



Eurozine Review

Charismatic megafauna

Soundings wonders where climate mainstreaming is heading; *Esprit* returns to earth; *Merkur* lampoons the CO2 dwarf; *Dilema veche* talks to Romania's impatient émigrés; *Transit* records the dilemmas of an editor; *Blätter* joins cause with the students; *Mittelweg 36* analyses the futility of political planning; *Akadeemia* doesn't miss the communists; and *Passage* reads modern Arabic literature.

Soundings 43 (2009)



The entry of climate change into the media mainstream, welcome as it is, nevertheless brings new problems. In *Soundings*, journalists, campaigners and scientists [discuss](#) the implications of demand-led reporting, the exploitation of public misunderstanding, and the dangers of focusing on "charismatic megafauna" (celebrities, polar bears and sharks).

[George Monbiot](#) observes that "a trend for sections of the media to both overemphasize and get the story wildly wrong", backfires when environmentalists and scientists are blamed for the media's distortions. This dramatic reportage has been called "climate porn" — yet do journalists have an alternative?

"I think we *needed* climate porn because there is a genuine problem here, and it's not been entirely cooked up by journalists," says Monbiot. "They have to try to make people interested in a subject which is not very 'newsy' and doesn't really fit into the standard package for generating public interest."

Yet when *The Daily Mail* launches an anti-plastic bag campaign, [Mike Goodman](#) begins to wonder whether "mainstreaming is going in the direction we want to go". The fact that environmentalism is no longer political means "you've lost that distinctly anti-corporate point of critique to mobilize people as a movement, to get them to change their behaviour at a larger structural level". Monbiot concurs: "The consumerist response is completely hopeless. [...] The only effective journalism is the journalism which mobilizes us as citizens rather than as consumers."

Economic restorationism: There is intense competition, writes John Clarke, "to name the [economic] crisis, to identify its distinctive characteristics and treat it as the ground on which to demand new ways of doing things". At the moment, the minimalist interpretation of what has gone wrong is prevailing; the main remedy on offer is a quick fix of the finance system before resuming business as usual. Yet the crisis is much deeper than "restorationist" strategies

would imply. Even if they win a temporary reprieve, restorationists will not be able to resolve the problems of a global economy that can no longer be fuelled by consumer debt.

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Esprit 12/2009



In *Esprit*, Dominique Bourg warns that as long as we keep believing that our environmental problems are largely "to do with pollution, we will fail to grasp the enormity of the situation". Reductions in greenhouse gases demand major lifestyle changes. "The issue is the conflict between our economic and political model and the preservation of the biosphere and natural resources."

Human consumption has a clear effect on climatic evolution: if India's meat consumption increased tenfold (to half that of the US), the effect on the land, on forests, glaciers and thus fresh water supplies would be immense. Just as the Industrial Revolution brought tuberculosis, writes Bourg, so today we face wide immunodeficiency among certain populations and new diseases resistant to antibiotics.

"Technology is not all-powerful" and "there is no infinite space available for our activities", argues Bourg. Our political system, with its built-in affirmation of individual liberty, is not well placed to acknowledge these limits, but we must: we face an ecological imperative in its true, moral, sense — we must abandon our obsessively humanist ideology if we wish to preserve humanity itself.

Reconsidering consumerism: While there has been growth in the green industry, says Edwin Zaccai in interview, short-term green initiatives have wrongly been favoured over others. More than individual action and conscientiously "buying green" (*pace* the massive increase in recycling since 1980), "what has improved air quality in European cities and water quality [...] is fundamentally standards set on emissions and [large-scale] investment programmes".

The philosophy that over-consumption harms both the environment and the quality of life is spreading, and reconsidering consumerism is vital, says Zaccai. What *has* changed is "the intensity with which [environmental] themes, previously relatively marginal, have entered the heart of politics and the media". We must anticipate these shifts, socially as well as regarding profit and managing poverty. Ecological parties are specialists in these questions, but the stakes are such that all must contribute.

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Merkur 1/2010



The human urge to (self-)deception is the leitmotif of the January issue of *Merkur*, culminating in Gunter Schäble's humorous text "CO2-dwarfs, or: Man in climate". On the basis of numerous examples, Schäble explains how mankind, with its "lack of laziness", hyperactivity and dash of fatalism, is unflinchingly heading for climate catastrophe.

"Increasing CO2 is easy for an active human being: one drives, flies, heats, eats warm meals, is picked up by a company car, builds one's own home, ransacks the soil, removes rainforests, uses, renovates, widens, extends, enlarges, raises [...] There is no need to draw a distinction between main occupations and sidelines, their impact is strongest when they combine, and when — taking into account the military-strategic nature of all these activities — the climate is caught in a comprehensive pincer movement. Nevertheless, emitting CO2 in itself remains the supreme discipline."

Industry and climate protection are currently reconciling their differences in particularly brilliant ways, remarks Schäble, filling the landscape with wind energy facilities, solar modules, and environmentally oriented mail-order companies. The entrepreneurial spirit is celebrating new triumphs in the guise of the spirit of environmentalism.

Also: Wolfgang Ullrich mocks the newest machinations of the hippest global artists; Karen Horn guides the way to a Nobel Prize in economics (no guarantees); Peter Ulrich makes a case for republican liberalism; Cord Riechelmann venerates Alexander von Humboldt; and Wolfram Högbebe honours Joseph Beuys.

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Dilema veche 302–305 (2009)



Dilema veche speaks to Romanians who have left the country since 1989 to live and work abroad (issue 305). Feeling they belong neither here nor there, these émigrés describe themselves as "international citizens". Architect Andreea Scarlet lists among her reasons for leaving Romania soon after 1989, "the desire to hold discussions with people who were not as labile and radical as Romanians in the early 1990s".

Writer Cristina Hermeziu, on the other hand, says that young people left because they "did not have the patience to evolve in the rhythm of post-revolutionary Romania".

And how did they perceive Romania when they returned on visits? Each time Hermeziu felt "Romania was gasping for breath. Because of pleasure or effort, because of the mad race it had started, because of impatience."

"I never stay in Romania long enough to understand whether this gasping for breath is effective," Hermeziu continues. "Sometimes I think that one day I will find Romania breathing calmly and know that it has found its balance without me."

Perpetuating irresponsibility: Contributors discuss the implications of Romania's 12.9 billion euro loan from the IMF, contracted last year to help

overcome the effects of the global financial crisis (issue 303). Economist Dragos Paslaru thinks the crisis should be taken as an opportunity to bring more discipline into economic behaviour:

"It is understandable that Romanians want to attain prosperity fast after generations have lived in poverty," he writes. "But we must turn to a more responsible form of consumption. Both consumers and banks must understand the enormous risks of perpetuating irresponsibility."

North or South? Writing during the Copenhagen climate conference, Cristian Ghinea wonders whether eastern Europe belongs to the global North or South (issue 304). The paradoxical position of the region is summed up in the words of Polish Finance Minister Jan Rostowski: "From our point of view, it is completely unacceptable that poor European countries help rich European countries help poor countries in other parts of the world."

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Transit 38 (2009)



In *Transit*, [Claus Offe](#) points to a blind spot in attempts to understand the transformation underway in eastern Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall: all concentrate on the development of democracy, market economy and the rule of law, leaving the building and re–building of the welfare state out of the equation. Surprisingly, notes Offe, "social issues" are far down on the political agenda in the new democracies.

This is all the more remarkable since the economic transformation has brought considerable ordeals for a large part of the population.

Offe is convinced that the central and eastern European welfare states have a long way to go before they reach the level of their western neighbours. But they will have to cover that distance. That is nothing less than a prerequisite for the consolidation of democracy in the post–communist countries — and for their integration into the political and institutional framework of the EU.

The dilemmas of an editor: As co–founder and editor of the *New York Review of Books*, Robert Silvers is one of the most important actors in the global intellectual public sphere. But he hardly ever writes himself. Silvers' *Transit* essay on the "Dilemmas of an editor" must therefore be regarded as a small sensation, giving a unique insight into the problems facing a publisher who values political and economic independence. He touches on several sensitive situations in the history of the *NYRB*, including controversies around the Vietnam war, the Israel–Palestine conflict and, recently, the Chinese protest document "Charta 08". But he also comments on what he sees as one of the main challenges facing today's media: the cultural revolution brought about by the Internet.

"Now what is disturbing, in a final dilemma of the editor, is that in dealing with the digital revolution and the Internet, there has been an almost complete absence of analysis and coherent standards of criticism of that revolution itself — hardly any penetrating criticism at all of the ways that the contents and the experience of the Internet and its instant linkings are consciously, and I am sure unconsciously, changing our lives. The proliferation of commercial and technical possibilities and of new means of diffusing and linking, and profiting

from 'communications' gets close attention. But in all those communications: what is being gained, and what is being lost, above all in the quality of what is communicated?"

Also: A section entitled "United Europe — divided history", centred around Timothy Snyder's essay "[Holocaust: The ignored reality](#)"; and an excerpt from Steve Sem-Sandberg's novel *The destitutes of Lodz*, which recently won the August Prize, Sweden's most prestigious literary award.

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Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik 1/2010



Student strikes in Germany against the Bologna Process are the last stand against what amounts to a cultural revolution, writes Richard Münch in *Blätter*. With hierarchies between universities opening up as a result of the process, the intended transnational integration is accompanied by "national disintegration".

In Germany, universities and professional bodies have traditionally collaborated to form "identities" around particular professions. Yet BA programmes, according to Münch, provide graduates with only basic skills, while employers judge candidates on additional, non-academic qualities such as self-presentation and self-marketing.

With the rapid growth of the availability of knowledge, universities must invest less in academic staff than in facilities in order to justify higher fees. This creates a three-tier system such as in the US, with exorbitantly expensive private degree courses at the top, "mass-market" state universities in the middle, and cheap "community colleges" at the bottom. "Once education has become a commodity, its degree of exclusivity determines the prestige value of the academic title, which in turn translates into salary expectations," writes Münch.

Swiss self-defeatism: Those who have blamed the Swiss vote to ban minarets on a "populist factor" inherent in referenda are off the mark, writes Rudolf Walther. "The legitimate entitlement of citizens to direct participation is not the quirk of a small alpine country [...], but rather the core demand of emancipatory citizenship." There were other factors at work in the "self-defeating" vote, Walther argues: popular resentment at high-level corruption and the fear of social declassification. Most significantly, the Swiss parliament, though not legally obliged to do so, approved the vote for fear of censuring the far-right SVP.

"Switzerland is isolating itself in Europe, because with this decision they have lowered the minimum standards of legality and tolerance. Constitutionalizing a law on building norms is as ridiculous as when the white wine lobby banned Absinthe in 1908."

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Mittelweg 36 6/2009



"Planning fantasies and the will to form represent the essential nature of political modernity", write Stephan Lessenich and Berthold Vogel in their introduction to an issue of *Mittelweg 36* on political planning. "The historical novelty of the epoch is defined not least by a firm belief in the planability of social relations".

Contributors take a distinctly sceptical approach to the subject. After considering disastrous historical examples of demographic forecasts and fruitless planning efforts, Hermann Lübke comes to the conclusion that, "demographic conditions at any one time evolve from a complex interaction of natural, cultural, social and economic factors of generative behaviour. This behaviour is never guided by an intention to contribute to the creation of a demographic situation optimized in terms of pension policy, education policy, military policy or ecological policy."

A radical attempt to limit the "atomizing" effects of modernity on society was Alva and Gunnar Myrdal's concept of social engineering in Sweden. Thomas Etzemüller describes the couple's 1934 book *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* as a deeply paradoxical answer to the social challenges of the time:

"To use the metaphor of 'weeding' to describe the approach to the ambiguities of modernity might be appropriate in the cases of Germany and the USSR. [However] the story in Sweden was incomparably more paradox. It was a deeply *democratic* national community, which focused primarily on inclusion via social policy and only in exceptional cases on exclusion via eugenic measures — a community that was not *totalitarian*, but rather, through the total social structuring of the national body, aimed at the eradication of ambiguity and the creation of order. Sweden demonstrates [...] that 'order' in a democratic, but in the western sense distinctly anti-pluralist state, can be obtained using means that from today's perspective are suspiciously reminiscent of National Socialism."

Also: [Walter Siebel compares](#) European and Islamic cities to show how in the first half of the twentieth century, the sophistication of planning tools increased in inverse proportion to planners' socio-political utopianism.

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Akadeemia 1/2010



Before World War II, communism had no real support in Estonia, and after the war it was associated with the privileged position of the newcomers from the Soviet Union, writes Toomas Alatalu in *Akadeemia*. An attempt by the students of the University of Tartu in the early and mid-1960s to reform the socialist society fizzled out. The Communist Party in Czechoslovakia was more successful with its "humane

socialism".

After 1991, efforts to revive communist leftism by joint election lists of ethnic Estonians and non-Estonians — in the spirit of integration — had the opposite result: the successor to the Communist Party declined and eventually left the political arena altogether. Estonia is the first post-communist country where this has happened. However, the majority of Communist Party members, reveals Alatul, have found themselves a place in a wide variety of parties within the new democratic society.

Cross-border studies: Academic collaboration between Estonia and Germany has a long tradition. In the nineteenth century, when the University of Tartu (Dorpat) was the only German-language university in the Russian Empire, there was frequent exchange of students and professors, and with them, of ideas, write Reinhard K. Kremer and Werner Marx.

When the University of Tartu became the national university of the Republic of Estonia in 1919, the shortage of Estonian staff made it necessary to request help from Scandinavia and Germany. Although cooperation with German scientists was extremely difficult after World War II, it survived. Joint publications of Estonian and German researchers now rank fourth after the former USSR, Finland and Sweden, preceding the US and Great Britain.

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Passage 62 (2009)



Modern Arabic literature make up less than one per cent of all literature translated into French, write the editors of *Passage*. In Scandinavian countries too, few works have been translated, and what is available reaches a narrow readership.

Peter Q. Rannes argues that modern Arabic prose has been dominated by an "epic unwillingness" — a lack of narrative drive more common in western prose — which explains poor international distribution. In the Arabic countries themselves, literature has been the privilege of an educated elite. But with the success of Alaa al-Aswany's novel *The Yacoubian Building* (2007), the best-seller phenomenon has also spread to the Arab world and is indicative of a new popularization of literature, writes Rannes.

Diglossia: Elisabeth A. Moestrup looks at the problem of *diglossia* in Arabic. Present-day spoken Arabic in all its forms is not generally reflected in the written form, a phenomenon familiar to the German Swiss, who resort to High German when writing but speak a variety of *Schweizerdeutsch*. However, where the Swiss use a version that is the mother tongue for about eighty million Germans, "standard Arabic is no one's mother tongue; it's an acquired skill".

Poetry and politics: Nathalie Khankan analyses the relationship between Palestinian poetry and the country's political identity: "According to a long and proud oral tradition, the poet is a visible, audible and public person who engages in the problems of the collective, especially in difficult times," she writes.

This is directly illustrated in Bo Holmberg's article about Arabic prison literature written both during and after imprisonment, or by non-prisoners who live in a society where the threat of arrest is constant and all-pervasive. "Most of the countries in the Arabic world [...], have had periods of strong authoritarian rule, and many Arabic writers have been imprisoned for their political views," writes Holmberg. Prison literature thus gains a particular symbolic function, reflecting incarceration in everyday life.

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