Cambridge 02138

Gun violence, drug laws, climate change

EPIGENETICS
Professor Sarah Richardson’s research on gendered bias in scientific studies is fascinating (“The Science of Sex,” November-December 2019, page 34). I cringed, though, when I got to the part of the article stating that the theory Richardson explores in her recent book—the belief that the actions of mothers during pregnancy have long-term effects on their progeny—is “an idea that dates back to Aristotle.” The Chinese theory of “taijiao” (prenatal education) is probably at least as old as Aristotelian thought. No doubt the idea arose long ago in other communities, as well. The conceptualization of science as an exclusively European intellectual project at the heart of “Western Civilization” is a form of bias that Harvard’s historians of science have recognized and combatted for quite some time now, I believe. Still, Eurocentrism persists within the American educational system and among many journalists, skewing understanding of the world just as gendered bias does.

Kristin Stapleton, Ph.D. ’93
Buffalo

ZONING AND CLIMATE
Judicial administration of local zoning under the Mount Laurel decision has utterly failed to achieve its goals of reducing local zoning barriers to more affordable types of housing (“Land Use and Climate Change,” November-December 2019, page 15). This should come as no surprise. State courts are not equipped for this role; it is the responsibility of state legislatures.

Some states have successfully challenged local control over land-use matters because parochial local control was undermining the public interest in more equitable and environmentally sustainable outcomes. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Oregon legislature and state agencies forced local governments to zone residential land for all types of housing—from apartments to manufactured housing to subsidized housing—and shrank minimum lot sizes down to mid-twentieth-century scale. Allowing denser housing also contributed to Oregon’s effort to curb urban sprawl, and reduces driving per capita.

In 2019, in the face of unaffordable home prices and rents, the Oregon legislature acted again, passing legislation requiring all cities in the Portland metro region and all other cities with more than 25,000 population to allow owners to

With Warm Thanks

Lydia S.C. Rosenberg, production and design manager during the past three-plus years, concluded her Harvard Magazine service in late November. An exemplary colleague, she mastered our print and digital production processes; contributed significantly to the design and look of everything we do on readers’ behalf; and then taught herself new skills to produce the first series of Ask a Harvard Professor podcasts, which debuted to rave reviews during the fall semester. She leaves with our deep gratitude and best wishes as she assumes her new responsibilities across campus, as digital media manager at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society.

~The Editors
build duplexes, triplexes, and four-plexes on lots in single-family residential zones.

Oregon is not alone in correcting the deficiencies of local land-use control. In order to meet its greenhouse-gas reduction goals, California has reformed how local governments address traffic congestion, directing them to replace road-widening solutions with actions to reduce driving. It also passed legislation allowing accessory dwelling units (detached or internal apartments) on single-family lots across the state.

The courts’ role may be to identify the constitutional or statutory defects in locally controlled regulation—whether to address issues of social equity, the environment, or the economy—but it is up to state legislators to supply the remedy.

Robert Liberty, J.D. ’81, LF ’03
Portland, Ore.

GUNS
We do not have a gun problem (Ask a Harvard Professor podcast, “David Hemenway: Who Can Solve America’s Gun Problem?”). We have a (bad) misbehavior problem with little to no useful accountability for misbehavior. If Harvard would try to frame and solve “the problem” instead of duping itself by advancing an agenda for other purposes, we might get real improvement.

Charlie Bahr, M.B.A. ’71
Valley View, Tex.

Editor’s note: For more on David Hemenway’s public-health perspective on gun-related homicides and suicides, see page 43.

CAMPUS DISCOURSE
It’s a fine thing to say, as does President Lawrence Bacow and Dean Rakesh Khurana, that respectfulness and open-mindedness further the search for truth and understanding (“The Community’s Conversations,” November-December, page 18). But what I found missing is any information about what to do when others in the conversation are trying to destroy truth and understanding. We wouldn’t be here if that’s how our ancestors had treated dire wolves, cave bears, and saber-toothed tigers. Idealism without realism is just foolishness.

There are important and fairly clear differences between those who deserve a respectful and open-minded hearing and those who will misuse such responses. I would like our leaders to address those differences, and outline practical policies to preserve and protect the respectfulness and open-mindedness that we value.

Keith Roberts ’65, LL.B. ’68
New York City

ANGELA DAVIS AND ISRAEL
Although I have no argument with most of Jonathan Burack’s criticism of Angela Davis (Letters, November-December 2019, page 4), his statement about “her strong support for the anti-Zionist BDS movement, which aims to dismantle the Jewish homeland” is off the mark. The boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement is supported by individuals such as the late Stephen Hawking, and organizations such as the Presbyterian Church and Jewish Voice for Peace, the latter advertising over 70 local chapters and 200,000 on-line supporters. At local JVP meetings, member lawyers have pointed out that basic human rights, not just civil rights, of Palestinians are routinely violated by Israel. Individuals living under Israeli control cannot appeal to constitutional rights because Israel has no constitution.

The current U.S. administration’s embrace of Israeli expansionism into East Jerusalem and Syrian land in the Golan, while sanctioning Russia over its occupation of Eastern Ukraine, is inconsistent, to say the least.

David Mendenhall, Ph.D. ’71
Pomona, N.Y.

CRIME AND DRUG LAWS
“The War on Crime” and the War on Drugs are two of the largest policy failures in the history of the United States,” says historian Elizabeth Hinton in “Color and Incarceration” (September-October 2019, page 40). The prohibition of intoxicating liquors was a third such failure, but the nation corrected it relatively quickly.

Prohibiting drugs has long proved as futile and corrupting as prohibiting alcohol. Isn’t it finally time to

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Surpluses and Scholarship

A decade after the financial crisis overturned Harvard’s academic ambitions, the University has righted its financial ship, and then some: a $298 million surplus in the fiscal year ended last June 30, anchored by some $1.9 billion distributed from the endowment—fully 33 percent of revenues (see “The Black... and the Red,” page 22). That outcome represents considerable work. For example, the endowment was valued at $40.9 billion at the end of fiscal 2019, up from the severely depressed $26.1 billion in June 2009—a recovery abetted by retained earnings, The Harvard Campaign, and Corporation decisions to put academic operations on a diet by restraining distributions from the endowment. (The distributions have nonetheless totaled roughly $16 billion in the past decade, despite inconsistent investment performance.) Turning to outlays: employees began to bear higher costs for health insurance; central controls limited pay increases and hiring; and financial administrators whittled down debt and refinanced some high-cost borrowings, effecting large savings. And so on.

Thus Harvard—in the news a decade ago for its $1.1-billion loss in endowment value, and $3 billion of additional losses—is now a paragon of fiscal probity. It has recorded surpluses for six consecutive years: a cumulative $769 million. In one sense, that is simply prudent. The endowment has not grown much, if at all, in inflation-adjusted terms since its pre-crash value, but supports a costlier operation. The new and spiffed-up buildings dotting campus increase fixed costs—and much current research depends on renovations, expensive equipment, and lots of computational support. The present economic expansion will some day reverse; that could drive demand for financial aid and trim spending on executive education (a recently robust cash cow). Even with strong congressional support for research, gigantic federal deficits threaten funding. Whether reliving the doomsday experience a decade ago or looking warily forward, those who exercise fiduciary responsibility for Harvard have had good cases for caution.

But virtue is not cost-free. Politically, strong though their arguments may be against the new federal levy on endowment earnings (an estimated $50 million for Harvard in fiscal 2019), the University and its peers with surpluses have a tougher argument as they ask Congress (see those trillion-dollar deficits) for both tax relief and more spending on student aid and research. Anyone who cares about higher education writ large surely had to wince when reminded by “It’s Sink-or-Swim for Black Colleges” (The New York Times, October 22) that these institutions, which have produced 80 percent of the nation’s black judges and half of its black doctors and teachers, “are on the brink of collapse”—two days before the University reported its latest surplus.

And academically—most important, given Harvard’s mission—this community needs to consider the balance between storing acorns for the future and investing in discovery and education now.

To take one crude indicator, in the fall of 2009, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) had 722 “ladder” faculty members (tenured and junior professors). This past fall—after a decade of startling advances in data analysis, neuroscience and every branch of biology, historical and social science inquiry into diverse societies and newly accessible archives with digital research tools—it reported 724 members. The composition has changed (hiring has tilted toward engineering and applied sciences), but this is not strong evidence of keeping up with the growth in knowledge and the opportunities to acquire more. Nor—despite the intellectual prowess of the many new faculty members who have succeeded retirees and others—does this admittedly crude metric suggest much greater capacity to address today’s urgent challenges of inequality, technological change, etc.

Which brings us to the specter of climate change. Whatever doubts may be harbored in some circles, most people in the University think global warming is inexorably under way, prompting the need for breakthrough research and enormous efforts to protect Earth’s habitats. For most of the past decade, much of the debate on campus has focused on the near-at-hand question of whether the University should divest any investments in fossil-fuel producers held by the endowment. The recent intensification of faculty, student, and alumni divestment advocates’ efforts is described at page 19.

The Corporation and the past and present presidents have opposed divestment, and still do. They have rightly emphasized that this institution has the intellectual resources—in science, business, design, education, engineering, government, law, public health, divinity, economics, philosophy, and elsewhere—to make matchless contributions toward combating global warming. These might be discoveries in energy and battery technology; innovations in law, incentives, enterprises, and civic institutions to accelerate the adoption of needed changes, and ease the transition of those whose lives are or will be disrupted; or campaigns to change public understanding, opinion, and behavior. In his first remarks as president-elect in February 2018, Lawrence S. Bacow highlighted the breadth of Harvard’s expertise across all its schools as a singular strength—and the opportunity to enhance its impact by combining forces to address global problems.

This surely is one. At the November FAS meeting, Bacow emphasized focusing “not on points of disagreement but on points of agreement”: that climate change demands action. “Whatever people may believe about divestment,” he continued, “we all need to agree that as a faculty, we need to confront this issue through our scholarship and teaching.” Divestment advocates, meanwhile, described it as only a first step—before reinvesting endowment assets in sustainable technologies, and stepping up scholarship and teaching.

There’s plenty of common ground. What’s lacking, so far, is the commitment to bring schools and professors together; to shape a program that draws on Harvard’s strengths to address unmet challenges; and to secure the resources needed to proceed.

Is this the right way to use some of Harvard’s surplus? Not necessarily: its scholars may be better positioned to address poverty and inequality; the challenges of digital-era privacy and misinformation; or strains on democratic governance. Might it be a sound way to proceed? Given the risks of runaway climate change and the University’s intellectual riches, possibly so. A coherent, visible program on climate change is certainly consistent with the institution’s mission.

Moreover, it would demonstrate the real (but deferred) promise of One Harvard—and give some hope of moving beyond the deadlocked debate over divestment. A decade hence, if the campus remains mired in that confrontation, while the world has grown hotter and more endangered, those retained surpluses will look pound-foolish indeed.  

—John S. Rosenberg, Editor
repeal the laws that criminalize drugs, subject those drugs to life-saving quality controls, and use the sales taxes they will generate to treat and wean addicts and educate people against doing drugs?

During five weeks that I spent in a public defender’s office in Manhattan’s Criminal Courts in 1966, the majority of the cases that I watched or worked on involved heroin or larcenies to support a heroin “habit.” I concluded then that logic and humanity require all drugs to be decriminalized.

Soon, though, the nation got Richard Nixon’s War on Drugs, and prison populations burgeoned, sucking increasing millions of years out of Americans’ lives—disproportionately Americans of color. Decriminalizing drugs would not end our savage level of incarceration, but it would put a serious dent in it.

As Hinton has recorded, inequalities in policing, prosecution, and imprisonment have long been elements of the racism that infects the nation. Decriminalizing drugs would not end racism either, but at one stroke, it would eliminate a destructive result of racism.

Perhaps because I live on a remote mountainside, I haven’t heard much about the hypocrisy of keeping heroin criminalized, while legal killers like OxyContin merely present a medical problem that neither makers nor marketers go to prison for pushing beyond their legitimate use. It is those pushers who need to be prosecuted, not under anti-drug laws, but under state reckless-murder statutes.

Malcolm Bell ’53, LL.B. ’58 Weston, Vt.

Richard Merlo ’57 shocked by asking “Are we to believe that the black community bears no responsibility for its behavior?” (Letters, November-December 2019, page 4). An Asian man in my wealthy community killed his wife this year. Neither I nor the Asians in my community (from many different countries) bear responsibility for his behavior. We dump our poor in communities far from transportation and jobs. Single parents (or couples) who work can lose control of their kids in an environment wrecked by crime and drugs. Data show when they move to our wealthy suburbs, the kids and families thrive. But our wealthy suburbs fight against low-income migrants from the city, blocking off this escape avenue. Perhaps, Richard, you and I bear responsibility for the murder rate among young black men.

Kathryn Roy, M.B.A. ’85
Lexington, Mass.

CLIMATE CHANGE
I was struck by a startling contrast in your recent issue. On the one hand I read with interest your (in my view apt) celebration of Sarah Richardson’s skeptical, questioning approach to great swathes of sex and gender research, which has uncovered “hype” and “bias” due to the unacknowledged or unconscious personal agendas of the researchers.

On the other hand I read your curt dismissal of the letter from William Jones ’60 (page 10), who dares to imply that there may be some hype and bias in much of the voluminous research on climate change.

I think it is safe to say that climate researchers are no less likely to have unacknowledged or unconscious agendas than researchers into the biology of sex.

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nomena Richardson describes resulted from a rush to change human behavior based on some (clearly untenable, in retrospect) conclusions. Might some of us not be allowed to express concern about similar potential dangers from the “climate change consensus”?  
Richard Schneider, M.B.A. ’75
Bedford, NY.

JEFFREY EPSTEIN
The news item about Harvard’s financial involvement with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein in the November-December 2019 issue (page 25) opens with the following: “... Jeffrey Epstein—accused of being a serial sexual predator who continued to prey systematically on underage women even after a 2008 plea arrangement for sex offenses...”

There is no such thing as an “underage woman”—an underage woman is by definition a child; Epstein is accused of preying systematically upon children. And, I must add, an adult having sex of any kind with a child is by definition rape. Words matter tremendously; their misuse can, as in this instance, result in a great deal of harm. To promote the idea that there can be “underage women” is to defang the true meaning of the words; to imply that preying upon them is somehow less harmful than preying upon children. Such a turn of phrase is akin to another one which continues to make the rounds in political circles: the notion of “nonconsensual sex.” “Nonconsensual sex” is rape.

I ask that the staff of Harvard Magazine choose their words more carefully.

Christine Staples
Berkeley

WILLIAM MONROE TROTTER
I greatly appreciate the magazine’s high-profile recognition of Kerri Greenidge’s excellent paean to the activist cum journalist, William Monroe Trotter (Vita, November-December 2019, page 40). This article offers much more than revelatory insight into the tragic life of a lesser-known figure in African-American history. It also manages to cast a hagiographic glow around the enduring importance of remembering civil-rights activism as early black leaders and scholars practiced it.

As pioneering editor of the Boston Guardian, besides causing quite a stir in 1914 while visiting the White House, Trotter is also remembered for boldly lecturing President Wilson against the moral evils of segregation in the federal workforce. This was characteristic of Trotter’s passion for social justice, never shrinking from a responsibility to raise his voice unapologetically on behalf of all black working-class Americans, and do so in print in the Guardian. Much to Greenidge’s credit, her article delivers a revealing view of the murky underside of the ideological rifts between radicals like Trotter and the accommodationist racial views held by many conservative black and white progressives who sought to diminish the role of black dissent in order to promote a much narrower view of what could pass as racial respectability.

Even more compelling, Greenidge establishes a direct connection to the historical trend by moderate whites to muzzle black radicalism, which did not stop with Trotter’s death. Acting as an intermediary while striking a conciliatory posture between the white-controlled Carnegie Foundation and the American Association of Adult Education in 1935, Howard University philosopher Alain Locke [A.B. 1908, Ph.D. ’18; see “Art and Activism,” March—please turn to page 74]...
April 2018, page 36] continued this divisive accommodationist tradition by obsequiously capitulating to the conservative demands of Carnegie after its officials strongly objected to the militant tone of an essay written by none other than W.E.B. Du Bois [A.B. 1890, Ph.D. ‘95] for the foundation-funded project.

M. Anthony Fitchue, Ed.M. ’74
Baltimore

ATHLETICS AND ADMISSIONS

The excellent commentary “About Athletics” (7 Ware Street, November-December, page 5) omits mention of a troubling aspect of athletics at Harvard. While the Ivy League does not allow athletic scholarships, it does permit significant preferences in admissions for athletes. At Harvard, this means that one-fifth of all undergraduates receive a heavy thumb on the admissions scale just because they are athletes. As an institution focused on teaching and scholarship, this is disturbing. A change would take agreement by the Ivy League presidents, and I hope Harvard’s president will consider raising the issue with his Ivy colleagues.

Thomas Ehrlich ’56, L.L.B. ’59
Palo Alto

ENGINEERING LIFE

(continued from page 41)

few genes that are completely new, Church has numerous genetic tools at his disposal to determine their function. He can splice genes into other organisms to observe their effects, or silence them to see what changes then take place, or induce mutations in vitro, to see how that changes the protein products of the altered genes.

He has already introduced genes recovered from mammoth DNA as much as 700,000 years old into cultured cell lines. Some facilitate blood oxygen release at low temperatures, others the growth of thick hair and the accumulation of subcutaneous fat. Endowed with these genetic gifts, the potential range of the Asian elephant would expand into frigid areas where the animals would be far less likely to compete with humans for habitat. “We’ll be further increasing their diversity, possibly even making them more genetically diverse than any species has been before in that lineage,” Church explains, “because we’re not limited by time or geography, or even by natural DNA.”

The idea is not so farfetched as it might sound: “There’s evidence that there was interbreeding in the past,” he says. “It’s like the evidence in the human genome that our ancestors interbred with Neanderthals—it’s a pattern with elephants and mammoths.” Besides recently developing (with professor of genetics Chao-ting Wu) an improved method for reading ancient DNA, Church has successfully demonstrated the function of two woolly mammoth gene variants that aid adaptation to a cold environment, and has plans to modify at least 44 more ele-

Woolly mammoth adaptations to frigid environments included blood oxygen release at low temperatures, the growth of thick hair, and the accumulation of subcutaneous fat for insulation and fasting.