Several years ago, an international wire service carried a story about a blind man in Saudi Arabia who visited his doctor for an annual check-up. While filling out the chart, the doctor asked the man if he worked, and if so, what was his profession. “I’m a bus driver,” the man replied. When the astonished doctor asked how a blind person could drive a bus, the man explained that he’d lost his sight fairly recently and was very familiar with the route he’d driven for many years. So now his wife simply sat behind him and told him when to stop, go, turn left or right, or pick up or discharge passengers. In Saudi Arabia a blind man could operate a bus but his seeing wife could not, since women are forbidden to drive by law and custom.

Such anecdotes not only reveal the norms of one Muslim country, but may also help explain why there are no democracies among the Arabic-speaking Muslim states. In a recent Foreign Policy article, “The Sexual Clash of Civilizations,” and in their new book, Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World, two political scientists, McGuire lecturer in comparative politics Pippa Norris of the Kennedy School of Government and Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan, argue that prevailing beliefs about gender and sexual preference are fundamental obstacles to Islamic democracy.

In his 1996 book The Clash of Civilizations, Weatherhead University Professor Samuel Huntington attributed the lack of Islamic democracies to the absence of certain political values—representative government, separation of religious and secular authority, protection of individual rights and civil liberties—in Muslim countries. But drawing on data from the Stockholm-based World Values Survey, an international academic survey that began in 1981, Norris and Inglehart reach a different conclusion. “There was virtually no difference between Western countries and Islamic countries in terms of the support for certain democratic values,” Norris says. “In both Islamic and Western countries, 68 percent strongly disagreed with the statements ‘Democracies are indecisive and have too much quibbling’ and ‘Democracies aren’t good at maintaining order.’ And 61 percent of those surveyed in both groups strongly ‘Approve of having a democratic political system.’”

The researchers assert that the profound gap between Islam and the West actually shows up not in political values, but in sex-related attitudes. For example, 86 percent of Germans and 76 percent of Americans reject the statement, “On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.” But 91 percent of Egyptians endorse it, including the great pre-
ponderance of Egyptian women. (In Arab nations, in fact, only 4.5 percent of members of parliament are female, an exceptionally low figure.) “In traditional societies [like Egypt], women are as conservative as men,” Norris explains. “It’s not that the men are holding the women back.” Regarding homosexuality, 53 percent of Westerners think it can be justified, at least sometimes, while 88 percent of those in Muslim nations do not. “A society’s commitment to gender equality and sexual liberalization proves time and again to be the most reliable indicator of how strongly that society supports principles of tolerance and egalitarianism,” Norris asserts. And tolerance and equality are essential to democracy; the researchers argue that they are the adhesives that allow a society to cohere despite internal differences.

Islamic countries aren’t alone in dealing with these issues. “Parts of Catholic Europe are still quite conservative in regard to gender equality, as are some parts of South America,” says Norris. “Of course, there are also Americans who share those views, but they’re not in the majority, as they once were. In general, post-industrial countries are ahead of the curve in their attitudes about gender equality—followed by industrial and then agrarian societies.” The researchers believe that as countries progress in “human development”—including education, literacy, longevity, and gross domestic product—tolerance grows as well. Their survey data indicate that as countries like South Korea, Taiwan, and Mexico modernized, they moved toward equality for women and greater acceptance of private sexual conduct. “Investing in human development—getting rid of social inequalities, improving education—in the long term will provide the conditions for stable democratic consolidation,” Norris says. “You can’t bring in democracy at the barrel of a gun.”

~CHARLES COE

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**Caveat Caesar**

On March 15, 44 B.C., Julius Caesar walked unguarded to the Roman Senate despite his soothsayer’s oracular “Beware the ides of March,” his wife’s murder-foretelling nightmare, and a warning note pressed into his hand as he navigated the crowd. When he arrived to meet with 900 senators, a mob of conspirators ambushed him. Before horrified onlookers, they stabbed the dictator-turned-demigod 23 times and killed him, carrying out the most infamous political assassination in history. Case closed.

Or so historians and dramatists have assumed for more than two millennia. But received wisdom couldn’t explain all the data: “Why would this man, who was hotheaded and foolhardy,” says Bursztajn. “But he had never allowed himself previously to be blinded by his arrogance.” A psychoanalyst trained in physics and philosophy, Bursztajn is well prepared to ask questions that haven’t been asked before. To construct a more complex profile of Caesar than the blind-and-arrogant hypothesis, Bursztajn applied the same bio-psycho-social model that he uses for modern cases to the evidence that Garofano collected from ancient sources—a process Bursztajn calls “forensic archaeology.”

“The biological part is that he’s falling to pieces, he’s having seizures,” Bursztajn begins. When the Senate deified Caesar, for example, rather than rise to receive this highest honor, he remained seated—a grave insult. However, Plutarch writes that Caesar dared not stand not for fear of having a convulsion, while another ancient historian, Dio, writes that he sat to hide an attack of diarrhea. These conflicting accounts led Bursztajn to the first...
precise formulation of the “Caesar complex”: temporal lobe epilepsy, a progressive disorder resulting in a loss of mental and physical control (including bowel control) that would be anathema to someone with Caesar’s magisterial self-image.

The epileptic attacks, says Bursztajn, were “death’s calling card to Caesar” who, at 56, was already an old man by Roman standards. They created an urgent need to act, Bursztajn says: “But what could a man like Caesar, who’d gotten everything he wanted, who’d conquered everything he wanted to conquer, have left to accomplish in his life? Nothing—except being able to achieve virtual immortality. He would want to have a dynasty, and he would want to be well remembered and memorialized.”

To achieve his goals, Bursztajn says, Caesar acted as the great general he was, even in his last battle—the one against mortality. Bursztajn asserts that whether Caesar initiated the conspiracy or simply bent it to his own aims, he chose the time and place, pushing the conspirators to act before they were ready by announcing his departure for Persia. Rumors were already circulating that an illegitimate Egyptian son (by Cleopatra) would succeed him, something unthinkable to Roman aristocrats. Secretly, he changed his will, adopting as his son and successor his grandnephew Octavian (who would arrive from Greece within a week of the assassination), and granting Roman citizens money enough to live on for three months after his death. “By dismissing his bodyguards and walking into the Senate chamber where he had reason to believe he would be assassinated, Caesar in effect chose the time and place of his death,” Bursztajn asserts. “If the conspirators are going to kill him, what would be the worst place? Where they would lose their legitimacy”—in the traditionally weapon-free senator-
ial meeting place that the conspirators violate by attacking him.

“As you add up all these elements, the conventional analysis becomes more and more improbable,” says Bursztajn, whose interpretation persuaded Garofano that Caesar had a hand in his own assassination. In one suicidal stroke, in other words, he achieves both a dynasty and his own immortality. “Why have we decided to keep Caesar’s image so sacred that we haven’t even raised this as a possibility?” Bursztajn asks. “We like to think that people who are vain and arrogant get their just desserts. But what if he got just what he wanted? He’d gotten everything he wanted in life; maybe he was getting everything he wanted in death.”

~HARBOUR FRASER HODDER

**Harold Bursztajn**

**E-mail Address:** harold_bursztajn@hms.harvard.edu

**Website:** www.forensic-psych.com

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# Right Now

**“Prevention Creep”**

In shopping malls around the country, medical businesses sell ultrasound and CT (computed tomography) scans to healthy but vigilant customers. These body scans, which may cost several hundred dollars, allegedly can detect conditions like cancer and arterial blockage at early stages, and thus cue patients to seek “preventive” treatment. Body scanning is only one of many interventions aimed at detecting ailments early, or preventing them entirely. Childhood vaccines render a slew of diseases harmless before they can strike. Self-examinations are promoted as a quicker way to find lumps and moles before they can grow. And an array of blood tests and other kinds of imaging tests looks for tumors and malignancies at earlier and earlier stages.

But is the premise of preventive medicine being stretched too far? “Yes,” says Eric Schneider, assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and the Harvard School of Public Health. Schneider’s research indicates that many aggressive techniques for preventing illness are useless and costly; they can even generate new medical problems. Schneider calls it “prevention creep”—the notion that we can take strategies designed for public health and large populations and modify them almost at will to be applied in clinical situations to individuals.

For example, Schneider was the lead investigator in a study of angioplasty, a technique in which surgeons insert a deflated balloon into a coronary artery...
Using interviews with the first Tupperware saleswomen, and original promotional footage, Tupperware: The Movie demonstrates that the nifty plastic food-storage containers promised women much more than crisp lettuce and excuses to host parties. Despite its association with demure housewives and their casseroles, selling Tupperware enabled thousands of women, mainly from the working class, to earn an income and excel at something outside the domestic sphere.

“Tupperware offered opportunities women weren’t going to get working in the domestic sphere,” says Jerry Shine, author of Tupperware: The Movie. “It was a sign of independence and something for them to be proud of. It was something they could work on and have control over.”

Filmmakers have so delighted in debunking the idyllic myth of 1950s America that exposing the era’s seamiest side has almost developed into its own genre. In movies such as Written on the Wind, Peyton Place, and Far from Heaven, what appears tranquil and familiar quietly seethes with scandal and intrigue. Now a new documentary, bereft of salaciousness but chock-full of drama, reveals the surprising truth behind a beloved 1950s trademark: Tupperware.

Using interviews with the first Tupperware Ladies, excerpts from company archives, and original promotional footage, Tupperware: The Movie demonstrates that the nifty plastic food-storage containers promised women much more than crisp lettuce and excuses to host parties. Despite its association with demure housewives and their casseroles, selling Tupperware enabled thousands of women, mainly from the working class, to earn an income and excel at something outside the domestic sphere.

“The Tupperware party was an icon of the 1960s,” says Shine. “It was a time when people didn’t want to be judged. They were more relaxed and open to new experiences.”

But what the Tupperware party offered was more than just a social event. It was a way for women to challenge traditional gender roles and take control of their own lives. As Shine notes, “It was a time when people were starting to think about gender equality and women’s rights.”

As the Tupperware party grew in popularity, so too did the demand for more women to join the sales force. In 1958, Tupperware began hiring women as full-time sales associates, opening up new opportunities for women in the workforce. It was a significant step forward in the fight for gender equality, and one that would continue to shape the company and its products for years to come.

So the next time you see a Tupperware party in your neighborhood, remember that it’s more than just a social event. It’s a symbol of the progress that has been made in the fight for gender equality, and a reminder of the importance of perseverance in the face of adversity.
factories, on the farm, or at the five-and-dime,” says the film’s director, producer, and writer, Laurie Kahn-Leavitt, who completed the documentary while a fellow at Harvard’s Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History. (Tupperware is scheduled to air on PBS’s American Experience in the spring of 2004.) “Women were able to put their kids through college and take vacations they’d never dreamed of,” she explains. And since they could schedule Tupperware parties—at the time, the product’s only permissible sales venue—around existing domestic responsibilities, women were able to continue their roles as homemakers while developing entrepreneurial skills.

Even more surprising than Tupperware’s role in empowering women was the woman in charge of its sales. Brownie Wise, an ambitious and savvy divorcée, devised and implemented the ingenious marketing and sales-incentive strategies that transformed the company from penny-ante to multimillion. In 1954, she became the first woman featured on the cover of Business Week. As Tupperware flourished, says Kahn-Leavitt, “everybody copied what Brownie did.”

But it wasn’t until Kahn-Leavitt, who produced the Emmy-winning film A Midwife’s Tale (based on the eponymous Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Phillips professor of early American history Laurel Thatcher Ulrich), plumbed the Smithsonian’s extensive archive of Tupperware records that she discovered the company’s dramatic history and colorful characters. Earl Silas Tupper—a grouchy Massachusetts tree surgeon-cum-inventor whose previous ideas included a fish-propelled boat—patented the plastic seal that keeps Tupperware airtight and emits the characteristic burping sound when closed. But it was Wise who convinced him to sell Tupperware exclusively at home parties, who readily assembled and motivated a sales force of thousands, and who was ultimately, and unceremoniously, fired after a series of vague disagreements and alleged improprieties. Says Kahn-Leavitt, “This was a film waiting to be made.”

In an era when most women were in aprons, not offices, Wise’s contribution...
to Tupperware’s success was astonishing—and, notes Kahn-Leavitt, is disparaged by the company to this day. (In a particularly vehement effort to denigrate Wise’s influence, the staff dug a pit behind Tupperware headquarters after she had left the company and buried all remaining copies of Best Wishes, her book of motivational speeches.)

A single mother who presided over staff meetings sporting such stylish accessories as mini-stiletto kitten heels and pearls, Brownie Wise was a figure other women could relate to and aspire to emulate. She understood that their considerable—and not necessarily unpleasant—domestic obligations didn’t prevent women from craving an identity and camaraderie outside the home. Selling Tupperware allowed them to be homemakers, working women, and ladies all at once. “Brownie was a pragmatist,” says Kahn-Leavitt. “Who else was going to give a job to a woman without a college education?”

Women drew on their existing networks of friends and family to participate in their home parties, and tailored their schedules to work as much, or as little, as they wished. One former Tupperware Lady, with a noticeable gleam in her eye, recalls hosting four parties a day. For women whose previous jobs were frequently dreary assignments at defense plants during World War II, selling Tupperware was sociable, enjoyable, and lucrative.

Nothing epitomized this experience more than the annual Jubilee, a baroque celebration at Tupperware’s headquarters in Kissimmee, Florida. Part family reunion and part pep rally, Jubilee drew exuberant Tupperware Ladies from around the country who dressed in costume (each Jubilee had a different theme culled from movies, television, and beauty pageants), played games (prizes included kitchen appliances and mink stoles), and honored each other as shrewd and effective businesswomen (top saleswomen were awarded Cadillacs and trips to Europe). “In a culture that rarely applauded the efforts of working-class women, the Tupperware Ladies were showered with praise and prizes,” says Kahn-Leavitt. “What else in their lives offered that?”

But despite the cars and furs, it seemed a sense of accomplishment mattered most. “It must seem kind of corny,” former Tupperware Lady Anna Tate says in the film. “But it was very important. [Tupperware] meant an awful lot to thousands and thousands of women who were able to go out and make a good living for themselves and their family. They never dreamed it would turn out this way.” ~CATHERINE DUFREE

Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Archive Center, National Museum of American History, Brownie Wise Papers