

# Et cetera: Steven Poole's non-fiction roundup – reviews

Trust: Money, Markets and Society by Geoffrey Hosking, The Book of Universes by John D Barrow and Geographies of Mars by K Maria D Lane

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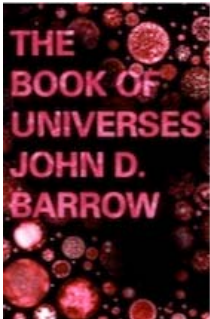
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**Trust: Money, Markets and Society**, by Geoffrey Hosking (Seagull Books, £9.50)

What has gone wrong with trust in our age? Hosking, a historian, blames the market economy. He rehearses the development of national banks and bonds between the 17th and 19th centuries, in which trust became "institutionalised" and the nation-state became "the generally accepted 'public risk manager'", and espies a pattern in our age of the market eroding trust the more it seeps into ordinary social interactions, as you might say "marketising" them.

## **The Book of Universes**

by John D Barrow



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Trust is, as the author nicely puts it, "part of the deep grammar of any society", so to revivify it he recommends studying historical structures of trust, as he argues the pioneers of microcredit in India did. The brevity of this essay forbids much nuance, yet one is surprised late on to find in the dock not only the market but also suddenly, as though hastily jammed in, the law: we are subjected burdensomely now to "financial and juridical criteria" and perniciously influenced by "the practices of [. . .] lawyers". If Hosking has an argument that law itself degrades trust, very well; but he does not appear to make it here.

**The Book of Universes**, by John D Barrow (Bodley Head, £20)

When does physics become metaphysics? Perhaps when it begins to propose an infinite multiplicity of other universes that we can never observe. You might not trust that. Barrow's history of 20th-century cosmologies takes us from steady-state to big bang theories, universes that create themselves in closed time loops, bouncing or eternally inflating universes, and "kinky", "deviant" or "Mixmaster" universes – the zoo of possible solutions to Einstein's equations is populated by strange fauna indeed.

But they couldn't all be right. The book's dramatic scheme is to seduce the reader with each beautiful new idea, only to report with sadness that it didn't work. By the end, Barrow is eagerly exploring the weird implications of modern theory. "If all possibilities are infinite and actual then reality contains rather more than we can bear," he notes, stealthily allusive. Perhaps we are living in a simulation; or in a universe that is the result of selective "forced breeding" by advanced civilisations; or perhaps you are just a short-lived brain floating in space. That would explain a lot. One is tempted to agree with GH Hardy: "Imaginary universes are so much more beautiful than this stupidly constructed 'real' one."

**Geographies of Mars**, by K Maria D Lane (Chicago, £29)

At least we can be sure that Mars is there, and it was all the rage at the turn of the 20th century. Had aliens built canals on it, and were they signalling to us with light ("telephotic communication")? Was it inhabited by creatures 14ft tall? Lane's fascinating cultural history of the "canal craze" around the red planet ("a veritable sensation") argues that the disagreements over whether Mars was inhabited were still largely scientific disagreements – rather than, as they have previously been portrayed, science on the one hand and wanton fantasy on the other.

Visually arresting imagery grounds the author's narrative, as she traces both the stylistic evolution of Mars maps and the heroic frontier aesthetic of pictures of observatories on Earth. Responses to the "inhabited-Mars hypothesis", she concludes, were conditioned by "imperial contexts" and by earthbound ideas about irrigated deserts. One finishes with new appreciation for the power of the idea of "Martians", not much diminished even now that we have robots trundling around up there. Well, perhaps they are the Martians now.