Out of the box and into the boot camp

PAUL SEABRIGHT

Gillian Tett

THE SILO EFFECT
Why putting everything in its place isn't such a bright idea
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Gillian Tett writes about the "silo effect" – what others have described as tunnel vision or a problem of fragmented world views – as though it were largely the product of an excess of specialization in advanced industrial societies. In fact, a preoccupation with this phenomenon has a very long pedigree. The parable of the blind men mistaking parts of the elephant for the whole is attributed to the Buddha and is known to the Jain, Hindu and Sufi traditions. Even in the hunter-gatherer societies Tett knows well, specialization is omnipresent: not everyone hunts, and not everyone makes tools. And when it is omnipresent, someone is going to worry, with good reason, that the rest of society is being forced to bend to a partial world view – of the hunters, say, or of the toolmakers.

Specialization is to some degree inevitable in any society, and trying to resist or deny it can be a source of confusion. The introspective-centipede effect may not have captured the imagination of the mystics to the same extent as the blind-men-and-the-elephant effect, but everyone knows that sometimes it is best to let the parts of the body unreflectively do their job, and the same often goes for the members of a team. How, then, can we decide when specialization is getting out of hand? How much specialization is too much?

Tett's take on this problem owes a lot to her training as an anthropologist, which she has put to brilliant use both in her work as a journalist for the *Financial Times* and in her previous book *Fool's Gold* (*TLS*, April 23, 2010), which explained the recent financial crisis from the point of view of the credit derivatives team at J. P. Morgan. She writes with great verve and exceptional clarity. The core of her new book is a series of case studies in which groups of professionals have either succeeded or failed to overcome the silo effect. Her accounts tend to involve narratives in which a single far-sighted individual struggles, successfully or unsuccessfully, according to the example chosen, against colleagues who are very good at their jobs but not very good at seeing beyond them. Thus Howard Stringer was appointed CEO of Sony in 2005 by those on the board who saw the need for a radically new vision at this once great company, but he stepped down in 2012, frustrated by his inability to break down the barriers between the rival product divisions. As one of his allies, Rob Wiesenthal, told reporters, "I have 35 different Sony devices at home. I have 35 battery chargers. That's all you need to know".

By contrast Brett Goldstein, a young start-up entrepreneur, was inspired by the events of 9/11 to join the Chicago police force where he pioneered the use of data-driven methods to manage the deployment of a task force that helped significantly to reduce homicide rates in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods. Other case studies recount similarly daunting challenges. Only Tett's Facebook case study is not couched in terms of a struggle ("nobody inside the company felt complacent"), though this, too, has its hero, a programmer called Jocelyn Goldfein who is challenged by the Facebook environment to look beyond the limitations of her geeky training, beginning with the famous "Boot camps" for new recruits that open her up to interactions with colleagues right across the company.

Tett's writing is excellent and every case study is gripping, though her quest for a good story sometimes leads her to some tunnel vision of her own. For example, her account of the blindness of the economics profession to the looming financial crisis in 2007–08 makes some excellent points but it is significantly distorted by her narrative frame. In Tett's telling, a lone Cassandra – Paul Tucker, the Bank of England insider who became Deputy Governor – tried repeatedly to draw his colleagues' attention to the dangers posed by certain obscure financial instruments, such as Collateralized Debt Obligations, and found himself frustrated by the dominance of economists who were incapable of looking beyond their narrow mathematical models at what was happening in the real world, and were thus convinced that the financial system was doing fine. Though this is not an unfair description of many economists, it is misleading in one important respect. Many did indeed foresee a crisis in the early 2000s, but they were mostly expecting a threat from quite different directions, the most common being a collapse in the US dollar as a result of global trade imbalances. A Google Scholar search turns up 243 books, articles and working papers with "global imbalances" in the title published between 2000 and 2007. The claim that the profession never anticipated the crisis is simply false. In fact, it anticipated crises too often and from too many directions for any of the many warnings to be entirely convincing, even perhaps to those who uttered them. This was not a new problem for economic forecasting: Paul Samuelson once wrote that the stock market had predicted nine of the previous five recessions. But a failure diagnosed in terms of a lone Cassandra is quite different from one involving a cacophony of rival Cassandras. So for all this book's persuasiveness it remains to be seen whether multiple and competing silo-busting initiatives really constitute a general solution to the predicament Tett describes.

Another example of where the narrative misses something important is in Tett's account of how Toby Cosgrove, appointed CEO of the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio in 2004, managed to revolutionize standards of medical care by organizing the clinic around institutes that dealt with anatomical and medical conditions ("Urological and Kidney Institute" or "Heart and Vascular Institute") rather than disciplinary specialities such as surgery and neurology. What Tett doesn't mention is that nearly a century ago something very similar happened in American manufacturing when several large firms, such as Dupont and General Motors, were reorganized around product divisions rather than around functional departments of engineers, accountants, salespeople and so on. Visionary managers such as Alfred Sloan at GM understood that people who share a discipline need to communicate with each other, and so do people who co-operate in a team to design, make and service a product. But Sloan also understood that while both forms of communication were important, the communication among teams was urgent in a way that communication among professional disciplines was not. Only if the sales force could

form the habit of rapidly communicating the concerns of customers to the designers and engineers would products respond to the exigencies of a newly prosperous and demanding American middle class.

The interesting story at Cleveland is not just about how Toby Cosgrove succeeded in silo-busting; he was a visionary but not an unprecedented one. What we are really left wanting to know is why the health care industry took nearly a century to reach the insights that Sloan and others pioneered in manufacturing in the 1920s. (Sadly, the academic profession is even further behind.) More recently, health care has been extremely slow to incorporate advances in information technology that firms elsewhere took on board two or three decades ago. So silo-busting is taking place within health care while happening only slowly and painfully between health care and other parts of modern life.

No one can do everything, and it would be unfair to reproach Tett with performing her narrative task too well, but we should be wary of entirely endorsing her closing paean to "six principles of anthropology" as a solution to the silo effect. Anthropology can build silos as well as undermine them. The principles are in any case rather bland and unexceptionable ("organizations need to think about pay and incentives", "information flows matter too"), and it is hard to imagine them really helping to discriminate between necessary and dangerous specialization. Gillian Tett's explanatory talent is admirable, as is her optimistic belief that a grounding in anthropology can help us, as Matthew Arnold wrote of Sophocles, to "see life steadily and see it whole". But the silo effect remains, for us as for the Buddha, far easier to diagnose in retrospect than to foresee or prevent.

Heat and death

JENNIE GAMLIN

Jason De León

THE LAND OF OPEN GRAVES

Living and dying on the migrant trail

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Migrant death is the theme of our day, and 2015 was emblematic for the massive increase in children, women and men who had risked their lives in the hope of escaping conflict, destruction and persecution in their homelands. According to the International Organization for Migration, more than 750,000 migrants had arrived in Europe by November last year, but an estimated 3,000 perished on their journey. These images of death have flooded our media, bringing an almost daily reminder of the catastrophe taking place on Europe's southern shores.

These are all preventable deaths, loss of life that can be avoided. Migrant deaths are not random accidents or natural disasters; they happen because states and governments make laws regarding the movement of people between nations that consign certain groups to the category of illegal. This fact means that people are only entitled to their full human rights – starting with the right to health and to life – when they are in a country where they have a legal right to remain. In *The Land of Open Graves*, Jason De León builds on this, and argues for the existence of a binary division between humans and non-humans. He discusses how the policy of Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) in the United States pushes "illegals" into the category of "aliens", through the enforcement of a border policy that is "designed to hurt people", a law which stipulates that, as migrants are forced to cross through increasingly hostile sections of desert, "violence will increase as effects of strategy are felt". An increase in deaths effectively becomes an indicator of the policy's success.

De León draws out a number of nuanced concepts and ideas relating to context and policy at the US–Mexican border. These provide the structure for the various forms of anthropological evidence discussed in *The Land of Open Graves*. His analysis pushes our understanding of how lives are lived and lost on the US–Mexican border to a new level. De León uses Giorgio Agamben's concept of a state of exception to define how the border zone has become "a physical and political location where an individual's rights and protections under law can be stripped away". This is a space where exceptional things happen: people disappear forever as their bodies are consumed by wild animals and weather; other bodies are recovered and never identified, listed only as "age unknown, country of origin unknown, cause of death undetermined (partial skeletal remains)".

To this space of exception, the hostile Sonoran desert that migrants cross to reach the US, he gives the name *hybrid collectif*. This is a space composed of various agents or *actants*, "sources of action that may be human or non human". The *actants* that become the focus of this book are the animals, weather, heat, cold, humans (people smugglers, border control and migrants themselves), and other elements that contrive to produce the "deterrence", or death, that US border control policy seeks. De León employs the idea of Necroviolence to describe how the *hybrid collectif* acts on people after their death, reducing bodies to dust, causing people to disappear without a trace. Using the resources of the "Undocumented Migration Project" at the University of Michigan, the author illustrates the effects of this violence experimentally, using the bodies of dead pigs. Necroviolence extends to the response to border deaths in the US, where the remains of more than 800 unidentified migrants are sealed in transparent plastic envelopes in medical examiners' offices waiting for the mothers, sisters, brothers, sons, daughters and fathers who will never find them.

In the second part of the book, De León describes, largely ethnographically, the reality of crossing the Sonoran desert into the US. In this section, named "El Camino", Memo and Lucho, two Mexican migrants, relate their personal histories of migration to the US, deportation back to Mexico, and the multiple attempts they then make to return to their families and lives in the US. Their narrative brings to life the theoretical ideas provided in the previous section, as the reader learns of the many hindrances to border crossing on the Mexican side – criminal gangs, smugglers and threats, extreme economic hardship – as well as the obstacle course that is the *hybrid collectif*. De León installs himself in the Mexican border town of Nogales and manages to wangle temporary lodgings at the Juan Bosco migrant hostel, from where he describes with intricate detail the sinister nature of these places of transit. The physical structure and economy of Nogales revolves entirely around the business of illegal border crossing. At this last port of call, before embarking on a life-threatening, but at the same time potentially dream-fulfilling journey, migrants invest their remaining pesos in camouflage gear and black water bottles, Bibles and pictures of the Virgin of Guadalupe, as well as the obligatory provisions needed to survive several days in the desert.

Human remains in body bags in the morgue of the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, Tucson, Arizona, December 9, 2014

It is not illegal to leave Mexico via the desert, and reaching "the line", often marked only with a barbed wire fence or gate, is relatively unchallenging. It is the hike lasting several days through the *hybrid collectif* on the US side of the border in order to reach civilization and travel onwards, that costs hundreds of migrants their lives every year. Border-crossers inevitably leave Mexico poorly prepared. It is impossible to carry all the water they will need for the trip, and migrants take no map or compass since, if they are caught by border control with these items, they are labelled smugglers and face "real jail time". Small details such as these increase the lethality of the PTD policy. The natural environment that poses such a massive risk to human lives has become a "cover for structural violence". In the three chapters that make up "El Camino", the reader is transported into this place where preventing illegal immigration into the US is "outsourced to animals, nature and technology". Sub-zero temperatures and searing heat with no shade, rattlesnakes, wild boar and vultures, unrelenting mountainous terrain, risk of apprehension by border patrol, the absolute lack of drinking water sources and the near-inevitability of losing one's way, all contrive to ensure that only a small proportion of would-be "illegals" actually make it to their destination. Like Memo and Lucho, who finally make it on their sixth attempt, 92–98 per cent will try again and again until they succeed – or die.

In the final part, "Perilous Terrain", we learn about the lives and families of Maricela and José, Ecuadorian migrants who are among the thousands of border-crossers who have died in their attempt to reach the US. These final chapters make uncomfortable reading, as we know from the outset that the migrants' journeys will end in death, yet De León somehow manages to compose the facts and interview data so that the reader hopes for a different ending. *The Land of Open Graves* is illustrated throughout by the photographer Michael Wells, and this section includes a shocking image of Maricela as she was found by the author and his team from the Undocumented Migration Project. "Her position lying face down, exposed on the side of a steep hill, suggests that her last movements were a painful crawl. She collapsed mid hike. To be left on the trail like this likely means that she died alone out here."

De León only makes a very brief mention of the fact that Mexico–US border crossings are now actually at one of their lowest historical levels. He is at pains to point out that Prevention Through Deterrence will not succeed in removing the motivation for risking one's life in the hope of achieving a dream, yet recent reports suggest that this is exactly what is happening. The principal deterrent may not be the *hybrid collectif*, however, but the alarming and lethal threat of criminal violence. Along the 2,000-mile border, drug-trafficking is entwined with people-smuggling, with police, government officials and even bus drivers taking part. According to press reports, rival factions of the Sinaloa drug cartel are fighting for "control" of the people-smuggling business. In the Mexican border town of Altar, the fact that the Mafia has become too greedy, charging extortionate fees, using too much violence and producing too many migrant deaths is discussed openly. This other form of structural violence is indeed acting as a deterrent to those even attempting border crossings.

The Land of Open Graves is hard to put down. Its violent and vivid content draws you into a reality that we should all know about, and the author's interpretation provides a political and theoretical perspective that challenges conventional beliefs about undocumented migration.