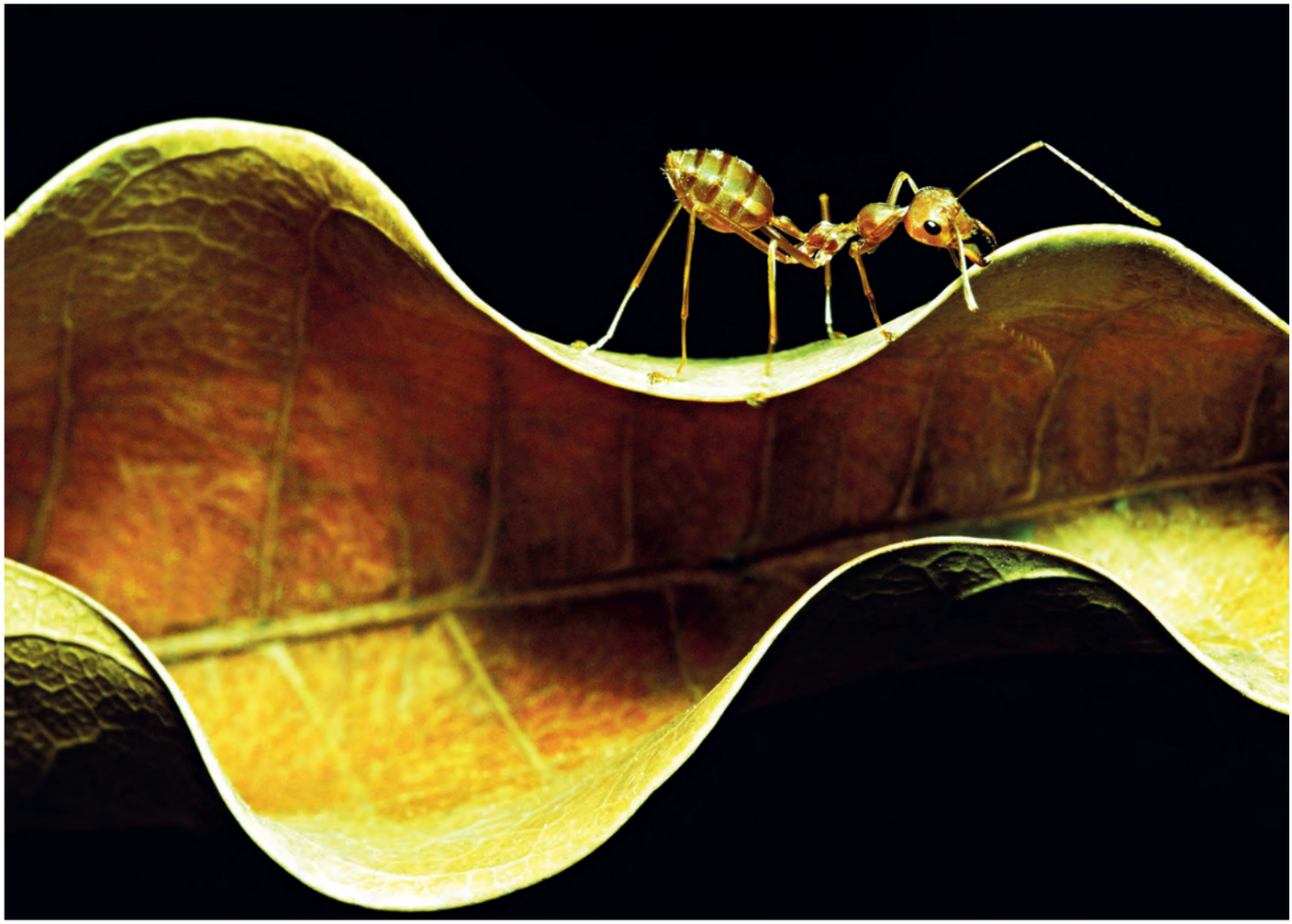

Close encounter: the biologist Mark Moffett argues that humans and ants share a capacity for complex social orders, war and colonisation

Mankind's inner ant

The human instinct to form colonies may be irrational but it is the best check on our need for conflict

By Bryan Appleyard

Meet the Argentine ant, a nondescript fellow, just an ant really. Genetically we have little in common, but the American biologist (and ant photographer) Mark Moffett argues that, behaviourally, this ant is much closer to us than any chimpanzee or bonobo. This species, he says, "represents a pinnacle of social evolution".

Like many other ant colonies, their social order is complex, with each member allocated a specific task. Just like us. They also recognise other colonists by a scent marker. We have markers too – haircuts, tattoos, etc – but also something else; I shall come back to that. But the two things that join us most closely to ants are war and colonial ambition. Like ants we swarm.

It used to be thought that Argentine ant society consisted of separate "supercolonies", mighty aggregations of hundreds of millions of these little beasts spread over many square miles. But now we know that, if unchallenged by a neighbouring colony, these become continent-crossing megacolonies. Moffett says he could picked up an ant in San Francisco, driven 800 kilometres to the Mexican border and "dropped her off, and she'd have been just fine".

But she wouldn't have been just fine if he'd dropped her off in the territory of any of the other three megacolonies in California; she'd have been dead. Along each border, terrible, futile, First World War-type conflicts rage: "The front lines shift glacially month after month, a few metres one way, then the other." And all because the other guys smell different.

Apart from its other virtues, *The Human*

ADISAK MITRPRAYOON/E+

Swarm is a book of wonders. Cascades of stories like that of the Argentine ant at first confuse – what is he getting at? On top of that there's Moffett's rebellious nature. Reputations of other thinkers about society are left in tatters. Even Jared Diamond, the venerable author of the other book reviewed here, is dismissed. His book *Collapse* is flicked aside as "a few extreme instances of what is actually the ever-changing nature of societies".

Along the way Moffett teases. Early on he offers "a cryptic preview of the conclusions ahead: chimpanzees need to know everybody. Ants need to know nobody. Humans only need to know somebody."

So what is he getting at? The answer is the absolute centrality of societies to the human experience.

Say you walk into a café. You will be surrounded by strangers but you will not threaten or fight them. This is "one of our species' most underappreciated accomplishments". Most other vertebrates would only get their lattes if they recognised everybody in the café; Argentine ants would get a drink as long as everybody smelled the same. Only humans relax among total strangers because that is the way our societies work. On this peculiarity all history is constructed. As Moffett says: "Being comfortable around unfamiliar members of our society gave humans advantages from the get-go and made nations possible."

The human need for such societies shapes all our experience. People may say that the forms that differentiate societies – religious, political, moral, flags, anthems – are irrational, contingent or unreal. And so they are, but without them we are nothing. Humans imagine themselves into the security of their cafés. Moffett quotes the philosopher Ross Poole: "What is important is not so much that everyone imagines the same nation, but that they imagine that they imagine the same nation."

Like the ants we need markers too, but these alone are not enough. Human societies also need an acceptance of "social control and leadership, along with increasing commitments to specialisations, such as jobs and social groups".

The first contentious implication of this is that, when we move out of our society, we remain always and irrevocably foreigners. In Moffett's world nobody ever really blends in. From the moment we are born we are bathed in the mores of our society; by adulthood this conferred identity has become an absolute. We may thrive as foreigners but we will always be foreigners.

Contemporary believers in fluid identities that float frictionlessly across different societies will find this bleak, even abhorrent.

The Human Swarm: How Our Societies Arise, Thrive and Fall
Mark W Moffett

Head of Zeus, 480pp, £20

Upheaval: How Nations Cope with Crisis and Change
Jared Diamond

Allen Lane, 512pp, £25

But they should bear in mind the other half of Moffett's case. The very success of human societies rests on their ability to absorb foreigners. Without that we would still be living in small groups or bands. We are, like the ants, a densely populated species. The ants achieve this by breeding more of themselves; we do it by embracing others.

The second implication is that there is no hope for a universal human society. "The notion of cosmopolitanism, the idea that the people of the world will come to feel a primary connection to the human race, is a pipe dream," Moffett says.

Secular or religious visions of the emergence of a new, united human world are fantasies. The reason is that such a world cannot be the society we need to define ourselves. Like it or not, we need the continued existence of others, who may be seen as revolting, barbaric or just alien, to know who we are. Moffett quotes the poet Cavafy: "Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?/They were, those people, a kind of solution."

> We need the existence of others, who may be seen as revolting, barbaric or just alien, to know who we are

Obviously this need for otherness can be catastrophic. Discontent in human societies is often directed towards outsiders. As a political ploy this can be explosively effective. Look at the 1994 Rwandan genocide, when Hutus killed up to one million Tutsis, many of them neighbours and friends.

On the other hand we do have "an aptitude for harnessing connections with seemingly incompatible others". But this can be elusive. Bodies such as the United Nations and the EU attempt to achieve harmony between societies but Moffett is sceptical; neither earns emotional commitment "because they lack the ingredients that make them real for the member". The EU, he thinks, may work because of its perceived need to counter threats from outside but it will never attain the imaginative power of its member states.

True enough, you might say, societies may be absolute in our imaginations but, like everything else, they rise and fall. We should all be humbled like Shelley's Ozymandias, king of kings – "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" Such thoughts may topple us into an easy relativism, the default mode of contemporary discourse, but honest introspection should reveal that this, too, is a work of the imagination.

In the end Moffett pins his hope on our "capacity to counter our inherited propensities for conflict through deliberate self-correction". There is an implicit scientism in this, which, perhaps, returns him to the fold of conventional contemporary thought from which he has so assiduously strayed. Also it is an expression of the imagined world of a particular society at a particular time – absolute to him, alien to others. But, after the tumult of this fascinating, often chaotic book, I think he's earned his moment of peace.

Jared Diamond's *Upheaval* could not be more different. Where Moffett is sprawling, Diamond is taut and composed; where Moffett is a maverick, Diamond is mainstream. He is now 81. Previous books, notably *Guns, Germs and Steel*, have made him one of the world's leading and most admired public intellectuals. But this book, I'm afraid, feels just too provisional, too tentative to add much to his existing oeuvre.

He effectively admits as much in his prologue, where he says he has not incorporated quantitative – basically, statistical – methods into this book and that would "remain a task for a separate future project". In the meantime, this book merely identifies "hypotheses and variables" that might feed into a quantitative analysis.

His approach is to identify a list of the features of personal crises and then to compare these with the features of national crises involving Chile, Finland, Germany, Japan, Indonesia, Australia and the United States – all countries with which he is familiar and, mostly, whose languages he speaks. From these he tentatively suggests ways of surviving crises.

There are easily defined, broad similarities between the national and the personal. "Successful coping," he writes, "with either external or internal pressures requires ▶

selective change. That's as true of nations as of individuals." He lists 12 factors that are related to the outcomes of a personal crisis – acknowledgment that one is in crisis, seeking help, honest self-appraisal and so on. Then he makes a parallel list for national crises. About seven of these turn out to be the same, but the rest have crucial and pretty obvious differences – political and economic institutions are not likely to be included in the resolution of what used to be called a nervous breakdown.

This is all very neat but rather odd. The individual histories of his chosen countries are, however, superbly gripping and informative. He captures the sheer oddity of Finland, with its strange and beautiful language and its nuanced adjustments to cope with the ever-present threat imposed upon the Finns by their long land border with Russia.

But I think his real subject is the United States, to whose future he devotes two chapters. Here he glimpses the real possibility of a Chilean-style breakdown of political compromise leading to dictatorship. "I… foresee one political party in power in the US government or in state governments increasingly manipulating voter registration, stacking the courts with sympathetic judges, using those courts to challenge election outcomes, and then invoking 'law enforcement' and using the police, the National Guard, the army reserve, or the army itself to suppress political opposition."

Inequality – worse in the US than in any other leading democracy – increases the risk. He asks when the US will take its problems seriously. The answer is: "When powerful rich Americans realize that nothing they do will enable them to remain physcially safe, if most other Americans remain angry, frustrated and realistically without hope".

For me, this anxiety suggests a link between Moffett and Diamond. Both books are struggling to define – Diamond therapeutically, Moffet anthropologically – ways in which we might be able to fend off disorder, tyranny or collapse. In the course of each this turns out not to be a generalised thesis but an urgent, topical demand. Something new seems to be wrong with the world – failing democracies, extreme politics, divisive rhetoric, kleptocratic capitalism – and these two intellectuals are standing up to be counted. Diamond does this explicitly, Moffett implicitly, by requiring us to take societies seriously as temporary absolutes without which we cannot endure. Neither provides answers, but each at least demands that we sit up and take notice. Ozymandias, king of kings, should have read both. ●

Bryan Appleyard writes for the Sunday Times

PETER STACKPOLE/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

From Cuba to Greeneland

Ian Thomson

Our Man Down in Havana: The Story Behind Graham Greene's Cold War Spy Novel
Christopher Hull

Pegasus Books, 352pp, £19.99

Our Woman in Havana: Reporting Castro's Cuba
Sarah Rainsford

Oneworld, 384pp, £9.99

Frontiers have a dynamism of their own in Graham Greene's fiction, and typically set off a reflex of unease. The novelist's father, Charles Greene, had been the pious Anglican headmaster of a public school in Berkhamsted near London, and each day the schoolboy Greene experienced divided loyalties as he left the family quarters to go to class. Greene's literary gift, later, was to locate the moment of crisis when a character transgresses a border of some sort, whether geographical, religious or political, and life is exposed in all its drab wonder.

East-West border tensions were rife in the Baltic outpost of Estonia, which Greene visited in spring 1934, "for no reason", he writes in his 1980 memoir *Ways of Escape*, "except escape to somewhere new". His fellow passenger on the flight from Latvia was an ex-Anglican clergyman installed in the Estonian capital of Tallinn as a diplomat. Greene does not name the man but he was Peter Edmund James Leslie, appointed His Majesty's Vice-Consul in Tallinn in 1931. Leslie was a Catholic convert who worked, rather dubiously, as a munitions salesman. He might have been a spy in an Eric Ambler novel. In fact, Leslie was Greene's first (and possibly inadvertent) contact with British intelligence. A Foreign Office file notes: "Leslie is one of the best representatives the SIS [the Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6] have got in eastern Europe."

Espionage runs through Greene's life like a Cold War melodrama. A film sketch conceived by Greene in 1944, "Nobody to Blame", concerns a British sales representative in Estonia ("Latesthia") for Singer Sewing Machines, who turns out to be an SIS spy. The film was never made as it poked fun at the British Secret Service; yet it contained the bare bones of what was to become "Our Man in Tallinn", later *Our Man in Havana*. In 1988, anticipating my first visit to Soviet Tallinn, I wrote to Greene asking why he moved *Our Man in Havana* from Estonia in the 1930s to Cuba in the 1950s. Greene explained that a Secret Service comedy about an expatriate vacuum cleaner salesman who gets "sucked up" into espionage would be more credible in pre-Castro Havana, with its louche nightclubs and promise of tropical

Cuban links: Graham Greene on the set of the *Our Man in Havana* film in 1959

oblivion, than in Soviet-occupied Tallinn. He concluded: "I already knew Cuba and my sympathies were with the Fidelistas in the mountains… One could hardly sympathise with the main character if he was to be involved in the Hitler war."

Of course, Cuba could not be more different from Estonia. Before Fidel Castro's revolution of 1959, Havana was, effectively, a mafia fleshpot and colony of Las Vegas. Yet James Wormold, the salesman-secret agent of Greene's Cuban "entertainment", is not unlike Peter Leslie of the Baltic. Both men are old-fashioned merchant-scholars with a taste for books (and a fear of women). Christopher Hull, a lecturer in Spanish and Latin American studies at the University of Chester, argues convincingly in his fascinating exploration of the history behind Greene's satirical spy novel that Wormold's character borrowed from both Leslie and Greene's "black sheep" elder brother Herbert, a fantasist who consorted with remittance men, confidence-tricksters and other compromised characters who inhabit "Greeneland". Herbert appears, scarcely disguised, as the con artist-cum-salesman Anthony Farrant in Greene's fine 1935 novel *England Made Me*. To Greene's dismay, Herbert had acted as a spy for the fascists during the Spanish Civil War, and all his life displayed a deep moral turpitude and opportunism.

Cuba meant a great deal to Greene. Hull's *Our Man Down in Havana* conjures the Cuban capital in all its tatterdemalion glory and Afro-Caribbean collision of skin colours and cultures. By Hull's estimate, Greene visited Havana 12 times between 1938 and 1983, in the guise variously of holidaymaker, novelist, screenwriter, journalist and – possibly – intelligence gatherer. The author of the "iconic" Havana spy novel that foreshadowed the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 may himself have ended up snooping on post-revolutionary Cuba for SIS, Hull speculates. Certainly Greene was a provoking and paradoxical novelist, who delighted in exposing conflicting loyalties and shifting political allegiances in others, if not in himself. Perhaps, as the late Christopher Hitchens surmised, Greene's most certain allegiance was to "betrayal".

When the man Evelyn Waugh nicknamed "Grisjambon Vert" (French for "grey ham green") visited Havana in 1954 to research his novel, the Batista regime was "creaking dangerously towards its end": Castro's revolution was just five years away. The dancing girls wore spangled headdresses and American tourists prowled the pre-communist city for cheap sex. With a taxi-driver as guide, Greene fathomed an underworld of anti-Batista revolutionaries, American double agents, dubious CIA operatives and a local sex artist called Superman, whose penis was said to be 12 inches long.

It is against this rackety background that Wormold is recruited into the Caribbean network of British Intelligence as Agent 59200/5 – the same number assigned to Greene when SIS despatched him to West Africa in 1941. In return for a British government salary, Wormold furnishes intelligence of a "big military installation under construction" in the mountains of eastern Cuba. The intelligence turns out to be based on the Atomic Pile vacuum cleaner user manual. Half a century later, in 2001, Hull reminds us, Tony Blair was taken in by "rough colour sketches" of presumed biological warfare installations drawn by an Iraqi "sub-source" code-named Curveball.

Greene's 1958 novel (filmed soon afterwards by Carol Reed) vividly captured the Cuban capital's atmosphere of surveillance and torture attendant on the Batista regime. Greene hurled himself promiscuously into the city's grimy underbelly and sex industry. On his subsequent visits, Cuba was officially communist and largely emptied of its pimps and prostitutes. Fidel's bearded Old Testament head appeared on billboards advertising a "new tropical variant of Marxism", Hull writes. Greene found that Cubans revered Castro as a tough yet "comradely father figure", whose overthrow of Batista had been nationalist, not socialist in origin. It was only after Cuban exiles abetted the CIA in the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 that Castro aligned himself with the Soviet Union. By then the Fidelistas were united in their fear and loathing of Uncle Sam. Castro closed the casinos, got rid of the go-go geishas and encouraged a defiant spirit as his people were subjected to ever more drastic belt-tightening.

In the end, though, Greene's political views on Cuba and Castro remain "an enigma", says Hull. Shortly after the Bay of Pigs debacle, the *New Statesman* published some doggerel by Greene titled "Lines on the Liberation of Cuba":

> Prince of Las Vegas, Cuba calls!
> Your seat's reserved on the gangster plane,
> Fruit machines back in Hilton halls
> And in the Blue Moon girls again

The implied criticism of the Las Vegas-Cuba mobster connection (the "Prince of Las Vegas" is probably John F Kennedy) was at odds with Greene's manifest relish for the seediness of Batista-era Havana. Whose side was Greene on? As it happened, Cuba under Castro did not revert to the lurid outpost of Las Vegas that Greene had imagined: the sainted El Comandante had immunised his people against "Capitalism Rampant". Now that Castro has died, the scramble for greenbacks has created a new Cuban sex industry. The resort of Varadero is a Batista-style Caribbean Torremolinos complete with casinos and love motels. The beach (12 miles of paradise, with insects) heaves with pink and peeling leftist-trendies and sex tourists wearing Viva Fidel! T-shirts. The revolutionary spirit is giving out: all talk is of the "Yanqui dollar" and how to obtain it.

Sarah Rainsford covers much of the same ground as Hull in her book on Cuba. *Our Woman in Havana*, an amalgam of reportage and travel, follows Greene round his various favourite hotels and restaurants in Havana (the Moorish-revival Sevilla hotel, the Floridita bar). We get a good sense of the city's photogenic decay, all collapsing promenades and salt-encrusted Catholic churches. Most Cubans, says Rainsford, practise a hybrid of Catholicism and the animist cult of Santeria, a low-alcohol version of Haitian Vodou (or voodoo, as it used to be called).

> Before Fidel Castro's revolution of 1959, Havana was, effectively, a mafia fleshpot and colony of Las Vegas

A former BBC Havana correspondent, Rainsford was in Moscow the day Castro died in 2016. Jeremy Corbyn spoke reverentially of the improvements made under Fidel in health and literacy: almost half of Cuba's population was illiterate during the "capitalist Babylon" of Batista but now less than 1 per cent of Cuban adults are unable to read and write. Donald Trump, in contrast, called Castro a "brutal dictator". Communist Cuba, in Trump's estimation, had been nothing but a hellhole of sugar quotas, bread queues and police surveillance, with labour camps for homosexuals and the occasional implementation of the death penalty. All that is true, but, as Greene noted of Cuba, it is "not the whole picture". ●

Ian Thomson's books include "The Dead Yard: Tales of Modern Jamaica" (Faber & Faber)