

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

July 2005

Is America too work-obsessed and success-driven compared to old Europe's dolce vita? Too aimless and pleasure-bent compared to new Asia's "tigers"? We look at several sides of the question: What kind of society do humanists want? This month, too, an old political friend considers American heresy, a new contributor questions irreligious intolerance, and we suggest some summer reading. But first we visit old New York, and finally, wish you the lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer.

## SUMMER SCHEDULE

Next month, the editor of PIQUE, the local and national staff, and all our correspondents in all our bureaus worldwide will be on vacation.

Next issue: September, and announcements of an exciting fall schedule of meetings, talks, roundtables, and book club discussions.

## HOW WE GOT TO BE WHO WE ARE

*A review of **The Island at the Center of the World**, by Russell Shorto*

**Reviewed by John Rafferty**

A cover blurb calls *The Island at the Center of the World* "the epic story of Dutch Manhattan and the forgotten colony that shaped America," and at least this once the words "epic" and "blurb" can share space in the same sentence.

History, Russell Shorto reminds us, is written by the winners. And so the story of New Amsterdam—and of the whole of colonial America—that we were taught in school was told from the perspective of the English who wrested the colony on the southernmost tip of Manhattan Island from the Dutch in 1664. The pious Pilgrims of New England were the stars of that history, and the Dutch of what would become New York were relegated to the role of comic supporting players.

But the home country in the Netherlands was the most liberal, progressively freemarket, and tolerant society in seventeenth century Europe, with a de facto Dutch Republic constitution that, astonishingly for 1579, guaranteed that "each person shall remain free, especially in his religion, and that no one shall be persecuted or investigated because of their religion."

For forty years, Shorto tells us—relying on over 12,000 documents from 1624-1664 only now being painstakingly translated (17th century Dutch is an almost lost language)—New Amsterdam was the free-trade, freethought capital not only of New Netherland, but of all the North American colonies: Dutch, English, French, Spanish, and Swedish. Then, as now, most other colonists (and Europeans) considered Manhattanites rude, loud, and untrustworthy, and the city itself a sinkhole of iniquity. But then, as now, they came here to do business, to have fun, or to get a couple of jumps ahead of the thought police back in Massachusetts or the Carolinas. The English overseers who arrived in 1664 didn't much approve of their new possession either, but they were

pragmatically smart enough to leave alone a system that worked. (That paid off: a hundred years later, David McCullough tells us in his new *1776* account of the American Revolution, the still-mostly Dutch neighborhoods of Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island stayed fiercely loyal to England and King George.)

And so the new New York remained Dutch at heart, the only English colony guaranteeing religious freedom and a free marketplace (“master” became “boss” in the workplace), and so continued attracting entrepreneurs and hustlers, intellectuals and crazies, the hard-working and the hard-living to “the island at the center of the world,” where they built the world’s first truly multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. Us.

## ALL SORTS OF HERETICS AND FANATICS

**Russell Shorto**

*(Excerpted from The Island at the Center of the World)*

Cultural diversity management was about the last item on [New Amsterdam Governor] Peter Stuyvesant’s list of job skills, and it’s safe to say he was less than thrilled to see Manhattan’s streets becoming an ethnic kaleidoscope. Religion was at the root of it: Stuyvesant despised Jews, loathed Catholics, recoiled at Quakers, and reserved a special hatred for Lutherans. Which is to say, he was the very model of a well-bred mid-seventeenth-century European. Religious bigotry was a mainstay of society. The four New England colonies to the north were founded on it. Across Europe it was universally held that diversity weakened a nation. Of course, the United Provinces of the Netherlands were supposed to be the exception to this rule, but the blanket of tolerance got a bit tattered on the transatlantic voyage. It’s strange that the one nod that history has given to the Manhattan-based colony—as a cradle of religious liberty in the early America—is off base. Not that it is wrong, exactly, but it needs to be combed out.

Dutch tolerance was indeed renowned throughout Europe, but it continued to be debated in the country, and every decade or so brought a shift in the prevailing cultural winds. One such shift had occurred in 1651 [when, at a Great Assembly at The Hague] the orthodox Calvinist faction chose ... to push the line that the whole tolerance business had gotten out of hand—that, in effect, before you knew it the streets of Amsterdam would be filled with drug dens and legalized prostitution ... and it became fashionable for a time to crack down, in particular, on Catholics, Lutherans, and Jews.

It was in this atmosphere that Stuyvesant ... [when asked by Dutch Reformed ministers] to block Lutherans from worshipping [in Manhattan] on the grounds that it “would pave the way for other sects,” so that eventually the place “would become a receptacle for all sorts of heretics and fanatics,” he did so with gusto. In 1654 twenty-three Jews ... showed up seeking asylum. You can almost see Stuyvesant shaking his head at being told that ... he now had a Jewish population. His reaction was matter-of-fact, and perfectly in character: the Jews were “a deceitful race” that would “infect” the colony if he didn’t stop them. He barred one from buying land ... even refused to allow them to take turns standing guard with the citizens’ militia, [and] if they didn’t like it ... “consent is hereby given to them to depart whenever and wherever it may please them.” But Abraham de Lucena and Salvador Dandrada, leaders of the Jews, knew their rights in the Dutch system, and appealed to the Dutch Republic. The Jewish community of Amsterdam applied pressure in the time-honored tradition of politics, and won. Stuyvesant’s superiors reminded him loftily of the “each person shall remain free in his

religion” law (and added that certain influential Jews had invested a “large amount of capital” in the West India Company), and ordered him to back off.

But it was the English Quakers who pushed tolerance to the limit. ... With their sermonizing and taunting and the jiggling fits of spiritual frenzy for which they were named, they all but invited Stuyvesant’s disdain. They were, in his estimation, a threat to the peace and stability of the colony, and probably out of their minds as well. ... When Stuyvesant forbade the town of Vlissingen [Flushing] from abetting them, thirty-one of the villagers, all English, followed the Dutch form of complaint by signing a remonstrance to Stuyvesant. The law of “love peace and libertie ... which is the glory of the Outward State of Holland,” they reminded him, extends even “to Jewes, Turkes and Egyptians.” Therefore, they respectfully refused to obey. The so-called Flushing Remonstrance is considered one of the fundamental documents of American liberty, ancestor to the first amendment in the Bill of Rights. ... Here, too, history has spun it as a Dutch-English story, with the English in the role of lovers of liberty and Stuyvesant, standing in for his non-English colony, as the reactionary boob. In fact, the currents running through the colony were more complex, the Netherlands being the source both of a legal code of tolerance and, at times, of the failure to adhere to it. If the first amendment harkens back to the Flushing Remonstrance, the Remonstrance [is based] on the religious freedom guarantee in the Dutch constitutional document.

[Manhattan] had its own character, and it was evolving rapidly. Thirty years later, one of Stuyvesant’s successors, Governor Thomas Dongan, casually referenced the varieties of religious experience that had proliferated by then in the New York colony. Besides a Church of England presence, a Dutch Calvinist population, French Calvinists, Dutch Lutherans, and Roman Catholics, there were “Singing Quakers; Ranting Quakers; Sabbatarians; Antisabbatarians; Some Anabaptists some Independants; some Jews.”

“In short,” he added to sharpen the point, “of all sorts of opinions there are some, and the most part, of none at all.” Stuyvesant must have lurched in his grave.

### **IN NEW YORK CITY, IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

City health officials are investigating whether a baby boy died of herpes—and three more were infected in the past year—by the rabbi who circumcised them. Most *mohels* draw blood in a circumcision by hand, but Rabbi Yitzchok Fischer uses an ultra-Orthodox method called *metzizah bi pleh* in which the *mohel* uses his mouth. The rabbi is not commenting or cooperating.

### **AMERICAN HERESY**

**Al Gore**

*(Excerpted from a speech to MoveOn PAC, 4/27/05. The full text of the speech is available at [www.moveonpac.org](http://www.moveonpac.org).)*

I am deeply concerned by Republican efforts to undermine the rule of law by stripping the Senate of its right to extend debate over judicial nominations and by engaging in outright threats and intimidation against federal judges with whose decisions they disagree. ...

The new assault on the integrity of our constitutional design is fueled by a small group claiming special knowledge of God’s will in American politics and charging those of us who disagree with their point of view with waging war against “people of faith.”

Yet, long before our founders met in Philadelphia, their forbears came to these shores to escape oppression at the hands of despots who mixed religion with politics and claimed dominion over both their pocketbooks and their souls. This aggressive new strain of right-wing zealotry is actually a throwback to the intolerance that led to the creation of America in the first place. ...

The arguments they are pressing are no less than an American heresy — a highly developed political philosophy fundamentally at odds with the founding principles of the United States of America.

We began as a nation with a clear formulation of the basic relationship between God, our rights as individuals, and the government we created to secure those rights. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” our founders declared. “That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights ...”

But while our rights come from God, as our founders added, “governments are instituted among men, deriving their just power from the consent of the governed.” So, unlike our inalienable rights, our laws are human creations that derive their moral authority from our consent to their enactment.

In pursuing the elimination of the filibuster, these extremists are seeking to undermine the deliberative character of our democracy because it stands in the way of their quest for absolute power.

*Comment: Al, if you'd only spoken like this in 2000 ...*

### **THE IDIOCY WATCH**

New Jersey State Assemblyman Craig Stanley, whose assembly district is Newark, where the New Jersey Devils hockey team will move in 2007, has introduced a bill to rename the team before it moves into his district. Mr. Stanley, a Baptist deacon, is afraid of a presence more spectral than sporting moving into Newark.

“The name, the merchandise, the paraphernalia,” he said, “it’s all based on the actual demonic devil.”

### **SENDOFF SPEECHES**

*(From commencement speeches in the Times June 12)*

Not long ago I read from the Declaration of Independence in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington. I was arrested and jailed for doing so. As I thought that was a violation of my free speech rights under the Constitution, I went back and read from the Bill of Rights. That landed me in jail, too. I felt freer in that jail, because I had spoken out as a free person, than I have ever felt in the open air. And I am not finished being a free American, whatever happy costs await me. I do not know what is in store for you. But I know that courage is freedom, and freedom is joy.

*— Doris Haddock, aka “Granny D,” unsuccessful  
2004 candidate for Senate, at Hampshire College*

Pay attention to the truth. ... You want a recipe? Boil some spaghetti. Heat up some good extra-virgin olive oil and throw in some thin slices of garlic and some red pepper flakes. When the pasta’s cooked, toss it in the skillet. Throw in some chopped parsley and a little of the pasta water. Toss it around. Put it on a plate. Grate some Parmigiano Reggiano on top. Congratulations, dude. You’ve just made *spaghetti all’ aglio e olio*. One of the

greatest simple truths of humankind — and a damn good emergency dinner. That’s a recipe. It’s an idea. It’s a dish. It’s an icon. It’s an experience. It’s not rules. And as you cook up your life, never let anyone else’s recipe for success intimidate you or get in your way. Rules are overrated.  
— *Mario Batali, Chef, at Rutgers*

If I were 21 I would walk the earth. ... don’t take the short road. Fool around. Have fun. ... You’re not going to get this time back. Don’t panic and go to graduate school and law school. This nation has enough frightened, dissatisfied yuppies living in gated communities, driving SUV’s and wondering where their youth went. We need you to walk the earth, so that other nations can see the beauty of American youth, rather than seeing our young in combat fatigues behind the barrel of an M-16.

— *James McBride, Writer, Composer, at Pratt University*

Revolutionary advances in technology are transforming war in our favor.

— *George W. Bush, President, at U.S. Naval Academy*

As democracy is perfected, the office of president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart’s desire at last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.  
— *H.L. Mencken*

*Novelist George Mandel responds to “Against Moderation, Against Tolerance” (PIQUE, June), excerpted from The End of Faith (the May SHSNY book club selection) and disputes its author, Sam Harris.*

## **ECHOES OF THE AGNOSTIC IMPERATIVE**

**George Mandel**

*The Agnostic Imperative* is a work-in-progress of mine so titled well before the “moral imperative” Sam Harris (maybe coincidentally) termed his personal conception of a drastic need to terminate world religion. To advance a far more moral necessity, I daresay, this is a mission taken on with an infinitely greater possibility of achievement, difficult though that may be, to say the least.

*The Agnostic Imperative* was inspired by the universal need of an utterly new way of thinking, which scientific minds have recently come to see as the only hope of salvation for a world hell-bent on self destruction. Given such a dire necessity, I have that postulate to offer somewhat less humbly than nice people would prefer, present Harris company excluded.

More than a hypothesis, the agnostic imperative is an attitude, based on belief that results from scrupulous consideration of evidence, which consciously resists its diametric opposite, belief based on attitude, and especially the presumptions thereof, customary to multitudes who nonetheless regard themselves as thinking people.

From that defective conviction, the first fault of hallowed faith, stems the second inaccuracy: a failure to recognize, as nothing more cerebral than faith, the attitude that merely reasons opposition to faith without evidentiary substantiation as a convincing belief.

Thus I refute Sam Harris, who condescends to unabashedly rationalize a stance *Against Moderation, Against Tolerance* with the even more supercilious assertion that religion is the greatest danger to the human race.

Of course war and many another horror can be blamed on religion. So never mind cancer and similar deadly blights, on which the lives of (heroic, to me) researchers are dedicated regardless of religious persuasion or its absence. Never mind the outrage of every crime from profiteering corporate treachery to the murderous rape it resembles.

But never mind superb writer Harris's wonderfully clear thinking? What a pity—to paraphrase from G.B. Shaw—that it's wasted on the sympathetic. Into the bottomless valley of ineffectuality ride the minority hundreds of secular rationalism, to quench the pale fires of which the vast majority of religious millions upon millions need but the obtuseness of their faith.

*The Agnostic Imperative* is designed to be a flame thrower ... effectual — against the adversarial ... irresistible ... hopeful. Clarence Darrow's perfect explication, "I do not pretend to know what many ignorant men are sure they know," can be broadened—well beyond the religion thing—by adding an incontestable, "I think I know what I know, and I'm sure I don't know what I don't know." On that account, I would hold anyone who is not overall agnostic to be less than intelligent, if I were not agnostic.

And by its purpose disinclined to oppose without proof, the agnostic imperative can at least distrust rationalism per se — the drawing of conclusions from reasoning alone; moreover the peremptory style of it practiced by most secular proselytizers. Not terribly far from Bernadette Peters' *Making Love Alone*, like most philosophizing. Is it possible that Sam Harris simply lacks the human cognizance to even imagine that the assorted masterminds he cavalierly holds his discernment above (from H.G. Wells to Albert Einstein) perceive the value of tolerance, which the common intelligence of youngsters I know comprehend without giving it a thought?

Can the man be imperceptive of the spiteful malice, the ruthless vindictiveness, the sheer heartlessness inherent in a cold rejection of moderation? Please allow a little anecdotal example for the fun and profit of a springtime scene that focuses this issue of faith more essentially on religion, where many attitudinal people assume both faith and ambiguity to apply exclusively.

In the park a politically radical merchant marine and I were approached by an elderly Italian lady distributing evangelical pamphlets. Handed one, my sailor friend, who fancied himself a deep thinker, pompously declared, "*Dio no esista!*"

Driven almost to tears, the poor frail person insisted, "*Dio esista.*"

As he began to repeat himself, I drew away not just a perfect dimwit for being sure he knew what mere attitude can only presume, but a cruel dimwit for denying a fellow human being her apparently crucial need.

*Against War, Against Adventurers* who monger war, in light of Harris's dark disallowance of moderation, tolerance, I shudder to think the *value* of contention is wasted on allies who believe as those arrant villains self-importantly do that ends they hold sacred justify their malevolent means.

### **ONE FOR THE ROAD TO ROME**

To combat the declining numbers of young men entering the priesthood (and in a tacit acknowledgement of where new recruits are most likely to be found), the Catholic Church

in England has begun an advertising campaign with recruitment messages on beer coasters in pubs.  
— *BBC News*, 5/29/05

### **THE SECULAR ANSWERPERSON EXPLAINS EVERYTHING FOR YOU**

*Dear Secular Answerperson:*

*I am confused as to the difference between God The Father and Mother Nature. Are the so-called father and the so-called mother living together? Are they having sex? What is the difference between them besides sex? I hope you will explain this to me in PIQUE, which I read regularly. Thanks.*

*Giles Kelly, Washington, D.C.*

Dear Giles:

Of course you're confused — because you obviously weren't paying attention in Catechism class. Okay, let's review. God The Father is the He-man-in-the-sky whose hairy-chested "religions of the book" wage global war to spread their visions of universal peace, and Mother Nature embodies all the weeny sects that sip herbal tea and skip around maypoles while GTF's missionaries steal their lunch. Yes, they're living together—and having sex—they're married; He carried Her off as spoils of war from one of His crusades. She cleans up His bloody battlefields by making the flowers grow again, but occasionally, just to keep Her hand in the Goddess game (or is it global-sized PMS?), She blows the top off one of Her volcanoes, or super-slops the waters of one of Her oceans. They're as happy as any mismatched human couple, and among their divine offspring are Thor, Apollo, Vishnu, the Angel Moroni, George W. Bush, Mary Baker Eddy, Doc, Dopey, Sneezy, and Rudolph.

*Have a question about secular humanism, skepticism, rationality, religion, irreligion, or the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930? Ask the Secular Answerperson at the SHSNY P.O. box, or at [john@rafferty.net](mailto:john@rafferty.net).*

### **AN ONLINE MESSAGE OF CHRISTIAN LOVE**

Huey Freeman, pint-sized African-American "radical scholar" and protagonist of the newspaper comic strip *The Boondocks* (locally in the *Daily News*), on June 2 received some Christian e-mail spam:

*Dear Friend:*

*We sent you a message regarding Christ's salvation and you didn't respond. You obviously don't care about your eternal soul. Now, we suggest you forward this to everyone you know, or else you will burn in fire and brimstone for all eternity.*

*P.S.: Jesus loves you.*

### **AND BUDDHIST PACIFISM IN PRACTICE**

*(Excerpted from Reuters, May 31)*

**Bangkok:** Five Buddhist monks have been defrocked after a street brawl with monks from another temple over alms-begging territory. "When a person is given a middle-finger sign," said one, "he will be mad, so am I."

**Comment:** *Let anger go: the finger isn't really there.*

### **EUROPE, THE GOOD LIFE, AND US**

## John Rafferty

The French and Dutch rejections of the proposed European Union constitution a month ago set off a flurry of punditry on the OpEd pages of the *Times*, and the subject is, I think, of more than passing interest to humanists: What kind of society do we expect to—do we *want* to—live in in this still-new century of ours?

Conservative David Brooks began the discussion by viewing the No votes as a collective European failure to be more like Americans, a kind of continental lack of moral fiber. Before pragmatic Thomas Friedman could scold the same Europeans from his slightly liberal point of view the next day, comparing Europeans to sterner-stuff Asians rather than to us, *Times* readers were already taking issue with Brooks. Then, two weeks later, from another source and another point of view entirely—in fact from a galaxy far, far away—novelist Neal Stephenson used an icon of pop culture to ask the same question: What kind of society are we becoming?

*Europe, the Good Life, and Us ...*

### FEAR AND REJECTION

#### David Brooks

*(Excerpted from The New York Times, June 2, 2005)*

Forgive me for making a blunt and obvious point, but events in Western Europe are slowly discrediting large swaths of American liberalism.

Most of the policy ideas advocated by American liberals have already been enacted in Europe: generous welfare measures, ample labor protections, highly progressive tax rates, single-payer health care systems, zoning restrictions to limit big retailers, and cradle-to-grave middle-class subsidies supporting everything from child care to pension security. And yet far from thriving, continental Europe has endured a lost decade of relative decline. ...

Anybody who has lived in Europe knows how delicious European life can be. But it is not the absolute standard of living that determines a people's morale, but the momentum. It is happier to live in a poor country that is moving forward—where expectations are high—than it is to live in an affluent country that is looking back. ...

The Western European standard of living is about a third lower than the American standard of living, and it's sliding. European output per capita is less than that of 46 of the 50 American states and about on par with Arkansas. There is little prospect of robust growth returning any time soon.

Once it was plausible to argue that the European quality of life made up for the economic underperformance, but those arguments look more and more strained, in part because demographic trends make even the current conditions unsustainable. Europe's population is aging and shrinking. By 2040, the European median age will be around 50. Nearly a third of the population will be over 65. Public spending on retirees will have to grow by a third, sending Europe into a vicious spiral of higher taxes and less growth.

This is the context for the French “no” vote on the E.U. constitution. This is the psychology of stagnation that shaped voter perceptions. ...

The core fact is that the European model is foundering under the fact that billions of people are willing to work harder than the Europeans are. Europeans clearly love their way of life, but don't know how to sustain it.



Over the last few decades, American liberals have lauded the German model or the Swedish model or the European model. But these models are not flexible enough for the modern world. They encourage people to cling fiercely to entitlements their nation cannot afford. And far from breeding a confident, progressive outlook, they breed a reactionary fear of the future that comes in left- and right-wing varieties -- a defensiveness, a tendency to lash out ferociously at anybody who proposes fundamental reform or at any group, like immigrants, that alters the fabric of life.

This is the chief problem with the welfare state, which has nothing to do with the success or efficiency of any individual program. The liberal project of the postwar era has bred a stultifying conservatism, a fear of dynamic flexibility, a greater concern for guarding what exists than for creating what doesn't.

That's a truth that applies just as much on this side of the pond.

*Europe, the Good Life, and Us ...*

### **TIMES READERS RESPOND**

#### ***To the Editor:***

David Brooks is mistaken: far from discrediting American liberalism, European experiences vindicate it.

German and French workers now work about 1,450 hours a year, while Americans work about 1,800 hours. But Europeans have higher life expectancy and lower infant mortality than Americans, achieved through mostly public rather than private health care provision. And they receive more generous pensions, child policies, disability and other benefits than Americans.

In other words, Europeans get more services (and better outcomes) for less work, while Americans get fewer services for more work.

And Europeans enjoy more equitable wealth distribution, less poverty, lower crime and incarceration rates, and stronger environmental and safety standards than Americans.

...

German, French and Dutch voters have many desires. Trading their social achievements for what Mr. Brooks euphemistically terms "flexibility" is not among them.

— *Willem Maas, New York, June 2, 2005*

#### ***To the Editor:***

In Brooks's view, we should give up hope of attaining the quality of life found in Western Europe and embrace the dog-eat-dog world of hard-nosed capitalism.

But since median income in the United States has fallen against inflation in the last few years, while a smaller percentage of Americans has health insurance or retirement security, Mr. Brooks should be cautious about bragging too loudly.

An economic system's true success is measured not by its "efficiency" or the latest stock-market peak but by the quality of life it delivers. On that scale, most Americans are falling further behind Europeans.

— *William S. Kessler, Seattle, June 2, 2005*

#### ***To the Editor:***

Some people measure quality of life by more than economic factors.

Americans are working more and earning less (other than the top 2 percent). And most workers, when asked the one thing they would want the most, say "more time off."

We spend less time with our children and less time on vacation, and the retirement age is going up. Where is the quality of life in that?

— *Bill Manning, Spring Valley, Calif., June 2, 2005*

*Europe, the Good Life, and Us ...*

### **A RACE TO THE TOP**

**Thomas L. Friedman**

*(Excerpted from The New York Times, June 3, 2005)*

It was extremely revealing traveling from Europe to India as French (and Dutch) voters were rejecting the E.U. constitution—in one giant snub to ... all the forces of globalization eating away at Europe's welfare states. It is interesting because French voters are trying to preserve a 35-hour workweek in a world where Indian engineers are ready to work a 35-hour day. Good luck.

Voters in "old Europe" seem to be saying to their leaders: stop the world, we want to get off; while voters in India have been telling their leaders: stop the world and build us a stepstool, we want to get on. I feel sorry for Western European blue collar workers. A world of benefits they have known for 50 years is coming apart, and their governments don't seem to have a strategy for coping. ...

Come to Bangalore, India, the outsourcing capital of the world. The dirty little secret is that India is taking work from Europe or America not simply because of low wages. It is also because Indians are ready to work harder and can do anything from answering your phone to designing your next airplane or car. They are not racing us to the bottom. They are racing us to the top.

Indeed, there is a huge famine breaking out all over India today, an incredible hunger. But it is not for food. It is a hunger for opportunity that has been pent up like volcanic lava under four decades of socialism, and it's now just bursting out with India's young generation.

"India is the oldest civilization, the largest democracy and the youngest population — almost 70 percent is below age 35 and almost 50 percent is 25 and under," said Shekhar Gupta, editor of *The Indian Express*. Next to India, Western Europe looks like an assisted-living facility with Turkish nurses. ...

The Indian state of West Bengal has the oldest elected Communist government left in the world today. Some global technology firms recently were looking at outsourcing there, but told the Communists they could not do so because of the possibility of worker strikes. No problem. The Communist government declared information technology work an "essential service," making it illegal for those workers to strike. Have a nice day. ...

Yes, this is a bad time for France and friends to lose their appetite for hard work — just when India, China and Poland are rediscovering theirs.

*Europe, the Good Life, and Us ...*

### **REAL AMERICANS DON'T LEARN CALCULUS**

**Neal Stephenson**

*(Excerpted from "Turn On, Tune In, Veg Out," The New York Times, June 17, 2005)*

Very little of the new film (*Star Wars, Episode III - Revenge of the Sith*) makes sense. What's interesting about this is how little it matters. Millions of people are happily spending their money to watch a movie they don't understand. What gives?

Modern English has given us two terms we need to explain this phenomenon: “geeking out” and “vegging out.” To geek out on something means to immerse yourself in its details to an extent that is distinctly abnormal — and to have a good time doing it. To veg out, by contrast, means to enter a passive state and allow sounds and images to wash over you without troubling yourself too much about what it all means. ...

“Concentrate on the moment. Feel, don’t think. Trust your instincts,” says a Jedi to the young Anakin in Episode I, immediately before a race in which Anakin is likely to get killed. ... It is distinctly odd counsel coming from a member of Jedi order, the geekiest people in the universe: they are expert fighter pilots, they build their own laser swords from scratch.

The masses and the elites both claim to admire [the Jedi], but actually fear and loathe them because they hate being dependent upon their powers.

Anakin wins that race [and] clearly the boy is destined to be adopted into the Jedi order, where he will develop his geek talents—not by studying calculus but by meditating a lot and learning to trust his feelings. I lap this stuff up along with millions, maybe billions of others. Why? Because every single one of us is as dependent on science and technology—and, by extension, on the geeks who make it work—as a patient in intensive care. Yet we much prefer to think otherwise.

Scientists and technologists have the same uneasy status in our society as the Jedi in the Galactic Republic ... scorned by the cultural left and the cultural right, and young people avoid science and math classes in hordes. The tedious particulars of keeping ourselves alive, comfortable and free are being taken offline to countries where people are happy to sweat the details, as long as we have some foreign exchange left to send their way. Nothing is more seductive than to think that we, like the Jedi, could be masters of the most advanced technologies while living simple lives: to have a geek standard of living and spend our copious leisure time vegging out.

If the “Star Wars” movies are remembered a century from now, it’ll be because they are such exact parables for this state of affairs. Young people in other countries will watch them in classrooms as an answer to the question: Whatever became of that big rich country that used to buy the stuff we make? The answer: It went the way of the old Republic.

We’ve arranged a global civilization in which most critical elements profoundly depend on science and technology. We have also arranged things so that almost no one understands science and technology. This is a prescription for disaster.

— Carl Sagan

### **WHAT SHALL WE READ NEXT? THE BOOK CLUB LINEUP FOR FALL**

**NOTE:** ALL dates, times, and places are tentative. Exact dates, times and places will be announced in September PIQUE and after September 1 on the answering machine at 212-308-2165, and at the website at [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org).

#### **SEPTEMBER:**

***Reading Lolita in Tehran***, by Azar Nafisi. From the paperback back cover: *Every Thursday morning for two years in the Islamic Republic of Iran, a bold and inspired teacher named Azar Nafisi secretly gathered seven of her most committed female students*

*to read forbidden Western classics. As Islamic morality squads staged arbitrary raids ... the girls in Azar Nafisi's living room risked removing their veils and immersed themselves in the worlds of Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Vladimir Nabokov. ... Reading Lolita in Tehran is a remarkable exploration of resilience in the face of tyranny and a celebration of the liberating power of literature.*

We'll probably meet Thursday evening, September 22, probably at the West 23rd St. Muhlenberg Library.

#### **OCTOBER:**

***The Science of Good & Evil***, by Michael Shermer, publisher of *Skeptic* magazine. From the paperback back cover: *Shermer explores how humans evolved from social primates into moral primates ... how the foundation of moral principles can be built upon empirical evidence ... and explains the existence of pure good and pure evil.*

This "paragon of popularized science and philosophy" is selected in conjunction with our first SHSNY Roundtable of the fall: ***Does Evil Exist in the Modern World?*** tentatively scheduled for Thursday evening, October 20, at the West 23rd St. Muhlenberg Library.

More on the Roundtable in September PIQUE.

#### **NOVEMBER:**

***The Bookseller of Kabul***, by Asne Seierstad. From the paperback back cover: *This mesmerizing portrait of a proud man who, through three decades and successive repressive regimes, heroically braved persecution to bring books to the people of Kabul ... The Bookseller of Kabul is startling in its intimacy and its details — a revelation of the plight of Afghan women and a window into the surprising realities of daily life in today's Afghanistan.*

We'll probably meet Thursday evening, November 17, probably at the West 23rd St. Muhlenberg Library.

#### **ALSO ON OUR FALL AND WINTER LIST:**

***Darwin***, edited by long-time SHSNY member Philip Appleman, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Indiana University. The paperback 3rd Edition includes not only the most important excerpts from Darwin's own writings, but contributions from, among others, Richard Dawkins, Edward O. Wilson, Daniel Dennett, and Stephen Jay Gould, who called this "the best Darwin anthology on the market." Watch for details.

***War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning***, by Chris Hedges, in \$11 paperback, and a myth-busting book that has roused the several members who've already read it. "*The attraction of war*," writes NYTimes correspondent Hedges, "*is this: Even with its destruction and carnage, it can give us what we long for in life ... purpose, meaning, a reason for living. ... It allows us to be noble.*"

***The Island at the Center of the World***, by Russell Shorto, in paperback. For a review, see page 1.

#### **WHAT ELSE?**

What do you want to read ... and discuss? Drop a note to the P.O. box, or email [john@rafferty.net](mailto:john@rafferty.net).

Headline in the supermarket tabloid Star, June 6:

**END TIMES PLAGUE**

**TO STRIKE U.S. JULY 1**

*Just so you know, and don't say we didn't warn you.*