobile phone in the 2000 – I was a late adopter – I can but wonder what the next two or three decades will bring.

The ability for such technology to also have a less than benign set of consequences is well documented and recently has been heavily underlined by the revelations of Edward Snowden, the former USA National Security Agency contractor. His revelations outed the ubiquity of telecommunications surveillance by the state (in fact many states) upon its citizens, something that had been suspected but never conclusively proved.\textsuperscript{83} You are never alone. Globalisation has made the planet a lot less lonely.

\textbf{Icarus shrugged.}

He is a bit of a mystery, Humaid AlBuQaish. He lives somewhere in the United Arab Emirates and he has far more money than me, or you, or just about anybody you know. How much he grafted for this wealth is anybody’s guess but we do know what he spends it on because he wants us to know. Humaid is one of the ‘rich kids of Instagram’.\textsuperscript{84}

What set Humaid above the crowd of other rich kids flaunting their lifestyles on Instagram is his penchant for ‘big cats’ as pets. Here is Humaid playing with pet lions, head in their mouths, or sitting atop of his silver Mercedes with a lioness for company. There is even a picture of him on a speedboat, Shahjah is the background, with a cheetah artfully positioned on the prow of the boat. With 250,000 followers Humaid has caused quite a stir, even the Daily Mail has been indignant.\textsuperscript{85}

‘The Rich Kids of Instagram’ is the title of a forthcoming novel that will further publicise this global phenomenon of rich hyper-consumers flaunting their lavish lifestyles for all to see.\textsuperscript{86} A few years back we used to have a US TV programme doing the global rounds called ‘Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.’ I once watched it in the home of a family from Maya Bazaar slum in Bengaluru. So steep visual gradients between the rich


\textsuperscript{84} I first came across Humaid AlBuQaish in a Daily Mail in a November 2013 story that led me to his Instagram account at http://instagram.com/humaidalbuqaish. At the current time it is still an open profile.


\textsuperscript{86} Pre advance information for this publication by Gallery Books can be found here http://richkidsofinstagram.tumblr.com/rkoibook
and the poor have been around a long time, probably since Nebuchadnezzar lavished his wealth on Babylon and the pharaohs buried themselves with their possessions under vast pyramids.

Yet the trend is not confined to those whose wealth is hard to comprehend but ordinary British teenagers. A quick Instagram tutorial from my elder daughter shows me the photographs of her peers who post up snaps of designer label shopping bags, shiny parental sports cars and sun drenched and palm tree flecked holiday snaps. Look what I’ve got.

Instagram is flying high with over 100 million active users. This is a stratospheric rise, as in April 2012 when Facebook bought the two year old ‘app’ it had never made a profit. Facebook paid $1 billion for Instagram. It remains difficult to see, beyond advertising revenues how Instagram can, as they say in management circles, be monetised.

 Somebody who would have understood the motivations of those who flaunt their wealth and privilege on Instagram would have been the American-Russian writer and philosopher Ayn Rand. Rand is a hero to the libertarian ‘right’ through her expression of objectivism, a philosophical idea expressed in her most famous novel ‘Atlas Shrugged’. Objectivism is essentially the idea that the rational pursuit of ones self interest is the only logical way to live. In accepting this thinking, the paramount rights of the individual stand above those of the collective. Rand argues that it is only through such behaviour do great people create the wealth of the world. London mayor Boris Johnson expressed it succinctly in the 2013 Margaret Thatcher Memorial Lecture:

“And for one reason or another – boardroom greed or, as I am assured, the natural and god-given talent of boardroom inhabitants – the income gap between the top cornflakes and the bottom cornflakes is getting wider than ever. I stress: I don’t believe that economic equality is possible; indeed, some measure of inequality is essential for the spirit of envy and keeping up with the Joneses that is, like greed, a valuable spur to economic activity.”

Set aside Boris’s analogy of society being like a box of cornflakes, (Forrest Gump anybody), what is striking here is that he argues that it is the pursuit of ‘more’ that is cited as the highest endeavour a human can pursue. Greed is good.

Boris has always had a strong taint of hubris about him, a sense of ‘to the manor born’ arrogance. He is not like us: he is better, superior, one of the cornflakes that rise to the top. A classicist like Boris would understand better than I, from my humble comprehensive school, the Greek myth of Icarus. The young man Icarus is warned by his father not to fly too close to the sun because it would melt the wax holding together

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the wings he had fashioned out of feathers. However, Icarus is swept up by his own success in flying and fails to heed the fatherly advice. With the sun melting the wax he plunges to his death into what we today call the Icarian Sea. Such mythological stories of hubris extend into Hindu, Babylonian and Chinese cultures.

It is a reality of the modern globalised world that our ability to extend our hubris, our sense of superiority over the natural world, is magnified. Such behaviours are at the most acute in the great global cities of the world. May I suggest the Burj Khalifa, the 829metre high skyscraper that is currently the world’s tallest man-made structure illustrates better than anything else I can think of that the folly of the rich is to believe that there is no other vision for the future of our planet than their own. As they reach for the sky, Icarus shrugged.
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