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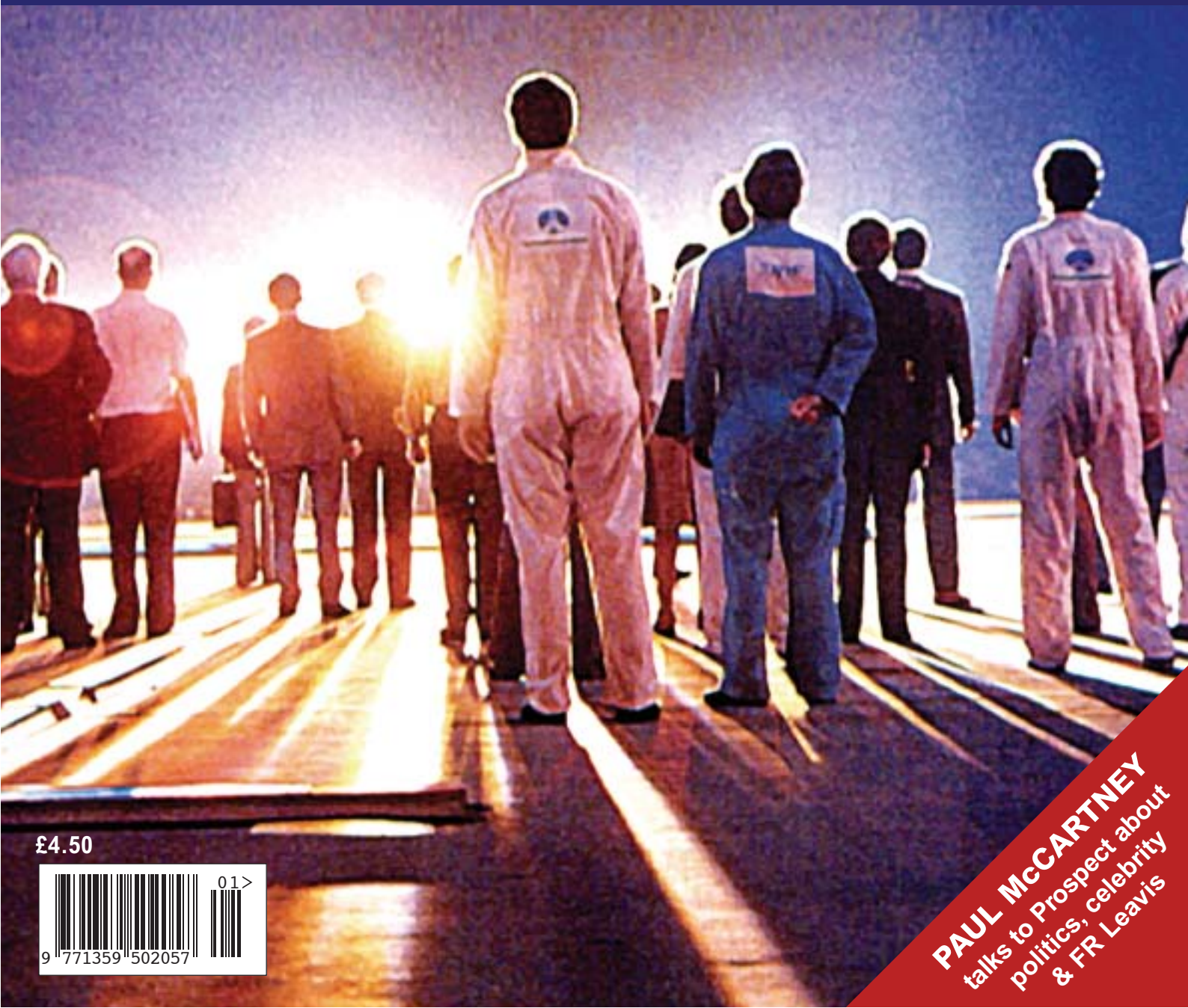
WHAT COMES NEXT? How to reinvent globalisation

By Robert Skidelsky

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talks to Prospect about
politics, celebrity
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What's the big idea?

Crowdsourcing, nudging and mass collaborating jostled eagerly. But was 2008 a vintage year for ideas books? It was a mixed bag, argues James Harkin—and perhaps not serious enough

For one night in November, fans of *The Lion King* were kept out of London's west end. Instead, the hip and attractive gathered to pay homage to a skinny man with eccentric hair: Malcolm Gladwell, the Lion King of idea-entrepreneurs.

Gladwell, the bestselling author of *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*, had flown in from New York to talk about his latest book, *Outliers*. The book debunks the idea of genius, by arguing that circumstances and culture are at least as important as talent in determining who succeeds.

Gladwell's thesis is unlikely to trouble the Nobel committee, but his asides and enthusiasm can captivate an audience. And quite a few smart academics are now following his lead. Before *Outliers* hit the shops in November, *Nudge* had easily been 2008's noisiest ideas book (reflected in its authors' podium finish in *Prospect's* public intellectuals contest; see p23). Sunstein and Thaler's breezy attempt to move their behavioural economists' tanks onto Gladwell's social psychological lawn shows how discrete encouragements and understanding human foibles can change our behaviour. It was an instant hit amongst think tankers and new Tories alike.

But if Gladwell was this year's icon and *Nudge* its most successful book, "mass collaboration" was certainly the buzz idea. Another quasi-academic, American media guru Clay Shirky, got in first in February with *Here Comes Everybody*—an exposé of how internet-based collaboration changes everything from encyclopedias to campaigns against paedophilic priests. Hot on his heels came Dan Tapscott's *Wikinomics* and Charlie Leadbeater's *We Think*. Journalist Jeff Howe, meanwhile, took the prize for the year's most irritating neologism. His *Crowdsourcing* owed more than a small debt to James Surowiecki's argument (in 2004's *The Wisdom of Crowds*) that groups make better decisions than experts. "Given the right conditions," Howe says, "the crowd will almost always out-perform any number of employees."



Tech books tend to dominate these lists, but the nerds didn't have it all their own way. Greenness was big too, especially with Thomas Friedman's *Hot, Flat and Crowded*, a more urgent book than its wildly successful predecessor. It argues that environmental fatalism sets back the cause of planet-saving, while muscular enviro-capitalism can reboot America's economy. That the book would linger atop the bestseller lists wasn't in doubt.

The trend for *Freakonomics*-influenced pop economics tracts finally tanked, only to be replaced by those about economics proper. The credit crunch favoured farsighted number crunchers, prime among them Yale's Robert Shiller, whose *The Subprime Solution* came close to predicting the financial crisis. An alternative take on

economics was offered by Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*, an ambitious attempt to follow up her smash *No Logo* by jamming together everything from Milton Friedman to CIA interrogation and Hurricane Katrina. The result was messy, but lefty readers still bought it in droves.

And foreign affairs? No single author had the impact of a Fukuyama or Huntington. But a number of globalisation books captured the mood. Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World* and Parag Mehta's *The Second World*, in particular, acted as neat companion pieces on the wider impact of US relative decline. Each, in turn, could easily be read alongside any of 2008's tide of China books.

"Obama books" formed another influential category—those titles burnished by association with the all-conquering Democratic nominee. *The Audacity of Hope* was, of course, written back in 2006 by the man himself. But Barack's reading list (and thus everyone else's) also included Larry Bartels's economic study *Unequal Democracy* and Doris Kearns Goodwin's biography of Lincoln, *Team of Rivals*.

Finally, we must acknowledge the year's most interesting trend: the book that wasn't. Or, rather, that isn't yet. Chris Anderson of *Wired* magazine will publish *Free* next year. But the lack of an actual book did little to stop the extracting, blogging and theory-refining that now precedes an ideas bestseller. Anderson may count himself lucky to have trousered the plaudits early; his big idea (that companies should give things away) seems unlikely to survive a credit crunch steamrollering.

A vintage year? Not quite. Earlier on, nudging and crowd-sourcing seemed right for the time. Now, against a gloomy backdrop, these trendier notions are a touch too lightweight. Next year expect a return to seriousness—the race to write the definitive crash book starts now. But 2008 was by no means a disaster. And those who sneer at the new cadre of idea entrepreneurs would do well to reflect that they tempt the average reader away from celebrity biographies and cookbooks. That, surely, is a nudge in the right direction even outliers can get behind.

James Harkin's book *Cyburbia* will be published in February by Little, Brown