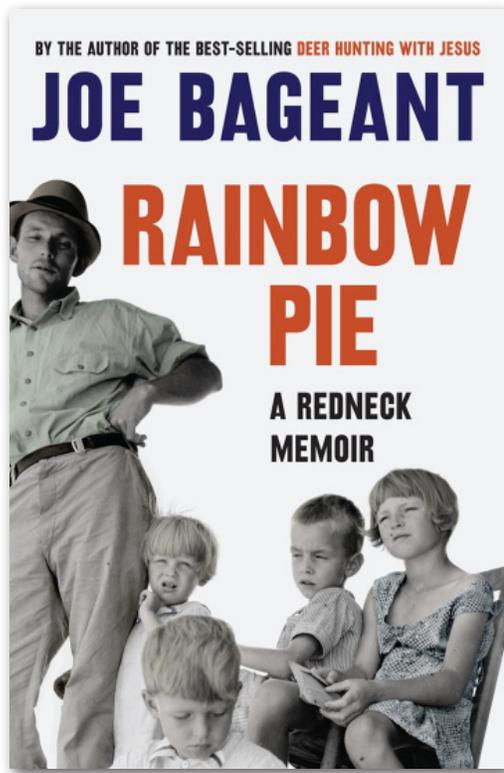


JOE BAGEANT

Algorithms & Red Wine

**Is the
'digital hive'
a soft
totalitarian
state?**

ColdType



JOE BAGEANT'S newest book, released in September in Australia and October in the United Kingdom, **Rainbow Pie: A Redneck Memoir**, deals with America's permanent white underclass, and how it was intentionally created. **Rainbow Pie** is available for preorder from Amazon-UK and Amazon-Canada. In Australia, the book may be ordered at www.scribepublications.com.au

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Algorithms & Red Wine

Is the 'digital hive' a soft totalitarian state?

FERRARA, Italy – I'm sitting in a *bottliberia*, one of those wine bars that brings out food to match your particular choice of wine, mystified by the table setting. What was that tiny baby spoon for? Cappuccino surely, at some point, but why no big spoon to go with the knife and fork? The things a redneck American does not know grow exponentially in Bella Italia, starting with the restaurants – not to mention several civilizations beneath one's feet. Being in a house that has been continuously occupied for over 1,000 years – resisting the temptation to piss in the hotel room bidet, that sort of thing.

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sided sameness and fast food franchises. Another thing is lack of a good educational system, given that Italy's is among the very best in the world. So here I am sitting with some college kids trying to hang onto my end of a discussion of evolutionary consciousness, and whether Italy can withstand the cultural leveling of globalism.

“And Mr Bageant, what do you think of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's concept of the hive mind and the noosphere? Can monolithism and totalitarianism possibly be resisted in the cybernetic age?”

Huh?

“Il regno mondiale dei computer, global computerization. Do all those disassociated shards of human input constitute an overarching hive intelligence? Or are

they the emergence of further evolutionary structures?”

“Ahem, uh, well, Timothy Leary once convinced me that they are,” I said. “But after the drugs wore off, I was not so certain. And now I’m certain again that he was right. But, with a far more chilling outcome than he or Chardin could have ever predicted.”

Which was pretty good for pulling it out of my ass.

In any case, it seems that 40 years in retrospect, the human hive enjoys monolithism and totalism far more than anyone would have ever guessed back in the sixties. Most of industrial humanity, as it turns out, is – or would be – quite happy to come home from a hard day in the mines and settle down to Facebook or Twitter or hive broadcast “news” and passive entertainments, distributed by unseen “corporate entities.” I dunno, I think I liked dope and live music and sex better. But as age diminishes all three, I’ve learned to settle for the Larry King Show and/or a lot less at times.

Big AI and the Tuscaloosa sprinkler man

On the other hand, this whole business of the new hive cybernetic connectivity, could be just a swarm of data bits with no particular significance, other than the magical thinking belief that they do. Which ain’t no small thing, given that what we agree upon as reality is achieved by social consensus. Hell, to some people Beelzebub still stalks the earth. To others, America is a free republic, not a company town. We all have our hallucinations.

One thing for sure. Most people in the (over)developed world think the connectivity and speed of the algorithms behind the cyberhive are worth it. Even teachers

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teach to a standardized test so students will conform to an algorithm, and if that ain’t hive mind, I don’t know what is.

Besides, if the worship of algorithms is not worth it, it does not matter. Whether we be Tanzanians à la Darwin’s Nightmare, or some Stanford professor writing economic algorithms, the people who control all our lives in the globalized economic world believe they are.

For example, bankers and investment houses believe intelligent algorithms (Big AI) can calculate human risk in making loans. That an algorithm can predict whether a 35-year-old lawn sprinkler installer in Tuscaloosa will be able to steadily make \$2,300 monthly payments on his \$220,000 twice refinanced “snout-house” (so-named because of the four-car garage sticking out the front) for 30 years. Most of us would be more than happy to make that prediction for them, and with far greater accuracy, for a fraction of what they paid the pinhead to write the algorithm.

In the pre-digital hive era there were limits to what the organic human brain, and therefore the mind, plus past experience, could calculate, then evaluate. At some point, one was forced to recognize the limits of a financial proposition or investment. Familiarity with the actual basis of an investment was necessary. (Hmmm. Lawn sprinklers, huh? And yer paying on a new Dodge Ram too?) But there was no stopping such things with the advent of computer-assisted hedge funds, and the techno nerds’ faith that you could remove the human risks through complex algorithmic structures. So mythical financial instruments such as derivatives and layers of bets on derivatives, and bets on those bets, bloomed out there in the “virtual economy,” sending out algorithmic spores that spawned

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even stranger financial flora. The whole of it could not be understood by any single human participant. Even the individual parts were understood only by their specific designers. As in, “Just trust me on this Marv. This instrument even creates its own collateral” (which many of them did). Information, of course, is not reality, not even close to the juicy anecdotal stuff of which our daily lives are made. In essence, investment is reduced to an algorithmic Google search for debt, which is wealth to a banker, then mathematically rationalizing that debt as wealth for the rest of us.

Life is lived anecdotally, not algorithmically. And anecdotal evidence is not allowed in the new digital corpocracy. As one poster on the Democratic Underground web site put it, “Anecdotal now has this enforced meaning such that no one is supposed to believe what they experience, what they see, hear, taste, smell, etc. The Powers That Be have basically extinguished the notion of inductive reasoning. Everything has to be replicated in a laboratory and since 90% of all the labs in this nation are operated by Corporate Sponsored monies, not much truth comes out of them.”

The trouble with the algorithmic age is that life is not a finite sequence of steps that define and contain the algorithmic concepts used. Even when created with the best of intentions – and we can all agree by now there were few good intentions at Goldman Sachs when they were creating and bundling these mutant investments – they cannot account for our uninsured sprinkler installer getting cancer, or divorcing the other half of the household income – or the end of America’s residential construction orgy.

The digital folly is never ending. The knock-on effect just keeps rolling. The

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latest is the rising scandal of millions of illegal foreclosures created by MERS (Mortgage Electronic Registration Systems), which enabled the big financial firms to securitize and swap mortgages at super high speed. But not to worry. Nancy Pelosi and Christopher Dodd are on the case, and there is sure to be a Congressional committee appointed. Whoopee! Have one on me.

Meanwhile, we have our social networking software to better weave us into the hive. Social networking software, now there’s a term that should scare the piss out of anyone with an IQ over 40. It means the database as hive reality. Facebook, online banking, shopping, porn, years of one’s life playing electronic games or whatever, online dating and reducing romance and companionship to fit the software. Or 4,,000 Facebook “friends,” data on 4000 Americans voluntarily collected for Facebook corporation. The concept of “friends” is cheapened, rendered meaningless as it passes through a database. In fact, all human experience is cheapened by that process. Information is not reality.

Flatworm economics

As my second wife, who was a mathematician, can tell you, I know as much about algebra as a flatworm. So I turn to experts when I write this stuff – or sometimes just make it up as I go. But even a dumb person can ask questions. And one of my questions as I sit here background Googling the subject is this: Does a search engine really know what I want, or am I dumbing down to fit its hive algorithms? If the latter is the case, then why don’t we just bring back PCP?

Anyway, allegedly, the hive does many things better than paid experts. Wikipedia is an example of this assertion. Most

web content is generated by hive inhabitants for free, profiting the new elite cybernetic ownership class, which is to say some corporation or other. This also means that content becomes worthless. That the efforts of skilled and devoted journalists, artists and others become valueless, unsellable, just more info-shards in the hive. Only advertising has value in the cyberhive. In a nation whose social realism has been represented by advertising for three quarters of a century, that was to be expected.

Of course the real global economic problem is seven billion people in increasing competition for ever scarcer vital resources. But capitalism loves competition, as long as, A: it is the people's capital involved, and B: it is not the capitalists doing the competing. Either way we're talking money here and what most people consider to be "economics." Economics equals money. Right?

But the actual world revolves around meeting our genuine needs, which may or may not involve money. In the big picture, money is just one small, much abused abstract tool. Money has been abused from the beginning, probably about fifteen minutes after the first shekel was minted, but now the abuse has reached such levels that the entire notion of money is collapsing in on itself. Our concept of money needs to be reevaluated and probably abandoned in the distant future.

The *bottliberia* waiter comes with something on a plate I can actually – by pure luck – identify. Octopus gnocchi. The conversation rolls on.

"What do you believe allowed such abuse and calamity?" I ask.

An intense young woman leans across the table, all black hair and red lips, making an old man moan and sigh inwardly.

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"Fossil fuels, of course," she says. "An unnatural supply of energy. But once that is gone, we're going to have to go back to a whole different way of doing everything. Everything."

"Spot on," I agree. At that moment she could have gotten me to agree that the earth is flat.

But the truth is that each gallon of fossil fuel contains the energy of 40 man-hours. And that has played hell with the ecology of human work, thanks mostly to the money economy. For instance, a simple loaf of bread, starting with the fossil fuels used to grow the wheat, transport, mill, bake, create the packaging materials and packaging, advertise and distribute it, uses the energy of two men working for two weeks. Yet this waste and vast inefficiency is invisible to us because we see it only in terms of money, jobs and commerce. Cheap oil allowed industrial humans to increasingly live on environmental credit for over a century. Now the bill is due and no amount of money can pay it. The calorie, pure heat expenditure as energy, is the only currency in which Mother Nature trades. Period.

Although America produced such thinkers on the subject of living simply as Thoreau, modern hydrocarbon-based civilization has driven expectations of material goods and convenience – and the transactions surrounding those expectations – through the stratosphere. Money has abstracted the notion of work to the point where, I dare say, there are not 100,000 people in America who truly understand that, although there are at least a few million trying to understand and liberate themselves.

I'm gonna take a wild shot here and say that understanding and liberation, come through self-discipline and self-denial, and that it's nearly impossible

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for Americans to practice self-discipline. They cannot imagine why self-discipline, and a more ascetic life, becoming less dependent on the faceless machinery of algorithm driven virtual money, is necessarily liberating.

If there can be a solution at this late stage, and most thinking people seriously doubt there can be a “solution” in the way we have always thought of solutions, it begins with powering down everything we consider to be the economy and our survival. That and population reduction, which nobody wants to discuss in actionable terms. Worse yet, there is no state sanctioned, organized entry level for people who want to power down from the horrific machinery of money. There are too many financial, military and corporate and governmental forces that don't want to see us power down (because it would spell their death), but rather power up even more. That's called “a recovery.”

When viewed from outside the virtual money economy, and from the standpoint of the planet's caloric economy, probably half of American and European jobs are not only unnecessary, but also terribly destructive, either directly or indirectly. Yet what nation or economic state acknowledges the need for a transition away from jobs that aren't necessary. None, because such an economy could not support the war machines or the transactional financial industries that dominate our needs hierarchy for the benefit of the few. Loaning us money we have already earned, stuffing us with corn syrup. And I won't even go into the strong possibility that everybody does not need to be employed at all times for the world to keep on turning.

Like the Reagan years on speed

One of the Italian students, Mariarosa,

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asks, “Is it true that so many Americans are struggling and suffering right now?”

“No,” I reply, “not in the real sense. If they are suffering, most of them are suffering from commodities withdrawal. What they really are is people oppressed by metastasized capitalism. Which is its own form of suffering, I guess. They are squeezed hard for profit every moment of their waking lives. They've got families and dare not make a move, even if they knew how.”

Everyone nods in agreement.

“It's coming to Italy, too,” says one young man. Again, all nod in agreement.

Yet, despite Berlusconi, despite the rightist takeover in progress in Italy – which I am guessing will be successful, because I've seen it all before in America through globalization – so many are still able to ask the right questions. They seem able to filter what they need and what is best for the majority from what they want. But looking at the overall country is like watching the Reagan era unfold again before your very eyes. Only faster. All of these kids probably own an iPod or cell phone, the only difference being that they do not let them interrupt a good meal.

The third bottle of wine arrives and the topic turns to global competition, and the EU charges that “Italy is not competitive enough.” A student named Cristiano sits directly across from me, sporting one of those fashionable three-day beards (I tried that once – people just asked me: “How long have you been depressed, Joe?”). Cristiano offers that cooperation would get us all a lot farther than competition.” Applause from everybody on that one. I raise my glass in salute. I've raised a few too many glasses in salute in my life, but what the hell.

Societies such as Italy, Greece and

many others are viewed by global capitalism as inferior economies. Especially agrarian societies: different rates of exchange and economies of scale, are set for them because capitalism benefits from the bonuses of synergies in scale and the virtual economy. Never do global capitalists want to see regional food security, energy security, or any other kind of security for that matter.

And I look at the faces of these young men and women, who are among the brightest, best educated and common-good oriented the world has to offer. A

Each face is illuminated for a moment, then golden dimness again prevails. And I am saddened

taxi's headlights flash through the window of the darkened bottilliberia. Each face is illuminated for a moment, then golden dimness again prevails. And I am saddened.

I do not expect that the world they have inherited will show them one ounce of mercy. But it is heartening to see clear competent minds drawing the right conclusions.

And I ask myself, what chance does America's far less informed, and purposefully misled public stand against all this?

One shudders to think.

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