

Miscellany 4: The AIDS Conspiracy; Jeffrey Sachs on Debt Relief; On Creationism versus Evolution; Recolonizing Africa; Using a Computer Like a Typewriter

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Some observations on the past week's reading and conversation.

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The AIDS Conspiracy

(18 July 2004) If you insert the phrase "AIDS conspiracy" in an Internet search engine, you will find lots of AIDS conspiracies. See, for example, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AIDS_conspiracy_theories. Many of these conspiracy theories seem farfetched. Consider the following example, from the Wikipedia article just cited: "Some African-Americans in the US believe that HIV was invented by Jews as a way to destroy the black race. Such theories have been propagated for years, first by Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, and by the New Black Panther Party, as well as by a number of professors in various small colleges. Conspiracy theorist Steve Cokely has made allegations that Jewish doctors have injected black babies with HIV." But this theory doesn't make sense, since there is no economic motive for it.

So is there an "AIDS conspiracy"? Here are a few of my observations on this issue.

The world's approach to dealing with HIV/AIDS is different from the approach used for most other deadly communicable diseases. For diseases like tuberculosis, leprosy, yellow fever, polio and smallpox, the approach was to isolate the infected individuals from the rest of the population. For HIV/AIDS, however, this is not done. Infected individuals continue to live in the general population, and continue to spread the deadly infection. The prevalence rate exceeds thirty percent in many countries (it was cited as 36 percent in Botswana, when I worked there three years ago). This approach is true even in prisons, where HIV-infected prisoners are generally not segregated from the rest of the prison population.

The fact has always surprised me a little. HIV/AIDS is a disease that affects certain subpopulations / subcultures more than others – blacks, poor people, prisoners, drug addicts, homosexuals, sex workers, Africans, and Asians have a significantly higher infection rate than others do. Since HIV is not spread by casual contact, I mused that the fact that isolation and quarantine are not employed might be attributable to the fact that the risk of infection to the lower-risk populations – generally richer, "straight" people in the Western world – was in fact quite low, and the lack of interest in aggressive disease control measures like quarantine simply reflected a lack of concern for people of other cultures or subcultures.

A few years ago, new drugs were introduced – antiretroviral drugs, or ARVs – that significantly extended the life expectancy of HIV-positive people. When I first heard of these drugs, I wanted to learn more about them. I had heard that the drugs did not cure people, but only prolonged their lives. But if this was so, I wondered whether the people taking the ARVs were still infective (capable of transmitting the disease to others). If so, then, *ceteris paribus*, the use of the drugs when HIV-positive people remained in the general population would *increase* the prevalence of the disease (since the people having the disease and taking the drugs would live longer, and therefore spread the disease to more people (by sexual activity, blood transfusions, birthing, and the like) than if they died earlier). In this case, more people would become infected, and more people would ultimately die of the disease.

In all of the news reporting on HIV/AIDS, I never heard any mention of this. A few years passed, and at one point, several years ago, I was visiting my brother, who lives in Atlanta, Georgia. It occurred to me that Atlanta was the location of the National Institutes for Health's Centers for Disease Control, and I asked him whether he knew anyone at the CDC. He did, and he gave me the person's contact details. I got in touch with the gentleman, and asked him whether people who were HIV-positive and on ARVs were still infective. He told me, absolutely!

Well, this was pretty amazing. Why would society take an action that *increased* the incidence and prevalence of a deadly disease? The apparent reason was that, since special subpopulations were at much higher risk of infection than the general population, society simply did not care at all about containing the disease in those subpopulations. If this were so, some of the conspiracy theories actually begin to look a little plausible. Western society simply didn't care, or maybe actually *preferred*, that the incidence rate and prevalence rate of HIV in prisoners, drug addicts, homosexuals, blacks, sex workers, Africans and Asians increased because of the use of ARVs.

Well, this seemed incredibly cynical, and so I looked for an alternative explanation. And then it occurred to me. Money! The economic motive! Western pharmaceutical companies stood to earn large amounts of money from the production of ARVs. If the prevalence of HIV increased, then they would earn even *more* money. And since the disease affected mainly special subpopulations of little empathic relationship to the societies / cultures producing the ARVs, their own health was not endangered very much by the increased prevalence. This explanation made economic sense. Usually, in today's world, people get "slammed" for taking negative actions against minority populations, and so that would not be good for business. That is why most of the conspiracy theories don't make sense – there is no apparent (economic) motive. But almost no one is against making more money, as long as it is not clearly discriminatory or otherwise illegal. In fact, that goal – the pursuit of wealth – is desired and promoted by most people in the Western world. It is not only acceptable, but encouraged. The widespread use of ARVs will significantly increase the lifetimes of HIV-positive people, during which time they will spend money for ARVs, and they will infect many more people (but mainly in their high-risk subpopulations), leading to even greater profits for the drug-producing and distributing organizations and countries. If challenged on why they would do such a thing, the drug producers and purveyors will simply point out that they are doing the altruistic thing of extending the lives of HIV-positive people. A perfect alibi! Nobody seems to care that the epidemic will simply grow worse as a result of this action. And the drug users will certainly not complain, since it will extend their lives.

In my view, the HIV/AIDS epidemic is probably not the result of the usual conspiracies in circulation, since I do not see the economic motive behind them. But the fact that Western governments and businesses would promote the use of ARVs, thereby increasing both the

incidence and prevalence and absolute numbers of infected people (but mainly in the high-risk populations to which they do not relate empathically), makes economic sense. They don't get hurt, and they make more money – and, what is more, the HIV-positive people and their advocacy groups are clamoring for the drugs! But they never mention that this action will result in the infection and deaths of many more people from HIV/AIDS. And, desperately clinging to a few more years of life, the takers of the drugs are the last ones who will refuse the drugs and question the motive for being offered them, even if doing so will increase the size of the epidemic. It is the same as the starving person who would kill the world's last panda for food – how could he do otherwise? Would you call this a “conspiracy”? Hardly. Is it not the “perfect” drug-addiction scheme? Of course not. Is it a conspiracy to increase the size of the HIV epidemic? Of course not. It is just good economics. No “conspiracy” at all.

Jeffrey Sachs on Debt Relief

(18 July 2004) As you know, I have written a couple of articles on Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University in New York and special advisor to UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, on the Millennium Development Goals. The following were the headlines in the July 7, 2004, issue of the Times of Zambia: “Don't pay foreign debt, African countries urged.” Here is a quote from some of this front-page article.

New York, Tuesday. A special adviser to United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan has said African countries should refuse to repay their foreign debts.

Annan's economic adviser Jeffrey Sachs first called on developed countries to cancel Africa's debts.

By failing that, he said, Africa should ignore its US \$201 billion (£109 billion) debt burden.

Economic analysis, he said, had shown that it was impossible for Africa to achieve its development goal of having poverty (sic) if it had to repay the loans.

Sachs made his comments on the eve of a summit of the heads of State of the African Union in Ethiopia.

“The time has come to end this charade,” he said.

“The debts are unaffordable. If they won't cancel the debts I would suggest obstruction; you do it yourselves.”

Sachs is special adviser to Kofi (sic) Annan on global antipoverty targets.

He called on the developed world to double aid to Africa to \$120 billion a year in order to meet commitments made in 1970.

There is some sympathy in some of the rich donor countries for the idea of debt cancellation.

The British chancellor of the exchequer or finance minister Gordon Brown, did float the idea before the recent summit of the G8 major powers in the United States, although there has been no decision and some creditor countries do have a history of reluctance on debt relief issues.

But none would be likely to welcome a unilateral decision by the poor countries themselves simply to stop paying their debts, which are owed mainly to international organizations such as the World Bank and to rich country governments.

Meanwhile, United Party for National Development (UPND) Moomba Member of Parliament Vitalis Mooya has called on Zambians to support campaigns by Jubilee Zambia for a total debt cancellation.

Mr Mooya said once the debt was cancelled, this would enhance development as resources being used to service the debt would be ploughed into developmental projects.

He said in an interview in Lusaka yesterday that Zambia would only move forward in development if her debt was (sic) cancelled and such a vision should be achieved through the initiative called by Jubilee Zambia.

Mr Mooya however, noted that there was need to change the management of resources once Zambia's debt was cancelled to ensure that it went towards development.

And Mr Mooya has commended Government for allocating \$2 million to Southern Province for rehabilitation of roads.

He said that although the money was not enough to cater for the whole province, Government had shown commitment to enhancing development in the area.

"I commend Government for releasing \$2 million and I would only urge them to continue with such a gesture and at least increase the allocation in future," he said.

He said that his constituency alone required about K30 billion to have improved roads, schools, hospitals and other vital infrastructure.

He added that roads were vital for development in any country.

"You cannot talk about having investors with poor roads. Even this poverty reduction exercise cannot be achieved with poor roads to access remote areas where there is poverty," he said.

Mr Mooya said he had the privilege to visit five provinces and saw the state of roads.

He suggested that money realized from vehicle licenses, international transit fees and weigh bridges be directed towards improving roads.

Mr Mooya said such an action would cushion funds that were directed to the National Roads Board (NRB) for rehabilitation of roads. – Times Reporter, BBC.

Should the Western world cancel the third world's debt? Well, if you agree that more economic development is desirable, then that would probably a good move. As I have written before ("The Role of Compound Interest"), the process of compound interest is unsustainable. It cannot continue forever, and eventually ends in bankruptcy, debt forgiveness, or debt renunciation.

But what about the morality of canceling the debt? Here in Zambia, it is estimated that the former president, Frederick Chiluba, accumulated a fortune of over three billion dollars, mainly from foreign aid. I previously worked in Malawi for a couple of years. There, it was estimated that former president Hastings Kamuzu Banda accumulated a fortune of about eleven billion dollars, also mainly from foreign aid. The amazing thing about these fortunes is that they were accumulated with the complete approval of the local population! Before becoming president of Malawi, Dr. Banda was a physician. Mr. Chiluba is about as mild-mannered a person as you will ever meet. I asked some local Zambians once why they gave all the money to Chiluba, when he was not "holding a gun" to anyone's head. They explained to me that "that's our culture – we give everything to the chief."

But now all of the money is gone. There is not a penny left. Last year, in Malawi, someone in Mr Bakili Muluzi's government (Muluzi followed Banda as president) sold all of the nation's grain reserves, and then the country proceeded to beg for grain from the West. Why should US taxpayers forgive one penny of foreign debt, when much of it was simply given to African leaders by their followers? If that's what American taxpayers want to do with their hard-earned money, fine. But I cannot imagine that this is what they want. Most of the money spent on economic development in poor countries has been totally wasted or ineffective – after several decades of massive development aid, these countries are worse off than ever, and much of the foreign aid has ended up lining the pockets of a few rich, then to be spirited out of the recipient country. The people of the debtor nations are never going to see the benefit of debt forgiveness – their leaders – their culture – will see to that. They are going to remain just as poor as they ever were. Debt forgiveness will simply place more money in the hands of the ruling elite.

On Creationism versus Evolution

(18 July 2004) The argument over evolution versus creationism continues to amaze me. Creationism makes sense, evolution does not. Before any physical system, such as a village, a city, an automobile, a computer, a pharmaceutical drug, or a civilization is created, there is always a vision by a sentient being. Cities and cars and penicillin and the Roman Empire did not simply come into existence by themselves. All of these physical artifacts are the result of someone's vision and will to bring them about.

The great mystic Hermes Trismegistus once observed, in commenting on the nature of things, "As above, so below." That view makes sense. The notion of a self-organizing universe, absent a sentient, controlling intelligence (Great Spirit), defies all of the evidence around us about how things work and come into being.

Recolonizing Africa

(18 July 2004) My wife and I had lunch last Sunday with the Lusaka Wine and Food Society. The lunch was an outdoors barbecue at a local Zambian farm. At my table were seated a Zambian couple and a visiting couple from Zimbabwe. The Zambian couple operated a farm. The Zimbabwean couple owned a transport business in Zimbabwe. They were being driven from Zimbabwe by Robert Mugabe's government, and were investigating Zambia as a possible place to go.

The Zambian farmer made the comment that, in view of the destruction of industrial society by black governments throughout Africa, it was just a matter of time before the whole continent collapsed, and then it would be recolonized by whites. He estimated that this would take place within a couple of decades.

I told him that his conjecture of collapse and recolonization was reasonable, but that, in my opinion, his timeframe was off. As soon as global oil production peaked, Africa would collapse instantly and totally. And world oil production was almost certain to peak before 2010. If Africa is to be recolonized, it will be within a few years, not a few decades.

Using a Computer Like a Typewriter: Still Going Strong after Twenty Years

(18 July 2004) In the 1970s, the State of Virginia introduced computers to their Department of Motor Vehicles. This was a tremendous improvement. Instead of waiting for several weeks to get your motor vehicle title, it was printed out immediately from the local office where you applied, within a few minutes. The local computer was connected to a mainframe computer in Richmond, the state capital.

When I moved to Arizona in 1981, the State of Arizona had also "computerized" its motor vehicle department. But, oh, what a difference! In Arizona, I spent most of a day waiting in lines at the motor vehicle department, to register my motor vehicles. They diligently typed all of the information into a computer, just as they had in Virginia. But then, at the end of the day, I was told that I would receive my car titles by mail, within several weeks!

I was absolutely astounded. What were the computers for? They were using them simply as typewriters, completing forms to be transmitted physically to the state capital Phoenix for processing! I could not imagine such a level of incompetence!

But all of that was over twenty years ago. Surely things have changed.

Unfortunately not. Recently, here in Zambia, I had another experience similar to that in Arizona. I applied last week, for the third year in a row, for automobile insurance. To my utter amazement, the lady started typing my information into the computer, all over again! On every desk was a powerful, late-model computer. The computers were all linked together via a network that included a printer. The system had retained the fact that I had a policy last year, but it did not retain any of the information about me in retrievable form! I waited for the better part of an hour while the lady entered all of my data again, and printed out my invoice and insurance certificate (several times, to accommodate corrections!). She was using the computer simply as a typewriter! Some things never change!