



# Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

## ***Vox Clamantis in Urbe*** **Garbage in, Garbage out** **or The Failures of the Educated in Contemporary Politics**

JACOB OPPENHEIM

We all love to complain about politics. While most of us choose not to join protests, or write vituperative blog posts, the majority of us do regularly share our disapproval in private. Our complaints, though, whether spoken calmly over beers or loudly in the streets, rarely, if ever, evince anything more than a metaphysical displeasure with the state of affairs. Politicians are corrupt; corporations have too much power; unions are stealing our tax dollars, etc. On occasion, we have read a long article (or gotten a quarter of the way through), but more likely have been aggravated by an exceptionally stinging op-ed. Our expressed opinions have little to do with actual data and much to do with ideology.

And we either hold, or are working towards, doctorates. The parlous state of discourse among us, as between the educated throughout the country, mirrors that of the nation at large. Indeed, I argue, it is causative.

Over the past sixty years, the broad expansion of tertiary education and the university system has transformed the world not only by creating an exceptionally educated populace, but also by generating vast streams of data about the world. This is obvious in the natural and physical sciences, but also in the social sciences. Advances in information technology have brought us a wealth of data that is far from fully analyzed. We have the ability to study immense amounts

of economic and sociological data, helping us better understand everything from the effects of changing corporate dynamics in the 1980s on the economy at large, to how the peculiarities of voter behavior affect election outcomes. Public policy, is no longer a game of ideologically based guess and check. Political discourse, however, has not changed, relying on weak philosophy, vacuous thought experiments, and a paucity of fact.

For every erudite, data-friendly commentator writing today, from Matt Yglesias or Ezra Klein on the left to Reihan Salam or Josh Barro on the right, there are legions of commentators repeating the same party line dreck that has filled newspaper op-ed pages for so long. At best, such

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## **On the Shoulders of Giants: A Defense of the Experiment and Theory Course**

MEGHAN LOCKARD

“If I have seen further, it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

*Sir Isaac Newton, in a correspondence with Robert Hooke, February 15, 1676.*

The motivation behind having the Experiment and Theory course, an introductory class for entering graduate students at Rockefeller University (RU), in which students read and discuss historically influential papers in the life sciences, has generally eluded students. At best, student opinion finds the class “a good opportunity to get to know classmates,” and at worst, “a total waste of time.” Few feel that reading historically important scientific works is intrinsically important to their overall science education. This opinion is understandable, if not reasonable, for the returns on one’s time investment in such an activity are not obvious: the techniques discussed are usually obsolete and the findings presented are typically already well-known. Some might argue that students come to RU to learn how to apply the scientific method in the service of scientific

discovery, not to learn how to be historians of science.

I would like to propose, contrarily, that not only is reading historical scientific papers important for the general training of the scientific mind, but it is one of the most important activities for the student of science. In order to hoist myself to an elevation that may allow me to see this argument through, I selected three “giants” from three disciplines: a scientist, a philosopher, and a satirist. Their thoughts, when considered together, illuminate the issue in a way that I hope readers will find thought provoking.

In *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister’s Pox: Mending the Gap between Science and the Humanities*, Stephen Jay Gould contextualizes the conflict between scientific and historical methods as a variation on the conflict between modern and ancient modes of thinking. He argues that academic disciplines that use historical approaches to uncover truth (i.e. the Humanities) have their intellectual origin in Humanism and the Renaissance, when

scholars sought truth from the classical texts of the Ancient World. Gould describes the sciences, on the other hand, as having their intellectual origins in the Scientific Revolution and the Age of Enlightenment. This movement asserted that true knowledge is obtained through observation, experiment, and their subsequent crystallization through mathematics and other logical systems of human reason. The Moderns rejected the Ancient World paradigms, and sought the truth in new discoveries and insights not yet brought to light.

In this context, it is perhaps more clear, or at least more understandable, how the activity of reading historical papers might conflict with the project of becoming a scientist. Would the student’s time not be better spent learning the art of making observations, reading and thinking about contemporary research, and learning techniques? This opinion, however, presupposes a dichotomy between the two modes of learning, that they are somehow mutually exclusive or maybe even destructive to one another. Gould posits that the persistent

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writers are misinformed, or willfully blind to facts that challenge their ideological presumptions. At worst, they simply do not care for any form of empirical reasoning, which, incidentally, might explain how some can still profess a belief in communism with a straight face.

When we fail to inform ourselves fully, we place ourselves on the side of the ideologues, spouting opinions with no basis in fact, or, when we keep silent, by letting the bloviators have their way. Is it such a surprise, then, that we endured constant talk of “death panels” from the right? And any criticism of public sector reform as “an attack on the middle class” from the left?

If you were to ask those who don’t follow politics about why they do not, they’d most likely give an answer along the lines of “it’s stupid,” “they’re all terrible,” or “it’s boring.” Such opinions become self-fulfilling prophecies. When vast numbers of us studying for or possessing doctorates at a top research institution cannot keep a high level of discourse amongst ourselves, why should we expect the country at large to do so? Is it such a surprise, then, that our Congressional

Representative has never heard of Rockefeller and is completely unresponsive to our concerns about Open Access? That any discussion of how the patent system may be ill-suited to modern IT ends with the rhetoric of theft and bills like SOPA and PIPA?

We have a social responsibility to use our education and our natural gifts to bring a more erudite perspective to public affairs. We should challenge the misuse of statistics and those who show ignorance of economic data, both to advance whatever agenda we, after careful study, believe to be right, and to keep our allies from lowering the state of discourse. It is the responsibility of those on the right to challenge the refrain of “socialism” from their own side in response to President Obama’s agenda. It is the duty of those on the left to oppose tax-and-spend plans that cannot pay for themselves. Only then, after we have spoken, written, and voted, can we begin to criticize.

We have nary to blame for the parlous state of contemporary politics but our own failure to educate ourselves, and those around us, to reject the politics of ignorance from left and right and

segregation of historical and scientific modes of thinking is what is actually destructive: “[H] owever logically sound and however sanctioned by long historical persistence, our taxonomies of human disciplines arose for largely arbitrary and contingent reasons of past social norms and university practices, thus creating false barriers that impede current understanding.” We, too, at RU acknowledge Gould’s point that “...conceptual tools needed to solve key problems in one field often migrate beyond our grasp because they become the property of a distant domain...” This is why the university is not organized into departments, and why many labs have multidisciplinary names such as “Cellular Biophysics” and “Structural Microbiology.” The Experiment and Theory course is a natural extension of this idea, embodying true consilience between seemingly opposed disciplines.

In the “Gouldean” formulation of the conflict and its resolution, the sciences and the humanities are seen as two distinct modalities of human thought. He seeks to “mend the gap,” and allow individuals to practice both modalities in the service of creative problem solving. Yet, he does not deny their two separate existences. In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, the philosopher Edmund Husserl proposes a radical, fundamental unification between scientific and

historical methodologies: that they actually have the same origin.

Of note, some scholars of Husserl have pointed out that when defining his use of “origin,” he employs the Empedoclean term for “root of all things” rather than the traditional Greek term that connotes the perfect shape that comes from that root. When Husserl asserts that science and history share the same origin, he wishes to invoke their common roots, rather than indicate a shared shape or set of traits.

For Husserl, the project of both science and history is to make the object—whether natural or historical—“significant,” or an “intentional unit.” For Husserl, “...to inquire into an object means...first to ‘bracket’ its objectivity and then to seek for its ‘constitutive origins,’ to reproduce its ‘intentional genesis.’” Let’s use the scientific example of identifying the gene for a trait of interest. First, the scientist “brackets” the trait—he defines it, establishes what the trait is and what it is not, which organisms possess it and which do not. He then looks for the “constitutive origins” of the trait—the gene—and establishes the genetic origin by knocking it out with a mutation and examining whether the absence of the trait coincides with the absence of the gene product. In a final step, the scientist takes the gene, and expresses it into an organism deficient for this gene, “rescues”

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mindlessly simplistic public policy. Or in the words of Shakespeare’s Cassius, “the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars/But in ourselves.” ☉

the trait, “intentionally generating” it where it did not previously exist. The historical project proceeds in the same way. The historian first “brackets” the moment in history as an objective event (e.g. Columbus discovers the Americas), seeks the “constitutive origins” (the events, opinions, and conflicts that led to Columbus’s voyage and discovery), and then retells the story in a way that makes the event significant and intentional (Columbus as the great explorer and not just another fifteenth century Italian with wanderlust).

According to Husserl, all true knowledge has within it the movement of its “intentional history.” It then goes through a subsequent step called “sedimentation.” The object becomes contained in its symbolic signification so that it is less cumbersome for our minds to manipulate. The historical movement of how we came to know that this gene produces this trait is intentionally “forgotten” so that we may use the fact for further scientific development. “Sedimentation is always somehow forgetfulness,” writes Husserl, “and this kind of forgetfulness accompanies, of necessity, the development and growth of a science.”

In this way, textbooks that train the next generations of scientists become litanies of this sedimentation, and learning about important scientific discoveries becomes detached from the activity of the human thought that

brought the discovery into existence. “[T]he new science itself, with all its amazing accomplishments and far-reaching potentialities, is basically the product of an accumulated sedimentation,” describes scholar and Husserl pupil Jacob Klein. Herein lies Husserl’s *Crisis*, that “the ‘sedimentation of significance’ can reach such a degree that a particular science, and science in general, appears almost devoid of ‘significance’” despite its accomplishments. Yet this “intentional history” of the human thought behind the scientific discovery can be freed from its sedimentation and “reactivated” by returning to its origins—the historically original presentation and formulation of the discovery.

The Experiment and Theory course is designed to “reactivate” the human thought that led to the discoveries that shaped the life sciences as a discipline. Is it essential training? I don’t think even Husserl would say so. Does this kind of training help developing researchers live their lives and conduct their work with a little more significance and intentionality? I would argue that it does, and that it aids the scientist in producing work that is intentional, significant, and enduring.

So far, the arguments presented for the consilience of the sciences and the humanities have focused on the more angelic aspects of human nature, expounding the virtues of scien-

tific and historical methods, and asserting that they can complement one another, or that in origin they are in fact the same method. Now, we turn to the satirist Jonathan Swift to explore how qualities from the darker side of human nature, such as pride, play out in ancient-modern conflict. In *The Battle of the Books*, Swift recounts an all-out war between the Ancient and Modern books, metonymies for the historical and scientific methods, respectively.

About halfway through the story, the action of the battle is interrupted when a curious bee flies through the window and accidentally runs into a spider’s web. The spider, aggressor and instigator of the dispute, calls the bee a “vagabond” whose “livelihood is the universal plunder of nature.” The spider, on the other hand, is a “domestic animal” with a “large castle (to show [his] improvements in mathematics)...built with [his] own hands.” The bee’s rebuttal describes how it does in fact visit the flowers of nature, “but whatever [he] collect[s] thence enriches [him] without the least injury to their beauty, their smell, or their taste.” He goes further to point out that the spider uses “venom” to trap the weak in a web that, though mathematically beautiful, is spun “by [his] own excrement,” whereas the bee, as a result of his garden meanderings “bring[s] home honey and wax.” The bee then flies away before the spider can respond.

In the book, the Greek fable writer Aesop is watching the exchange between the bee and the spider, and declares to all in the library that it is an allegory for the ancient-modern conflict, the spider representing the Moderns and the bee representing the Ancients. But is this Swift’s intention for the story? The spider represents the proud and the critical, killing creatures it deems weaker than itself and using its excrement to spin a web that is ultimately transient and fragile. The bee, in its wisdom and humility, goes into the world to bring back sweetness (honey) and light (wax), leaving the flowers it visits unharmed. In this interpretation, the dangers of pride, the assumption that your time or your intellectual interests are superior to those of any other, become the salient theme of *The Battle of the Books*, rather than the superiority of historical over scientific thinking.

Such pride may also be the cause of undue disregard for an educational approach that, lacking in immediate application, seeks to deepen the student of science’s participation and experience in his or her vocation. Opinions that dismiss entire disciplines or academic approaches should be regarded with great suspicion. May we be ever vigilant of our pride and our arrogance before we allow them to undermine the opportunities to learn and grow that our world affords us ◊

## Skating in the City

AILEEN MARSHALL

I was taught to skate at a very young age by my parents on the frozen pond in Van Cortlandt Park. My parents had both learned to skate as children in city parks. In those days, it was common for the ten-for skating. will never Olympic perform- salchows, activity I There are a few places in Manhattan one can spend an afternoon or evening of skating (or sitting rink-side, drinking hot chocolate) for not too much money.



The skating rink in Bryant Park

The rink at Bryant Park is my favorite since they have the best prices, although it’s only open for a limited time in the winter. This year it is open until February 26. Officially, its name is Citi Pond. Its hours are Sunday to Thursday: 8 a.m.–10 p.m. Friday and Saturday: 8 a.m.–midnight. Admission and locker usage are free, so if you have your own skates and a lock, or a friend to watch your bags, skating won’t cost you anything. Of course there is always the snack bar and the restaurant bar

rink-side. If you need to rent skates, they are \$14 and bag checks run \$7-10. More information can be found at <http://citipondatbryantpark.com/>.

The next rink I would recommend is Wollman Rink in Central Park. Enter the park at 59th Street and just follow the path. It’s a nice little walk. They are open until 10 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and until 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. They close at 2:30 p.m. Mondays and Tuesdays. The admission is \$10.75 for adults and \$5.75 for children during the week and \$16 and \$6, respectively, on weekends. There is even a spectator fee of \$5. Locker rentals are \$4.50 and skate rentals are \$6.75. More information can be found at <http://www.wollmanskatingrink.com>

Rockefeller Center maybe the priciest rink, but you can’t beat the view. There is something awe-inspiring about skating around and being able to look straight up at the towering skyscrapers. Its hours are: Monday to Thursday 9:00 a.m.–10:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday 8:30 a.m.–midnight, Sunday 8:30 a.m.–10:00 p.m. There is a special price of admission of \$7.50 on Tuesdays through Feb 7. Normally adults are \$19 and kids are \$12.50, but prices vary by date and day. This is a common place to spring a proposal; you can work out an arrangement with the staff to let you stay on the rink for a few minutes after they’ve cleared everyone off for the Zamboni. For more information, go to [www.patnagroup.com/east/iceRink](http://www.patnagroup.com/east/iceRink).

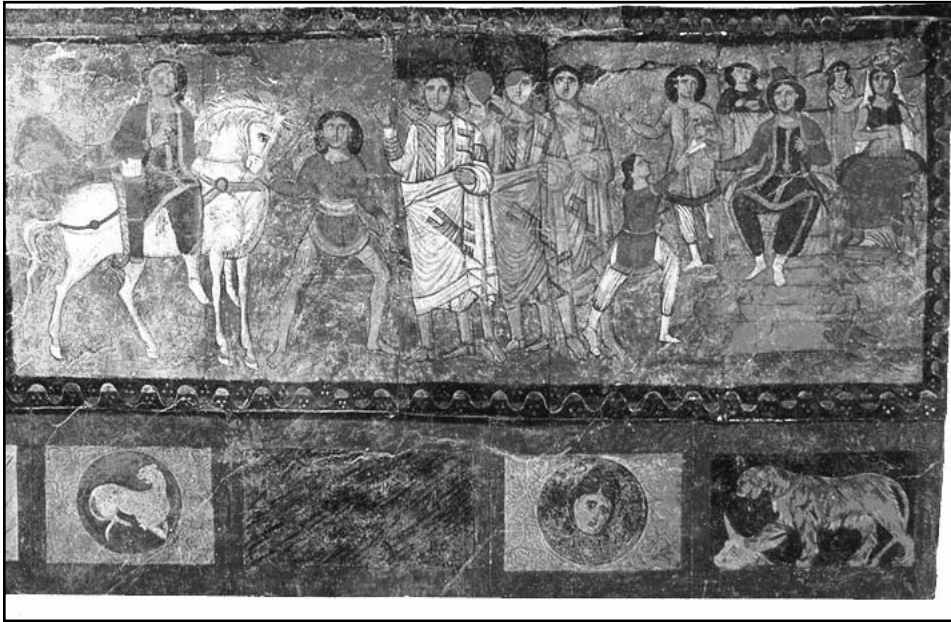
Even if you are not a professional, skating can be good exercise and a lot of fun. ◊

## CULTURE DESK: Exhibition Reviews

***Edge of Empires: Pagans, Jews, and Christians at Roman Dura-Europos* (Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, 07/23/2011 - 01/8/2012)**

***Late Medieval Panel Paintings: Methods, Materials, Meanings* (Richard L. Feigen & Co. gallery, 11/4/2011 - 01/27/2012)**

BERNIE LANGS



Part of the frescoes of the Dura-Europos synagogue illustrating a scene from *The Book of Esther*

For want, perhaps, of better things to do, I took two years in the 1980s to read a multi-volume study of early Netherlander Renaissance paintings by the late Max J. Friedlander. Later in the decade, I spent four years reading a lengthy series of books by the late Erwin R. Goodenough entitled *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*. (Both studies are now available in single-volume condensed versions.) The Friedlander series offers views of probably over 1,000 paintings of the Northern Renaissance period. Goodenough's tome includes hundreds and hundreds of photos of remains from the ancient world, from small glass perfume bottles to massive ruins scattered around several continents. In December 2011, I was extremely fortunate to visit two fabulous exhibitions in Manhattan that offered glimpses of works from both of these areas of interest.

Goodenough's series ends with a detailed analysis of the ancient city of Dura-Europos, closely examining the iconography of its synagogue's murals from the third century A.D. In a work that took him decades to write, he discusses how the ancient world's various religions all slipped behind the veil of mystical spirit to create powerful symbols that were common for all, yet uniquely expressive of the needs of each individual religion. At New York University's uptown Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, everything from wall paintings to statues to coins were on view from Dura-Europos, showing the confluence of ideas that makes that Syrian city so interesting. In the third century, it was a Roman outpost that was later destroyed by invaders from the Sasanian Empire. When it was excavated, remains were found of pagan places of worship, along with Christian buildings and the marvelous synagogue. One of the two exhibition galleries at the Institute was devoted to historical photos from the excavation of Dura-Europos.

The exhibition's highlights included a startling, almost surre-

alistic relief of the face of the pagan goddess Atargatis, borrowed from the Yale University Art Gallery. Also on view were a set of ceiling tiles from the synagogue, each with a painted symbol in its center of simple subjects such as grapes (representing the important religious focus of wine and fluid in the ancient world) and exotic birds. Within the gallery, there was a computer that streamed images of the frescos from the synagogue as well (see illustration, left). The most exciting pieces of the show were the large murals on display, especially those from the Christian church showing *Christ on the Water* and a mystic procession of women. On the pagan side, a mural of armed Roman soldiers was surprisingly colorful and majestic. The images on the ceiling tiles and in the wall paintings seem to reach out and pulsate through time, revealing their symbolic secrets to the gallery's visitors.

At 69th Street near Madison Avenue, the gallery known as Richard L. Feigen & Co. is one of the great Old Masters dealers in the world. It recently had on view museum-quality works, mostly panels from the Northern Renaissance centers of Europe. The exhibit was put on in collaboration with Sam Fogg, a London-based dealer. Friedlander's books had trained me well to discern the famous Masters of the genre from the lesser painters. As I walked into the main gallery, I went straight to a painting by the most famous name in the exhibit: a panel of *The Virgin and Child* from the workshop of Dirk Bouts. Though the Metropolitan Museum of Art holds great Northern paintings in its permanent collection, it is a rare treat to see a different work by a major name, especially if you don't have time to jet over to Bruges.

The rest of the Feigen show of these late medieval panel paintings was top tier as well. *The Nativity*, a work by the Master of the Rheinfeldern Altarpiece, was memorable in its rich colors, details, and precision. I've always believed that the Northern Renaissance painters depicted a more brutal violence than their Italian counterparts, and there were several such examples of this at Feigen. For instance, at the entrance to the show was a stark depiction of the Crucifixion that recalled a similar work by Rogier van der Weyden in The Philadelphia Museum of Art.

I remember a point, several years into reading Goodenough's books, when he refers in his text to a photo that showed one of the many symbols in the study. He notes that if one has read this far in his work, one should be having a visceral, tactile, response to seeing the mystic image. The ancient world and its artifacts and the paintings of the Renaissance are now embedded in my consciousness, and I couldn't have been happier this holiday season to see these two shows on these subjects that are so important to me. ◉



## New York State of Mind

This Month Natural Selections interviews Maria Valerio, animal technician in the Comparative Bioscience Center.

Country/State of origin: USA/NY

- 1. How long have you been living in the New York area?** My whole life.
- 2. Where do you live?** Inwood and the Heights. I think there's a lot of history up there and it's really beautiful.
- 3. Which is your favorite neighborhood?** Park Slope, Brooklyn.
- 4. What do you think is the most overrated thing in the city? And underrated?** Everything in the city is kind of overrated. Maybe nightlife is the most overrated. People who come here from out of town seem to be in shock when they get here and see bars and restaurants open past midnight. They seem to think it's a big deal. I don't think it's that big of a deal. I also don't think anything is underrated because everything in the city gets hyped up.
- 5. What do you miss most when you are out of town?** I try never to go out of town. But if I do, I miss the noise. It's a part of you. If it's too quiet, you start to think too much. It makes you feel sick.
- 6. If you could change one thing about NYC, what would that be?** The



Maria Valerio, left

city is too expensive. The people who work here and make NYC so great can hardly afford to live here. I would make wages in the city go up with inflation and make it more affordable to live here.

- 7. Describe a perfect weekend in NYC.** Drinking!! The perfect weekend would involve enjoying whatever the city has to offer with friends and family. Really, the perfect weekend would be if there was no Monday through Friday.
- 8. What is the most memorable experience you have had in NYC?** Going to Broadway shows is always a memorable experience. My fondest memories are going to shows like *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, and *Plantains and Collard Greens*. I love plays and live musicals. They're a lot of fun and any person who comes here should experience it.
- 9. If you could live anywhere else, where would that be?** I couldn't and wouldn't live anywhere else. I'm stuck here.
- 10. Do you think of yourself as a New Yorker?** What do you think? ◉

## Happy Third Monday of February!

MATTHEW M. MEREDITH

If you are anything like me, you will not realize it's Presidents' Day until you wander over to Weiss Café to find it closed on February 20. Then, after a few more moments of confusion while checking the time and wondering if today might actually be Sunday, you will vaguely remember today might be a three-day weekend. Thank you, honorable US Presidents!

But how much do you know about Presidents' Day? Trick question! Technically it's Washington's Birthday. In recognition of George Washington's contributions, Congress designated his birthday, February 22, as a federal holiday for the District of Columbia in 1879, and then for the 38 states six years later in 1885. Its inclusion as an official federal holiday was an effort by Congress to minimize the impact of federal employee absenteeism on the already "unofficial holiday," which was celebrated even before Washington's death in 1799.

Almost a century later, the same problem of federal employee hooky around federal holidays was the motivation to change Washington's Birthday to the holiday we know today. Amid much opposition, Congress re-designated Washington's Birthday and two other federal holidays (Memorial Day and Veterans Day) as Monday holidays with the Uniform Monday Holiday Law in 1968. To sweeten the deal, the law also included the creation of a brand new Monday holiday, Columbus Day.

Congress outlined a three-point benefit plan for the change to Monday holidays. Familiarly, the shift to Mondays was intended to avoid the disruption from midweek holidays, which had redirected the absenteeism Congress was originally trying to prevent to the days before and after the official holiday. Congress also highlighted that three-day weekends provided the opportunity for families to spend time together, and for individuals to pursue hobbies, educational activities, and cultural outings.

Thus, Washington's Birthday was changed from the actual date of February 22 to the third Monday of February. Ironically, the new Washington's Birthday Monday holiday—occurring between the 15 and the 21—would never fall on Washington's actual birthday. The third week was strategically chosen for proximity to Lincoln's birthday on February 12. Along with the switch to Monday, some pushed for a change to recognize Lincoln and other presidents by renaming the holiday Presidents' Day. Opponents argued the name change would further diminish the honor intended for Washington, so the holiday remained Washington's Birthday.

The name Presidents' Day, however, did eventually take hold when retailers latched onto the new Monday holiday. Advertisement campaigns developed for Labor Day, the first official Monday holiday, were applied to the new Monday holidays. To maximize sales, some extended promotions from Lincoln's birthday on February 12 through Washington's on February 22. The public began to associate the two presidential birthdays together due to these sometimes month-long sales events. A decade later in the 1980s, the term was commonly printed in newspapers and calendars. Some states have even passed laws to formally observe Presidents' Day as a celebration of additional presidents, particularly Lincoln. Federal law, however, still reserves the day for Washington.

Opponents of the change made to Washington's Birthday in 1968 prophetically argued that by detaching the holiday from Washington's actual birthday, the public would forget its connection to Washington and simply think of it as that random three-day weekend in the middle of February. People like me seem to have proven them right. So this year let's put on some wooden teeth and find some cherry trees to cut down! ◉

# The Age of Mind Over Marriage?

CARLY GELFOND

One morning last November, I sat down at my desk at work, sipped a cup of coffee, and logged into my email. Waiting in my inbox was a note from my boyfriend's older sister, Liz, with the subject line, "Happy Anniversary, you two!!" Shoot, I thought. I opened a new email. "Happy Anniversary, honey!" I wrote. (At least he seemed to have forgotten, too.)

Like many committed but as yet unmarried couples I know, John and I celebrate the anniversary of the day "we think we started dating"—a fuzzy guess at best. This year marked six years for us. As our families eagerly point out, it's a long time to be together without actually tying the knot. At 28, I am certainly at an age where it's expected, though John is two years my junior.

What's the hold up? people ask us. What's the hurry? we say.

The thing is, we are happy. This past September, John and I moved into a new apartment together. Our relationship has thrived here. Would marriage be so different? As a couple in which each partner independently possesses a steady job, a career-track, and benefits, marriage is less of a financial incentive. Neither he nor I have particularly strong religious beliefs, and either way, we are of different religious backgrounds. Of our friends—mostly college-educated 20-somethings, many of them in similarly "serious" relationships—barely any are currently married.

Yet marriage is lately on all of our minds.

In December, the Pew Research Center released a report<sup>1</sup> noting that only 51%—barely half—of all adults in the US were currently married. That's a record low. A look back to 1960 when 72% of all adults were married provides us with a telling picture, and gives a sense of where the institution of marriage in this country might be headed if current trends continue.

Is marriage becoming obsolete? As a society, we have mixed feelings on the issue. In a 2010 Pew Research survey, almost four-in-ten Americans (39%) said it was. Yet in the same survey, 61% of Americans who have never married responded that they would like to do so someday. From this we might infer that attitudes toward the state of marriage as an institution do not always reflect personal desires about marrying.

Today's young adults may be finding the idea of marriage less appealing, or they may be simply delaying it, as I would argue is the case with many of my friends. Pew reported that the median age at first marriage is at an all-time high (26.5 for women and 28.7 for men). Compare that with those same statistics in 1960, when the median age at first marriage for women was 20.3 and for men was 22.8. Young people are choosing to spend a greater part of their 20s unmarried.

Perhaps these statistics aren't shocking. Alternative adult living arrangements like cohabitation (my current situation), single-person households (my situation a year ago), and single parenthood (the situation in which I was raised) have all contributed to the rise of new family forms. Yet a second trend found by the Pew report may prove more surprising: while marriage has declined among all demographic groups, it has declined far less among adults with a college education and good income than among adults with less education and lower income. It is my peer group, it seems, that is continuing to embrace the institution, despite perhaps delaying a bit.

In a recent *New York Magazine* article<sup>2</sup>, the Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz and his wife, former business journalist Anya Schiffrin, attempt to account for this finding. Stiglitz points to statistics suggesting that higher-income people seem to be attending church more than people in lower economic brackets, who spend a greater portion of their day on the job and thus don't have time to attend religious services. If better-educated individuals are living in more structured communities and going to church, says Stiglitz, then that could be one reason why they're more likely to marry. He adds that thanks to *Roe vs. Wade* (the landmark

Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in 1973) and the subsequent decrease in shotgun marriages, as well as the Social Security benefits for which increasing numbers of working women are no longer dependent on men, the incentives that once lured many into marriages are fewer than perhaps ever before.

In the November 18, 2010 *Time Magazine* cover story<sup>3</sup>, "Who Needs Marriage? A Changing Institution," Belinda Luscombe writes, intriguingly, that while increasing numbers of Americans view marriage as becoming obsolete, "this doesn't mean...that we're pessimistic about the future of the American family; we have more faith in the family than we do in the nation's education system or its economy. We're just more flexible about how family gets defined."

Certainly recent years have seen a broadening in our understanding of what a marriage can be, and between whom it can exist. Sometimes the changes are subtle but telling. New York University sociologist Dalton Conley finds that between 1986 and 2003, the most recent year for which figures are available, the proportion of marriages in which the woman was taller than the man increased by more than 10%. "In absolute terms," he says, "it's still a small minority of marriages. But I think the trend signals an incredible shift in marital and gender norms." Luscombe notes that there has also been a substantial rise in the percentage of marriages in which the wife is older. Conley believes that these changes signify a whole different understanding of the roles of men and women in a marital union, and I would have to agree.

It used to be that marriage was an act that marked the beginning of adulthood, a life independent from the family in which we were raised. Now, sociologists are finding that marriage is being treated as more of a finishing touch, a stage many are choosing to put off until the completion of one's education, the launch of one's career, or until one's finances are at the very least stable. Or perhaps it is not desired at all.

In the interview with Stiglitz and Schiffrin (who married in 2004 when she was 41 and he was 61 and twice divorced), Schiffrin chimes in with an observation that particularly resonated with me: "One thing that definitely happens in a marriage, speaking of division of labor, is a division of information. When I was a journalist, I had to pay attention to where the dollar was and what the stock market was doing. Now I can always ask you," she says, meaning her husband. "And there are a million things you don't have to pay attention to because you can always ask me." Schiffrin's point elucidates a larger idea about the modern marriage: that it is perhaps becoming less of an act of meeting our own practical needs and more of an effort to find enrichment by linking one's life to another.

For John and me, the subject of marriage has recently been on our tongues as well as on our minds, the "if" slowly solidifying into a "when." It's hard to say what's changed, other than that it is something that, for whatever reason, is starting to feel right. However unhelpful and unscientific a description that is, it's the best I can do.

"How soon will the wedding be?" people ask us. "What's the hurry?" we say, perhaps for our generation. ◉

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# For Your Consideration

JIM KELLER

## 2012 ACADEMY AWARDS PICKS AND NOMINATIONS

Rank	Best Picture	Best Director	Best Actor	Best Actress	Best Supporting Actor	Best Supporting Actress
1	<i>The Artist</i>	Michael Hazanavicius ( <i>The Artist</i> )	*George Clooney ( <i>The Descendants</i> )	Viola Davis ( <i>The Help</i> )	*Christopher Plummer ( <i>Beginners</i> )	Octavia Spencer ( <i>The Help</i> )
2	* <i>The Descendants</i>	*Martin Scorsese ( <i>Hugo</i> )	Jean Dujardin ( <i>The Artist</i> )	*Meryl Streep ( <i>The Iron Lady</i> )	Kenneth Branagh ( <i>My Week with Marilyn</i> )	Berenice Bejo ( <i>The Artist</i> )
3	* <i>Hugo</i>	Woody Allen ( <i>Midnight in Paris</i> )	Brad Pitt ( <i>Moneyball</i> )	Michelle Williams ( <i>My Week with Marilyn</i> )	Jonah Hill ( <i>Moneyball</i> )	*Shailene Woodley ( <i>The Descendants</i> )
4	<i>The Help</i>	*Alexander Payne ( <i>The Descendants</i> )	*Michael Fassbender ( <i>Shame</i> )	Glenn Close ( <i>Albert Nobbs</i> )	Nick Nolte ( <i>Warrior</i> )	<b>Janet McTeer</b> ( <i>Albert Nobbs</i> )
5	<i>Midnight in Paris</i>	David Fincher ( <i>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</i> )	*Demián Bichir ( <i>A Better Life</i> )	*Tilda Swinton ( <i>We Need to Talk about Kevin</i> )	Albert Brooks ( <i>Drive</i> )	Jessica Chastain ( <i>The Help</i> )
6	<i>Moneyball</i>	<b>Terrence Malick</b> ( <i>The Tree of Life</i> )	*Gary Oldman ( <i>Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy</i> )	<b>Rooney Mara</b> ( <i>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</i> )	<b>Max von Sydow</b> ( <i>Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close</i> )	Melissa McCarthy ( <i>Bridesmaids</i> )
7	<i>The Tree of Life</i>					
8	<i>War Horse</i>					
9	<i>Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close</i>					

While the book is virtually closed on this year's Academy Awards race, I've culled some of the earlier offerings that you might want to take a peek at, and I have included thoughts on those films I just got around to seeing before the big, golden moment arrives on February 26. My latest nominee predictions, before they were announced, ranked me number 106 out of 1971 participants on goldderby.com. All and all, a pretty good place to be for this film obsessive. The table reflects those predictions along with an asterisk for films discussed in this installment. Misses have been crossed out and actual nominees not predicted are in bold.

*Margaret* (director: Kenneth Lonergan): Lonergan's long-awaited meditation on the life of a post 9/11 NY teenager's life, following a tragic bus accident, is a thoroughly entertaining matryoshka doll. A teenager's plight to do right subsequently darkens into a study on her psyche, bringing to mind *Black Swan*'s Nina. As the layers come off, Anna Paquin's Lisa tries to run for cover, but it's Jeannie Berlin's Emily who ultimately has her number. The performances in this film (including J. Smith Cameron's Joan) all around are to be commended, as is the UK critic who saved this once shelved drama and helped it obtain some of the acclaim it deserves.

*Hugo* (director: Martin Scorsese): Scorsese outdoes himself in this 3D homage to cinema, skillfully rolled out on a film reel about an orphan boy living in a Paris train station and his wanton desire to finish his father's life's work. Asa Butterfield and Chloë Moretz are outstanding as the dynamic duo of Hugo and Isabelle, who work tirelessly to realize Hugo's dream while unwittingly unlocking a buried secret.

*War Horse* (director: Steven Spielberg): Based on the Tony Award-winning play of the same name, the film adaptation captures the bond shared between a boy and his horse, and ingeniously uses the horse to live out the human experience. A sure-fire Oscar tearjerker, the film is masterfully crafted by Spielberg, who knows just when to tighten and loosen the reigns.

*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (director: Tomas Alfredson): Based on John

LaCarre's novel, the film adaptation manages to condense a five-hour mini-series about espionage in the Cold War era into just over two hours without missing a beat. Gary Oldman skillfully inhabits the role of George Smiley—a semi-retired spy who seeks to bring down those who thwarted him. Colin Firth, Benedict Cumberbatch, Tom Hardy, and the rest of the supporting cast are all spot-on as the faction of men that comprise Smiley's cronies.

*A Better Life* (director: Chris Weitz): Demián Bichir earned a Golden Globe nod as a Mexican immigrant gardener working to making a better life for him and his son. When an opportunity presents itself, he loses sight of all else and leaves himself vulnerable to being taken advantage of. It's the age-old story of why people come to America, what hope shines in their eyes, and what doors are slammed in their faces.

*A Dangerous Method* (director: David Cronenberg): Viggo Mortensen and Michael Fassbender respectively display Freud and Jung's chutzpah with grace, but it's Keira Knightley's jaw-dropping performance as a mental patient-cum-psychoanalyst which is the star here. It's a pity that people love to hate Knightley; she does something wonderful and it is to be commended.

*The Descendants* (director: Alexander Payne): Payne, working from the novel by Kauai Hart Hemmings, shows us how the emotional gears turn when a human is in crisis. George Clooney gives an outstanding performance as Matthew King, a man with one hand on the key to his extended family's financial future while the other grips his daughters' tightly as they say farewell to their imperfect mother, and navigate to a better tomorrow.

*We Need to Talk about Kevin* (director: Lynne Ramsay): Tilda Swinton gives yet another career-best performance as a mother who struggles to connect with an ill-begotten child from day one of his life. Filmmaker Lynne Ramsay forces us to take a look at our inner beings and how they may affect how our children grow up unmitigated, under our very noses—a true fight between nature and nurture. The beauty of this film is the ease with

which it slips in and out of time sequence in order to tell its harrowing tale.

*Shame* (director: Steve McQueen): McQueen continues to make his mark on the cinematic landscape with this slow-building look at the human psyche's relationship to the Id's compulsions, and how they can work together to reveal our innermost cores. What happened to these damaged siblings that allowed for such emotional strife and heartbreak? It's a travesty that the Academy snubbed both Michael Fassbender and Carey Mulligan—the latter after giving, hands down, the best supporting performance of the year.

*Meek's Cutoff* (director: Gavin O'Connor): Kelly Reichardt tells the tale of Stephen Meeks and his band of settlers as they travel out West chasing wagon train dreams. While strikingly original, if Reichardt's characters were shrouded throughout to hide the actor's identities, it would've made more of an impact. Somewhat perplexing considering early reviews claimed the film did just that.

*The Iron Lady* (director: Phyllida Lloyd): Meryl Streep cuts through a schizophrenic, steaming pile of a film that doesn't know what it wants to be as the former UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. While the film itself swirls around in a fictional frenzy full of comedic and historical interludes, Streep's performance is untouched. She skillfully delivers both a younger and older Thatcher—the latter, grappling with dementia. Jim Broadbent is woefully underused as a mere farce of Dennis Thatcher. It's a pity the film didn't pan out as well; it would've made the road to Oscar all the easier.

*Submarine* (director: Richard Ayoade): In his film debut, Ayoade gives us a coming of age story that is an intimate look at a budding boy-girl relationship and the fallout surrounding it, the kind that forces us to reconcile our own early relationships. Craig Roberts and Yasmin Bevan are scintillating as Oliver and Jordana, who find one another through shared schadenfreude, and help each other cope with life's personal disasters.

*Beginners* (director: Mike Mills): Mostly known for his music video work, Mills successfully weaves together an affectionate father-son story told from the future looking backward. Oliver (Ewan McGregor) recently lost his father Hal—a late-to-bloom gay man, played deftly by Christopher Plummer—who left Oliver with his dog and a lifetime of memories. While he begins to rebuild his life, with the help of Mélanie Laurent's impeccable Anna and a nudge in the right direction from his "talking" dog, Oliver remembers his father in his later years.

*Jane Eyre* (director: Cary Fukunaga): Mia Wasikowska is Jane Eyre, an orphan woman discarded from life, forced to live on the fringes of society, who falls in love with a fairytale only to see it smashed to pieces. Through it all, the literary icon holds strong and lives to see through her life's storm. Had the film appeared later in the year, Wasikowska surely would've found herself in the play for the Best Actress Oscar, but as any prognosticator will tell you, it's a long, hard road to Oscar.

*Margin Call* (director: J.C. Chandor): Zachary Quinto plays Peter Sullivan, a risk management guy at a Manhattan investment bank who discovers the nation's cataclysmic financial folly before it takes hold. A cast of characters, including those portrayed by Kevin Spacey, Demi Moore, Simon Baker, and Jeremy Irons, are then left to sort out the mess and decide whether or not to take a dive. We all know what happened, but being behind the scenes, as the film allows, gives you a more level-headed perspective. I wonder if that's to blame for some of the backlash against the film?

*This Must Be the Place* (director: Paolo Sorrentino): Sean Penn is retired, reduced rocker, Cheyenne—who plays like a would-be Robert Smith-type and is disillusioned by the world at large. When his father passes, Cheyenne is compelled to become an avenging angel and to find a living Nazi, which leads him down a path of self-discovery. The film boasts an excel-

lent soundtrack from David Byrne and beautiful imagery. Unfortunately, despite Penn's strong performance, the film canters under the weight of underdeveloped characters and murky sub-plots.

*The Guard* (director: John Michael McDonagh): Brendan Gleeson is an off-kilter Irish cop with nothing to prove who finds himself in the midst of an FBI drug caper with a tempered Don Cheadle. Gleeson shines as a man who speaks his mind, regardless of the situation, and uses intuition over protocol to catch the baddies.

*The Debt* (director: John Madden): Don't believe the hype! This nail-biting drama plays out like a thrill ride for the senses. Years after a Massad mission goes awry, the gang is back together to carry it through. Jessica Chastain and Helen Mirren lead the pack in this remake of the Israeli original.

*Brighton Rock* (director: Rowan Joffe): A taut, British gangster drama, adapted from the novel by Graham Greene, features stellar performances by Sam Riley and Andrea Riseborough. Pinkie is a desperate man who will do anything he can to save himself, including lying to a lonely girl and murdering his cronies. Can Helen Mirren's Ida shake Riseborough's naive and protective Rose awake before it's too late? Morrissey fans will be jolted by the mentioning of Dallow, Spicer, Pinkie and Cubbit—so that's what he means!?

*W.E.* (director: Madonna): Madonna is astute behind the camera, complete with stylistic shots and exploratory angles. Riseborough shines as Wallace Simpson and the film itself is injected with the right intensity to draw you in. While I applaud the director for her flawless maneuvers through space and time, the '98 plot lacks development and character motivation while that of the past is nearly flawless.

*Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (director: Werner Herzog): Herzog directs and narrates this documentary that looks inside the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave in France, which contains the earliest known cave paintings and evidence of Upper Paleolithic life. While one is blown away by the images and their preservation, at times he employs odd characters to hypothesize strange circumstances, but falters. Still, the images are enough to temper the missteps.

*Certified Copy* (director: Abbas Kiarostami): Outside of Juliette Binoche's brilliant performance, perhaps the most interesting thing is how her character leads William Shimell's and its parallel to reality—Shimell said that she led him through the film. Admittedly, the roles are difficult. The filmmaker has done an amazing job examining the intricacies between originals and copies in life, so much so that by the end, you scarcely know the difference. ◊

## Life on a Roll



Summer Musings by Jeanne Garbarino

