

ten to our lectures on human rights, as President Jiang Zemin made clear in his visit to the United States in the fall of 1997. Although he is a comparative youngster at 70, Premier Zhu Rongji is unlikely to reverse the gerontocracy's way of doing things too quickly in any but the economic realm; the old men responsible for the Tiananmen Square massacre still hold sway.

Even so, change is coming. One small index is the importance of goods manufactured by prison labor to the Chinese economy: According to a recent *Washington Post* article, these goods account for only one-fifth of one percent of China's Gross National Product, a far smaller figure than don't-buy-Chinese-exports propagandists would have it. Historically, Americans have bridled whenever foreign governments have pressured us to do things their way; we should not be surprised when the Chinese government applies the same standard to our entreaties.

Neither, I hasten to add, must we kowtow to the Chinese state when it is clearly in the wrong.

But if the Chinese are not yet quite ready to declare themselves "born to be wild," they are taking real steps toward liberty. The times are changing, and faster than anyone can track. Said that old cardiologist, who had suffered so much, "I think socialism is good. Communism is good. But the government has not let the people talk. Talking about what's good or bad—that is socialism."

Perhaps so. There is now much talk in the air in China. With that talk, socialism is disappearing, and another revolution, profound and dislocating, is in the making.

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## Letter From Scotland

by Bryan Giemza

### Busspotting



On my short list of Great Equalizers, I would jot "The Chainsaw," "The Auto-

mobile," and "The Internet" without hesitation. In a separate category dubbed Great Equalizing *Experiences*, I would begin with the axiomatic two: "Death" and "Taxes." My next entry would be century-specific: "Bus Travel."

I've experienced bus travel in many places, primarily in countries where buses are designed to accommodate, in lavish comfort, midgets. Bus travel has come a long way in Britain, and given the motorways and scale of the island, it's not hard to see why the bus has supplanted rail as the busiest conduit of human traffic. While the fixtures of the bus station are fairly new—the fluorescent uniforms for conductors, and the sleek, charcoal-tinted double-decker night buses that smell of oil, rubber, and recently pressed plastic—the form of the place is certainly nothing new.

Glasgow's bus station is well suited to a city that is still plainly painted with its industrial past. The brownstone flats are limned by smears of old soot, and in a city that spends most of the year under rain, the effect is endearingly gritty. It is a place that is resilient in the shadow of factory fallout. Indeed, the abiding impression of Glasgow is that it lives under a cloud, both literally and figuratively. The city's flowers are found in the pavement cracks: in the pubs, in the comportment of the people in shops, and yes, even in the bus station. There is a merriment in the bustle of the place, and something charmingly old-fashioned about seeing papers and sweets loaded into the bins of buses destined for small Scottish villages. Perhaps it is just a matter of incongruity: that on a bleak morning there could be such cheer.

I shouldn't be surprised. Mist-shrouded Ireland produced Van Morrison, who sings as soulfully about Tupelo honey as any Delta singer in the sun-kissed Southland. And the South is greatly on my mind after two months of rain without a clear day. The chilly Glasgow nights are stirred by warm sea currents. So, too, the hearts of the restless city dwellers who nightly bestir themselves to the streets. I take a walk through the scrimshaw spiderwebs of the city's night lights and the rain that dances like waterbugs on the street-lit pavements.

The next morning, I find myself at the bus station, destinationless and bemused by the travelers' caffeinated early morn *bonhomie*. I resolve to board a bus to visit friends in Dundee, a place famed for west-coast weather, which is to say the er-

rant sunny day. An hour into the journey, a young man in his middle 20's drops into the seat beside me. Give people any seat to choose from, and they always choose to sit beside me. The smell of tobacco burns an acrid imprint in my nostrils. It is as if the man himself has been slowly burned up. His jaw is etched with scars. He will not make eye contact with me, but he talks, and he fumes. At first, I think he is talking to himself. I pause in my reading and strain to make out his words through his slurry of Scottish glottals. I understand the slang; it comes with being around young Scots. Even so, I can only make out half of it. He needs money for methadone. He is incredulous of his own body.

*I mean, look at me.*

I haven't been. He has endured another stint in rehab. He needs a new clinic where he will not be abused, or so he has it made out. He considers, in the alternative, that a bottle of vodka might just carry the night for him.

People always choose to talk to me. I suspect that this is because I will listen to just about anyone. I don't know how the talkers spot the listeners, but they do.

*It's f---ed up. Some of the dreams in the clinics, you kinna bear them; it'll f-- you up.*

I answer softly, as a Scot would.

*Aye.*

I do not want him to realize that I am not a Scot. A foreigner is an easy mark. This might be the first lie of our conversation. I have been a child of the wayward wind, and I've seen more of this blue marble in my short years than most do in a lifetime. Only once did someone peg me. I asked a question of a foreign-born man in a queue in Budapest. He marked me at once: "You're a Southerner." I was startled. My accent is not heavy. Yet this foreigner knew, he said, based on the way I approached him. He said I was polite, deferential. Reticent.

*If you've ever seen Trainspotting, that bit with the dreams, that's what it's like. It's shite-like.*

I resist the impulse to think of him as having emerged from *Trainspotting*, the film about Scottish junkies. He is real. Our conversation is not. It is his monologue, a chronologically scrambled stream-of-consciousness listing of friends and relations imprisoned, of drugs and counteracting drugs, of dosages down to the milliliter, of the haphazard injustice of institutions in which he has found himself immured. He does not seem to

fault the institutions. He just keeps small grudges, as if they are all he can afford. He was shorted at the bus station. The nurses didn't listen. Most of his time had been on auto theft.

*Daft, innit?*

When he advises me not to get into drugs, it is the only moment in the conversation that comes close to levity. The relentless stream of the cheerful dance music favored by the Scots churns merrily along. Someone shouts to turn it off.

*Boy you got to carry that weight . . .*

An old Beatles favorite has been redone. Mercury tadpoles of rain stream over the window. He continues to talk.

I remember the ex-cons I lived with as a volunteer in a halfway house. It is familiar to me: the distrust that borders on a survival instinct, the impulse to help. As with the ex-cons, "f---ing" is the staple of his speech, a choking sincerity. His is indeed a world of things rubbing up against each other, clashing, grinding, making more, a violence of machinery that is (gratefully) alien to me. But his talk of sex isn't a particular crudity. I realize that he loved a girl once. I'm certain of that much.

*I couldna e'en shag me bird; I'm three months waiting on the AIDS test now.*

I imagine what it would be like. I try for a while. I turn from it. I cannot pretend to imagine. My life has been good.

I have this peculiar curse. I am a local wherever I go. People joke with me in the pubs and then try to hide their disappointment when I speak. Foreigner. How could it be? I cannot talk to others, but they can talk to me. I am so inoffensive that I am a shadow. I am good at being the figurative fly on the wall.

*. . . carry that weight . . .*

He has 80 pence. I know. I watched him count it twice. Not to make a point, either. Orange asters unfold in his hazel eyes like dead, pinned starfish. His eyes are unrevealing, absent. He is talking about how methadone addiction is worse than the heroin. Something about the liquid food and medication given in lockdown. I have set aside my book. I note in detached fashion that his hands are soiled. But they are not strong. A set of nicotine stains on thumb and forefinger match the parchment of his lip. My own hands are still shabby, tan, hearty, folded as neatly as shirts on my lap.

*Put you off your book, haven't I?*

*That's all right.*

His speech continues. It is like hearing a set of demons chattering on, a

hurt so fragmented that it has torn itself to oblivion and grown eerily calm, content with its own diminishing noise. A spent cinder. There are others. He admires a man who is serving six years. Slit a throat. I wonder if he admires the man or admires his suffering. The two are liable to be inseparable for him. There is much nodding between us. We have little in common. We have everything in common.

*. . . a long time . . .*

I cannot sort out all the drugs, and what does what for him, and why. There is no innocence in the precision of this litany: meta-, -mine, something or other. There is a certain terrifying f---ed-upness about it. This is not a word I use lightly. It is not a word I use.

He has mastered the chemistry of his dying soul. Where I come from, I was not made to worry about it. The only panhandlers were downtown. I didn't have much business downtown. And alcohol seems simple.

I have that peculiar aching sympathy, unique to foreknowledge, that what I do won't be enough. But there is something I can do. He thinks I am local. I do not speak. I have nothing to say. Speech would be as superfluous to me as tears to him.

After a time, I stop trying to read. Or rather, stop holding the book open. I think that he admitted that part of his chat came from withdrawal from one of myriad substances. It seemed to be out of his hands, as if he were under the sway of a truth serum. Maybe he was. There is another reason to blather with a stranger, though. Words are free, like the wind, virtually effortless. He was remembering that he still existed. Everything was empty in memory. He could sound himself through me, though. Something might be gained. Something might unfold. I am hoping against it.

The radio is singing. It will not shut up.

*You never give me your money . . .*

Inevitably, he comes around to it. I have been waiting for it. It is a little betrayal between us, a little dirt. He knows it. I know it. It can't be helped. I want to help.

*Don't suppose you could spare a quid?*

I reply in Scottish slang.

*Sorry, I'm absolutely skint.*

It's true. I have £20 on me, enough to buy a return ticket and eat with my friends. It isn't quite satisfactory, though. *you only give me your (inspiration?) . . .*

Just before the bus arrives, he asks if I'll have a few pints with him. I wouldn't mind buying him a pint. But I know what will follow. I cannot sort him out with a pint. That's what I tell myself.

*Sorry.*

*Tha's a-right.*

We are at the station. He uses that peculiar conclusive Scots expression.

*Tha's me, then, awee.*

Rising, he looks at me for the first time, calmly, resigned, without malice. Empty. He winks and vanishes into the station, vanishes in the way that someone who lives in stations can disappear. There isn't time to reconsider. He is gone. That's him, then, away.

On the way to my friend's flat, I look over my shoulder from time to time.

\* \* \*

I passed a woman begging in the rain one night in Glasgow.

*Spare 20 pee?*

I didn't reply. It was not a time for hesitation. I went to the nearest chippy and bought a bag of fries. They steamed in the night, sharp with vinegar, lovely crystalline starches lumped in the thin brown paper. Starch. Warmth in hand. Nourishment.

I returned to the stoop to give the woman the parcel. I found the alley, glistening a little in an oil slick of fresh pavement under streetlights.

But she was gone, disappeared. Too late.

I have this odd curse on me. I'm a local wherever I go.

*Bryan Gierza writes from Chapel Hill, North Carolina.*

## LIBERAL ARTS

### THE MONEYCHANGERS ARE BACK

Israel's National Parks Authority approved a project at Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee that will allow tourists to walk on water just like Jesus did. A 13-foot-wide, 28-foot-long, crescent-shaped floating bridge will be submerged two inches below the lake's surface, accommodating up to 50 people. It will have no railing in order to enhance the effect of walking on water, but lifeguards and boats will be ready in case anyone slips off. The attraction is part of a host of projects approved for the millennium, when authorities expect 4 million pilgrims to visit."

—from the Syracuse New Times (August 25-September 1, 1999)

## ECONOMICS

Debt Money and  
the Federal Debt

by Gus R. Stelzer

In 1985, I was a resident of Rancho Sante Fe, California, and a member of the prestigious Rancho Sante Fe Golf and Country Club. I often played golf with "Jack" (not his real name), who was listed in *Forbes* magazine as one of the 400 richest people in America. On one occasion, as we were walking down the fairways, I talked about the evils of a rising federal debt, then about \$1.8 trillion.

After some 20 minutes of talk (mostly mine), Jack stopped walking and said, "Gus, you worry too much about the federal debt. I hold \$15 million worth of federal T-bills. They're risk-free, and they're paying me over a million dollars a year in interest. The higher the debt goes, the more T-bills I will buy, and the more interest I will get. Anyway, tomorrow, Madge [his wife] and I are flying to Tahiti for two weeks, and I'm not going to worry about the federal debt. It's a money-maker as far as I'm concerned."

Today, the federal debt is over three times as large as it was when Jack told me what the debt is really all about. His message was: "There is big money in it for the financial elite . . . individuals with considerable discretionary wealth, banks, insurance companies, securities brokers, currency speculators, and others who build fortunes on debt and on the backs of people who pay the interest."

Without the general populace being aware, the monetary system of the United States has been transformed. Today, the gap between rich and poor is wider than at any other time in American history. We are gradually becoming a two-tier society, like most Latin American countries.

The federal debt functions as a mechanism to transfer the wealth of the "poor and middle class" to ten percent of our population, who already own or control

90 percent of private wealth. The federal debt is a gold mine for money lenders!

Today, the federal debt is about \$5.6 trillion, of which \$2 trillion is owed to various trust funds, such as Social Security, Medicare, veterans' benefits, highways, railroad, etc. The balance, about \$3.6 trillion, is "publicly held" debt, against which T-bills have been issued by the Treasury Department. Of that amount, about \$2.3 trillion is held by U.S. citizens and institutions who already own, or control, 90 percent of our national wealth, and the federal government pays them over \$140 billion a year in interest.

The balance (about \$1.3 trillion) is owned by citizens of foreign countries (Japan, Germany, Britain, Taiwan, Communist China, etc.) with whom the United States has racked up \$2.6 trillion in merchandise trade deficits since 1971. Up until that time, foreign holders of our dollars could "cash them in" at a rate of \$35 for one ounce of our gold, under the terms of the 1944 Bretton Woods monetary accord.

As a result of rising imports in the late 1960's and early 1970's and the consequent outflow of U.S. dollars, our gold reserves were being depleted at an alarming rate. So, on August 15, 1971, President Nixon announced we would no longer honor our Bretton Woods commitment.

Now that they could not convert our currency into gold, the foreign beneficiaries of our \$2.6 trillion trade deficit cashed half of the dollars that they held in on federal T-bills. Today, our government pays them over \$70 billion a year in interest to get our own money back!

Thus, the federal government is now paying over \$210 billion in interest each year to finance the debt, a large part of which was caused by immoral trade policies that sabotaged our industrial tax base, closed thousands of factories, and shipped the jobs of over ten million law-abiding workers to countries that do *not* abide by our laws.

In order to pay that interest, the government must collect taxes from U.S. citizens at a rate of about \$2,000 per American household. This money is siphoned out of the wallets of average Americans and then transferred to those who already own or control 90 percent of our nation's private wealth, thereby steadily widening

the gap between rich and poor.

The most outrageous part of this scam is that over \$70 billion per year is being paid to foreigners in order to get our own trade deficit dollars back. If that \$70 billion of interest were retained in our country and applied against future obligations to Social Security and Medicare recipients, the worries about the solvency of those programs would disappear overnight.

The prudent use of the projected federal budget surpluses could also reduce the interest burden on the American taxpayer. The projected surpluses may simply be "smoke and mirrors," caused either by windfall tax revenues created by record capital gains in an unsustainable stock market or by temporary surpluses in Social Security that will have to be paid out in a few years. Still, let's assume that the surpluses do materialize. What should be done with them?

There is strong pressure in Congress to "give the money back to the American taxpayers" through various tax cuts. But there is a heavy dose of demagoguery in such proposals, political posturing to gain voter support in upcoming elections. Furthermore, the proposed tax cuts offer little benefit to those most in need—the working and middle classes. But they provide a double benefit to the rich: While their taxes are reduced, the wealth-transfer mechanism of the federal debt is left intact.

The working and middle classes would benefit more if all budget surpluses were applied against the federal debt until it is completely eliminated. In addition to saving the average household about \$2,000 per year in taxes, elimination of the debt would avoid a massive drain on our capital resources. Mortgage rates, interest on car loans, credit cards, etc., would fall drastically. These lower interest rates would save American homeowners and consumers thousands of dollars a year.

Such a plan would be a blessing for the average American and for our entire social and economic order: It would inflict a mortal wound on a devious scheme that transfers a good part of the meager wealth of the poor and the middle class to the ten percent who already own or control 90 percent of our private wealth. It would stop the widening polarization of our society. It would liberate average cit-