Extra-Ordinary Popular Perceptions

And The

Sanity Of Crowds

by
William Essex

To begin...

On the day that I write this, the early news tells us of a parade in Moscow to celebrate Russia's defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Crimea remains annexed, and the Russia/Ukraine crisis is not resolved. At around half eight, the BBC's reporter in Moscow is cut off in mid-sentence as he summarises the military hardware on display; the *Today* programme on Radio 4 cuts to the sports news.

Sentenced to a year's "community service" for tax fraud, former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi turns up at a care home to work with dementia patients. Because he escaped prison, Berlusconi will still be able to lead his party in the forthcoming European elections. Because he's an

elderly politician who doesn't know a lot about mental health, Berlusconi will be accompanied at all times by a medical worker who specialises in Alzheimer's (to help with care of the patients, duh).

In other news, the UK tax authorities come under fire for (revived) plans to deduct money from taxpayers' bank accounts without prior judicial authorisation. The central criticism is that tax officials at Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs "have a history of making mistakes" (reports the BBC). Oh, and new research by Danish scientists tells us that too much arguing can lead to early death.

You couldn't make it up? There's no need to make it up. The world is out of control. It always has been, and it always will be.

On the day that you read this, the events of 9th May 2014 will be history (unless you see this as soon as I upload it). Hindsight will give them that patina of inevitability that coats the reported past. Just as you can't watch the Archduke being driven through Sarajevo without knowing what happens next, or the Titanic set sail (both on *YouTube*), so you might find it quaint that I inhabit a world where "what happened next" isn't part of the story.

This introduction is being written with the book unfinished, on 9th May 2014, so I don't even know how my own work ends (for more on this, see *Why this book? Why this way? Why today?* on page 5). What I think I'm going to say is that, although we don't quite labour under the delusion that the world and its events can be directed, possibly even controlled, we do act as though we still believe that the old ways of running a country, a company, an economy still work. We imagine that our political structures are effective.

As if they ever were. One of the ancient news-

reels on YouTube tells us that the Archduke came to Sarajevo to "reassure his people". The Titanic, as we all know, was unsinkable.

I'm not writing this book to point out that the world is out of control. That's obvious. But I do think that the world is out of control in new ways (yes, I'm about to mention the internet), and that the people who think they're in charge are not in charge at all.

The world is under new management (I'll discuss whether we can call it "management" later). So are all the countries, economies and institutions that make up the political, macro-economic, whatever-you-want-to-call-it infrastructure that we call (without irony) civilisation.

Countries have leaders and armies, companies have boards and remuneration committees, economies have central bankers, finance ministers, tax authorities. And the rest of us have smartphones, social media, the internet, access to pretty much everything and at least one platform per person to air our opinions to the world.

This is a difficult time to be a political leader, but an interesting time to be a political activist – in fact, any kind of activist. It's much easier to criticise, satirise, name'n'shame, mock, express indignation, argue back, than it is actually to do anything.

Today, indignant is the new indifferent. When Prime Minister David Cameron wrote in the *Church Times* that he thought of the UK as a "Christian country", which he did around Easter time this year, fifty-plus assorted notables protested to the media that he was wrong. But hey – what else is a politician going to say in the *Church Times*? At Easter? The ensuing short-lived public row took us back to the 2001 census, in which 59% of the UK population

self-described as Christian (and from there to a debate on whether or not those 59% meant it).

One "official" response to our un-governability is repression. But that doesn't work. When the Turkish government banned Twitter in March 2014, the result was a surge in the volume of tweeting from Turkey. Twitter users there changed their DNS settings and posted 2.5 million tweets within the first three hours of the ban. [They had learned how to do this, it was suggested, during previous attempts at repression.]

There's a kind of genius to a culture in which 757 million people use Facebook every day (at end-2013, says Facebook), to broadcast themselves to the world, but any kind of repression, surveillance, oversight, CCTV is a political hot potato (in the short term, at least – we'll come to that). People are intrinsically un-governable, and now they are empowered by their smartphones and the internet.

What's to be done? This is also a world in which people suffer injustice. Human rights are flagrantly disregarded. Crimes are committed. People die. Shots have been fired in Ukraine; in Syria, the Old City of Homs has just been re-occupied by government forces after three years of fighting. 284 schoolgirls have been kidnapped in Nigeria and face being sold into slavery. Today. In the twenty-first century. Indignation is not enough.

There has always been something utopian about the internet. The early pioneers saw in it a new freedom of expression. To some degree – repressive governments can't shut us up – they were right. And it's true that our ability to express ourselves via technology has at least the theoretical potential to bring about a perfect democracy – we can all make ourselves heard; we can all canvass; we can all vote.

Sadly, we're not following that script. Website designers use terms such as "user damage" to describe what happens to the websites they've designed, once their customers get hold of them. I think our connected world has been suffering "user damage" ever since it started to be built. But I also think that it still has the potential to work well, if we can only find a way to fix the damage, and ensure that it stays fixed.

Maybe I'm the idealist. But I hope I can write a book that starts with an examination of where we are now, and goes, via various subject headings that I'll come back and put into this paragraph later, to some suggestions for a "user manual" for our networked world.

Why this book, why this way, why today?

9th May 2014 was an ordinary day. Stuff happened. Time passed. With the help of Wikipedia, *YouTube* and a couple of news websites, I wrote the Introduction above (and then I called it something else). I'm writing this paragraph on 15th May 2014. It's going more slowly. Hot day.

I wrote a version of this book on and around 21st June 2012, pretty much two years ago. I know that because I mention(ed) the date in the text (and will do so again), not because I knew in advance that I was going to have a thing about dates. Then, I was responding to a friend's call for books to populate his new online publishing venture. He wanted factual books of 10,000 words at most, and, frankly, I had time on my hands. I thought about it for a while, not too long, and realised – I do have something to say.

But stuff happened then, too. Time passed and continued to pass. All of a sudden it was January 2014, and we were agreeing that the book needed updating before publication. Then all the hundred-year anniversaries kicked in.

Or rather, they didn't. Nobody said a word about the first scheduled airline flight, between St Petersburg and Tampa with Tony Jannus as pilot (go, Wikipedia!), nor indeed about the founding of Merrill Lynch, nor about Henry Ford's decision to use an assembly line for Model T production. It was as if the New York premier of Frank Craven's *Too Many Cooks* had never happened. Charlie Chaplin's tramp first appeared in 1914, although the film *The Tramp* didn't open until 1915 (go, IMdb!).

What happened 100 years ago was that the Titanic sank and then the First World War started. Or so we might as well assume, given that we have "what happened next" as part of the story. The ship went down (in 2012) and then everybody stood around waiting for the guns to start firing, the tank to be invented and the War Poets to open their notebooks and start writing.

History is problematic, not least because it is so often delivered as a form of storytelling. There's a beginning (Gavrilo Prinzip), a middle (trenches, gas, futility, poetry) and an end (Treaty of Versailles, Weimar Republic… uh oh). There are big events that obscure the little ones. Themes emerge. Too often, we start to see simple cause-and-effect linkages between, let's say, Apparently Insignificant Event A and Unavoidable Big Consequence B. As if nothing else could have happened.

When we read history – or, more often these days, watch dramatic reconstructions "based on real events" – we know which events were impor-

tant (and if we don't, the background music tips us off), and we know the conclusions that we're supposed to draw from them. Ships need to have lots of lifeboats, et cetera. Don't go via the icebergs. Wars don't end by Christmas, et cetera. Go easy on the war reparations.

But if these are really the lessons of history, we're going to be bolting the doors on a lot of empty stables in the years ahead. Put <MV Sewol> into your search engine. 241 dead, 16th April 2014. Maybe read the online picture story *Disasters at Sea: 6 Deadliest Shipwrecks*, which was posted almost exactly 100 years after the Titanic hit the iceberg. Spot the seafarers, ship-owners and others who didn't learn the lessons of history.

The obvious quote to put in here is "Those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them," which was approximately used by Winston Churchill in 1935, written by George Santayana in 1905 and probably first said by Edmund Burke in 1729 – although the attribution and precise phrasing differ according to the (online) source you're using. One version suggests that the problem is a simple failure "to remember the past".

Whatever it is, we're still failing at it. Santayana also said, "Only the dead have seen the end of war." Which is pretty cool, right? By one of those strangely satisfying conjunctions that it would take a scientist to dismiss as coincidence, the BBC aired the first episode of its drama *37 Days*, about the run-up to the First World War, on 6th March 2014. That was the 99 years, eight months, several days anniversary of the Archduke's assassination. The drama was intended to get across the idea that the war was caused by Western political leaders' inadequate responses to a crisis in eastern Europe.

And 6th March 2014 was also the date on which Russia moved on Crimea. Spooky, or what?

Why this book? I think I've covered that one.

Why this way? Because the events aren't the point. Nor is updating them. I want to get a sense of not knowing what happens next into my writing. We can learn, or not learn, the lessons of the past, but we should also pay attention to the big lesson of the present, which is that we don't know what's going to happen next.

Neither did the passengers of the White Star Line who were woken by a bump at around midnight on 14th/15th April 1912. Nor did a 46-year-old woman named Sophie, who went on a car journey with her husband in 1914, in Sarajevo. The youngest of their three children, aged ten when his parents were shot, survived Dachau concentration camp to die aged 49, younger than I am now, in 1954.

Nobody knows what happens next. History – indeed, herstory – may be based on real events, but it's at best an inadequate representation of what happened (and why). So I'm going to write this book in history, but with the added kick of not knowing how it all turns out – I'm going to write it in real life.

I'll keep some of what I wrote in 2012, and some of the contemporaneous examples I used then, but I'll resist the temptation to apply hindsight or otherwise bring them up to date. History never quite repeats itself, but when it does come close to doing so, it's not the events that happen again, but how the people treat each other. So this is a book about people and how they behave. That subject is always up to date.

And if I continue to sit here waiting for the Russia/Ukraine crisis to end, so that I can craft some comfortable little paragraph about how history does

or doesn't repeat itself, and the political leaders of 2014 are no better/no worse than the political leaders of 1914, I'm not only falling into my own trap, by looking for an end to go with the beginning and the middle; I'm also expressing no confidence in my own argument - as if whatever I say might be invalidated by what happens next. Easy mistakes to make, and I've been making them.

Why today? The specific historical (sic) event that triggered this exercise in writing, page-laying out and serial e-publishing was the decision of a writer-and-editor in Montana to start a discussion on LinkedIn about procrastination. I read it, added a comment, and thought: but I'm not procrastinating. I'm just waiting for the right moment to start.

Then I thought: when, in the whole of history, has there ever been a right moment to start anything? That isn't right now?