

Giving them a chance

You painted a frustratingly incomplete picture of America's new "opportunity zones" ("Oh, the places you'll grow", November 17th). After applauding the policy's objectives, a federal-tax incentive with the aim of boosting investment in struggling communities, you asked whether opportunity zones are adequately targeted towards people and places truly in need of help?

It is an important question. However, the evidence that those in need have been targeted is substantial. State governors selected places that as a group were more distressed than other eligible areas they did not select. For example, 29% of residents in the opportunity zones live in poverty and most zones saw their poverty rates rise over the past decade. The average median family income is nearly 40% lower than the national median. And life expectancy is roughly four years lower in zones than outside them.

You cited an analysis from the Brookings Institution, a think-tank, to assert that the zones are more likely to be gentrifying areas than the poorer communities that were passed over. What you did not mention was that Mississippi, the poorest state, emerged as the worst offender on the Brookings measure. Having raised the spectre of gentrification, you left readers with no way to gauge its pervasiveness across opportunity zones. In fact, only a tiny fraction can reasonably be considered gentrifying. A multidimensional study by the Urban Institute puts the figure at merely 3.6% of all zones.

Like any policy, opportunity zones deserve scrutiny. We believe some additional context would have helped your readers better evaluate the merits of this new initiative.

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Stressing the accent

You seemed perplexed by a French politician's put-down of a journalist who asked him a question in an accent that is common in south-west France ("The fear of accents", October 27th). Over five decades, linguistic research has laid bare the explicit and implicit biases related to the regional variation of language in society. Such features serve as markers for evaluating a speaker's personality or social status.

The French, just like the English, are cultured to believe that there is only one correct way of speaking. This is entirely arbitrary; there is no one better or worse accent or dialect. Power asymmetry lies at the centre of this. It is no coincidence that the Parisian accent is the model for the French language because Paris is the centre of power. The accents of politicians such as Jean Lassalle from Pyrénées-Atlantique are still openly mocked. In Britain, MPs such as Angela Rayner and Leanne Wood have also been ridiculed for the way they speak. This is linguistic discrimination, clear and simple. We need better education when it comes to linguistic variation on both sides of *la Manche*.

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Disabled access

Bartleby addressed the problems of designing buildings for the disabled (November 3rd). The concept of "universal design" has been taught in architectural schools for over 50 years, but there are obstacles to making buildings accessible to all. For example, a ramp that is suitable for a paraplegic might be a hindrance for a pensioner who can't walk more than a few paces. The height of door hardware for a very short person might be impossible to reach for a person who cannot bend over. Cost is another problem. A fully accessible building requires more square footage and duplication of

many amenities. Yet few universally accessible buildings will ever be used by people with the full range of unusual needs. So designers, with a fiduciary responsibility to the owners of the building, usually opt to design to code. It is a knotty problem with no easy feel-good solution.

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India's banking problems

Schumpeter wrote about India's shadow banking crisis (November 10th). The government has not addressed the root cause of the problem and is instead tinkering with more intervention, such as by directing India's largest insurance provider to rescue IDBI, a bank with significant non-performing loans. The government is basically juggling the finances of its public-sector enterprises. It faces an election and is promulgating populist policies, hence the pressure on the central bank to transfer more of its surpluses to the public purse. It is unlikely that the government will prioritise long-term fiscal policy against its short-term electoral aims.

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Le petite armée

Emmanuel Macron's call for a European army ("Macron's long march", November 17th) awakens long-standing concerns in Britain. In fact, chance would be a fine thing. The EU has over 700,000 soldiers at its disposal, so could theoretically create a European army with ease. In reality, without American support, European nations would struggle to field even one corps of 60,000 troops capable of high-intensity war-fighting. The central problem for European defence policy is not an American no-show, but rather that EU countries, even if they were willing, have so little with which to show up.

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Is it all in the genes?

Here are some questions I do not see behaviour geneticists, such as my long-time colleague, Robert Plomin, addressing ("Destiny's child", November 10th). If heritability coefficients vary across countries, cultures and communities for the same phenotypes (such as IQ), doesn't that make them reflections of environmental—as much as genetic—influence? Doesn't such cross-context variation reflect the fact that some contexts afford the expression, or penetrance, of genetic differences more so than do others? If so, then why do we only interpret heritability coefficients in terms of genetic, and not also environmental, effects?

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In the age-old conundrum of nature versus nurture, Mr Plomin's book comes down clearly on the side of DNA. So it was ironic to read the obituary of James "Whitey" Bulger in the same issue (November 10th). He was one of America's most notorious mobsters. Yet his brother is William Bulger, who led the Massachusetts Senate for two decades and then became president of the University of Massachusetts.

ALAN GOLDFARB

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The long and the short of it

Further to the question of Napoleon's height (Letters, November 17th), there is a story of an occasion when the emperor was reaching for a book on a high shelf. Marshal Moncey helped him, saying, "Majesty, allow me. I am bigger," to which Napoleon replied, "No, Moncey. You are longer."

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