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Pocket World in Figures
Book of isms
from Abolitionism to Zoroastrianism

John Andrews
To my son, Tom, a true wordsmith
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Preface

What is an “ism”? The etymologists, harking back – via medieval French and Latin – to Greek words that end in “ismos”, will say those three letters are a convenient suffix: add them to a noun or adjective, or to the stem of a verb, and, to the delight of philologists, you add meaning, distinction and nuance. Terror becomes terrorism; global becomes globalism; baptise becomes baptism. Inventive types will add “ism” to all manner of words – a “Bushism”, for example, for any of the many malapropisms uttered by America’s 43rd president. Bushism has the same linguistic form as Reaganism, or Thatcherism or Marxism, and yet is conceptually different. For Messrs Reagan, Thatcher and Marx, their “isms” define their political and economic ideologies; despite the existence of a Bush doctrine, his “ism” describes merely his verbal oddities.

Purists may argue that a list of isms should be confined to the doctrines of religion, the schools of philosophy, the vagaries of society or the mysteries of science and medicine. Our approach is more forgiving: Bushism enters our list because it means something just as clear, in its own way, as Marxism. So does schism, which is not properly speaking an “ism” at all (its last three letters are not a suffix but are part of the stem) but which is an informative little word given the number of religious “isms” that follow from one schism or another.
And because schism is in, prism must enter the list too – though it is surely intrinsically less interesting.

In the English language “isms” have existed since at least the late 17th century, and their number increases by the year. Dadaism could not exist before Dada – and Dada was not launched until 1916; Darwinism could not exist before Darwin. Most “isms” go hand-in-hand with an “ist”: a Marxist believes in Marxism; a Calvinist in Calvinism. But the connection is by no means invariable: there is no “etymologism” for an etymologist, or “philologism” for the philologist. Yet because, thankfully, there is no English equivalent of the Académie française to determine what words are acceptable, there is nothing to stop anyone from inventing an “ism” and proffering it to the altars of either common usage or scholarly esoterica. Perhaps we shall soon be talking of “Facebookism”.

But will our “isms” become “wasms”, to paraphrase the judgment of the Hungarian-born American historian John Lukacs on the collapse of the Soviet Union (he made an exception for nationalism)? Let us hope not. “Isms” help to inform us, educate us and sometimes even amuse us. This collection of more than 400 is a modest attempt to keep them alive.

John Andrews

May 2010
Abolitionism A movement in Europe and the Americas dedicated to ending slavery, including a transatlantic slave trade that saw perhaps 15m Africans transported to the Americas between the 15th and 19th centuries. The British abolitionist movement was founded by Quakers in 1873. Influenced by the campaigning zeal of William Wilberforce (1759–1833), a British member of Parliament, Britain outlawed the trading of slaves throughout its empire in 1807 (the possession of slaves remained lawful until 1834). France, which had originally condemned slavery in its 1795 constitution, incorporating its declaration of human rights, followed suit in 1848. In the United States abolitionism can be traced to a Quaker petition against slavery in 1688, but success was, to say the least, gradual: northern states banned slavery in the early 19th century, with the importation of slaves being outlawed in 1808, but southern states considered slavery an essential part of their economy and way of life – hence the bloody American civil war of 1861–65. With the defeat of the south and the subsequent passing of the 13th amendment of the Constitution, slavery was
Abolitionism

formally ended in the United States in December 1865. In law, there is now no slavery in the world; in practice, the UN calculates that around 27m people worldwide live in slavery.

Absenteeism The state of being absent from the workplace – a frequent complaint by bosses, who may associate its rate in the workforce with trade-union membership. Boredom could be a reason, too.

Absolutism As a political doctrine, it asserts the unlimited authority and sovereignty of a central figure, for example a monarch unchecked by parliament, judges or clerics. As Louis XIV, the “sun king” who reigned in France from 1643 to 1715, famously put it, “L’état, c’est moi” (I am the state). The simple justification in the Europe of the 16th–18th centuries was “the divine right of kings”, with the monarch deriving his authority from God. Modern tyrants also wield absolute power, but often claim to be exponents of democracy. As a philosophical concept, absolutism holds that certain values, such as truth, are unchanging. Relativists think otherwise (see relativism).

Abstract expressionism A school of non-figurative art that began in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, emphasising spontaneous creation – as in the “action” paintings of Jackson Pollock (1912–56), who would pour or drip paint onto a whole canvas. Other leading abstract expressionists (though their style differed from that of Pollock) were Mark Rothko (1903–70) and Dutch-born Willem de Kooning (1904–97). This New York school of
painting, which in its origins was greatly influenced by Europeans, such as the painters Salvador Dali (1904–89) and Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) and the poet André Breton (1896–1966), in flight from the second world war, shifted the post-war centre of gravity of the art world from Europe to America.

**Absurdism** A philosophy, closely linked to existentialism and nihilism, that holds that mankind exists in a meaningless, irrational world, making absurd any search for order and meaning. Absurdism was intrinsic to the ideas of the 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), but was popularised by the French-Algerian philosopher Albert Camus (1913–60) in his essay The Myth of Sisyphus. Much of modern theatre is influenced by absurdism: the idea that life is ultimately without purpose has attracted playwrights from Eugène Ionesco to Harold Pinter.

**Aestheticism** A European, and particularly British, cultural movement in the late 19th century that decreed that art exists for its beauty alone – “L’art pour l’art” (art for art’s sake), as the French philosopher Victor Cousin (1792–1867) noted in 1818. The movement’s origins can be traced back to the 18th century, with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) arguing that aesthetic standards are separate from morality or utility. The artists of the British Pre-Raphaelite school, such as Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82), were prominent followers of the movement, reacting against the view of John Ruskin (1819–1900) and
William Morris (1834–96) that art must be connected to morality.

Afrocentrism A view of the world that puts Africa, and by extension any people of black African heritage, at the centre. Afrocentrism was a concept developed mostly by African-Americans, such as the scholar W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), in reaction to generations of western oppression, either by colonialism or by slavery. The term “Afrocentric” seems to have originated in 1961 or 1962, possibly thanks to Du Bois, in a proposal for an Encyclopedia Africana, which was to be “unashamedly Afro-Centric but not indifferent to the impact of the outside world”. In 2000 the American scholar Molefi Kete Asante (born Arthur Lee Smith Junior in 1942) gave a lecture at Liverpool University in Britain entitled “Afrocentricity: Toward a New Understanding of African Thought in this Millennium”. By the end of the 20th century Afrocentrism had become a common theme in Black Studies at many American universities.

Ageism Discrimination against the old on the basis of their age. The word was coined in 1969 by an American gerontologist, Robert Butler, and has since become an essential part of any politically correct vocabulary, not least because the voting power of the elderly in western democracies has increased with greater life expectancy and lower birth rates. In response, many governments have passed laws forbidding compulsory retirement ages and other such “ageist” measures. Culturally, ageism seems embedded in the youth-admiring West, where
national leaders are often elected when they are in their 40s; by contrast, in East Asia old age commands respect, including in politics.

**Agnosticism** Strictly speaking the idea that man cannot know anything beyond his material experience, but – in common usage – the notion that man cannot prove or disprove the existence of God. The term “agnostic” (formed by prefixing the “privative alpha” to gnosis, the Greek word for knowledge) was first used in 1869 by the British biologist Thomas Huxley (1825–95) as a rejection of both traditional Judaeo-Christian theism and atheism. Atheists sometimes argue that agnostics simply lack the courage to deny the existence of God; agnostics counter that they are being intellectually honest.

**Agrarianism** A movement that holds that the cultivation of the soil – but not industrial farming – provides a happier, more satisfying life than societies based on the city and modern capitalism. Agrarian societies may have been the norm in the Middle Ages, but today they exist only in isolation: for example, the Amish and Mennonites in the United States, or hippy communes. Several European countries had agrarian parties in the early 20th century, but the only instance of an agrarian movement gaining political power was the tyrannical rule from 1975 to 1979 of Pol Pot’s Khmers Rouges in Cambodia. For all the supposed attractions of agrarianism, the trend towards city-living seems ineluctable: according to the UN more than half of the world’s population now live in urban areas, a milestone reached in 2008.
**Alarmism** The issuing of needless, or exaggerated warnings. Opportunities for alarmists are legion: terrorism, disease and natural disasters all invite pessimistic (see pessimism), but ultimately inaccurate, predictions – for example, the Y2K bug that was supposed to wreck computer systems at the turn of the millennium, or the risk that Saddam Hussein (c1937–2006) would unleash weapons of mass destruction on the West. “Crying wolf” is a common idiom for alarmism. However, alarmists are not inevitably wrong: the curse of Cassandra, according to Greek myth, was to make accurate prophecies that were never believed.

**Albigensianism** A heretical Christian sect of Cathars (see Catharism) that flourished in southern France in the 12th and 13th centuries. The name comes from the town of Albi, though the main centre of the Albigensians was in Toulouse, to its south. The sect rejected the priestly functions of the Roman Catholic church and believed in a Manichaean dualism of spiritual good and material evil: God and the evil one; light and dark. The Albigensians admired extreme ascetism, including celibacy, and were divided into two classes: the believers and the “perfect”. Those able to meet the sect’s strict standards were the perfect – and were, of course, a minority. The Albigensians prospered in part because of their contrast with a corrupt Catholic church, but in 1209 Pope Innocent III launched a crusade against them, promising that the land of the defeated Albigensians would pass to his allies from northern France. The crusade lasted for 20 bloody years, ending with the destruction of Provençal
civilisation and passing control of the Languedoc region to the French monarchy. There then followed, under Pope Gregory IX, an investigation of the Albigensians by the Dominican order of monks – the beginning of the century-long Inquisition that crushed the movement forever.

**Albinism** The absence, by a congenital defect, of the melanin pigment in a person, leading skin to be white and eyes to be usually blue but occasionally red. The term, derived from the Latin *albus*, meaning white, originates in the early 18th century when the Portuguese noticed albinos among African blacks. The condition can also be found in birds and animals, though white tigers are not actually albinos.

**Alcoholism** An addiction, sometimes associated with mental illness, to alcoholic drinks, which an alcoholic consumes to excess. America’s National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence defines alcoholism as “a primary, chronic disease characterised by impaired control over drinking, preoccupation with the drug alcohol, use of alcohol despite adverse consequences, and distortions in thinking”. The description of alcoholism as a disease, rather than simply a form of behaviour, became prevalent in the latter half of the 20th century and is not universally accepted. What is clear, however, is that alcoholics are disproportionately prone to health problems such as liver disease.
Altruism A doctrine – coined in the 19th century by the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857), the founder of positivism – that holds that individuals have a moral duty to seek the good of others. Altruism, the opposite of egoism and selfishness, is basic to many religions, from Christianity to Sikhism. One problem, however, is to define “the good”, not least when short-term and long-term interests diverge or when the doer of good and the supposed beneficiary disagree.

American exceptionalism A notion, rooted in the admiring 19th-century commentary of the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59), that the United States has a special place in the world as a nation of democracy, opportunity and immigrants. As the British writer G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936) noted, “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence.” The term, a favourite of political scientists after the second world war, has roots that are religious (as in the 17th-century metaphor that America “shall be a city upon a hill” and in the 19th-century theory of a conquering “manifest destiny”). But the roots are also social – America as a melting pot of races – and, indeed, environmental, given the variety of America’s natural resources and geography. Unimpressed cynics note that many nations consider themselves exceptional, and critics argue that American exceptionalism is an excuse for jingoism and neo-imperialism.
Anabaptism  The doctrine, held by radical Protestants, that baptism – signifying entry into the Christian church – should be confined to adults, rather than being administered to infants as in most Christian denominations. The word, originally used derisively by mainstream Christians, is derived from the Latin anabaptismus (second baptism), in turn from the Greek ana, meaning up or anew, and baptismos (baptism), and was first used in English in 1532. The second baptism would have been administered to adult converts who had already been baptised as infants. The Anabaptists were a radical wing of the 16th-century Reformation movement, seeking to model themselves on the earliest Christians. They rejected infant baptism on the grounds that infants had no knowledge of good and evil and could therefore not repent and accept baptism. They baptised converts for the first time in Zurich in 1525, in protest at the city council’s decree that all unbaptised children be baptised. These particular Anabaptists, known as the Swiss Brethren, separated themselves from the control of the state church, thus becoming the first to practise the complete separation of church and state.

Anarchism  A philosophy, literally meaning (from the Greek) “without rule”, that holds that mankind can and should live in harmony without government – and that government is intrinsically harmful. The word was first used pejoratively in the 17th-century English civil war by opponents of the Levellers (a movement espousing popular sovereignty in opposition to the monarchy), but in 1793, while not using the word itself, a British
journalist, William Godwin (1756–1836), elaborated on the virtues of anarchism and the natural goodness of human beings. The first to call himself an anarchist, in 1840, was the French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65), famous for declaring that “property is theft”. Anarchists are often linked with extreme left-wing movements and with Marxism, but – in contrast to anarchists – Marxists believe the state must first be taken over before it can wither away, hence a fundamental disagreement in the 19th century between Karl Marx (1818–83) and Mikhail Bakunin (1814–76), whose support for violent action inspired a string of political assassinations. Anarchism’s high point was reached in the early decades of the 20th century in Europe, before it was crushed by the rise of fascism. It survives today only as a fringe movement, inspired by its opposition to globalisation (see globalism).

**Anarcho-syndicalism** A political and social movement, perhaps originating in the Spanish labour movement in the late 19th century but certainly common in France in the first decades of the 20th century, which sought to replace the state and establish in its place a society based on workers organised in units of production. The anarcho-syndicalists, who were influenced by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (see anarchism), opposed the wage system as a form of exploitation by the capitalist class, reducing workers to the status of slaves. The derivation of the term is from the Greek *anarkhos*, meaning “without (an) a ruler (arkhos)”, and the French *syndicalisme*, meaning trade unionism. The principles of anarcho-syndicalism were first spelled out at the “First