[Strange Days Indeed: The 1970s: The Golden Age of Paranoia, Francis Wheen, PublicAffairs, 352 pages]

Sinister '70s

By Brendan O'Neill

READING *Strange Days Indeed*, British writer Francis Wheen's rollercoaster romp through the 1970s, made me glad that I am too young to remember that doom-laden decade, having only been born halfway through it.

The nostalgia industry may recently have got its grubby mitts on this most peculiar 10-year period in modern history, re-presenting it as a gloriously un-PC decade in which men wore kipper ties and swore a lot ("Life on Mars") and women leapt around like menopausal kangaroos while singing ABBA songs ("Mamma Mia"). But that says far more, Wheen convincingly argues, about the history-warping, money-making opportunism of the nostalgists than it does about the reality of life in the 1970s.

For this, he reckons, was a decade not of song, dance, and abandon, but of fear, paranoia, and political madness. It was a decade that kicked off with Richard Nixon moaning about the threat posed by "homosexuality, dope and immorality in general" and ended with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and the revolutionary victory of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. The grocer's daughter and the imam had something in common, Wheen notes: both wanted to turn back the clock, Thatcher to the Victorian era of "self-help, private philanthropy and *laissez faire*," Khomeini to the era of the Islamic Caliphate.

In between Nixon's paranoia and the rise of Thatcher and Islamo-fundamentalism, there were guerrilla warfare, strikes, conspiracies and also conspiracy theories, green extremism, the rise of neo-Malthusianism, an increase in state surveillance, a new era of "claustrophobic cinema," punk, nihilism, and a general, free-floating feeling of fear and dread that, Wheen says, was best expressed by Chairman Mao's wife in 1971: "I have been feeling as if I am going to die any minute, as if some catastrophe is about to happen tomorrow. I feel full of terror all the time."

Was the decade really so dark? Why was it a fertile breeding ground for fear, conspiracy theory, and some of today's most backward, stifling, and now orthodox political outlooks, including misanthropic environmentalism? Wheen paints a Hieronymus Bosch-style picture of a decade in which a British prime minister hysterically described himself as "a big fat spider in the corner of the room" who was being followed by secret services and an American president covered up a break-in to try to save his political skin. Unfortunately, he is weaker on the "why": he never completely analyzes where the widespread sense of paranoia came from or what, ultimately, it expressed.

The main thing about the 1970s, for Wheen and most historians, is that they were not the 1960s. Dropping out of the rat race was replaced by conspiratorially imagining that The Man wanted to kill us all. The hippie anthems of The Mamas and The Papas were replaced by the harsh tones of Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, and David Bowie, who said in 1976, "I believe Britain could benefit from a fascist leader." And the running street battles between students, professors, and Panthers and the powers that be were replaced by the bombings of miniscule yet mayhem-creating terror groups such as the Baader-Meinhof Gang and Weatherman, nicely described by Wheen as products of the "defeats of 1968." Indeed, the Seventies can be seen as the big fat comedown from the decade of peace and love and experimentation. (Though, lest we forget, our image of the Sixties is also a product as much of nostalgia as reality.)

Wheen felt the Not-the-Sixties nature of the Seventies more acutely than most. He was brought up in the bosom of privilege and educated at Harrow, Prince Charles's alma mater. Like many advantaged young Brits with time on their hands—and disposable income to spend on pop singles such as The Groundhogs' bizarre peace anthem "Thank Christ for the Bomb"—he became a hippie. "Wishy-washy liberal," he'd say, when asked by friends to define his political outlook. In 1973, he sneaked out of the family home in dull suburban Kent, leaving a note telling his parents that he was "off to join the alternative society" and would not be back.

But to Wheen's surprise, and disappointment, the alternative society was no more. Arriving at a hippie hangout in West London that he had read about in the underground press, the 16-year-old announced, "Hi, I've dropped out," only to be told, "Drop back in, man. You're too late. It's over."

That feeling of "it" being over—"it" being the something-or-other about the 1960s that made them so apparently sexy and exciting—was palpable for Wheen's too-late generation. Wheen runs through various theories about when "the Sixties" ended. For Joan Didion, it was Aug. 9, 1969, the night Charles Manson's disciples murdered Sharon Tate and four others. For Kenneth Tynan, it was March 9, 1971, when Muhammad Ali—that "epitaph of the Sixties: flair, audacity, imagination, outrageous aplomb"—was defeated by the "stubborn, obdurate" Joe Frazier. For Edward D. Berkowitz, it was April 30, 1974, the day Nixon released the profanity-strewn transcripts from recorded conversations at the White House, ending "the postwar presidential mystique." Yet while the birthdate of the Seventies is debatable, says Wheen, the flavor of those years should be clear: "A pungent mélange of apocalyptic dread and conspiratorial fever."

Politically, culturally, and academically, there was an atmosphere of anti-hope, a future-fearing sense of dread, he says. In the U.S., it was embodied in Nixon, the anti-Kennedy, a politician with a sweating, gurning face better suited to the gramophone era than the TV age, who, Wheen strongly hints, was mad. As the Sixties ended and the Seventies began, Nixon was "dreaming up policies at five in the morning," says Wheen, including his plan to bomb the living daylights out of Cambodia: "They say the darkest hour is just before the dawn, and caliginous thoughts often swirled through [Nixon's] murky,

insomniac mind as he lay awake fretting about his waning leadership quotient and brooding on his colleagues' disloyalty."

In Britain, Wheen believes, the paranoia was best embodied in Harold Wilson (Labour prime minister from 1964-70 and 1974-76) and some of his colleagues. Sir William Armstrong, the "most powerful man in Whitehall," was so paranoid that he would frequently only meet in places that were definitely not bugged, "stripp[ing] off his clothes and lay[ing] on the floor, chain-smoking and expostulating wildly about the collapse of democracy and the end of the world." Wilson was not much saner, says Wheen. A few weeks after resigning in 1976 he gave his infamous "big fat spider" interview: "Occasionally when we meet I might tell you to go to the Charing Cross Road and kick a blind man standing on the corner. That blind man may tell you something, lead you somewhere." Eh?

Of course, the Seventies saw economic and political upheaval in much of the developed world. There was an oil crisis, recession, and war (in Vietnam and Cambodia for America; in Northern Ireland for Britain). In the UK, the Seventies started, under Ted Heath's Conservative government, with severe inflation measures and wage freezes, which led to standoffs between the government and trade unions. In response to the 1974 coal miners' strike, Heath's government introduced the Three-Day Week, when electricity could only be used for three specified consecutive days a week. The blackouts and the candlelit homes and offices exacerbated a powerful sense of imminent societal collapse.

In the realm of ideas, too, the impression of things falling apart was widespread. This was a period when deep ecology—modernity-hating, backward-looking ecology—rose from the swamp of bad ideas and dug its nails into mainstream debate. British billionaire Teddy Goldsmith, who founded *The Ecologist*, said in 1971 that Britain was heading back to feudalism: "People will gather round whichever strong men can provide the basic necessities of life and offer protection against marauding bands from the dying cities." On the first Earth Day in 1970, American academic Peter Gunter predicted, "By the year 2000, the entire world, with the exception of Western Europe, North America and Australia, will be in famine." Population scaremonger Paul Ehrlich added, with a curious combination of nonchalance and hysteria, "I'm 37 and I'd kind of like to live to be 67 in a reasonably pleasant world and not die in some kind of holocaust in the next decade."

While all this is eye-opening, jaw-dropping, and at times, yes, funny, Wheen's excavation of the madder moments of the 1970s relies too much on paranoia, on the notion that people and politicians had lost the plot and gone "off their rockers." Of the small left-wing terror groups that preferred bombing to thinking, Wheen says, "Nihilist hyperbole and exaggerated fury filled the analytical void." True. But there are moments in *Strange Days Indeed* when Wheen's almost psychotherapeutic conviction that politicians and others went barmy in the Seventies also fills an "analytical void," substituting for a more profound explanation of the political content and nature of that turbulent decade.

This creates two problems in an otherwise fine book. First, Wheen sometimes tries (and ultimately fails) to explain major political crises and events through the foibles or tendency to paranoia of the participants. So of Northern Ireland, where a war between the British Army and the Provisional Irish Republican Army raged throughout the 1970s, he says there was an "insanity" that was "contagious," where crazy IRA men and unhinged British politicians did stupid and self-destructive things. Here a 25-year conflict over sovereignty and territory, at its most violent in the 1970s, is depicted as little more than an outbreak of speedily spreading madness. The standoff between miners and government is also discussed mostly through the personality traits and stubbornness of the trade union leaders and Conservative politicians involved, which overlooks the political and deeply class-based nature of that clash. And is it really enough to describe Nixon as a lip-sweating lunatic who paced the corridors of the White House? After all, there were very real and very rational pressures on the president. His armed forces were losing to an army of liberation in Southeast Asia, and he faced loud and sometimes rowdy political opposition at home. If Nixon was "on the edge," it might be because his enormous opposition pushed him there.

Second, to the extent that some Western leaders did express themselves in a "paranoid style," fretting openly about being followed or about the collapse of democracy and the end of the world, Wheen doesn't fully explain why. The Seventies were a period of profound moral and political crisis for Western ruling elites—not only because they faced economic recession and political opposition, but also because, perhaps for the first time in the 20th century, they lacked any convincing moral arguments to help them withstand challenges to their authority. The Sixties exposed that the emperor, the rulers of Western societies, had no clothes; their way of life, their traditions, their culture, their history had been called into question by the tumultuous events of the 1960s (and indeed the 1950s and '40s, too), from the universities of West Coast America to the universities of Paris and Hamburg, from the streets of Chicago to the streets of Rome. This left Western leaders bereft of ideas and lost for words by the 1970s, meaning they experienced opposition as something terrifying, imagining that the world could collapse at any minute. In such circumstances, a strike becomes the harbinger of social collapse, a rowdy protest hints at the end of the world, and a bomb planted by disgruntled middle-class dropouts in Germany signals the potential end of civilization. Indeed, as Wheen himself says of Baader-Meinhof & Co., in the 1970s "even the tiniest band of desperadoes could paralyse a nation"—not because they were strong, but because the elites, denuded of their traditions, lacking in any inspiring new ideas, were weak politically, morally, and institutionally. ■

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[SuperFreakonomics: Global Cooling, Patriotic Prostitutes, and Why Suicide Bombers Should Buy Life Insurance, Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, William Morrow, 288 pages]

Conventional Wisdom, the Sequel

By John Payne

WHEN *Freakonomics* was released in 2005, it achieved the unthinkable by inspiring a massive interest in applied economics among a popular audience. The book's authors, Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, accomplished this bizarre feat by using economic logic and statistical analysis to catch teachers cheating and explain crack dealers staying in the dope game when they make less money than McDonald's employees.

Levitt and Dubner have now returned with a sequel bearing the painfully obvious title *SuperFreakonomics*. (I wonder if the estate of Rick James will be seeking compensation.) The book is already a bestseller, but it is clear that Levitt and Dubner did not hold any of their "A" material back from the original. *SuperFreakonomics* is well written, with a number of intriguing ideas and a solid thesis—even if its authors seem to be unaware of it for most of the book—but it is ultimately a disappointment, with many of its insights being less than freaky.

In a brief explanatory note at the beginning of *SuperFreakonomics*, the authors write that although they claimed in the original that the stories had no unifying theme, they came to realize that a thread was there: "People respond to incentives"—perhaps the most basic premise in all of economics. While this idea runs through the sequel as well, there is another one that unites much of this book, though Levitt and Dubner never make it explicit: every age has problems that must be solved through human ingenuity and technological innovation, but these solutions create problems of their own that perpetuate the cycle.

For instance, at the end of the 19th century, the horse was the primary means of transportation for the affluent in American cities. The thought strikes most modern audiences as romantic and quaint, but Levitt and Dubner point out the multitude of negative externalities associated with movement by steed: feeding the animals drove up food prices; their manure and even rotting carcasses filled the streets, offending the senses and spreading disease; and numerous pedestrians were trampled to death by the enormous creatures. These problems were solved by the invention and rapid spread of the automobile, which ran on cheap gasoline, did not leave solid waste in the streets, and was far easier to control than its equine predecessor. Yet we may now be facing a new danger brought on, in part, by the use of automobiles: global warming.

It is the chapter on solving this problem that has stirred the most controversy. The authors accept that the globe is warming (although they point out that scientists were worried about global cooling 30 years ago) and that it is caused to a large degree by human activity. They are in the sights of environmentalists for having the temerity to suggest that global warming might be better handled through technological innovation than by attempts to make unrealistic cuts in carbon output. In other words, they argue that humanity should attack global warming the same way we have successfully attacked every other major environmental problem our species has faced.

Levitt and Dubner argue that pumping sulfur dioxide into the stratosphere above the poles should form a protective blanket to reflect sunlight and cool the planet. Their critics respond that the idea is fanciful and could lead to unintended consequences, such as the further acidification of the oceans, but that criticism misses the point. Although they focus on the sulfur dioxide idea, Levitt and Dubner do not present it as the only possible solution to global warming, nor do they deny that any geo-engineering scheme will create its own problems. What they do argue is that human ingenuity is equal to the challenge of global warming and any subsequent challenges that solution causes.

Perhaps the book's most interesting chapter deals with research on altruism (although I'm sure Adam Smith—author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in addition to *The Wealth of Nations*—would have an objection to Levitt and Dubner's assertion that economists before the mid-20th century were unconcerned with altruism). To test altruism in a laboratory setting, economists developed a game called Dictator that gave one player $20 and allowed him to split the money evenly with another, anonymous player or give the other player just $2. Economists were surprised to discover that most players divided the money evenly; it seemed to undermine the assumption of rational self-interest that underlies neoclassical economics. This widespread and naturally occurring altruism also seemed hard to square with the abundance of selfish behavior witnessed by even the most casual observer of the human condition.

The obvious discrepancy interested economist John List, so he redesigned the experiment in numerous ways to make the players' options more realistic. List quickly found that people were not nearly as altruistic when given more choices. When offered the additional option of taking a dollar from the second player, for instance, only a third of players gave money to the second participant, while the others either gave nothing or took a dollar. Most interestingly, when List made both participants work for the money they used to play the game by stuffing envelopes, two-thirds of the participants did not