

Judging 2003's Ideas: The Most Overrated and Underrated

At the end of each year, Arts & Ideas asks a handful of writers, scholars and other opinionated people to identify the year's most underrated and overrated ideas.

Contributors may choose any subject they please, from designer chocolate to extreme makeovers, but most pick Big Concepts like religion, money or politics.

If you find yourself outraged by the suggestion that monotheism is overrated or baffled by the possibility that hip-hop politics is underrated, please send your own candidates to ideas@nytimes.com.

Emily Eakin and Felicia R. Lee compiled the responses.

OVERRATED

Beauty

An essential component of beauty is being undermined and will soon be practically eliminated, and that is scarcity. Botox is to cosmetics what cut-and-paste software is to music production. Whatever was precious five minutes ago becomes overbearingly omnipresent five minutes from now. The quest for beauty coupled with technological proficiency undermines the relative value of each beautiful invention. Find beauty in nature, but when it comes to culture, it's time to forget beauty. It will soon be nothing more than another word for nostalgia.

Jaron Lanier, a computer scientist, composer and virtual reality pioneer.

Repeal of the Estate Tax

We pay taxes only because the alternative is worse: no taxes, no government; no government, no army. Among our myriad taxes, none is as efficient and painless as the estate tax. It's like a lawyer's contingency fee: injured parties who couldn't otherwise afford legal access can try to recover damages because lawyers are willing to forgo their fees unless they win. Similarly, the estate tax lets us finance valuable public services with a surcharge that kicks in only if we end up among the wealthiest 1 percent. It also permits lower income-tax rates, encouraging effort and investment. It stimulates charitable giving, reducing the need for tax-financed public services. And a tax levied after death is surely less unpleasant than one collected from the living.

But if the estate tax is so great, why do 70 percent of surveyed voters favor the Bush administration's efforts to repeal it permanently? Perhaps this tax would fare better if pollsters began with a question like this: "If the estate tax were repealed, which other taxes should be increased, or which government services should be eliminated, to make up for the lost revenue?"

Robert H. Frank, professor of economics at Cornell University and author of the forthcoming book "What Price the Moral High Ground?"

Monotheism

In their most extreme forms, monotheistic religions are deeply intolerant. If there is only one right way of doing things, every other way is wrong. If we are good, others are evil. By contrast, the ancient Greeks and Romans welcomed new gods into their pantheon and worshiped them alongside the old. They had no crusades or jihads. The Roman authorities threw Christians to the lions because they mistook the early Christians' intolerance for seditiousness. They did not seek to kill them because they rejected the Christians' God.

Mary Lefkowitz, author of "Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn From Myths."

Rapper Beefs

Long an aspect of hip-hop, battles between M.C.'s this year took on a marketing twist, as record labels and artists consciously tried to cash in on hip-hop drama. Beef was repackaged and sold to hip-hop consumers both in the form of a film bearing the name as well as in more transparent ways. The face-off between Ja Rule and 50 Cent culminated with an MTV lovefest featuring Ja Rule and Louis Farrakhan (with a conspicuously absent 50 Cent) on the eve of Ja Rule's album release. The enigmatic rapper Benzino, a.k.a. Raymond Scott, who this year emerged as co-founder of the hip-hop bible *The Source*, kept alive a yearlong war of words with the white rapper Eminem by accusing him of stealing sales from black rappers. Unfortunately for reporters frantically in search of that special hip-hop moment to rival the East Coast-West Coast war of the 1990's, the beefs of 2003 came up short.

Bakari Kitwana, author of "The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture."

Public Intellectuals

Intellectuals and professors who write for a general audience are always valuable, but the idea of the "public intellectual" as a specific role is now well past its sell-by date. Being a public intellectual has degenerated from a calling to a career. Aspiring public intellectuals can now get a Ph.D. to prepare them for this academic market niche, and some enterprising professors have already added the term "public intellectual" to Web sites. In theory, the public intellectual could address any subject, even — imagine! — teaching and higher education; but public intellectual purists reserve the title for social critics who take an exclusively oppositional stance to political policies in general, and American foreign policy in particular. The public intellectuals' lack of accountability — no bucks stop at their desks — and their remoteness from the world of difficult, flawed, risky, but necessary decision-making (the "tenured gadfly," as Richard Posner says in his updated

"Public Intellectuals," is an oxymoron), makes their critical posture seem self-indulgent despite its virtue. Anybody can complain, blog and find fault; the real intellectual might try to solve problems.

Elaine Showalter, professor of English emerita at Princeton University.

America

What Americans overrate most is — America. They imagine that they live in the most democratic nation on earth, but in the United States, to a far greater extent than in many other democracies, electorates are shamelessly gerrymandered, the voting system squeezes out minor parties, Wyoming has as many senators as California, and money gives the rich a wildly disproportionate share of power and influence.

Americans think they are the freest people on earth, but the president keeps American citizens in detention for nearly two years without even allowing them to talk to a lawyer, let alone putting them on trial. And no one in America has the freedom of the Dutch to choose how they die, should they become incurably ill.

Americans also favor "American pre-eminence" — the Hobbesian view that the United States ought to rule the world, simply because it has the military muscle to do so.

Peter Singer, professor of bioethics at Princeton University.

Straussianism

Last spring it suddenly became fashionable to assign blame (or, if you prefer, credit) for the Iraq invasion to the University of Chicago political theorist Leo Strauss. A bevy of articles explicated Strauss ideas (often inaccurately) and traced his influence among neoconservative policymakers — including Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, a former student of his, who was deemed (again inaccurately) the architect of the invasion.

In fact, Strauss wasn't mainly concerned with geopolitics; his cult following stemmed from his frankly elitist brand of conservatism, which prized the study of classical philosophy and what he called an esoteric tradition of writing and teaching. More important, the key movers behind the war were not intellectuals but thoroughgoing political animals named Donald H. Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and George W. Bush.

David Greenberg, author of "Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image."

Capitalism

When Sitting Bull toured with Buffalo Bill's Wild West circus, he gave his earnings to the street urchins he met, appalled that a society that could produce such wealth could permit such poverty. He commented that white men were good at production but bad at

distribution, a criticism of capitalism that's still trenchant. In the wealthiest society the world has ever seen, education, health care and housing are deteriorating into speculative commodities out of reach for many, and the "economic recovery" — of what? for whom? — is jobless. Capitalism and democracy are sometimes equated, but you only have to look at the Bush administration, with its passion for unfettered corporate privilege and loathing for civil liberties and public participation, to get over that fairy tale. Happily, it's not overrated everywhere; Latin Americans are looking for more humane models, from Argentines' surviving the collapse of their model neoliberal economy by creating community alternatives to Bolivians' ousting a president who tried to sell off the nation's natural gas, to the landless people's movement in Brazil.

Rebecca Solnit, author of "River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West."

Psychology

Psychologists and psychiatrists can do wonderful things. But these days you would think that there is no such thing as normal, thanks to the hand-in-glove working of the drug and insurance companies with the American Psychiatric Association, which publishes the handbook of 374 "mental illnesses." If you are still grieving a loved one's death two months later, you fit the category of "major depressive disorder." Insurance companies want you quickly fixed, drug companies have a pill for every occasion, and friends and family are too overworked to provide the irreplaceable support for grief that is present in other countries. We are damaging the nature of friendship, teaching people that they need experts to treat them for everything.

Paula J. Caplan, Ph.D., author of 12 books about mental health and social issues, editor of the forthcoming "Bias in Psychiatric Diagnosis."

Metaphors

Metaphors have become the verbal equivalent of grade inflation. You are a goddess! Everyone is a hero! (Thanks to Joseph Campbell for that one). Gods were immortal, ageless and powerful; heroes were extraordinary. No ancient person would have made that mistake. There was only one Hercules.

Mary Lefkowitz, author of "Greek Gods, Human Lives."

UNDERRATED

Curatorial Culture

In all the hype over Apple Computer's online music store, one fascinating new feature included in the latest version was strangely overlooked: the celebrity playlist. The digital age version of the venerable mix tape, playlists have been a central selling point of the MP3 music revolution, since creating a brand-new mix of your favorite tunes is now as

easy as dragging files into a folder on your desktop. Apple's new Celebrity Playlist area in its store features collections of music assembled — with liner notes — by famous musicians: Sting, Ben Folds, Wynton Marsalis and many others.

What's potentially revolutionary here is the ability to buy a compilation of music handpicked by another individual, as opposed to the official compilations released by record labels. No doubt Apple will soon offer a feature that enables ordinary music fans to create public playlists engineered around every imaginable theme (the post-breakup collection, the happy Nick Drake songs, the underappreciated recordings of Miles Davis) and then sell those compilations via the online store. Historically, the world of commercial music has been divided between musicians and listeners, but there's long been a mostly unrewarded group in the middle: people with great taste in music — the ones who made that brilliant mix for you in college that you're still listening to. They're curators not creators, brilliant at assembling new combinations of songs rather than generating them from scratch.

Steven Johnson, author of the forthcoming "Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life."

Legacy Admissions

Senator Ted Kennedy has introduced legislation to force colleges to disclose the number of places awarded to children of alumni. The initiative has been hailed as a blow for meritocracy against inherited privilege, and also as a blow against racism, since most beneficiaries of legacy admissions are white. Many people want to abolish legacies altogether, but while that sounds like the principled thing to do, our moral commitment to meritocracy should not require us to ignore the human side of institutions.

A recent editorial in The New York Observer stated that while most colleges reserve about 12 percent of their places for legacies, they typically raise 90 percent of their outside funds from alumni, much of which goes into scholarships. Abolishing such preferences therefore threatens to diminish the quality of higher education while sharply raising its cost. That would hurt the same minority and lower-income students whom reformers like Senator Kennedy are trying to help.

While legacy preferences have mainly benefited whites, it seems unfair to deny minorities the opportunity to pass on social capital to their children just when they have managed to gain access to this privileged sphere. After all, institutionalized nepotism has often been the means by which excluded groups have lifted themselves out of poverty.

Adam Bellow, executive editor at large for Doubleday and author of "In Praise of Nepotism."

Thomas Jefferson

Recently, Thomas Jefferson has been viciously maligned in ways normally reserved only for modern American presidents and liberals. Jefferson-bashing historians criticize Thomas Jefferson for having a secret affair with a slave, slight his authorship of the Declaration of Independence, compare him badly with John Adams (who mistrusted democracy and signed the Alien and Sedition Acts) and call Jefferson the forerunner of Pol Pot. A prominent new book disparages him as a callous pro-slavery politician, and celebrates, as the anti-Jefferson, one Timothy Pickering — a raving antidemocratic plotter with a dubious record on slavery.

Eventually, critics will catch up with these writers' distortions and basic factual errors. Historians will retrieve Abraham Lincoln's judgment that "the principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society."

Sean Wilentz, professor of history at Princeton University.

Link Between Money and Happiness

In conferences around the globe this year, psychologists reported that measures of human happiness scarcely change when national income grows. Citing this finding, many social critics now insist that income growth no longer promotes well-being.

Experience suggests otherwise. Years ago, when I was a graduate student with two children in diapers, my wife called in distress to report that our 10-year-old clothes dryer had died. That evening I scanned the classified ads, made numerous calls and the next day drove out to inspect several machines. After haggling with the owner of a five-year-old Kenmore, I wrote a check we could barely cover. I drove a friend's truck across town to pick it up, then drove 25 miles to take the old machine to the dump. Four days and numerous hardware store visits later, we again had a working dryer.

I now earn many times what I did then. Recently my wife called to say that another dryer had died. "Call Werninck's," I suggested. When I got home that evening, the old machine was gone and a new one already up and running. Money doesn't guarantee happiness. But having enough can make life a lot less stressful.

Robert H. Frank, professor of economics at Cornell University and author of the forthcoming "What Price the Moral High Ground? Ethical Dilemmas in Competitive Environments."

Hip-Hop Politics

Countless local hip-hop activist groups around the country are on the cutting edge of grass-roots activism and politics that matter most to the hip-hop generation. Organizations like the San Francisco-based Ella Baker Center for Human Rights; the 21st Century Leadership Movement, based in Selma, Ala.; and the Hip-Hop Political Action Committee in Chicago have been in the trenches laying the groundwork for organizing the hip-hop generation into a concrete voting bloc. Four signs point to their growing

influence: Active Element Foundation's publication of the "Future 500," which documents grass-roots youth activists nationwide; presidential candidates arming themselves with hip-hop to reach out to young voters; the much-discussed National Hip-Hop Political Convention in the works for June 2004; and the often-overnight platinum sales of hip-hop CD's that, once channeled into votes, will mean the end of politics as usual.

Bakari Kitwana, author of "The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture."

Leisure

We are tethered to our e-mail, day and night. We are rarely out of cell phone range. Long working hours extend into evenings and weekends. Most of us feel lucky to love our work, but we put few limits on it. Less fortunate Americans labor long days to compensate for laid-off co-workers or simply to pay the bills. Studies reveal that Americans do an average of 350 hours (the equivalent of almost nine 40-hour weeks) more work each year than Europeans, and two-thirds fail to sleep eight hours a night. Stress-induced illnesses are rampant. Even when we're not working, we "work out" or watch reality TV. We have turned our homework- and activity-burdened older children and ourselves into workaholics, multitasking 24/7. What are we trying to prove?

Lizabeth Cohen, professor of history at Harvard University and author of "A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America."

Public transportation

Four of the best ideas in the area of public transportation are the E-Z Pass, the Eurostar Chunnel train, the congestion charge for city drivers and the London taxi. Unfortunately, the only American one is still underutilized.

Elaine Showalter, professor of English emerita, Princeton University.

Status

What people really seem to want most is a better place in the pecking order. Status would appear to be a sad but fundamental legacy of our evolutionary origins. While it's a shame people care so much about an invisible and potentially destructive prize, there is one wonderful thing about status. It can be manufactured at low cost. The genius of America has always been the presence of unlimited distinct tracks to success. An ambitious person might become an executive or a garage inventor or a fitness guru. The benefit is that having endless overlaid pecking orders reduces the sting of being left out of any particular pecking order. When executives insist on making thousands of times more money than workers in order to feel rewarded, the peculiar American social contract is undermined. Both domestically and internationally, we're collectively trending toward

mass humiliation of opponents. Why not try to make as many reasonable people as happy as possible when it costs so little?

Jaron Lanier, a computer scientist and composer and virtual-reality pioneer.

The Women's Movement

Despite pandemic phobia about the word "feminist," a movement as multifaceted as a jewel is reflected in ubiquitous (shoestring-budgeted) services for abused women; increased attention to the complexity of sexism and its interactions with race, class and sexual orientation; and the energy of young Third Wave feminists. Feminists in the 1970's hardly dared to dream that principles like equal pay and recognition of poverty and elder abuse as problems especially affecting women would be taken as givens, where formerly they were dismissed as signs of paranoid, man-hating women.

Paula J. Caplan, Ph.D., author of 12 books about mental health and social issues, including "They Say You're Crazy: How the World's Most Powerful Psychiatrists Decide Who's Normal."

Honesty

To say that honesty is a virtue often underrated in political life is, I realize, like pointing out that the sun rises in the east. But never have the dangers, costs and consequences of concealing or distorting the truth seemed quite so alarming as they have this past year.

The demand for truthful answers to the most essential questions (Did our administration really believe that Iraq was harboring weapons of mass destruction? Will the new prescription-drug plan actually benefit the elderly?) is more and more often dismissed as "partisan" or, worse, "unpatriotic."

Forthrightness and integrity are being made to seem naïve and weak, the moral province of losers, pointless scruples inconsistent with the more manly attributes required to wage war on terror. But what could be more terrifying than the prospect of a society that no longer has the desire, the will, the energy or the ability to distinguish between the truth and the spin that our leaders would prefer us to believe?

Francine Prose, novelist, and the author of "The Lives of the Muses."