



The Company of Strangers: A Natural History of Economic Life, by Paul Seabright (Princeton, £13.95)

Human civilisation is the result of a magnificent collaborative effort, the unwitting by-product of countless individuals working together. Termite mounds are created in a similar way, but humans are far more complex than termites. In particular, we are the only animal that engages in elaborate task-sharing between non-relatives: we trust strangers (workers in a beehive or an ant colony are sisters). It is, says Seabright, “a phenomenon as remarkable and uniquely human as language itself”. Although we are “the same shy, murderous ape” that avoided strangers for most of its evolutionary history, for the past 10,000 years we have engaged in a “great experiment”, creating a society of strangers. This remarkable book explores the origins of trust and the role it plays in economic institutions. First published in 2004, it has been revised to address the current financial crisis, which was a “failure of social trust on a massive scale” and “a test case” for his thesis. Drawing on history, biology, literature, anthropology and economics, his argument is subtle and compelling. **PDS**