

LIQUID RULES: THE DELIGHTFUL AND DANGEROUS SUBSTANCES THAT FLOW THROUGH OUR LIVES

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Liquid Rules, like most good books in its genre, explains in an interesting way why certain things are the way they are. This is popularized science, and such books tend to fall into one of two categories, straight science or politicized science. I could have, if I had wanted to read the latter on vacation, picked instead *The Uninhabitable Earth*, a recent screed on global warming by David Wallace-Wells. Fortunately, however, I chose wisely, and therefore learned a few things while enjoying myself, instead of choking on the dry and boring leftovers of global warming alarmism.

The frame of *Liquid Rules* is of a London to San Francisco flight, during which the author, Mark Miodownik (a materials scientist), meditates on the various liquids with which he comes into contact. Expertly and seamlessly worked into each discussion is the science behind liquids. Miodownik begins, as the plane takes off, with explosive liquids, not so much of the terrorist kind but of the fuel kind, focusing on kerosene (which, technically, is not explosive). Then, as he tries to relax, intoxicating liquids, where he confirms what I've tended to believe, that most wine appreciation is essentially a fraud, as shown by among other things that experts given white wine dyed red almost uniformly describe it with the nomenclature they use only for red wines. Next comes water. We also get glues; paints; expectorated bodily fluids such as saliva and mucus; cleaning fluids; coolants; ink; clouds; and magma. All in all, a fascinating brief tour.

Miodownik manages to get his facts right nearly one hundred percent of the time, a rare feat for popularized writing, which for some reason seems to attract basic errors like flies to honey, even though you'd think editors would find it easier to fact check than technical writing. And I certainly learned a wide variety of interesting facts, some about liquids, some only indirectly related. For example, the master nurse Florence Nightingale was not only a crusader for sanitation in military hospitals in the Crimean War; she was also a non-trivial mathematician, and, more importantly, the inventor of new graphical means of presenting

data, including a type of pie chart. (She is not to blame for PowerPoint.) Beyond mere interesting facts, two major thoughts occurred to me on reading this book, one about the history of science, the other about airplane service. They are grumpy and only tangentially related to the book, I warn you.

Ruminating on ink, Miodownik ascribes the invention of the fountain pen to engineers employed by “the caliph of the Maghreb . . . in the year 974.” Of itself, this is of only passing interest, but if examined closely, it is emblematic of the political corruption of the history of science. One part of that corruption is that false claims for Islamic scientific superiority completely pervade popular writing about science history, due to an unceasing global campaign of propaganda by Muslim apologists. If you read any Wikipedia article about any scientific invention prior to A.D. 1800 or so, for example, you are nearly certain to be treated to a lengthy discourse, in a special section, about how Muslims, or those living under Muslim rule, invented the object or process in question. Books are not much better, though the publishing process sometimes culls out the most obvious falsehoods.

This is not terribly surprising; it is the normal approach for all groups with a severe inferiority complex. The Soviets and the East Germans, for example, used to claim that Communists invented everything, from fire to the telephone. But that had much less impact on public knowledge, because there was no pressure in the West to believe such silly things, and it was before the internet and Wikipedia, when facts were always filtered through professional editors rather than propagated directly to the masses by bored, unemployed ideologues who cannot be made responsible for errors or lies. Back then, you had to read *Pravda*, or visit an East Bloc museum, to even hear the claims. Today, though, it’s not just Muslims pushing self-puffery, because Muslims are an approved victim group in the liturgy of intersectionality. And lifting them out of oppression requires, by all people who are woke, exaggerating or manufacturing historical contributions for the chosen groups, including Muslims. We are doubtless only a year or two away from Muslim History Month, if any free months can be found. You heard it here first.

So presumably Wikipedia is from where Miodownik got this obscure tidbit on a Fatimid caliph’s supposed role in inventing the fountain pen. But if examined closely, one can see how the claim is totally false, and

how such false claims are dealt into common knowledge. A fountain pen is a pen with a reservoir that applies ink to the page by capillary action, a difficult technical task. Although he does say he thinks that “this seems unlikely,” due to its difficulty, Miodownik also states as fact that the caliph “was presented with the first fountain pen recorded in history.” The only source for this appears to be an article from 1981 in the *Journal of Semitic Studies*, entitled “A Medieval Islamic Prototype of the Fountain Pen?” Wikipedia also summarizes the takeaway of the article as the caliph “was provided” such a pen. But the article actually only reports that the caliph asked for a pen with a reservoir, that could be held upside down, and when told this was not possible, replied “It is possible if God so wills.” There is no suggestion such a pen was really made, or even developed in theory, and given that it was only in the nineteenth century that such a pen was created, after innumerable failures (including by Leonardo da Vinci), the chances are pretty clearly zero that it was. Yet we are expected to swallow this, and thousands of other similarly dubious claims, as evidence that supposedly oppressed groups really are responsible for modern science and the benefits of the modern world, instead of hated straight white males. Such propaganda is wholesaled across our entire society, in an attempt to, for a wide variety of supposedly oppressed groups, either claim accomplishments that they did not make, or exaggerate or manufacture the importance of unimportant accomplishments.

True, inventors in Islamic societies for a few hundred years made a variety of second-order scientific discoveries, some of which were used as building blocks by later, far more successful, Western scientists. To call those, as they always are, “Muslim inventions” is also propaganda; it ignores that many or most inventions in the Golden Age of Islam were actually done by Christians or Jews, since Islam always had a tense relationship with science. (It also gives its propaganda nature away by that Western discoveries are not called “Christian inventions.”) By itself, how the fountain pen was invented is not very important. But this little propaganda vignette illustrates the corruption of reality by political ideology. Tens of millions of people over the past several years, since this project really got going, have had implanted in their brains the delusional idea that Islam, or for that matter any culture other than the West, had a great deal to do with modern science. Is this the worst

thing ever? I suppose not, but it's just another example of the rank stupidity of the present. Indulging fantasies about the past is no way to make the future flourish.

Let's switch focus to a different oppressed group: airline passengers. Since Miodownik is on an airline flight, in economy class, he notes several times in passing the various accompanying discomforts, chief among them awful service. He discusses the tea and coffee he is offered, by a flight attendant "who looked at me with a combination of boredom and impatience." Bingo. I've been flying for thirty years now, and I never cease to be amazed at how the abysmal service of flight attendants every year manages to plumb new depths. But why is this?

Bad service, meaning incompetent, rude, or nonexistent, is a different complaint from the general discomfort of flying, where we are all subjected to security theater and are packed into ever smaller seats with ever fewer amenities. That is a function of cost, and the simple fact is that most people demand incompatible ends—they want the cheapest possible flights, and they then complain when they are offered the cheapest possible way of getting them somewhere. Moreover, the airlines, due to the power of big data and algorithms, have the upper hand, able for the first time in many decades to consistently extract profits (aided hugely by the failure of United States regulators to forbid anti-competitive consolidation), by slicing and dicing the pricing of flights and amenities. But that is not why service by flight attendants is bad.

Flight attendants today do almost no actual work. They provide nearly zero service even on the longest flights. We can all attest to this, or at least economy class flyers can. I was on a fourteen-hour flight last year, and a few hours after takeoff, small bottles of water were offered. When I declined, I was admonished in no uncertain terms that the offer would not be repeated, so I had better take it; the tone made clear I was not to ask later, either. When yesterday I flew on a three-hour flight, the four economy-class flight attendants relaxed, reading books and using iPads, in the very back of the plane (except for one in first class)—and drew a thick, opaque curtain between themselves and the passengers so they would not be bothered. They only appeared in the aisles twice: once to throw crackers at us, and once right before landing to flog credit cards to a captive audience.

Oh, sure, there are occasional excellent flight attendants who go above and beyond the unbelievably minimal service requirements set by the airlines. My family had one on a flight five or six years ago. Not since then, though. And the exception proves the rule. Supposedly Southwest flight attendants are better, though in my limited experience they don't actually provide service, they're just somewhat more pleasant.

The natural evolution of this would be to have fewer flight attendants. From the airlines' perspective, a lot of money could be saved by not paying people to do nothing. But FAA regulations (14 CFR § 121.391) require a set number of flight attendants, and the required number of flight attendants has not changed since 1965. The FAA's theory is that flight attendants are there for the passengers' safety. From the FAA's perspective, this is true. But from the perspective of both the airlines and the passengers, it is not true, since flight attendants have always had the dual, independent, roles of service and safety. In practice, the former role is vastly more important, given that safety incidents in which flight attendants are relevant are vanishingly few.

If anyone's safety is important to attendants, it is theirs—witness their rage in 2013 when their union howled down the FAA's desire to allow short pocketknives on flights again—and then in 2017 demanded, and got, a federal law forbidding the FAA from ever permitting such a thing, openly celebrating their victory over the infamous “knife lobby.” Heaven forbid that flight attendants take any risk, no matter how small, when the costs can instead be pushed off onto passengers! And on the very few times I've seen a call button pressed in the past ten years, the barely restrained anger of the flight attendant at being summoned like a servant by someone she regards as a peon, when she finally shows up, is always a sight to behold. Along similar lines, on most flights the “fasten seat belts” sign is on for seventy or more percent of the flight, not for safety reasons, but to discourage movement that might inconvenience the attendants (and also to limit possible liability for the airlines, in the very unlikely event of enough unexpected turbulence to injure unsecured passengers). Twenty years ago, the norm was to turn off the sign during the middle phase of ascent, and keep it off ninety-eight percent of the time. It certainly suits flight attendants' hauteur to claim their primary role is safety. But in a free economic system, now that on any flight less than five hours there is essentially zero service, the airlines, given they

cannot trim the number of attendants, would instead require them to provide service, so as to achieve customer satisfaction. But they don't. Why? As far as I can tell, this is largely a function of unions, and also of anti-discrimination laws.

The union has to exercise its power in some way. It can't negotiate on keeping its members' jobs, because they aren't under any threat. They could negotiate on pay, but as with most unions, that is not their primary goal, or at least it does not appear to be. Their primary goal seems to be to allow flight attendants to choose flight assignments based on seniority and to make those assignments as easy as possible. This means that the most elderly, and widest, grim battleaxes serve on the plum long-haul flights, where service would be most necessary, but where the attendants can instead run their eBay stores from the back of the plane while relaxing (something I have personally witnessed).

In a brief search, I quickly turned up a 2016 *Washington Post* article, which describes what else the unions are now doing for their members. "The flight attendants union has been pushing for some time now for federal legislation that would require airlines to give them the same minimum 10 hours rest between flights that pilots must receive." Yup, really. Now those who serve us coffee and tea (rarely and badly) need more rest. Their rationale? " 'Since Sept. 11, we became the last line of defense in aviation security,' said Sara Nelson, a United Airlines flight attendant who became international president of The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO, in June 2014. 'Flight attendants handle threats and security threats all the time that many passengers don't even know about.' " Sure they do. Right after they finish shipping their latest eBay purchase. The reality is that flight attendants have nothing to do with security. They know as well as we do that if they were to dare to, for example, point out a suspicious-looking Muslim individual, the only type of individual likely to attack a United States plane, they would be severely punished both by their employer and the press, and pilloried in social media. And if there were any fighting to be done, it wouldn't be done by the flight attendants, but by male passengers on the flight capable of fighting.

What would a rational system look like? Well, it might look like the 1960s and 1970s, where young unmarried women could see the world and find a husband by becoming flight attendants. If you were ugly, fat,

or old, no need to apply. This system has a long pedigree; it was used by Fred Harvey in the creation of his chain of Western restaurants, where the servers were the famous Harvey Girls. For many international airlines, this is still the case. But for United States carriers, and others in the same civilizational dead end such as British Airways and Qantas, age- and sex-discrimination rules prevent this today. (I don't think there should be any such rules; I would only have the government ban private discrimination in employment against African Americans—no other group.) Of course, given the caliber of today's passengers, that system probably wouldn't work today anyway. I have not flown on any of the international airlines that maintain the old system, like Cathay Pacific, but presumably they are higher priced, and therefore attract a different clientele. Surveying the average United States airline flight down the middle aisle is similar to surveying the average Walmart aisle—it does not show a lot of high-quality marriage material for a young woman. Which society-wide lack of marriage material, along with the degradation brought by feminism and a host of related, *Hillbilly Elegy*-type problems, is a big part of why marriage and birth rates are in the basement.

I'm not sure if the old marriage-market system, for flight attendants and other forms of primarily female employment, is a good one, or the best one. It certainly wouldn't work in isolation; such things are part of an organic societal whole. The system is of interest, though, as I continue to evaluate what society should look like, instead of what we are told by the Left society should look like, since soon enough their project is going to come to an end, and something is going to replace it. A marriage market seems like a small thing, but relations among the sexes are core to any society, and they need to be based on reality, recognizing different needs and goals, rather than on a false equivalency.

One possible objection is that such a setup oppresses women; we are often pointed to the television series *Mad Men* as demonstration of how women were oppressed in the 1960s and 1970s. I wasn't around then, so I don't know, but we should keep in mind that like all entertainment media today, including such things as computer games, *Mad Men* is not just entertainment, but also skillful leftist propaganda, in this case coated with a thick layer of apparent realism to give it verisimilitude. As with most stories of oppression (the sole exception being African Americans), the idea that women have been systematically oppressed

by men throughout history, at least for the past two thousand years under Christian systems, is a total falsehood, so I suspect that in reality the 1960s system served women quite well.

What does the history of science and the roles of flight attendants have to do with Mark Miodownik's book? Not much, I have to admit. But then, much of Miodownik's book doesn't have much to do with liquids. Still, I think I am just particularly curmudgeonly today. I have at least ten books to review, along with a very long piece on Francisco Franco and the Spanish Civil War to complete. That's my excuse. Nonetheless, being curmudgeonly doesn't mean I'm wrong.