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The Atlantic Monthly | October 2006

#### THE AGENDA

## PRIMARY SOURCES

***Unrest in China; on parking and national character; the importance of being squiggly; our overconfident youth***

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#### FOREIGN AFFAIRS

#### WHAT WOULD MAO DO?

A wave of social unrest is sweeping across China—in the past two years, the number of public protests has risen by nearly 50 percent—and the government has been “unable or unwilling” to control the eruptions, according to a new report prepared by the Congressional Research Service and obtained by *Secrecy News* (an online newsletter covering security and intelligence policy). Unlike the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of 1989, or the ongoing struggle between the government and the religious sect Falun Gong, the current protests are driven primarily by economic concerns. Peasants and farmers are unhappy with the environmental degradation, official corruption, and decline in employment and social services that followed the decollectivization of state agriculture, and they are resisting the government’s attempts to seize property and force evictions for infrastructure projects. More troubling, from Beijing’s point of view, is agitation in the industrial sector, where workers are more educated, enjoy wider access to foreign reporters and rights activists, and have, according to the report, “a greater sense of entitlement.” China’s capitalist tinkering has hurt workers in state companies, where 27.8 million factory jobs were lost between 1999 and 2004; many of the urban protests have been aimed at “collusive agreements between factory managers, local officials, and outside investors.” Some experts anticipate that the government, fearing another of the “color revolutions” that have recently swept Ukraine and Georgia, will begin to take a harder



line toward the mounting turmoil.

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—“[Social Unrest in China](#),” Thomas Lum, Congressional Research Service

#### CARTOGRAPHY

##### **SQUIGGLY FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS**

It’s long been speculated that when European powers divided up colonial territories based on latitude and longitude rather than ethnic, linguistic, or religious borders—and when postcolonial governments decided to respect those borders instead of drawing new ones—they set the stage for decades of political and economic misery. Now a new study confirms that theory, by examining the correlation between a nation-state’s likelihood of achieving prosperous stability and two variables: whether its borders partition ethnic groups (leading to cross-border strife), and whether its borders follow straight lines or “squiggly” ones (straight borders are “more likely to be artificial”). The study finds that when other variables are controlled for, artificially drawn borders are associated with lower per capita GDP, greater political instability, and poorer quality of life overall.

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**From the archives:**

**"The Perils of Partition"** (March 2003)  
Our author examines the political—and literary—legacy of Britain’s policy of “divide and quit.” By Christopher Hitchens

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—“[Artificial States](#),” Alberto Alesina, William Easterly, and Janina Matuszeski, National Bureau of Economic Research

#### ETHICS

### DIPLOMATIC IMPUNITY

What makes officials corrupt? Disentangling law and culture is a tricky business, but a pair of economists have come up with an ingenious way to do it: studying the frequency of parking violations committed by diplomats in New York City. Since, as their study reports, there is “essentially zero legal enforcement of diplomatic parking violations,” the authors hypothesized that any cross-national variation in parking-violation rates should flow from culture alone. And sure enough, diplomats from countries with high levels of corruption were significantly more likely to incur parking tickets, suggesting that cultural factors rather than legal norms drive a great deal of official misconduct. The worst offenders were Kuwaitis, who accumulated an astonishing 246 violations per diplomat per year from the end of 1997 through 2002, followed by Egyptians, with 140 violations per diplomat per year; countries whose diplomats *incurred no parking tickets* included Canada, Israel, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. The study also found that officials from countries where the U.S. is less popular were much more likely to park illegally, and that there was a significant drop-off in violations after 9/11, particularly among diplomats from Muslim nations.

<b>PARK WHERE YOU PLEASE</b>		
<i>Average unpaid annual New York City parking violations per diplomat, November 1997 to November 2002</i>		
<i>Country</i>	<i>Violations per diplomat</i>	<i>UN Mission diplomats in 1998</i>
<b>1. Kuwait</b>	<b>246.2</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2. Egypt</b>	<b>139.6</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3. Chad</b>	<b>124.3</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>4. Sudan</b>	<b>119.1</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5. Bulgaria</b>	<b>117.5</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>6. Mozambique</b>	<b>110.7</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>7. Albania</b>	<b>84.5</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>8. Angola</b>	<b>81.7</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>9. Senegal</b>	<b>79.2</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>10. Pakistan</b>	<b>69.4</b>	<b>13</b>

—“[Cultures of Corruption: Evidence From Diplomatic Parking Tickets](#),” Ray Fisman and Edward Miguel, Columbia University and the University of California at Berkeley

#### THE WORKPLACE

##### **A HARD DAY’S NIGHT**

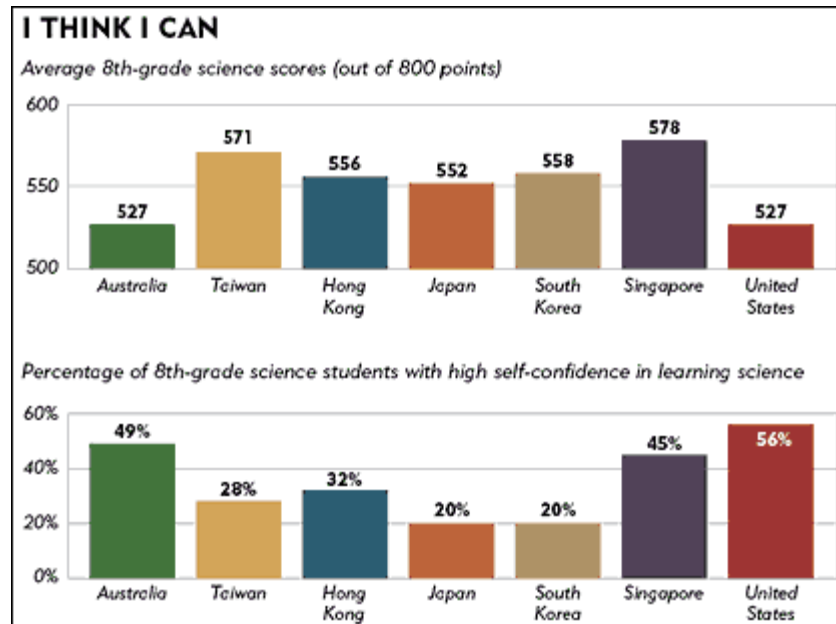
For most of the twentieth century, the typical American workday grew shorter and shorter, and the proportion of American men working long hours dropped steadily. But since 1970, a recent paper points out, this trend has reversed itself: men are working longer hours overall, and the share of men who work more than fifty hours a week has been growing. This trend is most pronounced among highly skilled workers: in 1980, 22 percent of college-educated men routinely pulled fifty-hour workweeks; in 2001, 30.5 percent worked fifty hours or more. Meanwhile, low-paid workers are less likely to work long hours than in the past. The authors argue that this shift reflects a changing approach to compensation, in which companies give their salaried workers financial incentives to persuade them to work longer hours. The authors don’t attempt to explain *why* companies would be increasingly incentivizing fifty-hour workweeks, but they do note the information industries’ steady appetite for highly skilled workers as a potential source for this shift.

—“[The Expanding Workweek? Understanding Trends in Long Work Hours Among U.S. Men, 1979–2004](#),” Peter Kuhn and Fernando Lozano, National Bureau of Economic Research

#### EDUCATION

##### **THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING**

Motivational speakers may tell you to believe in yourself, but if you want to do well in school, you may be better off taking a more pessimistic attitude toward your own abilities. In a report detailing the various things the U.S. can learn from the Chinese educational system about teaching math and science—including the importance of national curricular standards, better training of teachers, longer school years, and extra homework—comes the news that the U.S. lags far behind Asian nations in grade-school math and science scores. This gap, however, is not for want of student self-confidence: despite faring worse on a standardized eighth-grade science test than students in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea, American students are more than twice as likely as their peers in those countries to enjoy high “self-confidence” in their ability to learn science.



—“[Math and Science Education in a Global Age: What the U.S. Can Learn From China](#),” Asia Society

#### POLITICS

##### **THE RICH ARE DIFFERENT FROM YOU AND ME**

What makes a red state red, and a blue state blue? It’s the voting habits of their wealthiest residents, according to a study from Columbia University. Although the GOP has traditionally been considered the party of the wealthy and the Democrats the party of the poor, lately Republicans have tended to win in the poorer states in the interior of the country, while Democratic victories have been concentrated in the wealthier states along the East and West Coasts. This trend has led pundits to argue that the Republicans have developed a common touch, while the Democrats have become elitist and alienated from the masses—but actually, the study’s authors argue, the red-blue gap is best explained by the fact that rich people in poor states are much more likely to vote Republican than rich people in well-off states. In Mississippi, for example, there is a strong relationship between income and voting patterns: the wealthier the Mississippian, the more likely he or she is to pull the lever for a Republican presidential candidate. But as a state’s average income rises, the correlation between being wealthy and voting Republican disappears. In Connecticut, for instance, there is almost no connection between income and voting behavior: both the poor and the rich tend to vote for Democratic candidates.

—“[Rich State, Poor State, Red State, Blue State: What’s the](#)

Matter With Connecticut?” A. Gelman, B. Shor, J. Bafumi, and D. Park, Columbia University

What do you think? Discuss this article in **Post & Riposte**.



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