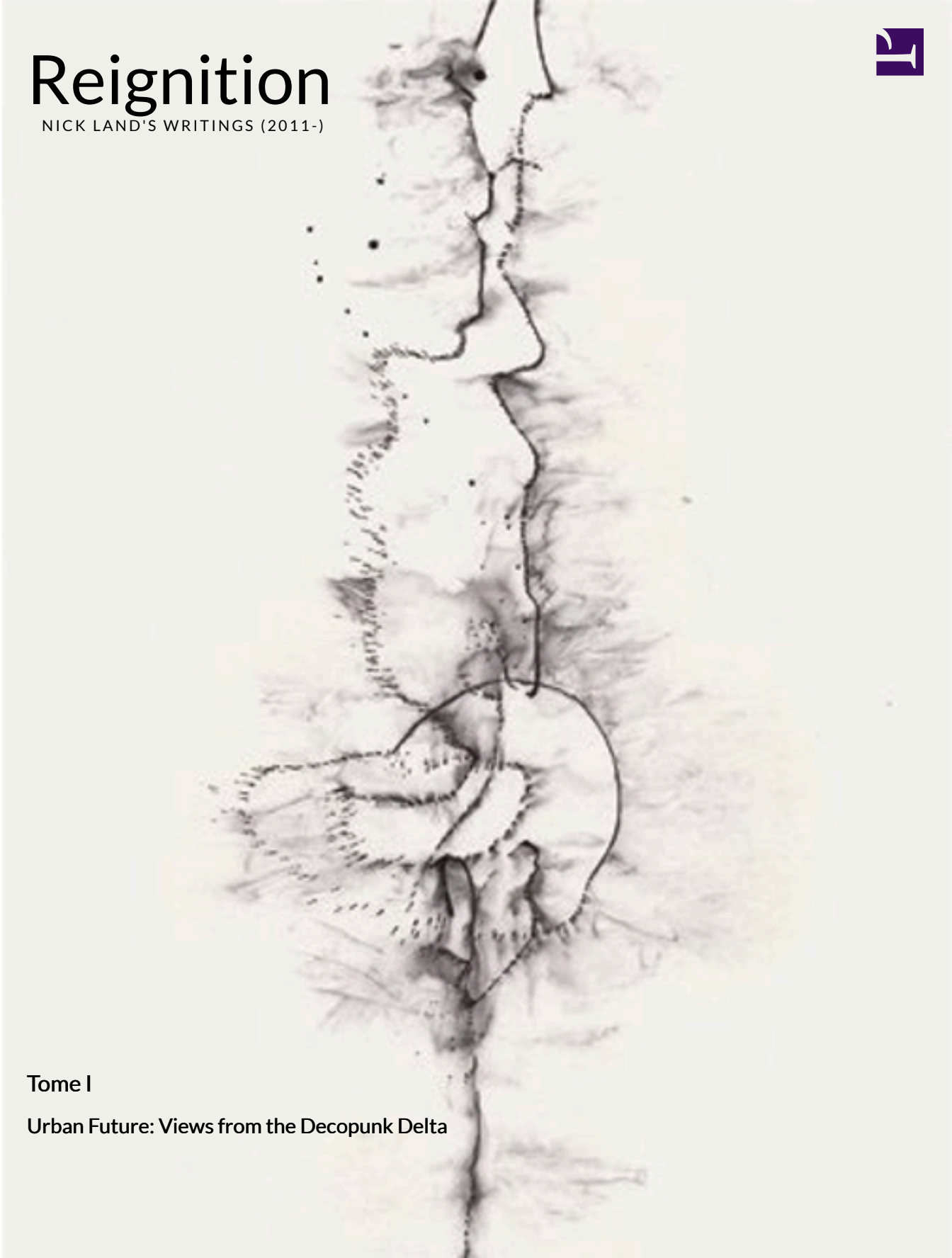
Reignition

NICK LAND'S WRITINGS (2011-)



Tome I

Urban Future: Views from the Decopunk Delta

Reignition

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EDITED BY URIEL FIORI

Table of Contents

Table of Contents vi

BLOCK 1 - URBAN FUTURE 9

BLOCK 2 - TEMPLEXITY 63

CHAPTER ONE - THE BIGGEST PICTURE 129

CHAPTER TWO - THE ABSTRACT FORM OF TIME 136

CHAPTER THREE - NARRATIVIZATIONS 171

SECTION A - APOCALYPSES 204

CHAPTER ONE - CUMMULATION OF FAILURES 205

CHAPTER TWO - SUSPENSION 233

CHAPTER THREE - 2012 276

CHAPTER FOUR - CASE STUDIES 290

CHAPTER FIVE - COMPILATIONS 311

CHAPTER SIX - POLITICAL INSANITY 318

CHAPTER SEVEN - ECONOMIC COLLAPSE 328

SECTION B - ACCELERATION 342
CHAPTER ONE - EXPONENTIALS 350
CHAPTER TWO - HISTORICAL TRENDS 365
CHAPTER THREE - DISTRIBUTED THOUGHT 372
CHAPTER FOUR - IMPROVING MACHINERY 385
CHAPTER FIVE - SOCIAL DISRUPTION 395
CHAPTER SIX - ANTHROPOL 401
SEQUENCE i - ON LEFT ACCELERATIONISM 424

BLOCK 3 - BITCOIN AND BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY 487
CHAPTER ONE - BTC FACETS 488
CHAPTER TWO - BTC DEATH? 507
CHAPTER THREE - BTC POLITICS 526
CHAPTER FOUR - OTHER BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGIES 535
CHAPTER FIVE - CHINA, BITCOIN AND WORLD ORDER 545

BLOCK 4 - SINGLOSPHERE 589
CHAPTER ONE - PRIMERS 590
CHAPTER TWO - SYNTHETIC CULTURE 602
CHAPTER THREE - ECONOMY AND POLICY 626
CHAPTER FOUR - URBAN DEVELOPMENT 651
CHAPTER FIVE - NICK LAND'S TRIPS 715
SECTION A - NEO-TRADITIONALISM 786

CHAPTER ONE - ARTWORKS 792
CHAPTER TWO - CONFUCIAN RESTORATION 814

BLOCK 1 - URBAN FUTURE

Introducing Urban Future

What can readers expect from this blog? Since it promises to be oriented towards the future, it makes sense to begin with some preliminary forecasting about itself.

Most basically and predictably, Urban Future has been programmed by its name. Its principal topic is the intersection of cities with the future. It aims to foster discussion about cities as engines of the future, and about futurism as a dynamic influence on the shape, character, and development of cities. More particularly, it scavenges for clues, and floats speculations, about the Shanghai of tomorrow. It anticipates a global urban future in which Shanghai features prominently, and a coming Shanghai that expresses, both starkly and subtly, the transformative forces of global futurism. This

is to get quite far ahead of ourselves, which is where we shall typically be.

For some readers, ‘futurism’ will invoke the early 20th century avant garde cultural movement crystallized by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s 1909 Futurist Manifesto. Futurism, they might reasonably object, has been defined and even closed by the passage of time. Like modernism, it now belongs to the archive of concluded history. What exists today, and in the days to come, can only be a neo-futurism (and a neo-modernism): no less retrospective than prospective, as much a repetition as a speculation. Such considerations, corrections, and recollections, with all their attendant perplexities, are extremely welcome. The time to address them will soon come.

Since Shanghai is cross-hatched with the time-fractured indices of historico-futuristic ambiguity, from paleo-modernism to neo-traditionalism, the blog will have every opportunity to discuss such things. For the moment, casual reference to the strangely-twinned architectural icons of such time-tangles, the Park Hotel and the Jinmao Tower – each a retro-futurist or cybergothic masterpiece – has to substitute as a mnemonic and promissory note.

Also, in time, the obstacles to forecasting need to be thoroughly addressed: such topics as historical catastrophism, the efficient-market hypothesis (EMH), Karl Popper’s critique of historicism, Knightian uncertainty (or Rumsfeldian “unknown unknowns”) and

the Black Swan theory of Nassim Nicholas Taleb. In order to get up and running, all these complicating thoughts have been temporarily bracketed, like cunning and ferocious beasts, but they will not remain caged forever, or even very long.

Because there's something irresistibly twisted about starting with the future, the first flurry of posts will head straight into tomorrow, with topics becoming increasingly city- and Shanghai-focused as things progress. An initial series of interconnected posts will outline futuristic thinking in broad terms, including preliminary sketches of principal way-stations on the mainline techno-scientific tradition that supports it.

Ultimately, nothing relevant to the future of Shanghai is alien to this blog's purpose. It will draw upon Shanghai history, geography, and culture, traditional Chinese philosophies of time (Yijing and Daoism), theories of modernity and urbanism, evolutionary biology, science fiction, techno-scientific discussions of complex systems and emergence, the economics of spontaneous order, long waves, technological trends, robotics research and developments, models of accelerating change, and anticipations of Technological Singularity. Things should get continuously weirder.

Tomorrow, it begins.

March 29, 2011

Eternal Return, and After

If occult knowledge is unavailable, futurology must rely upon historical patterns. Ultimately, some variant of extrapolation is its only resource.

The hazards of extrapolation are manifold, and frequently discussed. A seemingly robust trend can be illusory, the shape of its curve can be misrecognized, and coincidental processes can disrupt it. Even more insidiously, the recognition of a trend can lead to responses that transform or nullify it.

Yet, since governments, businesses, and individuals necessarily act in accordance with models of the future, forecasting is an incessant, inevitable, and often automatic feature of social existence. Whatever the complexities of prediction, survival depends upon future-adapted decision-making. A base-level futurism is simply unavoidable. Radical skepticism – irrespective of its intellectual merits — does not offer a practical alternative.

There are only four fundamental ways things can go: they can remain the same, they can cycle, they can shrink, or they can grow. In reality these trend-lines are usually inter-tangled. Among complex systems, stability is typically meta-stability, which is preserved through cycling, whilst growth and shrinkage are often components of a larger-scale, cyclic wave.

The historical imagination of all ancient cultures was dominated by great cycles. In the Vedic culture of India, time unfolded as regular, degenerative epochs (yugas) that subdivided each ‘Day of Brahma’ (4.1 billion years in length). Chinese time was shaped by the metabolism of Imperial dynasties. “Long united, the empire must divide. Long divided, it must unite,” begins the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Mesoamerican civilizations envisaged world history as a succession of creations and destructions. In the West, Plato described the history of the city as a great cycle, degenerating through phases of Timocracy (or rule by the virtuous), Oligarchy, Democracy, and Tyranny.

The ages of mankind described by Hesiod, and later Ovid, are less obviously cyclical, as is the eschatological time inherited from ancient Judaism by the Abrahamic faiths. In these cases too, however, the course of history is understood as fundamentally degenerative, and guided to the restoration of a sacred origin (as described by Mircea Eliade in his analysis of the myth of Eternal Return).

Even Karl Marx remains captivated by this mythic historical pattern, in its Abrahamic variant. His epic of human social development begins with an Edenic ‘primitive communism’ that falls into the alienated degeneracy of class society, subdivided into a series of ages. The eschatological culmination of history in communist revolution thus completes a great cycle, sealed by a

moment of sacred restoration (of authentic 'species being'). It is no coincidence that this mytho-religious 'big-picture' aspect of Marxism has impinged far more deeply upon popular consciousness than its intricate mathematical model of techno-economic dynamics within 'the capitalist mode of production', despite the fact that Marx's writings are overwhelmingly focused upon the latter. A great cycle feels like home.

In modern times, the clearest example of history in the ancient, great cycle mode, is found in the work of another German socialist philosopher: Oswald Spengler. Modeling civilizations on the life-cycles of organic beings, he plotted their rise and inevitable decay through predictable phases. For the West, firmly locked into the downside of the wave, relentless, accelerating degeneration can be confidently anticipated. Spengler's withering pessimism seems not to have detracted significantly from the cultural comfort derived from his archetypal historical scheme.

Eliade describes the myth of Eternal Return as a refuge from the "terror of history." Firmly rooted in familiar organic patterns and the cycle of the seasons, it sets the basic template for traditional cultures. By identifying what is yet to come with what has already been timelessly commemorated, it promises the pre-adaptation of existing social arrangements and patterns of behavior to unencountered things, psychologically neutralizing the threat of radically unprecedented eventualities. We have been here before,

and somehow we survived. Winter does not last forever.

It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that the conception of progressive historical time has been so slow to consolidate itself. John M. Smart summarizes the conclusions reached by historian J. D. Bury in his *The Idea of Progress* (1920), noting: "… the idea of progress in the material realm was missed, amazingly, even for most of the European Renaissance (…14th-17th century). Only by the 1650s, near the end of this cultural explosion, did the idea of an unstoppable force of progress finally begin to emerge as a possibility to the average literate mind." The idea of progress, as continuous, innovative growth, is unique to modernity, and provides its defining cultural characteristic.

Moderns found themselves, for the first time, cast outside the cosmic nursery of Eternal Return. A strange new world awaited them.

March 31, 2011

Beyond Urbanization

'Urbanization' doesn't capture very much of what cities are up to

(This post is basically a pre-emptive footnote. Please feel even freer to ignore it than you usually would.)

The principal topic of Urban Future is the development of cities (with Shanghai as exemplary case). It is peculiarly frustrating, therefore, to find that no single term exists to describe a process that is arguably the most important of all social phenomena, and even the key to whatever meaning might be discoverable in human history.

One thing, at least, is clear (or should be): urban development is not urbanization.

'Urbanization' is a comparatively rigorous and well-defined demographic concept, referring to the dynamic re-distribution of populations from non-urban to urban existence. Because it describes the proportion of city-dwellers within a population, it can be quantified by a percentage, which sets a strict mathematical limit to the process (asymptotic to 100% urbanized). When plotted historically, the approach to this limit follows a steep curve, echoing the (open-ended) exponential or super-exponential trends of modernization and industrialization.

Whilst theoretically indispensable, clear, meaningful, and informative, the concept of urbanization is inadequate to the phenomenon of urban development. Cities are essentially concentrational, or intensive. They are defined by social density, uneven distribution, or demographic negative entropy. Urbanization describes only a part of this.

Within the entire demographic system, urbanization provides a measure of the urban fraction (based on an at least semi-arbitrary

definition of a city, by size and by boundary). It says nothing about the pattern of cities: how numerous they are, how they differ in relative scale, how fast larger cities grow compared to smaller ones, or in general whether the urbanized population is becoming more or less homogeneously distributed *between* cities. In fact, it tells us nothing at all about the distribution of the urbanized population, except that it is somehow clumped into 'city-scale' agglomerations.

Once 'clumped' – or drawn within the spatial threshold of a city-sized cloud – a demographic particle switches binary identity, from non-urbanized to urbanized. Registered as a city-dweller, there is no more to be said about it. Yet the city is itself a distribution, of variable density, or heterogeneous concentration. *Within* each city, urban intensity can rise or fall, irrespective of the overall level of urbanization. The limit of urbanization sets no restriction upon trends to urban intensification, as exemplified by high-rise architecture.

Urbanization is a proportional concept, indifferent to absolute demographic scale. In contrast, measuring intensity, or negative entropy, provides fine-grained information that rises with the size of the system considered (since the entropy measure is a logarithmic function of system scale, defined by the totality of possible distributions, which rises exponentially with population). Whilst social scientific or demographic phenomena are highly intractable to quantitative intensive analysis, their reality is nevertheless

intensive, which is to say: determined by distributive variation of *absolute* magnitudes. The measure of urbanization is not affected by the doubling of a city's population unless the overall population grows at a lower rate. Urban intensity, in contrast, is highly sensitive to absolute demographic fluctuation (and not uncommonly hyper-sensitive).

Intensities are characterized by transition thresholds. As they rise and fall, they cross 'singularities' or 'phase transitions' that mark a change in nature. A small change in intensive magnitude can trigger a catastrophic change in system behavior, with the emergence of previously undisclosed properties. When measuring urbanization, a city is a city is a city. As an intensive concentration, however, a city is an essentially variable real individual, passing through thresholds as it grows, innovating unprecedented behaviors, and thus becoming something 'qualitatively' new.

Whilst summoning the courage to float an adequate neologism ('urbanomy'?), Urban Future will stumble onwards with awkward compounds such as 'urban development', 'urban intensification', 'urban condensation', or whatever seems least painful at the time (whilst meaning, in each case, what 'urbanization' would describe if urbanists had managed to grab it before the demographers did).

Yet, despite this linguistic obstacle, a surprising amount can be said about the urban process in general. Making a start on that comes next.

April 15, 2011

An Introduction to Urbanomy

However irritating neologisms can be, they are sometimes near-compulsory. When a compact, comparatively simple thought is forced to route itself, repeatedly, through crudely-stitched terminological tangles, the missing *adequate word* fosters the linguistic equivalent of a nagging hunger. Word invention becomes a simple prerequisite of smooth cognitive function.

Urban development of the individual city, or the typical process of urban maturation, is a quite basic but linguistically underserved concept of exactly this kind. The absence is aggravated by the presence of another word — one that sounds superficially suitable, but which actually designates an entirely separate idea.

When a city grows, it does not 'urbanize' (only a wider social system can do that). Urbanization applies to a society that becomes proportionately more urban, as rural people move into cities, but when an individual city develops – and in fact individuates – it undergoes *urbanomy* (on the model of 'teleonomy'). Urbanomy – urban self-organization — is far more critical to this blog than urbanization is. Coining the term is a declaration of theoretical commitment to urban individuation as a structured – and thus

cognitively-tractable – social, historical, and ultimately cosmic reality.

The foundations of urbanomic understanding were laid down by Jane Jacobs in her book *The Economy of Cities*. In this work she outlines a simple and powerful theory of urban self-organization, driven by a spontaneous economic process of *import replacement*. Cities develop by autonomization, or introversion, which occurs as they learn from trade, progressively transforming an ever-greater proportion of their commercial flows into endogenous circuits. This (urbanomic) tendency need not isolate cities from the world, but it necessarily converts stable dependency into dynamic interaction, driving continuous commercial modification. The logistical and informational advantages of local urban producers – minimizing transport costs and maximizing feedback intensity – tend to encourage the internalization of productive activity, teaching the city what it can do for itself, and consolidating its singular identity (as a real individual). The growth, complexification, and individuation of the city are integral to a single urbanomic process.

It is urbanomy that produces cities, with urbanization – typically – occurring as a secondary phenomenon. Functional cities are not demographic dumping grounds, but endogenously maturing entities which draw things (including people) into themselves.

Among the many side-consequences running off Jacobs' thesis, one in particular is so historically-suggestive that it merits a short

digression. Since cities are not nutritionally self-supporting, it has been natural to assume that they presuppose settled agriculture, which they relate to in a way that is – at least calorically – parasitic. Jacobs turns this assumption upside down, proposing instead that the commercialization of food production which accompanied the emergence of cities was itself a crucial motor of agriculturalization. By providing concentrated, comparatively large-scale markets, cities made the production of substantial food-surpluses economically rational for the first time, automatically supporting their own further development in interactive lock-step with the Neolithic revolution.

The basic urbanomic insight of greatest relevance here, however, is more abstract. The Jacobs thesis establishes a framework for systematically exploring the time-structure of the urban process, conceived not solely as a (prolonged) episode in time, or history, but also as the working of a *chronogenic*, or time-making social machine.

The concept which Jacobs tacitly introduces, as the guiding principle of the urbanomic trend, is *autoproduction*. As it grows, internally specializes, self-organizes, dissipates entropy, and individuates, the city tends to an impossible limit of complete productive autonomy. It appears as a convergent wave, shaped in the direction of increasing order or complexity, as if by an invisible hand, or according to an intelligent design. The pattern is exactly what would be expected if something not yet realized was orchestrating its self-creation. Even after 150 years of coherent evolutionary

theory, such processes – in the absence of a dominating creative agent – appear extraordinary, and even uncanny, because they seem to run backwards, against the current of time.

Time as it is lived and explored is *tensed*. It is occupied from the middle, which is always now, and from which the past recedes (partially remembered, or recorded), as the future approaches (partially anticipated, or forecast). The time-line crossing 'now' or the present is asymmetric. It has an 'arrow'.

The mainstream scientific currents which support the modern understanding of the world describe this arrow of time in two very different ways. Both are easily intuited and generally accepted, at least in their broadest outlines.

Firstly, we are told that the arrow of time corresponds to an increase of disorder. Things break, erode, age, die, and decay. Presented with two photographs, of an intact egg and the same egg smashed, there is no doubt about which came first. Eggs don't unsmash, time doesn't reverse.

Except that (secondly) we generally anticipate progress, or improvement. Knowledge accumulates, inventions are made, economies are expected, normally, to grow. Even those most resistant to modern messages – such as evolutionary ideas — work confidently to produce order in their lives, when tidying, sorting, assembling, organizing, or composing. Eggs might not unsmash, but there are eggs, and they've been made somehow (there weren't any

500 million years ago).

So how do our time intuitions align with the arrow of time? Which way is forward, and which is back? Between increasing and decreasing order, which seems normal and which strange?

These questions are complicated by the fact that we mentally process the world in two very different ways, dividing it as neatly as possible between people and things, agency and inertia, the animate and the inanimate, teleology and mechanism. This very basic dual system of perceptual classification – almost certainly supported by deeply archaic neurological structures — corresponds to a twin cognitive apparatus of profound expectation. Categorical violations are viscerally unsettling.

When people – or even 'lower' animals — behave as things, they primitively evoke the dread of morbidity, mortality, and more radical varieties of cosmic wrongness, partially captured by the figure of the zombie. The intermediate zone, of the 'living dead', can be entered from either direction, triggering an archaic revulsion from monstrosity – the most fundamental of all *things that should not be*. Horror fiction dwells almost entirely in this twilight world of categorical slippage.

When order emerges spontaneously among things, it seems like magic (in the ancient, soul-seizing sense), and panicked spectators reflexively grasp for the hidden agents of 'animistic' or religious interpretation, compelled by categorical intuitions far older than the

human species. Calm apprehension of such 'teleonomies' is grounded, perhaps invariably, in an attenuation or vagueness of distinct perception. Were a biologist to truly *perceive* the evolutionary process, its integral, primordial horror would be ineluctable. Urbanomy, likewise, belongs to the realm of real monstrosity. That is one reason why cities cannot readily be seen for what they are.

Spontaneous animation, horror, and time-reversal are inextricably knotted together at the root of their apprehension. The human nervous-system cannot register a deeper *wrong* than an inversion of time, as demonstrated by a thing that *comes to life*. Cities, eventually, will scare us. In doing so, they will draw us out beyond what has been – to date — the horizon of intelligible time.

July 29, 2013

Event Horizon

People gravitate to cities, but what are cities gravitating into? Some strange possibilities suggest themselves.

Cities are defined by social density. This simple but hugely consequential insight provides the central thesis of Edward Glaeser's Triumph of the City: How our Greatest Invention Makes us

Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier and Happier (2011), where it is framed as both an analytical tool and a political project.

“Cities are the absence of physical space between people and companies. They enable us to work and play together, and their success depends on the demand for physical connection,” Glaeser remarks.

High-density urban life approaches a tautology, and it is one that Glaeser not only observes, but also celebrates. Closely-packed people are more productive. As Alfred Marshall noted in 1920, ‘agglomeration economies’ feed a self-reinforcing process of social compression that systematically out-competes diffuse populations in all fields of industrial activity. In addition, urbanites are also happier, longer-living, and their ecological footprint is smaller, Glaeser insists, drawing upon a variety of social scientific evidence to make his case. Whether social problems are articulated in economic, hedonic, or environmental terms, (dense) urbanism offers the most practical solution.

The conclusion Glaeser draws, logically enough, is that densification should be encouraged, rather than inhibited. He interprets sprawl as a reflection of perverse incentives, whilst systematically contesting the policy choices that restrain the trend to continuous urban compression. His most determined line of argumentation is directed in favor of high-rise development, and against the planning restrictions that keep cities stunted. A city that

is prevented from soaring will be over-expensive and under-excited, inflexible, inefficient, dirty, backward-looking, and peripherally sprawl- or slum-cluttered. Onwards and upwards is the way.

Urban planning has its own measure for density: the FAR (or Floor-to-Area Ratio), typically determined as a limit set upon permitted concentration. An FAR of 2, for instance, allows a developer to build a two-story building over an entire area, a four-story building on half the area, or an eight-story building on a quarter of the area. An FAR sets an average ceiling on urban development. It is essentially a bureaucratic device for deliberately stunting vertical growth.

As Glaeser shows, Mumbai's urban development problems have been all-but-inevitable given the quite ludicrous FAR of 1.33 that was set for India's commercial capital in 1964. Sprawling slum development has been the entirely predictable outcome.

Whilst sparring with Jane Jacobs over the impact of high-rise construction on urban life, Glaeser is ultimately in agreement on the importance of organic development, based on spontaneous patterns of growth. Both attribute the most ruinous urban problems to policy errors, most obviously the attempt to channel – and in fact deform – the urban process through arrogant bureaucratic fiat. When cities fail to do what comes naturally, they fail, and what comes naturally, Glaeser argues, is densification.

It would be elegant to refer to this deep trend towards social

compression, the emergence, growth, and intensification of urban settlement, as urbanization, but we can't do that. Even when awkwardly named, however, it exposes a profound social and historical reality, with striking implications, amounting almost to a specifically social law of gravitation. As with physical gravity, an understanding of the forces of social attraction support predictions, or at least the broad outlines of futuristic anticipation, since these forces of agglomeration and intensification manifestly shape the future.

John M. Smart makes only passing references to cities, but his Developmental Singularity (DS) hypothesis is especially relevant to urban theory because it focuses upon the topic of density. He argues that acceleration, or time-compression, is only one aspect of a general evolutionary (more precisely, evolutionary-developmental, or 'evo devo') trend that envelops space, time, energy, and mass. This 'STEM-compression' is identified with ascending intelligence (and negative entropy). It reflects a deep cosmic-historical drive to the augmentation of computational capacity that marries "*evolutionary processes* that are stochastic, creative, and divergent [with] *developmental processes* that produce statistically predictable, robust, conservative, and convergent structures and trajectories."

Smart notes that "the leading edge of structural complexity in our universe has apparently transitioned from universally distributed early matter, to galaxies, to replicating stars within galaxies, to solar

systems in galactic habitable zones, to life on special planets in those zones, to higher life within the surface biomass, to cities, and soon, to intelligent technology, which will be a vastly more local subset of Earth's city space."

Audaciously, Smart projects this trend to its limit: "Current research (Aaronson 2006, 2008) now suggests that building future computers based on quantum theory, one of the two great theories of 20th century physics, will not yield exponentially, but only *quadratically* growing computational capacity over today's classical computing. In the search for truly disruptive future computational capacity emergence, we can therefore look to the second great physical theory of the last century, relativity. If the DS hypothesis is correct, what we can call relativistic computing (a black-hole-approximating computing substrate) will be the final common attractor for all successfully developing universal civilizations."

Conceive the histories of cities, therefore, as the initial segments of trajectories that curve asymptotically to infinite density, at the ultimate event horizon of the physical universe. The beginning is recorded fact and the end is quite literally 'gone', but what lies in between, i.e. next?

April 15, 2011

Implosion

We could be on the brink of a catastrophic implosion – but that's OK

Science fiction has tended to extroversion. In America especially, where it found a natural home among an unusually future-oriented people, the iconic SF object was indisputably the space ship, departing the confines of Earth for untrammeled frontiers. The future was measured by the weakening of the terrestrial gravity well.

Cyberpunk, arriving in the mid-1980s, delivered a cultural shock. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* still included some (Earth-orbital) space activity – and even a communication from Alpha Centauri — but its voyages now curved into the inner space of computer systems, projected through the starless tracts of Cyberspace. Interstellar communication bypassed biological species, and took place between planetary artificial intelligences. The United States of America seemed to have disappeared.

Space and time had collapsed, into the 'cyberspace matrix' and the near-future. Even the abstract distances of social utopianism had been incinerated in the processing cores of micro-electronics. Judged by the criteria of mainstream science fiction, everything cyberpunk touched upon was gratingly close, and still closing in. The future had become imminent, and skin-tight.

Gibson's cities had not kept up with his wider – or narrower –

vision. The urban spaces of his East Coast North America were still described as 'The Sprawl', as if stranded in a rapidly-obsolescing state of extension. The crushing forces of technological compression had leapt beyond social geography, sucking all historical animation from the decaying husks of 'meat space'. Buildings were relics, bypassed by the leading edge of change.

(Gibson's Asian city-references are, however, far more intense, inspired by such innovations in urban compression as the Kowloon Walled City, and Japanese 'coffin hotels'. In addition, Urbanists disappointed by first-wave cyberpunk have every reason to continue on into *Spook Country*, where the influence of GPS-technology on the re-animation of urban space nourishes highly fertile speculations.)

Star cruisers and alien civilizations belong to the same science fiction constellation, brought together by the assumption of expansionism. Just as, in the realm of fiction, this 'space opera' future collapsed into cyberpunk, in (more or less) mainstream science – represented by SETI programs – it perished in the desert of the Fermi Paradox. (OK, it's true, Urban Future has a bizarrely nerdish obsession with this topic.)

John M. Smart's solution to the Fermi Paradox is integral to his broader 'Speculations on Cosmic Culture' and emerges naturally from compressive development. Advanced intelligences do not expand into space, colonizing vast galactic tracts or dispersing self-

replicating robot probes in a program of exploration. Instead, they implode, in a process of 'transcension' — resourcing themselves primarily through the hyper-exponential efficiency gains of extreme miniaturization (through micro- and nano- to femto-scale engineering, of subatomic functional components). Such cultures or civilizations, nucleated upon self-augmenting technological intelligence, emigrate from the extensive universe in the direction of abysmal intensity, crushing themselves to near-black-hole densities at the edge of physical possibility. Through transcension, they withdraw from extensive communication (whilst, perhaps, leaving 'radio fossils' behind, before these blink-out into the silence of cosmic escape).

If Smart's speculations capture the basic outlines of a density-attracted developmental system, then cities should be expected to follow a comparable path, characterized by an escape into inwardness, an interior voyage, involution, or implosion. Approaching singularity on an accelerating trajectory, each city becomes increasingly inwardly directed, as it falls prey to the irresistible attraction of its own hyperbolic intensification, whilst the outside world fades to irrelevant static. Things disappear into cities, on a path of departure from the world. Their destination cannot be described within the dimensions of the known – and, indeed, tediously over-familiar – universe. Only in the deep exploratory interior is innovation still occurring, but there it takes place at an

infernal, time-melting rate.

What might Smart-type urban development suggest?

(a) Devo Predictability. If urban development is neither randomly generated by internal processes, nor arbitrarily determined by external decisions, but rather guided predominantly by a developmental attractor (defined primarily by intensification), it follows that the future of cities is at least partially autonomous in regards to the national-political, global-economic, and cultural-architectural influences that are often invoked as fundamentally explanatory. Urbanism can be facilitated or frustrated, but its principal 'goals' and practical development paths are, in each individual case, internally and automatically generated. When a city 'works' it is not because it conforms to an external, debatable ideal, but rather because it has found a route to cumulative intensification that strongly projects its 'own', singular and intrinsic, urban character. What a city wants is to become itself, but more — taking itself further and faster. That alone is urban flourishing, and understanding it is the key that unlocks the shape of any city's future.

(b) Metropolitanism. Methodological nationalism has been systematically over-emphasized in the social sciences (and not only at the expense of methodological individualism). A variety of influential urban thinkers, from Jane Jacobs to Peter Hall, have sought to correct this bias by focusing upon the significance, and partial autonomy, of urban economies, urban cultures, and municipal

politics to aggregate prosperity, civilization, and golden ages. They have been right to do so. City growth is the basic socio-historical phenomenon.

(c) Cultural Introversion. John Smart argues that an intelligence undergoing advanced relativistic development finds the external landscape increasingly uninformative and non-absorbing. The search for cognitive stimulation draws it inwards. As urban cultures evolve, through accelerating social complexity, they can be expected to manifest exactly this pattern. Their internal processes, of runaway intelligence implosion, become ever more gripping, engaging, surprising, productive, and educational, whilst the wider cultural landscape subsides into predictable tedium, of merely ethnographic and historical relevance. Cultural singularity becomes increasingly urban-futural (rather than ethno-historical), to the predictable disgruntlement of traditional nation states. Like Gibson's Terrestrial Cyberspace, encountering another of its kind in orbit around Alpha Centauri, cosmopolitan connectivity is made through inner voyage, rather than expansionary outreach.

(d) Scale Resonance. At the most abstract level, the relation between urbanism and microelectronics is scalar (fractal). The coming computers are closer to miniature cities than to artificial brains, dominated by traffic problems (congestion), migration / communications, zoning issues (mixed use), the engineering potential of new materials, questions of dimensionality (3D solutions

to density constraints), entropy or heat / waste dissipation (recycling / reversible computation), and disease control (new viruses). Because cities, like computers, exhibit (accelerating phylogenetic) development within observable historical time, they provide a realistic model of improvement for compact information-processing machinery, sedimented as a series of practical solutions to the problem of relentless intensification. Brain-emulation might be considered an important computational goal, but it is near-useless as a developmental model. Intelligent microelectronic technologies contribute to the open-ended process of urban problem-solving, but they also recapitulate it at a new level.

(e) Urban Matrix. Does urban development exhibit the real embryogenesis of artificial intelligence? Rather than the global Internet, military Skynet, or lab-based AI program, is it the path of the city, based on accelerating intensification (STEM compression), that best provides the conditions for emergent super-human computation? Perhaps the main reason for thinking so is that the problem of the city – density management and accentuation – already commits it to computational engineering, in advance of any deliberately guided research. The city, by its very nature, compresses, or intensifies, towards computronium. When the first AI speaks, it might be in the name of the city that it identifies as its body, although even that would be little more than a 'radio fossil' — a signal announcing the brink of silence — as the path of implosion deepens,

and disappears into the alien interior.

April 29, 2011

Scaly Creatures

Cities are accelerators and there are solid numbers to demonstrate it

Among the most memorable features of Shanghai's 2010 World Expo was the quintet of 'Theme Pavilions' designed to facilitate exploration of the city in general (in keeping with the urban-oriented theme of the event: 'Better City, Better Life'). Whilst many international participants succumbed to facile populism in their national pavilions, these Theme Pavilions maintained an impressively high-minded tone.

Most remarkable of all for philosophical penetration was the Urban Being Pavilion, with its exhibition devoted to the question: what kind of thing is a city? Infrastructural networks received especially focused scrutiny. Pipes, cables, conduits, and transport arteries compose intuitively identifiable systems – higher-level wholes – that strongly indicate the existence of an individualized, complex being. The conclusion was starkly inescapable: a city is more than just an aggregated mass. It is a singular, coherent entity,

deserving of its proper – even personal – name, and not unreasonably conceived as a composite 'life-form' (if not exactly an 'organism').

Such intuitions, however plausible, do not suffice in themselves to establish the city as a rigorously-defined scientific object. "[D]espite much historical evidence that cities are the principle engines of innovation and economic growth, a quantitative, predictive theory for understanding their dynamics and organization and estimating their future trajectory and stability remains elusive," remark Luís M. A. Bettencourt, José Lobo, Dirk Helbing, Christian Kühnert, and Geoffrey B. West, in their prelude to a 2007 paper that has done more than any other to remedy the deficit: 'Growth, innovation, scaling, and the pace of life in cities'.

In this paper, the authors identify mathematical patterns that are at once distinctive to the urban phenomenon and generally applicable to it. They thus isolate the object of an emerging urban science, and outline its initial features, claiming that: "the social organization and dynamics relating urbanization to economic development and knowledge creation, among other social activities, are very general and appear as nontrivial quantitative regularities common to all cities, across urban systems."

Noting that cities have often been analogized to biological systems, the paper extracts the principle supporting the comparison. "Remarkably, almost all physiological characteristics of biological

organisms scale with body mass … as a power law whose exponent is typically a multiple of 1/4 (which generalizes to 1/(d +1) in d-dimensions)." These relatively stable scaling relations allow biological features, such as metabolic rates, life spans, and maturation periods, to be anticipated with a high-level of confidence given body mass alone. Furthermore, they conform to an elegant series of theoretical expectations that draw upon nothing beyond the abstract organizational constraints of n-dimensional space:

> "Highly complex, self-sustaining structures, whether cells, organisms, or cities, require close integration of enormous numbers of constituent units that need efficient servicing. To accomplish this integration, life at all scales is sustained by optimized, space-filling, hierarchical branching networks, which grow with the size of the organism as uniquely specified approximately self-similar structures. Because these networks, e.g., the vascular systems of animals and plants, determine the rates at which energy is delivered to functional terminal units (cells), they set the pace of physiological processes as scaling functions of the size of the organism. Thus, the self-similar nature of resource distribution networks, common to all organisms, provides the basis for a quantitative, predictive theory of biological structure and dynamics, despite much external variation in

appearance and form."

If cities are in certain respects meta- or super-organisms, however, they are also the inverse. Metabolically, cities are anti-organisms. As biological systems scale up, they slow down, at a mathematically predictable rate. Cities, in contrast, accelerate as they grow. Something approximating to the fundamental law of urban reality is thus exposed: larger is faster.

The paper quantifies its findings, based on a substantial base of city data (with US cities over-represented), by specifying a 'scaling exponent' (or 'ß', beta) that defines the regular correlation between urban scale and the factor under consideration.

A beta of one corresponds to linear correlation (of a variable to city size). For instance, housing supply, which remains constantly proportional to population across all urban scales, is found – unsurprisingly – to have ß = 1.00.

A beta of less than one indicates consistent economy to scale. Such economies are found systematically among urban resource networks, exemplified by gasoline stations (ß = 0.77), gasoline sales (ß = 0.79), length of electrical cables (ß = 0.87), and road surface (ß = 0.83). The sub-linear correlation of resource costs to urban scale makes city life increasingly efficient as metropolitan intensity soars.

A beta of greater than one indicates increasing returns to scale. Factors exhibiting this pattern include inventiveness (e.g. 'new

patents'ß = 1.27, 'inventors' ß = 1.25), wealth creation (e.g. 'GDP' ß = 1.15, wages ß = 1.12), but also disease ('new AIDS cases' ß = 1.23), and serious crimes (ß = 1.16). Urban growth is accompanied by a super-linear rise in opportunity for social interaction, whether productive, infectious, or malicious. More is not only better, it's *much* better (and, in some respects, worse).

> "Our analysis suggests uniquely human social dynamics that transcend biology and redefine metaphors of urban 'metabolism'. Open-ended wealth and knowledge creation require the pace of life to increase with organization size and for individuals and institutions to adapt at a continually accelerating rate to avoid stagnation or potential crises. These conclusions very likely generalize to other social organizations, such as corporations and businesses, potentially explaining why continuous growth necessitates an accelerating treadmill of dynamical cycles of innovation."

Bigger city, faster life.

May 5, 2011

Edward Glaeser on Triumph of the City

that's Shanghai interviews the world's most topical urbanist

Shanghai isn't one of the featured cities in your book. It's massive and massively high-rise. Did you ever consider writing about it?

Shanghai is one of the world's great cities, but I don't know the city well enough to write about it. I hope to get to know the city better and feature Shanghai's successes in some later work.

China is a place where cities have grown incredibly quickly and there's been a massive exodus from the countryside to urban life. What do you think China's cities should focus on as they grow?

Cities, today, succeed as forges of human capital and engines of innovation. China clearly recognizes this and is investing massively in education. That should continue. Just as importantly, China needs to focus on fostering more entrepreneurship by eliminating any remaining barriers to small start-ups.

You talk about how cities should be seen as "masses of connected humanity," rather than agglomerations of buildings. Do you think this is well understood at this point, or are too many places still attempting to "build their way back to success"?

Unfortunately, too often political leaders try to garner headlines with a splashy new structure. The key is to focus on those infrastructure investments that will really benefit the people in the

city.

Are you optimistic about city planners around the world finding the balance between Paris and Mumbai, i.e. between Haussman-style central planning that risks sterility and a chaotic free-for-all?

That's the 10 trillion dollar question. I wish I could be more optimistic, but city planning is hard and many governments are either unable to manage chaos or too inclined to central control. This requires not just knowledge but political strength and that's a rare combination.

Which cities around the world are getting it right? Which aren't?

I believe that Singapore is the best-managed city in the world – good schools, a superb transportation policy, and a sensible approach to regulation. But Hong Kong is also quite impressive, and I personally prefer it's somewhat more chaotic style.

The west has many urban powerhouses, but few of them are really models of perfect management. For example, I am a big fan of Mayor Menino in Boston, but despite more than 15 years of hard work, Boston's schools are still struggling.

Obviously, Barcelona, Paris, and Milan are all lovely, wonderful cities, but they are not necessarily models of good management.

You're cautiously optimistic in your book, but what worries you most about the future of the city?

The biggest challenges are in the mega-cities of the developing world, especially Africa. We are a very long way from providing even

the core essentially like clean water in many places.

In the US, we have huge problems of fiscal mismanagement that need to be addressed. Moreover, there is always the possibility of really major physical disasters – either natural or man-made.

Is there any way around the fact that the most vibrant cities also become the most expensive – or, as you say in the book, is this simply the price of good urban health?

The laws of supply and demand cannot be repealed. If a city is attractive and productive, demand for its real estate will be high. The best antidote for that is abundant supply, but it is a mistake to subsidize urban housing. The best path towards greater affordability comes from private housing construction that is regulated only as much as is absolutely necessary. Still, building up can be expensive and that will always make prices in successful cities more expensive.

By functioning as engines of economic opportunity and as refuges, cities tend to concentrate economic disparity. Do you think a case might be made that such inequalities could be interpreted as a symptom of urban success? Might you be subtly suggesting this in your own work?

I am suggesting just that. National inequality can be a real problem, but local inequality can be a sign of health. Cities don't typically make people poor they attract poor people. The inequality of a city reflects the fact that it attracts rich and poor alike, and that's something to admire.

How can cities strive to control inequality and avoid ghettos of rich and poor? Should they even be trying to?

Education is the best weapon against inequality. Cities should be striving to make sure that the children of every parent have a chance of being successful.

Some degree of stratification by income is inevitable, but segregation can be quite costly because such separations mean that isolated people lose the urban advantages of connection. There aren't great tools for reducing segregation, but governments should make sure that their policies do not exacerbate segregation.

Geoffrey West at the Santa Fe Institute has been studying cities as 'complex systems' and identified a number of reliable and quantifiable patterns on this basis. Do you find this type of analysis informative or relevant to your work?

Cities are indeed complex systems.

Even in the modern world, with nationalism ascendant, city states seem to be unusually successful. Do cities provide a challenge to dominant conceptions of large-scale political organization? How do you rate the prospects of devolutionary politics, with a municipal emphasis?

I don't think that nation-states will be likely to surrender all that much power, and cities can remain economically dominant but politically weak. The path in the US has continued to be towards more, not less, national power and I think that is probably a mistake.

In many cases – such as Mumbai – local choices would surely be better than the choices imposed on cities by above.

Other than your own work, who do you consider to be the most important writers on cities today?

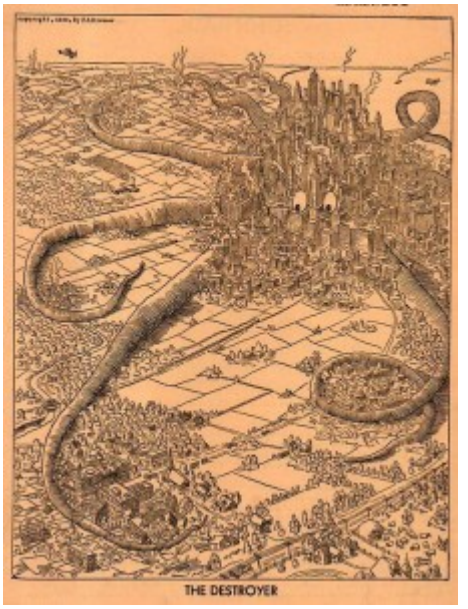
I deeply admire the Columbia historian Kenneth Jackson.

June 20, 2011

Our Cause

"So, what is *Urban Future* about, really?"

Basically this:



(That's what mail-order capitalism seemed to threaten in the

1939. The cephalocommercial monstrosity has to have become far more tentacular since. Image via @SlateVault.)

May 15, 2014

The Urban Factor

Project Syndicate linked to this (2011) McKinsey study of urban contribution to world GDP. The top bullet-point take-away: "only 600 urban centers generate about 60 percent of global GDP." Yet, because cities, as nodes in a global economic network, are distributed by a power law, any picture drawn by the top 600 urban centers tends to strongly de-dramatize the reality.

Wikipedia has a helpful table of world cities with a variety of GDP estimates. (The Brookings Institute figures are the most complete, and also the most generous.) From these it can be seen that Tokyo, on its own, accounts for almost 2% of world GDP. The world's 10 most productive cities — Chicago, London, Los Angeles, Moscow, New York, Osaka/Kobe, Paris, Seoul, Shanghai, and Tokyo — account for roughly 10% of total global economic output between them. The next thirty cities together do not quite double this figure, and from then on, the contribution of each city added dwindles rapidly.

McKinsey estimates the economic weight of the world's "23 megacities — with populations of 10 million or more" somewhat

more modestly, at 14% of global GDP. It expects them to contribute no more than 10% of global growth through to 2025, while: "In contrast, 577 middleweights — cities with populations of between 150,000 and 10 million, are seen contributing more than half of global growth to 2025, gaining share from today's megacities. By 2025, 13 middleweights are likely to be have become megacities, 12 of which are in emerging-markets (the exception is Chicago) and seven in China alone."

UF anticipates that the combination of continued urban agglomeration and economic concentration will tend to steepen the distribution, but the secular shift of economic gravity from West to East will dampen this pattern in the short-medium term. If, by mid-century, there is not a single Chinese economic center accounting for more than 3% of total global economic production, all our expectations about the world will have been proven wrong.

ADDED: A mid-century prediction isn't very audacious, but it's timidity is drawn from an important pattern of change. The world's two most productive cities, by far, are Tokyo and New York, and both are likely to see their relative contribution to global GDP shrink substantially over coming decades. In consequence, the near-term shifts in the distribution of economic activity will appear as a dilution, until a new 'capital' of world commerce emerges — in a process that can be expected to take at least 20 years.

ADDED: An urbanization update from Reuters, linking to some

cleargraphics).

July 10, 2014

Urban Defense

There's an easy solution to the 'tragedy of the commons' — abolish the commons. It works in cities too.

Warning: such policies can produce an upsetting vibrancy deficit, by deterring vagrants and panhandlers from participating in street life within your urban enclave.

Liberal comment on the Neocameral City: "It was impressive in its own way, I guess, but I was deeply distressed about the absence of bums."

February 22, 2015

London



Gentrification is the topic everyone is discussing, with the systematic pricing-out of problem populations (to provincial demographic dump-zones) as the scandal no one in polite society can admit to any ambivalence about. It's unspeakable, of course, especially since it is making the place so much nicer. An undertow of London secessionist rumor — straight out of *The Peripheral* — adds to the dark buzz. Also crucial is the "best horse in the glue-factory" dividend from the implosion of continental Europe. Overall, then, a vortical collapse dynamic of far more intriguing ambiguity than expected by the civilizational exiles here at *Outside in*.

… And overlooking the process (at Marble Arch): the 'She-Guardian' — make of her what you will.

June 26, 2015

London II

Surreptitiously recorded commentary on The Thing:

"It's started to spread from … to …"

"You see some remnants of the housing estate people around, and they really seem as if they're from another century…"

"Of course, the Conservative government is not going to do anything to stop what is happening …"

"There are still islands of social housing …"

June 27, 2015

Parametrics and Provocation

This is from April last year (but I've only just found it). It's quite amazing how many lines intersect in it:

Both Schumacher's and Hadid's language propose an architecture that's "above" trivial moral and political hand-wringing, like worker's rights. Peggy Dreamer, in a recent CalArts panel, described

Schumacher's style as "über-form," meaning that it takes on the aesthetic of the universal and inevitable in order to create icons of an imaginary future. And ***that*** *is what China and the Emirates are buying — the Seoul Design Park, Galaxy SOHO, Guangzhou Opera House, the 2022 Qatar World Cup Stadium. These are icons of future cities, not current ones.*

The reason it's here, now, though is to add some framing for this Patrik Schumacher talk, which I was politely asked (on Twitter) to trigger a *Xenosystems* conversation about it. While I'm in no position to directly wire-head XS readers, it looks stimulating to me. (There isn't much capitalistic historical materialism about.)

> @cryptosentiment seeking an @Outsideness comment section analysis of "Patrik Schumacher. In defence of capitalism" https://t.co/T7hMCOPXXR
>
> — Crypto Sentiment (@cryptosentiment) November 21, 2015

November 22, 2015

Free Cities



The *Free Cities Initiative: Let A Thousand Cities Bloom* (here). In every way an excellent thing to be happening, and crucially aligned with the deep planetary current.

This is the idea:

What is new about free cities is not the policies they will likely implement, but the manner in which those policies are implemented.

The traditional model is that the nation state creates a legal baseline. Cities and towns can add to that baseline, increasing taxes or regulatory requirements for example, but not opt out of it. A special economic zone is an institutional arrangement which allows territories to opt out of aspects of the institutional baseline. […] A free city is an institutional arrangement which allows a territory to opt out of most aspects of the institutional baseline. In recent history, this is a radical change. However, it is a radical change necessary to import good institutions; rule of law, property rights, and economic freedom. We already know what works. Free cities offer a path to get there.

And this is the trend:

… free cities are by and large inevitable. … Two trends, which are not yet common knowledge, point to the emergence of free cities. Those trends are the creation of special economic zones (SEZs) and new cities. … SEZs are forerunners to free cities, they are pockets of autonomy where certain national laws and regulations do not apply. Of course, they differ in several important aspects. First, SEZs are typically small, rarely encompassing a city. Second, the autonomy for most SEZs is relatively minor. Such autonomy might encompass lower taxes or expedited customs, but does not represent a new legal system, merely slight alterations to the existing one. […] Nevertheless, SEZs represent something of a challenge to the traditional notion of a nation state, an area where a sovereign body

sets the baseline legal standard. As such, it is reasonable to suggest that the number and trend of SEZs is roughly correlated with the likelihood of building a free city. A world where minor autonomy is acceptable is more likely to accept major autonomy than a world where no autonomy is acceptable. […] The trends of SEZs suggest that autonomy is becoming increasingly acceptable. …

June 16, 2016

Modernity's Fertility Problem

The techno-commercial wing of the neoreactionary blogosphere has an obvious fondness for Pacific Rim city states. Singapore, along with Hong Kong (a PRC 'Special Administrative Region' which retains significant trappings of autonomy), are regularly invoked as socio-political models. The striking difference between the two societies only confirms the merits of what they share. "If you love minimal democracy capitalist enclaves so much, why not move to Singapore (or Hong Kong)?" is a notably ineffective challenge to this constituency. Those who haven't already fled there – or somewhere else that is in important respects comparable – can only see the prospect of such an exile as a tempting invitation. It's not quite "Go to heaven!" but it's as close as political polemic gets. The asymmetry is decisive. Unlike any concrete approximation to a left-utopian social

model that has ever been available, these are societies that incontestably work, with attractions that require no active propaganda operation to support. The right rises because – unlike its enemies – it can find examples of what it admires that aren't agonizingly embarrassing upon close inspection. Seriously, be our guests and look more attentively. The details are even more impressive than the dazzling general impression. This would be a great place to stop, but instead…

…in March 2013, dissident right blogger 'Spandrell' put up a short post on his abrasive but consistently brilliant *Bloody Shovel* site that messed up the narrative in a way that has yet to be persuasively addressed. Entitled 'Et tu, Harry?,' it placed the Singapore miracle in a disconcerting context. Rather than harmonizing with neoreactionary celebrations of the city state's unapologetically selective immigration policy, Spandrell asks:

> How many bright Indians and bright Chinese are there, Harry? Surely they are not infinite. And what will they do in Singapore? Well, engage in the finance and marketing rat-race and depress their fertility to 0.78, wasting valuable genes just so your property prices don't go down. Singapore is an IQ shredder.

The accusation is acute, and can be generalized. Modernity has a

fertility problem. When elevated to the zenith of savage irony, the formulation runs: At the demographic level, modernity selects systematically against modern populations. The people it prefers, it consumes. Without gross exaggeration, this endogenous tendency can be seen as an existential risk to the modern world. It threatens to bring the entire global order crashing down around it.

In order to discuss this implicit catastrophe, it's first necessary to talk about cities, which is a conversation that has already begun. To state the problem crudely, but with confidence: Cities are population sinks. Historian William McNeil explains the basics. Urbanization, from its origins, has tended relentlessly to convert children from productive assets into objects of luxury consumption. All of the archaic economic incentives related to fertility are inverted.

McNeil summarizes his argument in an online essay considering 'Cities and their Consequences':

> Intensified exposure to infectious disease was the traditional reason why cities did not reproduce themselves. […] But it is the cost of raising children in all urban environments, not disease, that best explains why urban populations generally decline without immigrants from rural areas. Wherever adults go off to work in factories, shops and offices, and small children are not allowed to accompany them, who looks after the young? How can they be readied for gainful employment?

> Public education and pre-schooling are seldom available in urban slums, particularly outside Western countries, but occasionally even within them, too. Grandmothers and elderly neighbors can sometimes do the job, but extended family coherence is not as prevalent in cities, and often such caregivers are not available. Professionals of various descriptions must then be found. That renders the cost of children's upkeep high, and the nurturing that such professionals usually offer rarely matches their large fees. […] Even as children are more expensive in cities, they are less economically useful at an early age. There are few berries to be picked, no small domesticated animals to herd. There is a much longer wait until children can begin to contribute to family income in urban settings.

Education expenses alone explain much of this. School fees are by far the most effective contraceptive technology ever conceived. To raise a child in an urban environment is like nothing that rural precedent ever prepared for. Even if *responsible parenting* were the sole motivation in play, the compressive effect on family size would be extreme. Under urban circumstances, it becomes almost an aggression against one's own children for there to be many of them. But there is much more than this going on.

Recognition of the modern fertility crisis and the 'far right' –

whether in its 'misogynistic' or its 'racist' strains – are not easily distinguishable. The egalitarian axiom, as applied to gender or to ethnicity, comes under critical strain as the topic is pursued. A general theory of the post-conservative right would be productively initiated here.

Feminism has been the first, inevitable target. It is tightly correlated with the collapse of fertility, and is something modernity tends (strongly) to promote. The expansion of female social opportunities beyond obligate child-rearing could scarcely lead anywhere other than to a drastic contraction of family size. The inexorable modern trend to social decoding – i.e. to the production of an abstract contractual agency in the place of concretely determined persons – makes the explosion of such opportunities apparently uncontainable. The individualism fostered by urban life might, to the counter-factual imagination, have been in some way restricted to males, but as a matter of actual historical fact the dereliction of traditional social roles has proceeded without serious limitation, with variation in speed, but no indication of alternative direction. The radically decoded Internet persona – optionally anonymous, fabricated, and self-defining – seems no more than an extrapolation from the emergent norms of urban existence. Feminist assumptions, at least in their 'first-wave,' liberal form, are integral to the modern city.

Religious traditionalist lamentations in this regard are, of course,

nothing new. Christianity – especially under Catholic inspiration – has connected modernity to sterility for as long as modernity has been noticed. A number of crucial factors have nevertheless changed. Since the early years of the new millennium, secular liberals have begun to notice the connection between religiosity and fertility, and to express gathering concern about its partisan political consequences. In a 2009 paper, Sarah R. Hayford and S. Philip Morgan discuss the transition from a traditional discussion of the topic, focused upon differential Catholic and Protestant fertility, to its contemporary mode, subsequent to the convergence of denominational differences, and now mapping more closely onto red / blue state partisan affiliations. Their abstract is worth citing (almost) in full:

> Using data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), we show that women who report that religion is "very important" in their everyday life have both higher fertility and higher intended fertility than those saying religion is "somewhat important" or "not important." Factors such as unwanted fertility, age at childbearing, or degree of fertility postponement seem not to contribute to religiosity differentials in fertility. This answer prompts more fundamental questions: what is the nature of this greater "religiosity"? And why do the more religious want more

> children? We show that those saying religion is more important have more traditional gender and family attitudes and that these attitudinal differences account for a substantial part of the fertility differential.

"Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?" asked Eric Kaufmann in a 2010 book with that name. A peculiar twist in the Darwinian inheritance had begun to bring the heritability of religious attitudes into prominence, and linking it (positively) to the question of reproductive fitness. Those groups previously seen as having been unambiguously vanquished by a triumphant evolutionary science were now subject to an ironic – and from the progressive perspective deeply sinister – evolutionary vindication. This is a story that has still scarcely begun to unfold.

A parallel development, compounding the commitment of cultural modernity to imperative sterility, has been the efflorescence of LGBTQXYZ sexual identity politics. Following the decisive progressive victory in the cause of gay marriage, something like a Cambrian Explosion in non-traditional sexual and gender orientations has occurred, turbo-charging the pre-existing feminist critique of normative reproductive sexuality. Here, too, the affinity with profound modernistic inclinations is unmistakable, in a process of introjected brand and niche specialization. The tendency – often supported as an explicit political strategy – is to invert the terms

of marginalization, by drowning the reproductive family unit within a hyper-inflated menu of socio-libidinal positions. Fertility is increasingly identified as a conservative eccentricity, legitimately targeted by partisan political warfare. Intense backlash has been among the results (providing fertile ground for the post-conciliatory 'far right').

Oh, but there's more. The truly great transition, implicit in the process of modernity from the start, is marked by the threshold between *domestic* and *global* urbanization. Major cities have always been distinctively cosmopolitan, but for the initial phase of their histories the bulk of their demographic absorption has been limited to their own ethnic hinterlands. *Urbanization* meant, first of all, the conversion of rural populations into city dwellers. In the developing world, it still means this. In the most advanced modern societies, however, domestic rural populations were almost fully consumed, reduced to some negligible fraction of the national total. After this point, the process of population replacement intrinsic to the urban phenomenon from its beginning became inextricably bound to globalization, and trans-national migration flows. Now – which really is *now* – things get interesting.

Politics, by prophetic etymology, is about cities. The inevitability of an emergent 'Alt-Right' in the mass politics of advanced modern societies is already fully predictable from a minimal understanding of how cities work. It is simple delusion to imagine that mere

contingency rules here, perhaps under the guidance of particular political personalities. Rather, the urban metabolism – essentially – at a certain phase of its development, generates circumstances overwhelmingly conducive to the eruption of popular ethno-politics. Cities are demographic parasites. They trend intrinsically to a dynamic that – beyond a comparatively definite threshold – *cannot fail to be perceived as a systematic policy of ethnic replacement*.

There is still much hope of coaxing toothpaste back into its tubes. In other words, there is a massive failure to appreciate the profundity and magnitude of the processes underlying the current global crisis. For instance, the incendiary language of migration-driven 'genocide' is not going away. It is bound, on the contrary, to spread, and intensify. The re-emergence of the race topic, and all of its associates, is deeply baked into the modernist cake. Comparative modernity is automatically racialized once global metabolism lends differential (urban/rural) fertility its ethnic specificity. What is unfolding, among other things, is the racial disaggregation of the 'population bomb,' with drastic inevitability. This is not a product of intellectuals, but of the modern process inherently, and all attempts by intellectuals to obstruct its cultural condensation are hubristically misconceived. "Who, actually, is having kids?" It is a species of insanity to think this question can be strangled in the crib.

So, what's the answer? Does the Alt-Right have one? If so, there's been no sign of it yet. "Burn the cities to the ground" has been floated

on Twitter, and no doubt elsewhere, but it doesn't seem obviously practical. That solution has a rich – and especially East Asian – communist pedigree, which the Alt-Right will probably rediscover at some point. It didn't work out in the 1970s, and would be unlikely to perform any more convincingly today.

As the crisis escalates, it can be expected to generate a thread of novel political theory oriented to the question: *How do we make practical and technical sense of social solution searches in general?* Such thinking is going to be necessary. Our great cities pose an ultimate political problem. Eventually, something will be grateful for that.

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Notes:

William McNeil, 'Cities and their Consequences'

Sarah R. Hayford and S. Philip Morgan, 'Religiosity and Fertility in the United States: The Role of Fertility Intentions'

June 20, 2017

BLOCK 2 - TEMPLEXITY

Time in Transition

There has to be a hexagram for this

Isaac Newton's *Philosophae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* abstracted time from events, establishing its tractability to scientific calculation. Conceived as pure, absolute duration, without qualities, it conforms perfectly to its mathematical idealization (as the real number line). Since time is already pure, its reality indistinguishable from its formalization, a pure mathematics of change – the calculus – can be applied to physical reality without obstruction. The calculus can exactly describe things as they occur in themselves, without straying, even infinitesimally, from the rigorous dictates of formal intelligence. In this way natural philosophy becomes modern science.

(It is perhaps ironic that the Newtonian formulation of non-qualitative time coincides with a revolutionary break – or qualitative transition – that is perhaps unmatched in history. That, however, is a matter for another time.)

Modern science did not end with Newton. Time has since been relativized to velocity (Einstein) and punctured with catastrophes (Thom). Yet the qualities of time, once evacuated, cannot readily be restored.

Clock technology suffices to tell this story, on its own. Time 'keeping' devices *produce* a measure of duration, according to general principles of standardized mechanical production, so that a clock-marked minute is stripped of qualitative distinctness automatically. Chronometrically, any difference between one minute and another is a mechanical discrepancy, strictly analogous to a production line malfunction.

Time modernization culminates in an inversion of definition, eventually standardizing from a precisely reproducible building block (the atomic second), rather than accommodating itself to a large-scale natural cycle – qualified by variations of luminosity – which generates sub-units through division. Once the second has becomes entirely synthetic, all reference to a qualitative 'when' has been effaced. All that remains is quantitative comparison, timing, and synchronization, as if the time-piece was modeled upon the stop-watch. Calendars have become an anachronism.

Modern time intuitions would find plenty of support, even in the absence of mechanical chronometry. Every quantifiable trend, from a stock movement or an unemployment problem to a demographic pattern or an ecological disaster, can be communicated through charts that assume a popular facility at graphic intuition, and thus, implicitly, at algebraic geometry and even calculus. Time is so widely and easily identified with the x-axis of such charts that the principle of representation can be left unexplained, however strange this might have seemed to pre-moderns. Clearly, if time can be read-off from an axis – quickly and intuitively — it is being conceived, generally, as if it were a number line ('Newtonian').

Qualitative time, by now, is a scarcely-accessible exoticism. Nowhere is this more obvious that in the case of China's ancient Classic of Change, the *Yijing*, a work that is today no less hermetic to Chinese than it is to foreigners.

The *Yijing* is a book of numbers as much as a book on time, but its numbers are combinatorial rather than metric, exhausting a space of possibilities, and constructing a typology of times. The *Yijing* speaks often of quantities, but it does not measure them. Instead, it typologizes them, as processes of increase or decrease, rise and fall, lassitude and acceleration, typical of qualitative phases of recurrent cycles, with identifiable character and reliable practical implication.

The point of all this (just in case you were wondering)?

The current time is a period of transition, with a distinctive

quality, characterizing the end of an epoch. Something – some age – is coming quite rapidly to an end.

This is not a situation that the modern mentality is well-adapted to, since it violates certain essential structures of our time-consciousness. It eludes our intuitions and our clocks. Our charts register it only as a break-down, as they terminate the x-axis at a point of senseless infinity (hyperinflation, bubble stock p/e ratios, global derivatives exposure, urban intensity, technological intelligence explosion) or in a collapse to zero (marginal productivity of debt, fiat currency credibility, unit costs of self-replicating capital goods). The can clatters off the end of the road. Things cannot go on as they have, and they won't.

Given the heated political climate surrounding the impending transition of the global economic system, a non-controversial diagnosis is almost certainly unobtainable. Niall Ferguson describes an Age of Global Indignation, or Global Temper Tantrum, in which the objectively unsustainable nature of the established order, whilst widely if vaguely perceived, still eludes sober recognition. Riots, Molotov cocktails, and fabulous conspiracy theorizing are the result.

> "What all the Indignant have in common is the refusal to address squarely the problem that nearly all Western countries face. That problem is that the welfare systems that evolved in the mid-20th century are unaffordable under the

> demographic and economic circumstances of the 21st century. The financial crisis has merely exacerbated what was already a severe structural crisis of public finance, boosting deficits while slowing growth."

In all probability, Ferguson's blunt analysis will provoke further paroxysms of indignation. Yet, as the world's most pampered societies slide ever further into insolvency, such undiplomatic assessments will become ever more common, and the rage they inspire will become ever more unhinged.

John B Taylor emphasizes the senescence and death of Keynesian macroeconomics (drawing on the earlier work of Robert E Lucas and Thomas J Sargent). His research concludes that "the Keynsian multiplier for transfer payments or temporary tax rebates was not significantly different from zero for the kind of stimulus programs enacted in the 2000s." In other words, stimulus is ceasing to stimulate, and gargantuan public debts have been accumulated for no rational purpose. This is the 'debt saturation' that Joe Weisenthal describes as "a phase transition with our debt relationship" graphically portrayed in "the scariest [chart] of all time."

Between financial stimulus and chemical stimulus, there is no distinction of practical significance. Keynesianism and cocaine are both initially invigorating, before stabilizing into expensive habits that steadily lose effectiveness as addiction deepens. By the time

bankruptcy and mortality beckons, getting off the stimulus seems to be near-impossible. Better to crash and burn – or hope that something 'turns up' — than to suffer the agonies of withdrawal, which will feel like hell, and promises nothing more seductive than bare normality at the end of a dark road. Character decays into chronic deceit, intermittent rage, and maudlin self-pity. Nobody likes a junky, still less a junky civilization.

Keynesianism was born in deception – the deliberate exploitation of 'money illusion' for the purposes of economic management. Its effect on a political culture is deeply corrosive. Illusionism spreads throughout the social body, until the very ideas of hard currency (honest money) or balanced budgets (honest spending) are marginalized to a 'crankish' fringe and being 'politically realistic' has become synonymous with a more-or-less total denial of reality. To expect a Keynesian economic establishment to honestly confront its own failings is to laughably misunderstand the syndrome under discussion. A reign of lies is structurally incapable of 'coming clean' before it goes over the cliff (someone needs to do another Downfall-parody, on macroeconomics in the Fuehrer Bunker).

The long Keynesian coke-binge was what the West did with its side of globalization, and as it all comes apart — amidst political procrastination and furious street protests – a planetary reset of some kind is inevitable. The 'Chimerican' engine of post-colonial globalization requires a fundamental overhaul, if not a complete

replacement. The immense dynamism of the Chimerican Age, as well as its enduring achievements, have depended on systematic imbalances that have become patently unsustainable, and it is highly unlikely that all the negative consequences will have been confined to just one side of the world ledger.

For instance, China's soaring investment rate, estimated to have reached 70% of GDP, seems to have disconnected from any prospect of reasonable economic returns. Pivot Capital Management concludes: "credit growth in China has reached critical levels and its effectiveness at boosting growth is falling." For the PRC's fifth-generation leadership, scheduled to adopt responsibility for China's political management from 2012, inertia will not be an option. By then, a half-decade of global stimulus saturation, cascading macroeconomic malfunction and serial 'black swans' (the new millennium 'clusterflock') will have reshaped the world's financial architecture, trade patterns, and policy debates. Whatever comes next has to be something new, accompanied – at least momentarily – by genuine apprehension of economic reality.

For post-Expo Shanghai, a city stunningly rebuilt in the age of Chimerica, the time of transition is a matter of especially acute concern. This is a metropolis that waxes and wanes to the pulse of the world, rigidly tide-locked to the great surges and recessions of globalization. Will the next phase of world history treat it as well as the last?

July 13, 2011

A Time-Traveler's Guide to Shanghai (Part 1)

When did it all change?

There is a strange, time-fractured moment in the biopic *Deng Xiaoping* (2002, directed by Yinnan Ding). For most of its length, the film is sober, cautious, and respectful, exemplifying a didactic realism. It strictly conforms to the approved story of Deng's leadership and its meaning (exactly as it is found today in the nation's school textbooks). Beginning with Deng's ascent to power in the ruined China of the late-1970s, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, it follows the path of his decision-making, through the restoration (de-collectivization) of the rural economy, the re-habilitation of persecuted experts and intellectuals, and the beginning of the open-door policy, in Shenzhen, to the extension of market-oriented reform throughout the country, as symbolized by the opening of Shanghai.

Whilst clearly something of a carefully edited and precision-manufactured legend, this basic narrative of national regeneration, emancipation and growth – salvaged from the ashes of dead-end fanaticism and civilizational regression – is honest enough to inform, and even to inspire. It leaves no doubt that the 'meaning' of Deng

Xiaoping is openness and renaissance (at least ’70/30′), a judgment that is both popularly endorsed in China, and historically attested universally.

As the movie approaches its conclusion, however, pedestrian realism is suddenly supplanted by something entirely different, whether due to the ‘deeper’ realism of budgetary constraint, or the ‘higher’ realism of artistic serendipity. Deng Xiaoping, from the vantage point of a ‘yet’ (in 1992) inexistent bridge, gestures towards Pudong and announces the green-light for its developmental liberation. Yet, in the background of the scene, the deliriously developed Lujiazui of 2002 already soars, as if the skyline had been condensed from a pre-emptive vision, drawing its substance from the historical implication of his words. The future couldn’t wait.

Perhaps the speed of Shanghai’s Reform-era urban development has led everything to get ahead of itself, disordering the structure of time. The Oriental Pearl TV Tower – first architectural statement of the new Shanghai and still the most iconic – certainly suggests so. Retro-deposited into the Pudong of 1992 by the *Deng Xiaoping* movie, historically completed in 1994, symbolically heralding the promised Shanghai of the third millennium, architecturally side-stepping into a science fiction fantasy of the 1950s, alluding to poetic imagery from the Tang Dynasty, and containing a museum devoted to the city’s modern history in its pedestal, when, exactly, does this structure belong? It’s hard to know where to begin.

The Emporis profile of the Oriental Pearl TV Tower describes its architectural style as simply 'modernism', which is unobjectionable, but extraordinarily under-determining. If the modern defines itself through the present, conceived as a break from the past and a projection into the future, the Oriental Pearl TV Tower unquestionably installs itself in modernity, but only by way of an elaborate path. It reverts to the present from a discarded future, whilst excavating an unused future from the past.

Buildings that arrive in the present in this way are, strictly speaking, 'fabulous', and for this reason, they are considered disreputable by the dominant traditions of international architecture. The fables they feed upon belong to the popular culture of science fiction, which makes them over-expressive, vulgarly communicative, and rapidly dated. Insofar as their style is recognized generically, it is tagged by ugly and dismissive labels such as Googie, Populuxe, and Doo-Wop. By reaching out too eagerly for the future, it is tacitly suggested, one quickly comes to look ridiculous (although, today, neomodernists such as Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas are recuperating certain elements of this style more sympathetically).

Shanghai's Radisson Hotel, set back from the north of People's Square, is a quintessentially 'Googie' structure. It's space-ship top participates exuberantly in a Shanghai tradition of weird roof-elaborations, and echoes a formally-comparable — though far smaller — classical modern structure to the east, down Nanjing Lu.

The idea of high-rise rooftops as landing sites for flying vehicles, within a dynamic system of three-dimensional traffic, is a staple of ultramodernist speculation, whilst an alien arrival from a distant future is a transparent Shanghai fantasy.

In his path-breaking short story *The Gernsback Continuum*, William Gibson dubs this style 'Raygun Gothic', explicitly marking its time-complexity. He thus coaxes it into the wider cultural genre of retro-futurism, which applies to everything that evokes an out-dated future, and thereby transforms modernity into a counter-factual commentary on the present. This genre finds an especially rich hunting ground in Shanghai.

(This is the first post in a connected series on Shanghai's retro-future, departing from the Oriental Pearl TV Tower. An outline examination of retro-futurism itself comes next …)

July 22, 2011

A Time-Travelers Guide to Shanghai (Part 2)

Dark intimations of the time-rift

Shanghai's eclectic cityscape explores a variety of modernities simultaneously. The sheer scale of the city, exponentiated by its relentless dynamism, overflows the time-line.

During Shanghai's early- to mid-20th century high modernist epoch, for instance, the city's consolidating *haipai* culture was distinguished by the absence of a single core. It emerged, instead, as the outcome of loosely inter-articulated plural or parallel developments, including (but by no means limited to) the urban mores of a rising indigenous 'bourgeoisie', whose aspirational tributaries reached deep into the warrens of the *lilongs*; the hard accelerationism of the International Settlement business culture, dominated by near-limitless Shanghailander confidence in the city's global significance and potential; and the left-slanted literary and political trends fostered in the coffee shop salons of the French Concession, where *avant garde* ideas cross-pollinated promiscuously. This heterogeneous, fertile chaos found its architectural echoes in the juxtaposition of building styles, quantitatively dominated by Shanghai's native experiment in urban construction (the *lilong* block), but overawed in patches by Western neo-classical colonial edifices; Manhattanite cosmopolitan high-rises and Art Deco structures; bold adventures in Chinese modern designs (most prominently in Jiangwan); examples of proto-brutalist industrial and residential functionalism; and villas in a variety of international, hybrid, and advanced styles.

Since re-opening, in the early 1990s, Shanghai has added new ingredients to the mix, including its first major examples of construction indebted to the austere tenets of the International

Style (although large rectilinear structures are still, thankfully, a rarity); neo-traditional and ethno-exotic kitsch (especially in the Old City and the peripheral 'nine-towns' respectively); neomodernist re-animations of derelicted structures; and 'Googie' evocations of imagined futures.

Whilst the city's *modernization* has attained unprecedented velocity, however, its native *modernism* remains comparatively retarded. As an urban center in China, Shanghai's distinctiveness is far less marked than it was in the early 20th century. Once occupying an overwhelmingly commanding cultural position as the engine-room and icon of Chinese modernity, today it participates in a far more generalized process of Chinese development. Its internationalism, commercial prowess, and technology absorption are no longer obviously peerless within China, its domination of the publishing and movie industries has passed, its retail giants and innovative advertising have surrendered their uniqueness, and its intellectual bohemia is matched, or surpassed, in a number of other urban centers. Whilst *haipai* tenuously persists, its dynamism has diffused and its confidence attenuated.

If Shanghai has a specific and coherent urban cultural identity today, emerging out of its sprawling multiplicity, and counterbalancing the vastly strengthened sense of national identity consolidated since the foundation of the PRC, it cannot – like *haipai* before it – be derived from the continuity of the city's developmental

trend, or from an urban exceptionalism, feeding on the contrast with a conservative, stagnant, or regressive national hinterland. A thoroughly renovated Shanghainese culture, or *xin haipai*, is inextricably entangled with the city's historical discontinuity, or interruption, and with a broader Chinese national (or even civilizational) modernization that was anticipated by the 'Old Shanghai' and revives today as a futuristic memory.

The future that had seemed inevitable to the globalizing, technophilic, piratical capitalist Shanghai of the 1920s-'30s *went missing*, as the momentum accumulated over a century of accelerating modernization was untracked by aerial destruction, invasion, revolution, and agrarian-oriented national integration. As the city trod water during the command economy era, the virtual future inherent in its 'Golden Age' continued to haunt it, surviving spectrally as an obscure intuition of urban destiny. Upon re-opening, in the early 1990s, this alternative fate flooded back. Under these circumstances, futurism is immediately retro-futurism, since urban innovation is what was happening before, and invention is bound to a process of re-discovery. 'Renaissance' always means something of this kind (and cannot, of course, be reduced to restoration).

This retro-futurist tendency, intrinsic to Shanghai's revival of urban self-consciousness in the new millennium, creates a standing time-loop between two epochs of highly-accelerated modernistic advance. As it steadily adjusts itself into phase, heritage and

development densely cross-reference each other, releasing streams of chatter in anachronistic, cybergothic codes, such as the deeply encrypted 'language' of Art Deco. Prophetic traditions inter-mesh with commemorative innovations, automatically hunting the point of fusion in which they become interchangeable, closing the circuit of time. The past was something other than it once seemed, as the present demonstrates, and the present is something other than it might seem, as the past attests.

The most accessible examples of Shanghai's signature time-looping are spatially concentrated. At the limit, neo-modern renovation projects connect the city's great waves of modernization within a single structure, making a retro-futural theme intrinsic to a current development, such as those at M50, Redtown, Bridge8, 1933, or the Hotel Waterhouse (among innumerable cases). Slightly wider and more thematically elaborate loops link new buildings to overt exhibitions of modernist history. Among the most conspicuous of these are the pairing of the Oriental Pearl TV Tower with the Shanghai History Museum (in its pedestal), and the Old Shanghai street-life diorama to be found beneath the Urban Planning Exhibition Hall.

Such examples can be misleading, however, if they distract from the fact that the retro-futurist principle of the new Shanghai culture is ambient. From ordinary residential restoration projects, to commercial signage, restaurant themes, hotel décor and home

furnishings, the insistent message is re-emergence, an advance through the past. The latest and most stylish thing is typically that which re-attaches itself to the city's modern heritage with maximum intensity. Reaching out beyond the city does nothing to break the pattern, because that's precisely what the 'Old Shanghai' used to do. Cosmopolitan change is its native tradition.

Retro-futural couplings can be spatially dispersed. One especially prominent time loop lashes together two of the city's most celebrated high-rises – the Park Hotel and the Jin Mao Tower – binding the Puxi of Old Shanghai with the Pudong New Area. Each was the tallest Shanghai building of its age (judged by highest occupied floor), the Park Hotel for five decades, the Jin Mao Tower for just nine years. This discrepancy masks a deeper time-symmetry in the completion dates of the two buildings: the Park Hotel seven years prior to the closing of the city (with the Japanese occupation of the International Settlement in 1941), the Jin Mao Tower seven years after the city's formal re-opening (as the culmination of Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour, in 1992).

It takes only a glance (or two) to recognize these buildings as non-identical time twins, or mutant clones, communicating with each other darkly across the rift, in Art Decode. Reciprocally attracted by their structural and tonal resonances, the two buildings extract each other from their respective period identities and rush together into an alternative, occulted time, obscurely defined through contact

with an absolute future, now partially recalled.

Both of these beautifully sinister buildings are at home in the Yin World, comfortable with secrets, and with night. Among the first of these secrets, shared in their stylistic communion, is darkness itself. Nothing could be further removed from the spirit of Le Corbusier's Radiant City than the brooding opulence of these towers, glittering on the edge of an unfathomable nocturnal gulf, as if intoxicated by the abyss. They remind us that 'Art Deco' is a (retrospective) label patched crudely over mystery, that it never had a manifesto, or a master plan, and that – due to its inarticulate self-organization – it has eluded historical comprehension.

This is the sense, at least in part, of Art Deco's pact with night and darkness. Beneath and beyond all ideologies and centralized schemes, the spontaneous culture of high-modernism that climaxed in the interbellum period remains deeply encrypted. As the new Shanghai excavates the old, it is an enigma that becomes ever more pressing.

(Coming next in the Time Traveler's Guide to Shanghai: The Dieselpunk Plateau)

July 27, 2011

A Time-Travelers Guide to Shanghai (Part 3)

Dieselpunk with Chinese characteristics

Wikipedia attributes the earliest use of the term 'retrofuturism' to Lloyd John Dunn (in 1983). Together with fellow 'Tape-beatles' John Heck, Ralph Johnson, and Paul Neff, Dunn was editor of the 'submagazine' *Retrofuturism*, which ran across the bottom of the pages of *Photostatic* magazine over the period 1988-93. The agenda of the Tape-beatles was artistic, and retrofurism was "defined as the act or tendency of an artist to progress by moving backwards," testing the boundaries between copying and creativity through systematic plagiarism and experimental engagement with the technologies of reproduction. Whatever the achievements of this 'original' retrofuturist movement, they were soon outgrown by the term itself.

A more recent and comparatively mainstream understanding of retro-futurism is represented by the websites of Matt Novak (from 2007) and Eric Lefcowitz (from 2009), devoted to a cultural history of the future. Specializing in a comedy of disillusionment (thoroughly spiced with nerd kitsch), these sites explore the humorous incongruity between the present as once imagined and its actual realization. Content is dominated by the rich legacy of failed predictions that has accumulated over a century (or more) of science

fiction, futurology, and popular expectations of progress, covering topics from space colonization, undersea cities, extravagant urban designs, advanced transportation systems, humanoid domestic robots, and ray-guns, to jumpsuit clothing and meal pills. This genre of retro-futurism is near-perfectly epitomized by Daniel H. Wilson's 2007 book *Where's My Jetpack?: A Guide to the Amazing Science Fiction Future that Never Arrived*. The sentiment of the genre is highly consistent and quite readily summarized: disappointment with the underperformance of the present is redeemed by amusement at the extravagant – even absurd — promise of the past.

Retro-futurism in the missing jetpack mode can have broad historical horizons. It is only limited by the existence of adequately-specified predictions, optimally of the concrete, technologically-defined kind most suited to parodic recollection. Matt Novak's paleofuture or "past visions of the future" index spans 130 years (from the 1870s through to the 1990s). Nevertheless, the essential characteristics of the genre disproportionately attract it to the 'Golden Age' of (American) science fiction, centered on the 1940s-50s, when technological optimism reached its apogee.

Dated back to the July 1939 issue of pulp SF magazine *Astounding Science Fiction* (edited by John W. Campbell and containing stories by Isaac Asimov and A.E. Van Vogt), or to the April 1939 opening of the dizzily futurist New York World Fair, the Golden Age might have been pre-programmed for retro-futurist ridicule. Its

optimism was entirely lacking in self-doubt; its imagination was graphically clarified by the emerging marking tools of modern advertising, PR, and global ideological politics; its favored gadgetry was lusciously visualized, large-scaled, and anthropomorphically meaningful; and an emerging consumer culture, of previously unconceived scale and sophistication, served both to package the future into a series of discrete, tangible products, and to promote aspirations of individual (or nuclear family) empowerment-through-consumption that would later be targeted for derision. Implausibly marrying social conservatism to techno-consumerist utopianism, *every family with its own flying car* is a vision that, from the start, hurtles towards retro-futurist hilarity. By the time *The Jetsons* first aired in 1962, the Golden Age had ended, and the laughter had begun.

If William Gibson's *The Gernsback Continuum* (1981) antedated the term 'retro-futurism', it indisputably consolidated the concept, investing it with a cultural potential that far exceeded anything the light-hearted sallies of the oughties would match. Instead of picking among the detritus of Golden Age speculation for objects of amused condescension, Gibson back-tracks its themes to the 'Raygun Gothic' or 'American Streamlined Modern' of the interbellum period, and then projects this derelicted culture forwards, as a continuous alternative history (dominated by quasi-fascist utopianism). The Gernsback Continuum is no mere collection of oddities, but rather *a*

path not taken, and one that continued to haunt the science fiction imagination. Cyberpunk would be its exorcism.

Hugo Gernsback (1884-1967), commemorated by the 'Hugo' science fiction awards, was a futuristic fiction enthusiast and (shady) publishing entrepreneur who, more than any other identifiable individual, catalyzed the emergence of science fiction as a self-conscious genre, promoted through cheaply-printed, luridly popular 'pulp' magazines. In the first issue of *Amazing Stories*, which he founded in 1926, Gernsback defined 'scientifiction' as "charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision." Whilst commonly detested by his abused writers, due to his sharp business practices, Gernsback's politics seem to have been unremarkable. The ominous Aryan technocracy portrayed in *The Gernsback Continuum* probably owes more to the reputation of his successor at *Amazing Stories*, John W. Campbell (1910-1971), and the broader cultural tendencies he represented.

The re- (or pre-) direction of retro-futurism, from abandoned dreams to alternative histories, triggered a cascade of avalanches. Often, these have been marked by the wanderings of the '-punk' suffix. Initially indicative of an anti-utopian (if not necessarily positively dystopian) impulse, whose 'dirty' futurism embraces social and psychological disorder, chaotic causality, uneven development, and collapsed horizons, it increasingly adopted an additional, and previously unpredictable sense. The history of science fiction – and

perhaps history more broadly – was 'punked' by the emergence of literary and cultural sub-genres that carried it down lines of unrealized potential. Cyberpunk belonged recognizably to our electronically re-engineered time-line, but steampunk, clockpunk, dieselpunk (or 'decopunk'), and atompunk – to list them in rough order of their appearance — extrapolated techno-social systems that had already been bypassed. If these were 'futures' at all, they lay not up ahead, but along branch-tracks, off to the side.

These various 'retro-punk' micro-genres could be understood in numerous ways. When conceived primarily as literature, they can be envisaged as re-animations of period features from the history of science fiction, or, more incisively, as liberations of dated futures from the dominion of subsequent time. For instance, the Victorian future of the steampunks was more than just a hazily anticipated Edwardian present, it was something else entirely, propelled in part by the real but unactualized potential of mechanical computation (as concretized in the Difference and Analytical Engines of Babbage and Lovelace).

Apprehended more theoretically, retro-punk genres echo significant debates. In particular, axial arguments on both the left and the right melt into discussions of alternative history, especially in the dieselpunk dark-heartland of the 1920s-'30s. For over half a century, European Marxism has been inextricable from counter-factual explorations of the Soviet experience, focused on the period

of maximum *Proletkult* innovation between the end of the post-civil war and the social realist clampdown presaging the Stalinist regime. The figure of Leon Trotsky as alternative history (dieselpunk) socialist hero makes no sense in any other context. On the right, American conservatism has become ever more focused on counter-factual interrogation of the Hoover/FDR-Keynesian response to the Crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression, understood as the moment when republican *laissez-faire* capitalism was supplanted by New Deal social democracy (Coolidge / Mellon '28 tee-shirts might still be thin on the ground, but their day might come).

Whilst Shanghai is uploading itself into a cyberpunk tomorrow as fast as any city on earth, it has few obvious time-gates opening into clockpunk, atompunk, or (more disputably) steampunk futures. With dieselpunk, however, this series of dismissals grinds immediately to a halt. If some crazed dieselpunk demigod had leased the world to use as a laboratory, the outcome would have been – to a tolerable degree of approximation – indistinguishable from Shanghai. *Xin haipai* is dieselpunk with Chinese characteristics.

Shanghai's greatest dieselpunk counter-factual is inescapably: what if Japanese invasion had not interrupted the city's high-modernity in 1937? What was the city turning into? Beneath that enveloping question, however, and further back, a teeming mass of alternatives clamor for attention. What if the White Terror of 1927 had not crushed the urban workers' movement? What if the CCP

had succeeded, as Song Qingling dreamed, of transforming China's republican government from within? What if the international politics of silver had not combined with Guomindang kleptocracy to destroy the independent financial system? What if Du Yuesheng had extended his ambitions into national politics? What if the city's de-colonization had proceeded under peace-time conditions? What if the subsequent social and economic evolution of Hong Kong had been able to occur where it was germinated, in Shanghai?

The 90th anniversary of the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party was an occasion for the whole country to lose itself in the dark raptures of Shanghai dieselpunk. It was time to return to the 1920s, to revisit history as an adventure in contingency, before long-established actualities had been sifted from the intensity of raw potential, and to re-animate the indeterminism implicit in dramatic tension. It is improbable that the celebratory movie devoted to the establishment of the CCP, *Beginning of the Great Revival*, was deliberately formulated in the dieselpunk genre, but the nation's microbloggers recognized it for what it was, and swarmed the opportunity presented by this re-opening of the past.

The thickening of cyberspace transforms history into a playground of potentials, where things can be re-loaded, and tried in different ways. Electronic infrastructures spread and sophisticate, running actualities as multiple and variable scenarios, with increasing intolerance for rigid outcomes or frozen legacies. As the

dominion of settled actuality is eroded by currents of experimentation, the past re-animates. Nothing is ever over.

The game Shanghai plays, or the story it tells, is endlessly re-started in the dieselpunk cityscape of the 1920s and '30s, where everything that anybody could want exists in dense, unexpressed potentiality — global fortunes, gangster territories, proletarian uprisings, revolutionary discoveries, literary glory, sensory intoxication, as well as every permutation of modest urbanite thriving. It is a city where anything can happen, and somewhere, at some time, everything does.

July 29, 2011

Calendric Dominion

How hegemony still counts

Modernity and hegemony are *Urban Future* obsessions, which might (at least in part) excuse a link to this article in Britain's *Daily Mail*, on the topic of Christianity, the calendar, and political correctness. It addresses itself to the international dominion of the Gregorian, Western Christian calendar, and the sensitivities of those who, whilst perhaps reconciled to the inevitability of counting in Jesus-years, remain determined to dis-evangelize the accompanying

acronymics. More particularly, it focuses upon the BBC, and its attempt to sensitize on other people's behalf (pass the popcorn).

> *The BBC's religious and ethics department says the changes are necessary to avoid offending non-Christians.*
>
> *It states: 'As the BBC is committed to impartiality it is appropriate that we use terms that do not offend or alienate non-Christians.*
>
> *In line with modern practice, BCE/CE (Before Common Era/Common Era) are used as a religiously neutral alternative to BC/AD.'*
>
> *But the move has angered Christians …*
>
> *Ann Widdecombe, the Catholic former Tory Minister, said: 'I think what the BBC is doing is offensive to Christians. They are discarding terms that have been around for centuries and are well understood by everyone.*
>
> *'What are they going to do next? Get rid of the entire calendar on the basis that it has its roots in Christianity?'*

It's an interesting question, and the attempt to hold it open, as provocatively as possible, might be the best reason to avoid glib, politically correct remedies to the 'problem', however that is understood. *Anno Domini* reminds us of dominion, which is a far better guideline into historical reality than *kumbaya* gestures

towards a 'Common Era', as if hegemony had no content beyond togetherness. Since dominion has not been achieved primarily by impoliteness or insensitivity, politically correct multiculturalism is an irrelevant (and dishonest) response to it.

Regardless of whether Jesus is your Lord, or not, the Christian calendar dominates, or at least predominates, and the traditional acronymic accurately registers that fact. *AD bitchez*, as the commentators of *Zerohedge* might say.

It is an intriguing and ineluctable paradox of globalized modernity that its approximation to universality remains fundamentally structured by ethno-geographical peculiarities of a distinctly pre-modern type. The world was not integrated by togetherness, but by a succession of particular powers, with their characteristic traits, legacies, and parochialisms. For better or for worse, these *peculiar* features have been deeply installed in the governing order of the world. Their signs should be meticulously conserved and studied rather than clumsily effaced, because they are critical clues to the real nature of fate.

Without exception, calendars are treasure troves of intricately-sedimented ethno-historical information. They attempt to solve an ultimately insoluble problem, by arithmetically rationalizing irrational astronomical quantities, most obviously the incommensurable cycles of the terrestrial orbit (solar year), lunar orbit (month), and terrestrial rotation (day). No coherent

arithmetical construct can ever reconcile these periods, and even a repulsively inelegant calendar can only do so to a tolerable margin or error. The consequent ramshackle compromise, typically deformed by a torturous series of adjustments, reshufflings, and intercalations, tells an elaborate story of fixed and variable cultural priorities, regime changes, legacy constraints, alien influences, conceptual capabilities, and observational refinements, further complicated by processes of drift, adoption, and innovation that ripple through numerical and linguistic signs.

The hegemonic (Gregorian) calendar, for instance, is a jagged time-crash of incommensurable periods, in which multiple varieties of disunity jostle together. Weeks don't fit into solar and lunar months, or years, but cut through them quasi-randomly, so that days and dates slide drunkenly across each other. The length of the week is biblical, but the names of the days combine ancient astrology (Saturday-Monday) with the gods of Norse mythology (Tuesday-Friday). Although the Nordic-linguistic aspect of the week has not been strongly globalized, its Judaeo-numerical aspect has. The months are a ghastly mess, awkwardly mismatched with each other, with the lunar cycle, and with the succession of weeks, and testifying to the confused, erratic astro-politics of the Roman Empire in their linguistic mixture of deities (January, March, April?, May, June), festivals (February), emperors (July, August), and numbers (September-December). There is no need to excavate into this

luxuriant dung-hill here, except to note that the 'Christianity' of the Western calendar rests upon chaos-rotted pagan and poly-numeric foundations.

What matters to the AD-BC (vs CE-BCE) debate is not the multitudinously-muttering inner disorder of the Western calendar, but its estimation of the years, or 'era'. In this regard, it has clear competitors, and thus arouses definite resentments, since its closest cousins assert eras of their own. The era of the Hebrew calendar dates back to the *tohu* (chaos) of the year before creation, and records the years of the world (Latinized as Anno Mundi), to the present 5772 AM. The Islamic calendar, which begins from the Hejira of Mohammed, from Mecca to Medina, reached 1432 AH in AD 2011.

The Christian calendar, first systematized in AD 525 by Dionysius Exiguus (Dennis the Runt), counts the first *Anno Domini Nostri Iesu Christi* as the birth year of Jesus Ben Joseph, a false messiah to the Jews, the Christ and Redeemer for the Christians, a prophet to the Moslems, the Nazarene oppressor to Satanists, and something else, or nothing much, to everybody else. Regardless of the accuracy of its chronology or tacit theology, however, this is the year count that has been globally inherited from the real process of modernity, and recognized as a world standard by the United Nations, among other international organizations.

Compared to the Abrahamic calendars, those of Asia's

demographic giants generally lacked tight doctrinal and didactic focus. India can usually be relied upon to inundate any topic whatsoever in delirious multiplicity, and the calendar is no exception. Bengali, Malayalam, and Tamil calendars are all widely used in their respective regions, the Indian National Calendar counts from AD 78 = 0, which, in ominous keeping with current events, places us in 1933, and the most widely accepted Hindu religious calendar total the years since the birth of Krishna, reaching 5112 in AD 2011.

The fabulous complexity of China's traditional calendar makes it a paradise for nerds. Most commonly, it counts the years of each imperial reign, and is thus integrated by a literary narrative of dynastic history, rather than an arithmetical continuum. (The obstacle this presented to modernistic universalization is brutally obvious.) Alternatively, however, it groups historical time into sixty-year cycles, beginning from 2637 BC (which places us in the 28th year of cycle-78). Most Chinese today seem to have an extremely tenuous connection to this dimension of their calendrical heritage, which scarcely survives outside academic departments of ancient history, and in Daoist temples. Whilst the internal structure of the traditional year survives undamaged, as attested by the annual cycle of festivities, Chinese surrender to the Gregorian *year count* seems absolute.

Christian conservatives are surely right to argue that it is the year count – the number and the era – that matters. The acronyms are

merely explanatory, and even essentially tautological. Once it has been decided that history is measured from and divided by the birth of Jesus, it is far too late to quibble over the attribution of dominance. *AD bitchez*. That argument is over.
(Coming next, in Part 2 – Counter-calendars)

September 30, 2011

Calendric Dominion (Part 2)

Caesar with the soul of Christ

Political Correctness has tacitly legislated against the still-prevailing acronyms that define the hegemonic international calendar (BC-AD), and proposed clear alternatives (BCE-CE). Both the criticism and the suggestion are entirely consistent with its principles. In accordance with the tenets of multiculturalism (a more recent and also more active hegemony), it extends the liberal assumption of formal equality from individuals to 'cultures', allocating group rights, and identifying – whilst immediately denouncing – discrimination and privilege. As might be expected from an ideology that is exceptionally concentrated among intellectual elites, the proposed remedy is purely symbolic, taking the form of a rectification of signs. The 'problem' is diagnosed as a failure of consciousness, or sensitivity,

requiring only a raising of awareness (to be effected, one can safely assume, by properly credentialed and compensated professionals).

Even considered in its own terms, however, the rectification that is suggested amounts to nothing more than an empty *gesture* of refusal, accompanying fundamental compliance. Whilst the symbolic 'left' draw comfort from the insistence upon inconsequential change, with its intrinsic offense against conservative presumptions, reinforced by an implied moral critique of tradition, the counter-balancing indignation of the 'right' fixes the entire dispute within the immobilized trenches of the Anglo-American 'culture war'. The deep structure of calendric signs persists unaffected. Between Christian dominion (invoking 'Our Lord') and a 'common era' that is obediently framed by the dating of Christian revelation, there is no difference that matters. It is the count that counts.

Political Correctness fails here in the same way it always does, due to its disconnection of 'correctness' from any rigorous principle of calculation, and its disengagement of 'sensitivity' from realistic perception. A calendar is a profound cultural edifice, orchestrating the apprehension of historical time. As such, it is invulnerable to the gnat-bites of ideological irritability (and dominance is not reducible to impoliteness).

The problem of Western Calendric Dominion is not one of supremacism (etiquette) but of supremacy (historical fatality). It might be posed: *How did modernistic globalization come to be*

expressed as Christian Oecumenon? In large measure, this is Max Weber's question, and Walter Russell Mead's, but it overflows the investigations of both, in the direction of European and Middle Eastern antiquity. Initial stimulation for this inquiry is provided by a strange – even fantastic — coincidence.

In his notebooks, Friedrich Nietzsche imagined the overman (*Übermensch*) as a "Caesar with the soul of Christ," a chimerical being whose tensions echo those of the Church of Rome, Latinized Christian liturgy, and the Western calendar. This hybridity is expressed by a multitude of calendric features, following a broad division of labor between a Roman structuring of the year (within which with superficially-Christianized pagan festivals are scattered unsystematically), and a Christian year count, but it also points towards a cryptic — even radically unintelligible — plane of fusion.

In the Year Zero, which never took place, a mysterious synchronization occurred, imperceptibly and unremarked, founding the new theopolitical calendric order. For the Christians, who would not assimilate the Empire until the reign of Constantine in the early-4th century AD, God was incarnated as man, in the embryo of Jesus Christ. Simultaneously, in a Rome that was perfectly oblivious to the conception of the Messiah, the Julian calendar became operational. Julius Caesar's calendric reform had begun 45 years earlier, following the Years of Confusion, but incompetent execution in subsequent decades had systematically mis-timed the leap year,

intercalating a day every three years, rather than every four. The anomalous triennial cycle was abandoned and "the Roman calendar was finally aligned to the Julian calendar in 1 BC (with AD 1 the first full year of alignment)," although no special significance would be assigned to these years until Dionysius Exiguus integrated Christian history in AD 525.

Given the astounding neglect of this twin event, some additional emphasis is appropriate: The Julian calendar, which would persist, unmodified, for almost 1,600 years, and which still dominates colloquial understanding of the year's length (at 365.25 days), was born – by sheer and outrageous 'chance' – at the precise origin of the Christian Era, as registered by the Western, and now international, numbering of historical time. The year count thus exactly simulates a commemoration of the calendar itself – or at least of its prototype – even though the birth of this calendar, whether understood in the terms of secular reason or divine providence, has *absolutely no connection* to the counted beginning. This is a coincidence – which is to say, a destiny perceived without comprehension – that neither Roman authority nor Christian revelation has been able to account for, even as it surreptitiously shapes Western (and then Global) history. As the world's dominant calendar counts the years under what appears to be a particular religious inspiration, it refers secretly to its own initiation, alluding to mysteries of time that are alien to any faith. That much is simple fact.

Unlike the Julian calendar, the Gregorian calendar was determined under Christian auspices, or at least formal Christian authority (that of Pope Gregory XIII), and promulgated by papal bull in 1582. Yet a glance suffices to reveal the continuation of Julian calendric dominion, since the Gregorian reform effects transformations that remain strictly compliant with the Julian pattern, modified only by elementary operations of decimal re-scaling and inversion. Where the Julian calendar took four years as its base cyclical unit, the Gregorian takes four centuries, and where the Julian adds one leap day in four years, the Gregorian leaves one and subtracts three in 400. The result was an improved approximation to the tropical year (averaging ~365.24219 days), from the Julian 365.25 year, to the Gregorian 365.2425, a better than 20-fold reduction in discrepancy from an average ~0.00781 days per year (drifting off the seasons by one day every 128 years) to ~0.00031 (drifting one day every 3,226 years).

The combination of architectonic fidelity with technical adjustment defines conservative reform. It is clearly evident in this case. A neo-Julian calendar, structured in its essentials at its origin in AD 1 minus 1, but technically modified at the margin in the interest of improved accuracy, armed the West with the world's most efficient large-scale time-keeping system by the early modern period. In China, where the Confucian literati staged competitions to test various calendars from around the world against the prediction

of eclipses, Jesuits equipped with the Gregorian calendar prevailed against all alternatives, ensuring the inexorable trend towards Western calendric conventions, or, at least, the firm identification of Western methods with modernistic efficiency. Given only an edge, in China and elsewhere, the dynamics of complex systems took over, as 'network effects' locked-in the predominant standard, whilst systematically marginalizing its competitors. Even though Year Zero was still missing, it was, ever increasingly, missing at the same time for everyone. "Caeser with the soul of Christ" – the master of Quadrennium and eclipse — had installed itself as the implicit meaning of world history.

(Still to come – in Part 4? – Counter-Calendars, but we probably need an excursion through zero first)

October 8, 2011

Calendric Dominion (Part 3)

In Search of Year Zero

A Year Zero signifies a radical re-beginning, making universal claims. In modern, especially recent modern times, it is associated above all with ultra-modernist visions of total politics, at is maximum point of utopian and apocalyptic extremity. The existing order of the world

is reduced to nothing, from which a new history is initiated, fundamentally disconnected from anything that occurred before, and morally indebted only to itself. Predictably enough, among conservative commentators (in the widest sense), such visions are broadly indistinguishable from the corpse-strewn landscapes of social catastrophe, haunted by the ghosts of unrealizable dreams.

Christianity's global Calendric Dominion is paradoxical — perhaps even 'dialectical' — in this regard. It provides the governing model of historical rupture and unlimited ecumenical extension, and thus of total revolution, whilst at the same time representing the conservative order antagonized by modernistic ambition. Its example incites the lurch to Year Zero, even as it has no year zero of its own. Ultimately, its dialectical provocation tends towards Satanic temptation: the promise of Anti-Christian Apocalypse, or absolute news to a second power. ("If the Christians could do it, why couldn't we?" Cue body-counts scaling up towards infinity.)

This tension exists not only between an established Christian order and its pseudo-secular revolutionary after-image, but also within Christianity itself, which is split internally by the apparent unity and real dissociation of 'messianic time'. The process of Christian calendric consolidation was immensely protracted. A distance of greater than half a millennium separated the clear formulation of the year count from the moment commemorated, with further centuries required to fully integrate historical recording

on this basis, digesting prior Jewish, Roman, and local date registries, and laying the foundation for a universalized Christian articulation of time. By the time the revolutionary 'good news' had been coherently formalized into a recognizable prototype of the hegemonic Western calendar, it had undergone a long transition from historical break to established tradition, with impeccable conservative credentials.

Simultaneously, however, the process of calendric consolidation sustained, and even sharpened, the messianic expectation of punctual, and truly contemporary rupture, projected forwards as duplication, or 'second coming' of the initial division. Even if the moment in which history had been sundered into two parts — before and after, BC and AD — now lay in quite distant antiquity, its example remained urgent, and promissory. Messianic hope was thus torn and compacted by an intrinsic historical doubling, which stretched it between a vastly retrospective, gradually recognized beginning, and a prospect of sudden completion, whose credibility was assured by its status as repetition. What had been would be again, transforming the AD count into a completed sequence that was confirmed in the same way it was terminated (through Messianic intervention).

Unsurprisingly, the substantial history of Western calendric establishment is twinned with the rise of millenarianism, through phases that trend to increasingly social-revolutionary forms, and eventually make way for self-consciously anti-religious, although decidedly eschatological, varieties of modernistic total politics.

Because whatever has happened must — at least — be possible, the very existence of the calendar supports anticipations of absolute historical rupture. Its count, simply by beginning, prefigures an end. What starts can re-start, or conclude.

Zero, however, intrudes diagonally. It even introduces a comic aspect, since whatever the importance of the Christian revelation to the salvation of our souls, it is blatantly obvious that it failed to deliver a satisfactory arithmetical notation. For that, Christian Europe had to await the arrival of the decimal numerals from India, via the Moslem Middle East, and the ensuing revolution of calculation and book-keeping that coincided with the Renaissance, along with the birth of mercantile capitalism in the city states of northern Italy.

Indeed, for anybody seeking a truly modern calendar, the Arrival of Zero would mark an excellent occasion for a new year zero (AZ 0?), around AD 1500. Although this would plausibly date the origin of modernity, the historical imprecision of the event counts against it, however. In addition, the assimilation of zero by germinal European (and thus global) capitalism was evidently gradual — if comparatively rapid — rather than a punctual 'revolutionary' transition of the kind commerorative calendric zero is optimally appropriate to. (If Year Zero is thus barred from the designation of its own world-historic operationalization, it is perhaps structurally doomed to misapplication and the production of disillusionment.)

The conspicuous absence of zero from the Western calendar (count), exposed in its abrupt jolt from 1 BC to AD 1, is an intolerable and irreparable stigma that brings its world irony to a zenith. In the very operation of integrating world history, in preparation for planetary modernity, it remarks its own debilitating antiquity and particularity, in the most condescending modern sense of the limited and the primitive — crude, defective and underdeveloped.

How could a moment of self-evident calculative incompetence provide a convincing origin-point for subsequent historical calculation? Year Zero escaped all possibility of conceptual apprehension at the moment in the time-count where it is now seen to belong, and infinity (the reciprocal of zero) proves no less elusive. Infinity was inserted into a time when (and place where) it demonstrably made no sense, and the extraordinary world-historical impression that it made did nothing — not even nothing– to change that situation. Is this not a worthy puzzle for theologians? Omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, yet hopeless at maths — these are not the characteristics of a revelation designed to impress technologists or accountants. All the more reason, then, to take this comedy seriously, in all its ambivalence — since the emerging world of technologists and accountants, the techno-commercial (runway-industrial, or capitalist) world that would globalize the earth, was weaned within the playpen of this calendar, and no other. Modernity had selected to date itself in a way that its own kindergarten

students would scorn.

October 16, 2011

Calendric Dominion (Part 4)

A Digression into the Reality Principle

Between the world we would like to inhabit, and the world that exists, there's a gap that tests us. Even the simplest description of this gap already calls for a decision. 'Ideologies' in the broadest, and culturally almost all-consuming sense, serve primarily to soften it. Sense, and even compassion, is attributed to the side of reality, promising ultimate reconciliation between human hopes and desires and the 'objective' nature of things. Science, a typically despised and misanthropic discipline, tends to the opposite assumption, emphasizing the harsh indifference of reality to human interests and expectations, with the implication that the lessons it teaches us can be administered with unlimited brutality. We can dash ourselves against reality if we insist, but we cannot realistically anticipate some merciful moderation of the consequences. Nature does not scold or punish, it merely breaks us, coldly, upon the rack of our untruths.

Like other cultural institutions, calendars are saturated with ideologies, and tested to destruction against implacable reality. Their

collision with nature is especially informative, because they express obstinate human desires as favored numbers (selected from among small positive integers), and they register the gulf of the real in a strictly quantitative form. Any surviving calendar relates the story of an adaptation to reality, or cultural deference to (and deformation by) nature, as numerical preferences have been compromised through their encounter with quantitative facts.

Pure ideology in the calendrical sphere is represented in its perfection by the fantasy year of the ancient Mesopotamians, 360 days in length, and harmonized to the sexagesimal (modulus-60) arithmetic of the Sumerians. Its influence has persisted in the 360 degrees of the geometric circle, and in the related sexagesimal division into minutes and seconds (of time and arc). The archaic calendars of Meso-America and East Asia, as well as those of the Middle East, seem to have been attracted to the 360-day year, as though to an ideal model. If the Great Architect of the Universe had been an anthropomorphic geometer, this is the calendar that would work.

Of course, it doesn't (with all due respect to the engrossing Biblical counter-argument outlined here). Instead, in the mainstream world calendric tradition – as determined by the eventual global outcome – a first level adaptation systematized the year at 365 days – the Egyptian year. Unlike the 360-day archetypal year, which has all of the first three primes as factors, and thus divides conveniently into

‘months’ or other component periods, the 365-day year represents a reluctant concession to quantitative fact. The number 365 has only two factors (both primes, 5 and 73), but neither seems to have acquired any discernible calendrical valency, perhaps because of their obvious unsuitability to even approximate description of lunar periods. The Egyptians turned instead to an awkward but influential innovation: the intercalation. A five-day appendix was added to the year, as a sheer correction or supplementary commensuration, and an annual reminder of the gap between numerical elegance and astronomical reality. Whilst intercalations were invested with mytho-religious significance, this was essentially compensatory – a crudely obscured testament to the weakness of ideality (and thus of systematic priest-craft as a mode of reality apprehension, or efficient social purpose). If intercalations were necessary, then nature was not spell-bound, and the priest-masters of calendric time were exposed, tacitly, as purveyors of mystification, whose limits were drawn by the horizon of social credulity. Astronomical time mocked the meanings of men.

Over time, the real (‘tropical’) year discredits its calendrical idealizations by unmooring dates from the seasons, in a process of time drift that exposes discrepancy, and drives calendar reform. Inaccurate calendars are gradually rendered meaningless, as the seasonal associations of its time terms are eroded to utter randomness – by frigid ‘summer’ months and scorching ‘winter’ ones.

Clearly, no priesthood can survive in a climate that derides the established order of the year, and in which farmers that listen to the holy words (of time) are assured inevitable starvation. Unless tracked within a tolerable margin of accuracy by a calendar that 'keeps' the time, the year reverts to an alien and unintelligible thing, entirely exterior to cultural comprehension, whilst society's reigning symbols appear as a risible, senseless babble, drowned out by the howling chaos of the real.

With the introduction of the Julian Calendar, coinciding with the (non-event) of year zero, comes the recognition that the tropical year is incommensurable with any integer, and that a larger cycle of intercalation is required to track it. A kind of modernity, or structural demystification, is born with the relinquishment of the ideal year, and everything it symbolizes in terms of cosmic design or celestial harmony. The devil's appendix is attached, irremovably.

Numeracy and time measurement divorce at the origin of caesarean Calendric Dominion, but it is easy to mistake accidents on this path for essential concessions to reality. Even allowing for the inescapable function of intercalations, there was nothing inevitable – at least absolutely or cosmically inevitable – about the utter ruination of numerical coherence that the Julian Calendar incarnated, and passed on.

To explore this (admittedly arcane) topic further requires a digression to the second power, into the relations between numbers

and anthropomorphic desire. The obvious starting point is the 360-day calendar of ancient Sumer, and the question: What made this number appealing? Whether examining 360, or its sexagesimal root (60), an arithmetically-conventional attention to prime factors (2, 3, and 5), is initially misleading — although ultimately indispensable. A more illuminating introduction begins with the compound factors 10 and 12, the latter relevant primarily to the lunar cycle (and the archaic dream of an astronomically – or rather astrologically — consistent 12-month year), and the former reflecting the primordial anthropomorphism in matters numeric: decimalism. The 360-day calendar is an object of human desire because it is an anthropo-lunar (or menstrual-lycanthropic?) hybrid, speaking intrinsically to the cycles of human fertility, and to the 'digital' patterns instantiated in mammalian body-plans. A 360-day year would be *ours* (even if alien things are hidden in it).

Anthropomorphic decimalism suggests how certain numerical opportunities went missing, along with zero. 'Apprehension' and 'comprehension' refer understanding to the prehensile organs of a specific organism, whose bilateral symmetry combines five-fingered hands to produce a count reaching ten, across an interval that belongs to an alien, intractable, third. Triadic beings are monsters, and decimally *ungraspable*. The bino-decimal structure of the *Yi Jing* exhibits this with total clarity, through its six-stage time-cycle that counts in the recurrent sequence 1, 2, 4, 8, 7, 5 … Each power of three

(within the decimal numerals) is expelled along with zero from the order of apprehensible time. There is no way that a ternary calendric numeracy could ever have been anthropomorphically acceptable – the very thought is (almost definitionally) *abominable*.

Yet astronomy seems hideously complicit with abomination, at least, if the years are twinned. The sixth power of three (3^6) approximates to the length of two tropical years with a discrepancy of just ~1.48438 days, or less than one day a year. An intercalation of three days every four years (or two twin-year cycles) brings it to the accuracy of the Julian Calendar, and a reduction of this intercalation by one day every 128 years (or 64 (2^6) twin-year cycles) exceeds the accuracy of the Gregorian calendar.

It might be necessary to be slightly unbalanced to fully appreciate this extraordinary conjunction of numerical elegance and astronomical fact. A system of calendric computation that counts only in twos and threes, and which maintains a perfectly triadic order of time-division up to the duration of a two-year period, is able to quite easily exceed the performance of the dominant international calendar (reaching a level of accuracy that disappears into the inherent instability of the tropical year, and is thus strictly speaking unimprovable).

How many days are there in a year? ((3 x 3 x 3 x 3 x 3 x 3) / 2) + ~0.74219

The horror, the horror …

October 21, 2011

Calendric Dominion (Part 5)

From Crimson Paradise to Soft Apocalypse

Despite its modernity and decimalism, the French *calendrier républicain* or *révolutionnaire* had no Year Zero, but it re-set the terms of understanding. A topic that had been conceived as an intersection of religious commemoration with astronomical fact became overtly ideological, and dominated by considerations of secular politics. The new calendar, which replaced AD 1792 with the first year of the new 'Era of Liberty', lasted for less than 14 years. It was formally abolished by Napoléon, effective from 1 January 1806 (the day after 10 Nivôse an XIV), although it was briefly revived during the Paris Commune (in AD 1871, or *Année 79 de la République*), when the country's revolutionary enthusiasm was momentarily re-ignited.

For the left, the calendric re-set meant radical re-foundation, and symbolic extirpation of the *Ancien Régime*. For the right, it meant immanentization of the eschaton, and the origination of totalitarian terror. Both definitions were confirmed in 1975, when Year Zero was finally reached in the killing fields of the Kampuchean Khmer Rouge,

where over quarter of the country's population perished during efforts to blank-out the social slate and start over. Khmer Rouge leader Saloth Sar (better known by his *nom de guerre* Pol Pot) had made 'Year Zero' his own forever, re-branded as a South-east Asian *final solution*.

Year Zero was henceforth far too corpse-flavored to retain propaganda value, but that does not render the calendric equation 1975 = 0 insignificant (rather the opposite). Irrespective of its parochialism in time and space, corresponding quite strictly to a re-incarnation of (xenophobic-suicidal) 'national socialism', it defines a meaningful epoch, as the high-water mark of utopian overreach, and the complementary re-valorization of conservative pragmatism. Appropriately enough, Year Zero describes an instant without duration, in which the age of utopian time is terminated in exact coincidence with its inauguration. The era it opens is characterized, almost perfectly, by its renunciation, as fantasy social programming extinguishes itself in blood and collapse. The immanent eschaton immediately damns itself.

Historical irony makes this excursion purely (sub-) academic, because the new era is *essentially* disinclined to conceive itself as such. What begins from this Year Zero is a global culture of ideological exhaustion, or of 'common sense', acutely sensitive to the grinning death's head hidden in beautiful dreams, and reconciled to compromise with the non-ideal. From the perspective of fantastic

revolutionary expectation, the high-tide of perfectionist vision ebbs into disillusionment and tolerable dissatisfaction – *but at least it doesn't eat our children*. The new era's structural modesty of ambition has no time for a radical re-beginning or crimson paradise, even when it is historically defined by one.

Pol Pot's Year Zero is sandwiched between the publication of Eric Voegelin's *The Ecumenic Age* (1974), and the first spontaneous Chinese mass protests against the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (over the months following the death of Zhou Enlai, in January 1976). It is noteworthy in this regard that Deng Xiaoping eulogized Zhou at his memorial ceremony for being "modest and prudent" (thus the New Aeon speaks).

In the Anglo-American world, the politics of ideological exhaustion were about to take an explicitly conservative form, positively expressed as 'market realism' (and in this sense deeply resonant with, as well as synchronized to, Chinese developments). Margaret Thatcher assumed leadership of the British Conservative Party in February 1975, and Ronald Reagan declared his presidential candidacy in November of the same year. The English-speaking left would soon be traumatized by a paradoxical 'conservative revolution' that extracted relentless energy from the very constriction of political possibility. What *could not happen* quickly became the primary social dynamo, as articulated by the Thatcherite maxim: "There is no alternative" (= option zero). The auto-

immolation of utopia had transmuted into a new beginning.

Whilst the era of not restarting from zero can be dated to approximate accuracy (from AD *n* – 1975), and had thus in fact restarted from zero, in profoundly surreptitious fashion, its broad consequence was to spread and entrench (Gregorian) Calendric Dominion ever more widely and deeply. The prevailing combination of radically innovative globalization (both economic and technological) with prudential social conservatism made such an outcome inevitable. Symbolic re-commencement wasn't on anybody's agenda, and even as the postmodernists declared the end of 'grand narratives', the first planetary-hegemonic narrative structure in history was consolidating its position of uncontested monopoly. Globalization was the story of the world, with Gregorian dating as its grammar.

Orphaned by ideological exhaustion, stigmatized beyond recovery by its association with the Khmer Rouge, and radically maladapted to the reigning spirit of incremental pragmatism, by the late 20th century Year Zero was seemingly off the agenda, unscheduled, and on its own. Time, then, for something truly insidious.

On January 18, 1985, Usenet poster Spencer L. Bolles called attention to a disturbing prospect that had driven a friend into insomnia:

> *I have a friend that raised an interesting question that I immediately tried to prove wrong. He is a programmer and has this notion that when we reach the year 2000, computers will not accept the new date. Will the computers assume that it is 1900, or will it even cause a problem? I violently opposed this because it seemed so meaningless. Computers have entered into existence during this century, and has software, specifically accounting software, been prepared for this turnover? If this really comes to pass and my friend is correct, what will happen? Is it anything to be concerned about?*

Bolles' anonymous friend was losing sleep over what would come to be known as the 'Y2K problem'. In order to economize on memory in primitive early-generation computers, a widely-adopted convention recorded dates by two digits. The millennium and century were ignored, since it was assumed that software upgrades would have made the problem moot by the time it became imminent, close to the 'rollover' (of century *and* millennium) in the year AD 2000. Few had anticipated that the comparative conservatism of software legacies (relative to hardware development) would leave the problem entirely unaddressed even as the crisis date approached.

In the end, Y2K was a non-event that counted for nothing, although its preparation costs, stimulus effects (especially on outsourcing to the emerging Indian software industry), and panic

potential were all considerable. Its importance to the history of the calendar – whilst still almost entirely virtual – is extremely far-reaching.

Y2K resulted from the accidental — or 'spontaneous' — emergence of a new calendrical order within the globalized technosphere. Its Year Zero, 0K (= 1900), was devoid of all parochial commemoration or ideological intention, even as it was propagated through increasingly computerized communication channels to a point of ubiquity that converged, asymptotically, with that attained by Western Calendric Dominion over the complete sweep of world history. The 20th century had been recoded, automatically, as the 1st century of the Cybernetic Continuum. If Y2K had completed its reformatting of the planetary sphere-drive in the way some (few deluded hysterics) had expected, the world would now be approaching the end of the year 0K+111, settled securely in its first arithmetically-competent universal calendar, and historically oriented by the same system of electronic computation that had unconsciously decided upon the origin of positive time. Instead, the 'millennium bug' was fixed, and theological date-counting prolonged its dominance, uninterrupted (after much ado about nothing). Most probably, the hegemonic cultural complex encrusted in Calendric Dominion never even noticed the cybernetic insurrection it had crushed.

Between 0K and Y2K, the alpha and omega of soft apocalypse,

there is not only a century of historical time, but also an inversion of attitude. Time departs 0K, as from any point of origin, accumulating elapsed duration through its count. Y2K, in contrast, was a destination, which time approached, as if to an apocalyptic horizon. Whilst not registered as a countdown, it might easily have been. The terminus was precisely determined (no less than the origin), and the strictest formulation of the millennium bug construed the rollover point as an absolute limit to recordable time, beyond which no future was even imaginable. For any hypothetical Y2K-constrained computer intelligence, denied access to dating procedures that over-spilled its two-digit year registry, residual time shrank towards zero as the millennium event loomed. Once all the nines are reached, time is finished, at the threshold of eternity, where beginning and end are indistinguishable (in 0).

> "0K, it's time to wrap this puppy up." – Revelation 6:14
> (next, and last, the end (at last))

October 28, 2011

Calendric Dominion (Part 6)

Countdown

At the beginning of the 21st century, global cultural hegemony is

on the move. For roughly 500 years, Western — and later more specifically Anglophone — societies and agencies have predominantly guided the development of the current world system. As their economic pre-eminence wanes, their cultural and political influence can be expected to undergo a comparable decline. In the early stages of the coming transition, however, the terminal form of active Western cultural hegemony – multicultural political correctness (MPC) – is well-positioned to manage the terms of the retreat. By reconfiguring basic Western religious and political themes as a systematic sensitization to unwarranted privilege, MPC is able to distance itself from its own heritage and to live on, in the resentment of 'the other', as if it were the neutral adjudicator of disputes it had no part in.

When MPC turns its attention to the Gregorian (or Western Christian) Calendar it is, of course, appalled. But it is also stuck. What could be more insensitive to cultural diversity than an ecumenical date-counting system, rooted in the ethnic peculiarities of Greek-phase Abrahamic religion, which unapologetically celebrates its triumph in the uncompromising words Anno Domini? Yet global convergence demands a standard, no alternative calendar has superior claims to neutrality, and, in any case, the inertial juggernaut of large-scale complex systems – 'lock-in' or 'path-dependency' – pose barriers to switching that seem effectively insuperable. The solution proposed by MPC to this conundrum is so feeble that it

amounts to the completion of Gregorian Calendric Dominion, which is to be simultaneously rephrased (politely) and acknowledged in its irresistible universality as the articulation of a 'Common Era'.

MPC supplants problems of cultural power with obfuscatory etiquette, and in absolute terms, its smug dishonesty is difficult to like. As a relative phenomenon, however, its appeal is more obvious, since radical 'solutions' to Gregorian Calendric Dominion, re-beginning at Year Zero, have generally reverted to mass murder. Lacking persuasive claims to a new, fundamental, and universally acknowledged historical break, they have substituted terror for true global singularity, as if fate could be blotted out in blood.

Since resentment gets nowhere, whether in its mild (MPC) or harsh (killing fields) variants, it is worth entertaining alternative possibilities. These begin with attention to real cultural differences, rather than mere 'cultural diversity' as it presents itself to the vacuously MPC-processed mind. Soon after Shanghai had been selected as host city for World Expo 2010 (in December 2002), countdowns started. For Westerners, these probably had space-age associations, triggering memories of the countdowns to 'blast off' that were popularized by the Apollo Program, and subsequent science fiction media. It is far from impossible that Chinese shared in these evocations, although they were also able to access a far deeper – which is to say civilizationally fundamental – reservoir of reference. That is because Chinese time typically counts down,

modeled, as it is, on the workings of water clocks. The Chinese language systematically describes previous as 'above' (*shang*) and next as 'beneath' (*xia*), conforming to an intuition of time as descent. Time is counted down as it runs out, from an elevated hydraulic body into the sunken future that receives it.

Duration not only flows, it drips. Perhaps, then, an 'orientalization' of calendric perception and organization is something that significantly exceeds a simple (or even exceedingly difficult) renegotiation of beginnings. Re-beginning might be considered largely irrelevant to the problem, at least when compared to the re-orientation from an original to a terminal Year Zero. Whilst not exactly a transition in the direction of time, such a change would involve a transition in the direction of time intuition, simultaneously surpassing the wildest ambitions of calendrical re-origination and subtly organizing itself 'within the pores' of the established order of time. As modeled by the 2010 Expo, and previously by Y2K, the switch to countdown time does not frontally challenge, or seek to straightforwardly replace, the calendric order in being. Rather than counting in the same way, from a different place, it counts in a different way, within the framework of time already in place. It is a revolution with 'Chinese characteristics', which is to say: a surreptitious insurgency, changing what something already was, rather than replacing it with something else.

Both the 2010 Expo and Y2K also reveal the extreme difficulty of

any such transition, since a futural Year Zero, or countdown calendar, must navigate the arrow of time and its cognitive asymmetry (between knowledge of the past and of the future), presupposing exact, confident, and consensual prediction.

That is why it approximates so closely to conservative acceptance. If the countdown is to be sure of arriving at the scheduled terminus, the destination 'event' must already be a date (rather than an empirical 'happening'). Nothing will suffice except a strictly arithmetical, rigorously certain inevitability, as inescapably pre-destined as the year 2000, or 2010, which cannot but come. From the perspective of the countdown calendar, that is what (Gregorian) Calendric Dominion will have been for. It is an opportunity to program an inevitable arrival.

But when? The sheer passage (fall) of time has assured that the opportunity for calendric revolution presented by the Y2K 'millennium bug' has been irretrievably missed (so that AD 1900 ≠ 0). The same is true of World Expo 2010, an event without pretense to be anything beyond a miniature 'practice' model of global-temporal singularity. As for the real (techno-commercial) Singularity – that is an imprecise historical prediction, at once controversial and incapable of supporting exact prediction.

A more appropriate prospect is suggested by the science fiction writer Greg Bear, in his novel Queen of Angels, set in anticipation of the mid-21st century 'binary millennium' ($2048 = 2^{11}$). This is a

formally suitable, purely calendric 'event', deriving its significance from arithmetic rather than ideology or uncertain prophecy. He even envisages it as a moment of insurgent revolution, when artificial intelligence arises surreptitiously, and unnoticed. Yet arbitrariness impairs this date (why the 11th power of 2?), and no serious attempt is made to explain its rise to exceptional cultural prominence.

If an adjusted global culture is to converge upon a countdown date, it must be obvious, intrinsically compelling, and ideologically uncontroversial, in other words, spontaneously plausible. The target that World Expo 2010 suggests (anagrammatically) is AD 2100, a date that performs the final stages of a countdown (2, 1, 0 …). Reinforcing this indication, the Y2K 'millennium bug' threatened to re-set the date of AD 2000 to AD 1900, which would have tacitly reiterated itself at the exact end of the 21st century. If it continues to chatter about the calendar, perhaps this is how.

The impending Mayan Apocalypse, scheduled for 21 / 12 / 2012, offers a preliminary chance to indulge in a festival of countdown numbers – like 2010, it looks a lot like another digital singularity simulation. If the morning of December 22nd, 2012, leaves the world with nothing worse than a hangover, it could gradually settle into a new sense of the Years Remaining (to the end of all the time that counts, or the 21st century).

AD 2100 = 0 YR

AD 2099 = 1 YR

AD 2098 = 2 YR
AD 2096 = 4 YR
AD 2092 = 8 YR
AD 2084 = 16 YR
AD 2068 = 32 YR
AD 2036 = 64 YR
AD 1972 = 128 YR
AD 1844 = 256 YR
AD 1588 = 512 YR
AD 1076 = 1024 YR
AD 52 = 2048 YR
It's difficult to anticipate what it looks like from the other side.

November 4, 2011

Twisted Times (Part 1)

Abe: "You should go to China."
Joe: "I'm going to France."
Abe: "I'm from the future. You should go to China."
— *Looper*

In Rian Johnson's *Looper* (2012), the city of Shanghai reaches back across 30 years to draw people in. Over these decades it feeds itself based on what it is to become: *the city of the future*. When

compared to this, everything else that happens in the movie is mere distraction, but we won't get there for a while.

Strangely enough, 'everything else' was to have been simply everything. Joe was going to Paris, and Shanghai wasn't even in the picture. That was before Chinese authorities told Johnson that they would cover the cost of the Shanghai shoot, making the film a co-production, with convenient access to the Chinese cinema market. The Old World stood no chance.

For American audiences, *Looper* played into the trend of opinion, through its contrasting urban visions of a grim, deteriorated, crime-wracked Kansas City and the splendors of a 'futuristic' Shanghai. The movie doesn't answer the question: *How did America lose the future?* It nevertheless accepts the premise, as something close to a pre-installed fact.

Yet if *Looper* confirmed the direction of American popular attitudes, it marked a shift on the Chinese side. Only a few years before, Western media reported with amusement that the Chinese broadcast authorities had banned time-travel fictions from the nation's airwaves, apparently concerned that the country's citizens were defecting into a pre-republican past, under the influence of narratives that "casually make up myths, have monstrous and weird plots, use absurd tactics, and even promote feudalism, superstition, fatalism and reincarnation." Now a time-travel story was being actively recruited to close an urban promotion loop, linking

Shanghai's international image to a portrayal of retro-chronic anomaly. The Shanghai time-travel industry had arrived.

Before proceeding to a multi-installment investigation of ~~Topological Meta-History~~ tangled time-circuitry, which 'time-travel' illustrates only as a crude dramatization, it is worth pausing over *Looper*'s 'monstrous and weird plot'. Time-travel has a uniquely intimate, and seductively morbid, relationship to both fiction and history, because it scrambles the very principle of narrative order in profundity. If Western media authorities assumed the same role of cultural custodianship that has been traditional among their Chinese peers, they too might have been compelled to denounce a genre that flagrantly subverted the foundational principle of Aristotelian poetics: that any story worthy of veneration should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. If time-travel can occur, it seems (at least initially) that order is an illusion, so that fiction and reality switch places.

From a conservative perspective, therefore, comfort is to be found in the blatant absurdity of time-travel stories (insofar as this can be confined to a *reductio ad absurdam* of the time-loop structure itself, rather than spreading outwards as the index of primordial cosmic disorder). In this respect, *Looper* is a model of tranquillization.

The *Looper* time-travel procedure is monopolized by a criminal syndicate, which utilizes it exclusively for one purpose: the disposal

of awkward individuals, who are returned 30 years in time to be murdered, execution-style, by professional killers (yes: "This sounds pretty stupid"). The exorbitant absurdity of this scenario might exempt it from further critical attention, were it not the symptom of more interesting things, and the doorway onto others.

The symptom first: Non-linear time-structures are shaken to pieces almost immediately, once they allow for the transportation of *stuff* backwards in time. *Looper* economics exposes this with particular clarity. The killers of 2044 are paid in bars of silver for 'ordinary' hits, and in gold for 'closing loops' or executing their retro-deposited older selves. The bars are sent back from 2074, and circulated through an internal exchange operation, which swaps bullion for (Chinese) paper currency. Whilst this crude time-circuit is presented as a payments system, the process described actually functions as an under-performing money-making machine. By using it, one realizes the ultimate Austrian economic nightmare by *printing precious metals*, because an ingot sent backwards in time is doubled, or added to its 'previous' instance (which already exists in the past). Mechanical re-iteration of the process would guarantee exponential growth for free. We're not told what the 2074 criminal organization sees as its core business, but it must be seriously lucrative — exciting enough, in any case, to distract them from the fact that their murder-fodder machine is really a bullion fast-breeder. They could have shoveled it full of diamonds, doubling their fortune each 'time', but

they decided instead to duplicate human nuisances in 2044. The movie asks us quietly to suspend our impertinent disbelief, and trust that they know what they're doing.

Mike Dickison's excellent *Looper* commentary succinctly describes this implicit procedure for unlimited wealth, among other incredibly missed opportunities. It surely has to count as a criticism of the movie that its rickety framework of plot coherence is dependent upon the imbecility of its significant agents, who stumble blindly past the prospect of total power in their ruthless pursuit of a miserable racket. This absurdity, as already noted, serves a conservative purpose: The potential of the loop has to be suppressed to sustain narrative drama and intelligibility. The basic flaw of the movie is that far too much was given, before most of it was clumsily taken away.

In the absence of controlling censors, Johnson's story represses itself, messily, comically, and unconvincingly. "This time travel crap, just fries your brain like a egg," the elder Joe (Bruce Willis) confesses on Johnson's behalf. Unleashed time-travel is an anti-plot, inconsistent with dramatic presentation. (If you're not willing to take Aristotle's word for that, watching *Primer* a few dozen times should sort you out.) Narrative wreckage is what time-travel does.

Time-travel absurdity is a *choice*. It is a decision taken, at least semi-deliberately, for conservative or protective reasons, because the alternative would be ruin. Even the representation of (radically

nonlinear) time anomaly by 'time-travel' is indicative of this, since it is programmed by the preservation of a narrative function (the 'time-traveler'), regardless of conceptual expense. Far rather the incoherent jumble of matter duplication, time-line proliferation, immunized strands of personal memory, and the arbitrary inhibition of potentialities, than utter narrative disorder, fate loops, the annihilation of agency, and the emergence of an alien consistency, subverting all historical meaning.

If the mask of time-travel has slipped enough to expose some hint of the *intolerable* tangle beneath, we're ready to take the next step …

(This will help.)

February 17, 2013

Extropy

What greater calamity can a neologism inherit than a techno-hippy paternity? Such a fate, apparently, induces even other techno-hippies to skirt around it (whilst repeating it almost exactly). But it needs to be said, whether through gritted teeth or not, that 'extropy' is a *great* word, and close to an indispensable one.

Extropy, or local entropy reduction, is — quite simply — what it is for something to work. The entire techno-science of entropy, on its practical (cybernetic) side, is nothing but extropy generation. There

is no rigorous conception of functionality that really bypasses it. The closest approximation to objective value that will ever be found already has a name, and 'extropy' is it.

The importance of this term to the investigation of time is brought into focus by the work of Sean Carroll (although, of course, he never uses it). If the directionality or 'arrow' of time is understood as Eddington proposed, through rising global entropy (or disorder), as anticipated by the second law of thermodynamics, local extropy poses an intriguing question.

Carroll's discussion is directed towards his sense of the ultimate temporal and cosmological problem: the low entropy state of the early universe (assumed but not explained by prevailing cosmo-physics). Given this intellectual momentum, the problem of local negative-entropy production (extropy) is little more than a distraction, or a spurious objection to the conceptual scaffolding he presents. He comments:

The Second Law doesn't forbid decreases in entropy in ***open*** *systems — by putting in the work, you are able to tidy up your room, decreasing its entropy but still increasing the entropy of the whole universe (you make noise, burn calories, etc.). Nor is it in any way incompatible with evolution or complexity or any such thing.*

The perplexing question, however, is this: If entropy defines the direction of time, with increasing disorder determining the difference of the future from the past, doesn't (local) extropy —

through which all complex cybernetic beings, such as lifeforms, exist — describe a negative temporality, or time-reversal? Is it not in fact more likely, given the inevitable embeddedness of intelligence in 'inverted' time, that it is the cosmological or general conception of time that is *reversed* (from any possible naturally-constructed perspective)?

Whatever the conclusion, it is clear that entropy and extropy have opposing time-signatures, so that time-reversal is a relatively banal cosmological fact. 'We' inhabit a bubble of backwards time (whoever we are), whilst immersed in a cosmic environment which runs overwhelmingly in the opposite direction. If reality is harsh and strange, that's why.

February 20, 2013

CHAPTER ONE - THE BIGGEST PICTURE

Big Bang — an appreciation

A few reasons to love the Big Bang:

— Time turns edgy again.

— The steady state model proved unsustainable — the most exquisite irony ever?

— Physical theories now have cosmic dates. For instance, the still-elusive unifying theory of quantum gravitation corresponds to the Planck Epoch, when the universe was still far smaller than an atomic nucleus, compelling gravity to operate at the quantum scale. Similarly, particle accelerator technology becomes deep time regression.

— The Planck Epoch is really wild: “During the Planck era, the Universe can be best described as a quantum foam of 10 dimensions containing Planck length sized black holes continuously being created and annihilated with no cause or effect. In other words, try not to think about this era in normal terms.”

— The void animates. Sten Odenwald quotes UCSB physicist Frank Wilczek: “The reason that there is something instead of

nothing is that nothing is unstable".

February 26, 2013

Cosmological Infancy

There is a 'problem' that has been nagging at me for a long time – which is that *there hasn't been a long time*. It's Saturday, with no one around, or getting drunk, or something, so I'll run it past you. Cosmology seems oddly childish.

An analogy might help. Among all the reasons for super-sophisticated atheistic materialists to deride Abrahamic creationists, the most arithmetically impressive is the whole James Ussher 4004 BC thing. The argument is familiar to everyone: *6,027 years — Ha!*

Creationism is a topic for another time. The point for now is just: *13.7 billion years – Ha!* Perhaps this cosmological consensus estimate for the age of the universe is true. I'm certainly not going to pit my carefully-rationed expertise in cosmo-physics against it. But it's a *stupidly* short amount of time. If this is reality, the joke's on us. Between Ussher's mid-17th century estimate and (say) Hawking's late 20th century one, the difference is just six orders of magnitude. It's scarcely worth getting out of bed for. Or the crib.

For anyone steeped in Hindu Cosmology – which locates us 1.56 x 10^14 years into the current Age of Brahma – or Lovecraftian metaphysics, with its vaguer but abysmally extended eons, the quantity of elapsed cosmic time, according to the common understanding of our present scientific establishment, is cause for claustrophobia. Looking backward, we are sealed in a small room, with the wall of the original singularity pressed right up against us. (Looking forward, things are quite different, and we will get to that.)

There are at least three ways in which the bizarre youthfulness of the universe might be imagined:

1. Consider first the disconcerting lack of proportion between space and time. The universe contains roughly 100 billion galaxies, each a swirl of 100 billion stars. That makes Sol one of 10^22 stars in the cosmos, but it has lasted for something like *a third of the life of the universe*. Decompose the solar system and the discrepancy only becomes more extreme. The sun accounts for 99.86% of the system's mass, and the gas giants incorporate 99% of the remainder, yet the age of the earth is only fractionally less than that of the sun. Earth is *a cosmic time hog*. In space it is next to nothing, but in time it extends back through a substantial proportion of the Stelliferous Era, so close to the origin of the universe that it is belongs to the very earliest generations of planetary bodies. Beyond it stretch incomprehensible immensities, but before it there is next to nothing.

2. Compared to the intensity of time (backward) extension is of

vanishing insignificance. The unit of Planck time – corresponding to the passage of a photon across a Planck length — is about 5.4 x 10^-44 seconds. If there is a true *instant*, that is it. A year consists of less the 3.2 x 10^7 seconds, so cosmological consensus estimates that there have been approximately 432 339 120 000 000 000 seconds since the Big Bang, which for our purposes can be satisfactorily rounded to 4.3 x 10^17. The difference between a second and the age of the universe is smaller that that between a second and a Planck Time tick by nearly *27 orders of magnitude*. In other words, if a Planck Time-sensitive questioner asked "When did the Big Bang happen?" and you answered "Just now" — in clock time — you'd be almost exactly right. If you had been asked to identify a particular star from among the entire stellar population of the universe, and you picked it out correctly, your accuracy would still be hazier by 5 orders of magnitude. Quite obviously, there haven't been enough seconds since the Big Bang to add up to a serious number – less than one for every 10,000 stars in the universe.

3. Isotropy gets violated by time orientation like a Detroit muni-bond investor. In a universe dominated by dark energy – like ours – expansion lasts *forever*. The Stelliferous Era is predicted to last for roughly 100 trillion years, which is over 7,000 times the present age of the universe. Even the most pessimistic interpretation of the Anthropic Principle, therefore, places us only a fractional distance from the beginning of time. The Degenerate Era, post-dating star-

formation, then extends out to 10^40 years, by the end of which time all baryonic matter will have decayed, and even the most radically advanced forms of cosmic intelligence will have found existence becoming seriously challenging. Black holes then dominate out to 10^60 years, after which the Dark Era begins, lasting a *long* time. (Decimal exponents become unwieldy for these magnitudes, making more elaborate modes of arithmetical notation expedient. We need not pursue it further.) The take-away: the principle of Isotropy holds that we should not find ourselves anywhere special in the universe, and yet we do – right at the beginning. More implausibly still, we are located at *the very beginning of an infinity* (although anthropic selection might crop this down to merely preposterous improbability).

Intuitively, this is all horribly wrong, although intuitions have no credible authority, and certainly provide no grounds for contesting rigorously assembled scientific narratives. Possibly — I should concede *most probably* — time is simply ridiculous, not to say profoundly insulting. We find ourselves glued to the very edge of the Big Bang, as close to neo-natal as it is arithmetically possible to be.

That's odd, isn't it?

ADDED: Numerical escalation from John Derbyshire.

ADDED: Alrenous has a different Big Bang issue.

July 20, 2013

Space is Big

… even just the solar system. ‘Awesome’ is a word destroyed by casual over-use, but I’m groping for an alternative right now, and not finding it. This has to be one of the best uses of a website out there — meaning: *really out there*.

(Via.)

January 17, 2015

Climate of Uncertainty

Natural cycles being what they are, there’s bound to be another mini-Ice Age (of the Maunder Minimum-type) eventually, and quite possibly soon. The implications for climate science, climate politics, and much beyond, are huge. Clean data on systemic effects are not accessible within history. That means all vulgar attempts to read out the effects of anthropic interventions from the historical record are doomed to fail, until perfect understanding of confounding rhythms are fully understood — basically, indefinitely. (Throw in chaos theory and other sources of epistemological pessimism here.) No one seriously thinks that a globally-coordinated ‘precautionary’ policy stance viz anthropogenic warming is constructible during a mini-Ice Age (do they?).

The consequence: Climate politics could — in reality — be a fairly remote science fiction scenario. By the time its opportunity comes around, far more will have been decided than is being allowed for.

ADDED:

> Global warming is settled science, so I'm supposed to ignore this, right? But is there a good reason why? http://t.co/SCbhqYwE7M
>
> — Charles Murray (@charlesmurray) July 13, 2015

July 13, 2015

CHAPTER TWO - THE ABSTRACT FORM OF TIME

Time Spiral

In the Author's Note to Peter Hessler's *Oracle Bones* (2006, subtitled 'A Journey Between China's Past and Present'), it is explained that:

The main chapters of this book are arranged chronologically, but the short sections labeled 'artifacts' are not. They reflect a deeper sense of time — the ways in which people make sense of history after it has receded farther into the past.

As time advances, the past recedes. Modernity, however, is more than that. It is the excavation of the past through acceleration into the future, a process of discovery, reclamation, and dilation, through which the past is explosively expanded. As Hessler realizes, the Oracle Bones, indissolubly binding the recovery of China's deep history to its activation of modernity, provide an exemplary illustration of this.

Yet modernity, as consolidated upon European foundations, has

been dismissive of Chinese history, seeing only scale without pattern:

In the traditional view of the Chinese past, there is no equivalent of the fall of Rome, no Renaissance, no Enlightenment. Instead, emperor succeeds emperor, and dynasty follows dynasty. History as wallpaper.

In a Nanjing museum gift shop, Hessler glimpses an alternative model:

At one Nanjing museum, I bought a poster labeled OUTLINE OF ANCIENT CHINESE HISTORY. The poster featured a timeline twisted into the shape of a spiral. Everything started in the center, at a tiny point identified as 'Yuanmou Ape-man.' After Yuanmou Ape-man (approximately 1.7 million years ago), the timeline passed through Peking Man and then made an abrupt turn. By the Xia dynasty, the spiral had completed one full circle. The Shang and the Zhou dynasties wrapped up a second revolution. The spiral got bigger with each turn, as if picking up speed. Whenever something ended — a dynasty, a warring state — the spiral was marked with a line and a black X, and then something new took its place. There weren't any branches or dead ends. From Yuanmou Ape-man, it took three turns of the spiral to reach the revolution of 1911, where the timeline finally broke the cycle, straightened out, and pointed directly up and off the page.

Whether folding the historical time line, or expanding a snail shell,

the spiral synthesizes repetition and growth. It describes a *cyclic escalation* that escapes — or precedes — the antagonism between tradition and progress, elucidating restoration as something other than a simple return.

This is a matter of ineluctable importance, because the history of modernity is rapidly becoming Chinese, and Chinese history is not meandering 'wallpaper' but *Confucian Restoration*, conforming to three great waves, each a turn of the spiral, or Gyre. Following China's classical era, and the Song Dynasty rebirth of native philosophical tradition, the third Confucian epoch, or second Confucian Restoration, is underway today, coinciding exactly with the renaissance of Global Modernity (as 'Modernity 2.0'). As future and past evolve — or *involve* — together, the time-spiral is our guide.

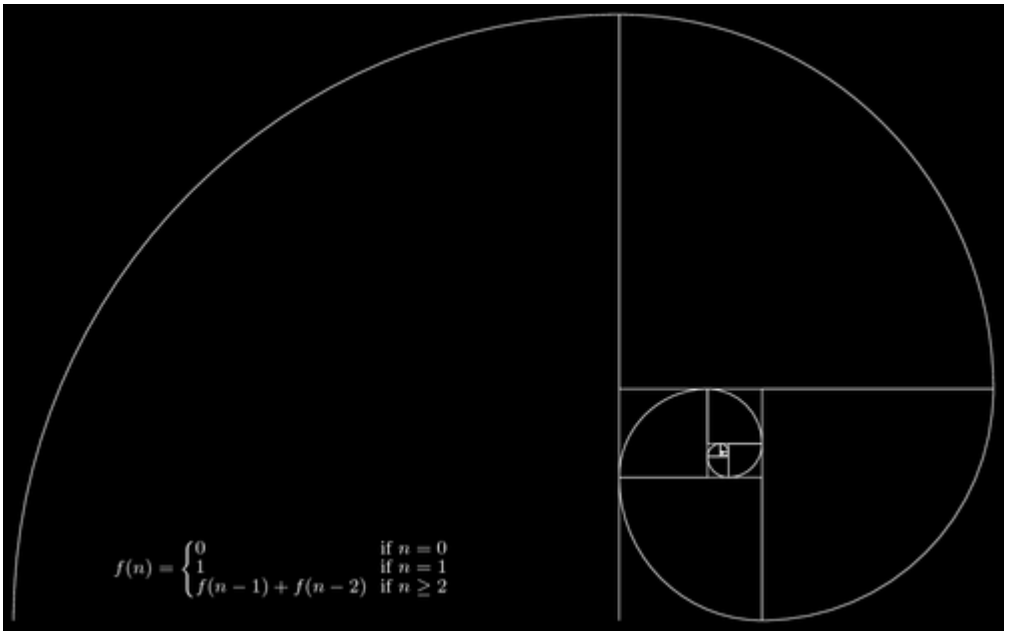
July 29, 2013

T-shirt slogans (#13)



E. Antony Gray triggered a Twitter storm about Greer and the tension between cyclic-repetitive and linear-progressive time. (I've no idea how to link the discussion that subsequently erupted.) Since the integration, or diagonal, between cycle and flight is not hard to find, it provides the perfect opportunity for a time-spiral T-shirt:

Cyclic Escalation



If this looks like the abstract cybergothic shape of NRx, it is only to be expected.

July 11, 2014

Quote notes (#7)

Some unusually brilliant Druidic prophecy from John Michael Greer:

Whether the crisis is contained by federal loan guarantees and bank nationalizations that keep farms, factories, and stores supplied with the credit they need, by the repudiation of debts and the issuance of a new currency, by martial law and the government

seizure of unused acreage, or by ordinary citizens cobbling together new systems of exchange in a hurry, as happened in Argentina, Russia, and other places where the economy suddenly went to pieces, the crisis will be contained. The negative feedback here is provided by the simple facts that people are willing to do almost anything to put food on the table, governments are willing to do even more to stay in power, and in hundreds of previous crises, their actions have proven more than sufficient to stop the positive feedback loops of economic crisis in their tracks, and stabilize the situation at some level.

None of this means the crisis will be easy to get through, nor does it mean that the world that emerges once the rubble stops bouncing and the dust settles will be anything like as prosperous, as comfortable, or as familiar as the one we have today. That's true of all three of the situations I've sketched out in this post. While the next round of crisis along the arc of industrial civilization's decline and fall will likely be over by 2070 of so, living through the interval between then and now will probably have more than a little in common with living through the First World War, the waves of political and social crises that followed it, the Great Depression, and the rise of fascism, followed by the Second World War and its aftermath—and this time the United States is unlikely to be sheltered from the worst impacts of crisis, as it was between 1914 and 1954. [Read the whole thing]

(Combining large-scale historical vision, cybernetic theory, and

extraordinary native intelligence, Greer is one of the most important voices on the reality-relevant blogosphere. His model of *Catabolic Collapse*, in particular, is an indispensable reference. *Outside in* will be visiting his ideas repeatedly over the next few weeks.)

July 10, 2013

The Shape of Time (Part 1)

Upon learning that America has an Arch-Druid, it would be only natural to make some assumptions about his beliefs, and cautious guesses would probably be right. The commitments of a religion that avoid appeal to the supernatural, one might expect, would be characteristically *down-to-earth*, ecological, conservative (in the determinedly lower-case and old-fashioned sense), practical, and empirical. At its most intellectually abstract, and also most (quietly) mystical, druidism would accept the ultimate complicity of all reality with a pattern of change that is at once sensible and insurmountable, multi-leveled, subtle, and all-enveloping: the cycle.

John Michael Greer, author of the Arch-Druid Report, eschews spiritual obscurity, at least in public. His persona as a blogger is that of a calm, lucid, and exceptionally insightful cycle theorist. In the strongest and most ineluctable sense, cyclicity is the norm, from which nothing truly, or sustainably, departs. A cultural formation that

loses this druidic grounding, by attaching itself to a setting which would break the cycle, thereby destines itself to a fall, or reversal of fortune – expressing the inevitable reversion to sustainability within a greater wheel of nature and history. Balance is less a moral imperative than a cosmic necessity, and since sustainability cannot be avoided, it can only also be advised.

As an analytical method, druidism is a kind of cybernetics, reflecting the mainstream orientation of the discipline. Negative feedback, which adjusts towards stability, fetches back deviations, to produce normal cycles. Perturbations are canceled within natural rhythms. Destabilizing, self-accentuating, positive feedback, in contrast, incarnates the unnatural, and is thus – from a certain perspective – unreal. Self-reinforcing processes accelerate to a crisis, and then collapse, describing a wave, or fluctuation, at a greater scale. What seems like an irrecoverable deviation has its counterpart within a larger whole, matching it exactly in one-sidedness, or violence, and providing the complementary reversion that restores equilibrium. A broken cycle is part of a more encompassing rhythm, partially perceived. Druidic naturalism insists that everything is eventually fetched back, because there is nowhere 'else' to flee. The law of the earth is ultimately inviolable:

… positive feedback [is] extremely rare in the real world, because systems with positive feedback promptly destroy themselves — imagine a thermostat that responded to rising temperatures by

heating things up further until the house burns down. Negative feedback, by contrast, is everywhere.

At the largest social scale, pathological deviations, and their reversions, are exemplified by the rise and fall of civilizations. Historical cycle theorists, such as Spengler and Toynbee, capture the recurrent pattern in its essentials. Cultures and all of their component parts, including historiography itself, are enveloped and directed by these great rhythms:

Every literate urban society, Spengler argued, followed the same trajectory from an original folk religion rich in myths, through the rise of intellectual theology, the birth of rationalism, the gradual dissolution of the religious worldview into rational materialism, and then the gradual disintegration of rational materialism into a radical skepticism that ends by dissolving itself; thereafter ethical philosophies for the intellectuals and resurgent folk religion for the masses provide the enduring themes for the civilization to come.

Such patterns offer the material for what Greer calls 'morphology' which, on the model (especially) of 18th and 19th century biology, extracts regular, comparable shapes from the confusion of varied particulars. Among the objects of morphological investigation are deep cultural structures, inextricable from religious ideas (in the widest sense), which pre-reflectively organize the experience of historical time. Globalized Occidental civilization ("modern industrial culture"), Greer argues, is characterized by two

dominant time shapes, at once twinned and aligned, which resonate with an unsustainable, positive-feedback dynamic in their pathological denial of balance, or eventual reversion.

Before examining these twinned shapes of modern time, some broader context can generate ambient illumination. Greer introduces a variety of time shapes from non-industrial cultures (and ecologies), including the changeless 'dream time' of hunter-gatherer societies, and the great cycles of pre-modern Chinese tradition. Indeed, his sketch of the classical Chinese time-shape appears oddly, even fetchingly, druidic:

The basic theory of the Chinese science of time is that events are guided by many different cycles, some faster and some slower, some influencing one dimension of human life and some shaping another. The cycle of the seasons was one of these; the cycle of human life was another; the cycle of the rise and fall of dynasties was a third; there were many more, each with its own period and typical sequence of events. Just as no two years had exactly the same weather on exactly the same days, no two repetitions of any other cycle were identical, but common patterns allowed the events of one repetition to be more or less predicted by a sufficiently broad knowledge of earlier examples. On a much broader scale, all cycles of every kind could be understood as expressions of a single abstract pattern of cyclic change, which was explored in the classic Chinese textbook of time theory, the I Ching — in English, the Book of Change.

The most jarring contrast with the progressive model of time, however, is found much closer to it, both in cultural proximity and obvious ecological complementarity. It is laid out by Hesiod in his *Works and Days*, where it is articulated as a grinding stepwise decline through successive ages, each determined by its deterioration relative to the age before.

Hesiod's abnormality – or ours – emerges starkly from an overlap. As modern historiography progresses, expanding its purchase ever more deeply into archeology and paleo-anthropology, it discovers ancient societies 'rising' from the new stone age ('neolithic') to the bronze age, and then later, with the advance of metallurgy, entering the iron age, with improved weapons and tools. The passage from bronze to iron is an obvious leap forward, corresponding to a basic threshold of cultural maturation, **locked in** to the history of the world by a progressive technological ratchet. How disconcerting, then, to find this same sequence repeated by Hesiod, but with inverse sign, in a degenerative series of ages — Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron – that proceed through increments of coarsening, from the most noble metal, to the most base.

From our deeply-entrenched, progressive perspective, any historical meta-narrative structured by relentless decline appears exotically strange. The same does not hold within Greer's ecological framework, which couples deviations to reversions within long cycles, so that a downward slope is no more abnormal than a

persistent incline. Our historical optimism finds itself ecologically relativized by a story that has no less confidence in its fears than we have in our long-consolidated hopes. The explanatory background that Greer supplies – themed by soil erosion — has sufficient directionality to match, and to carry, Hesiod's shape of time:

Two thousand years before Hesiod, prehistoric Greece had been the home of a lively assortment of village cultures making the slow transition from polished stone tools to bronze. On that foundation more complex societies rose, borrowing heavily from contemporary high cultures in the Middle East, and culminating in the monumental architecture and literate palace bureaucracies of the Mycenean age. Those of my readers who have some sense of the rhythms of history will already know what followed: too much clearcutting and intensive farming of the fragile Greek soils, made worse by the importation of farming methods better suited to flat Mesopotamian valleys than easily eroded Greek hills, triggered an ecological crisis; most of the topsoil of Mycenean Greece ended up at the bottom of the Aegean Sea, where it can still be found in core samples; warfare, migration, and population collapse followed in the usual manner, as Mycenean society stumbled down the curve of its own Long Descent.

Greer's readers have been prepared to recognize "its own" as a pointer to **our own** – another "Long Descent" anticipated by an ecological grounding pattern, this time set by the energy-availability curve of Peak Oil. This forecast is a topic for another occasion. For

now, our concern is more abstract, indifferent to the specific mechanism of civilizational limitation, and attentive solely to Greer's claim that the denial of historical cyclicity is a form of unwarranted *exceptionalism*, founded materially in an ecological boost-phase, and reasonably encapsulated in the notorious bubble slogan *this time it's different*:

There's a wry amusement to be had by thinking through the implications of this constantly repeated claim. If our society was in fact shaking off the burdens of the past and breaking new ground with every minute that goes by, as believers in progress like to claim, wouldn't it be more likely that the theory of historical cycles would be challenged each time it appears with dazzlingly new, innovative responses that no one had ever imagined before? Instead, in an irony Nietzsche would have relished, the claim that history can't repeat itself endlessly repeats itself, in what amounts to an eternal return of the insistence that there is no eternal return. What's more, those who claim that it's different this time seem blissfully unaware that anyone has made the same claim before them, and if this is pointed out to them, they insist—often with quite some heat—that what they're saying has nothing whatsoever to do with all the other times the same argument was used to make the same point down through the years.

It bears repeating that the belief in progress, and the equal and opposite belief in apocalypse, are narratives about the unknowable.

Both claim that the past has nothing to say about the future, that something is about to happen that has never happened before and that can't be judged on the basis of any previous event.

Neither progress nor apocalypse, Greer contends, are time-shapes well-suited to the realistic evaluation of their ends. [More on that next]

July 29, 2013

The Shape of Time (Part 2)

In the first part of this series, we introduced John Michael Greer's 'druidic' framework for the evaluation of cultural 'time shapes' – based on a presumption of dominant cyclicity, according to which any prolonged deviation or unbalanced process is exposed as an unsustainable exception. Within a sufficiently expansive great cycle, any continuous progressive trend is complemented by a proportionate regression (and, of course, inversely). The cyclic assumption marks out each and every image of *absolute progress* as illusory. In this way, the cycle, when applied to any particular figure of time, describes an enveloping structure that provides pointed critical perspective. (Criticism of the cyclic assumption itself — or 'in turn' — is best delayed until Greer's most significant positive results have been sketched.)

The presently-dominant global civilization – when apprehended at a level of extreme (ecological) abstraction – is the fossil-fuel burning runaway spurt that Greer calls "modern industrial culture." Central to this culture is an expectation of growth, founded in an unsustainable ecological process, and expressed through distinctive time shapes. The plural here is essential, because Greer's complete 'morphological' description of modern time unfolds within a tripartite system of classification.

The first time shape is mostly occluded. This is the cyclic model that organizes Greer's thinking, serving both as a pivot and as an enveloping frame. The cyclical time-conception defines a 'middle way' that exposes abnormality and excess through contrast, and also completes a holistic comprehension, contextualizing partiality or bias. It functions within Greer's analysis as an intellectual tool, or workshop, more than a distinct object of investigation. Given its 'transcendental' status within the druidic order of apprehension, the cycle is not limited to a moment of historical origination, or associated with the name of a particular cultural authority.

The second time shape is not intrinsically modern, but is rather the living ancestor, or vital inheritance, of the culture that would eventually assert the terms of global modernity. Of the world's numerous pre-modern time shapes, it is the one that has been universalized by its lineal descendents. Greer identifies it primarily with Augustine of Hippo, and he assigns it a specific birthday: AD

413.

Greer argues (conventionally), that the collapse of the Christian Empire under barbarian onslaught threatened the new faith with a crisis of legitimacy, leading Augustine to the radical conclusion that: "Ordinary history … has no moral order or meaning."

The place of moral order and meaning in time is found instead in sacred history, which has a distinctive linear shape of its own. That shape begins in perfection, in the Garden of Eden; disaster intervenes, in the form of original sin, and humanity tumbles down into the fallen world. From that point on, there are two histories of the world, one sacred and one secular. The secular history is the long and pointless tale of stupidity, violence and suffering that fills the history books; the sacred history is the story of God's dealings with a small minority of human beings — the patriarchs, the Jewish people, the apostles, the Christian church — who are assigned certain roles in a preexisting narrative. Eventually the fallen world will be obliterated, most of its inhabitants will be condemned to a divine boot in the face forever, and those few who happen to be on the right side will be restored to Eden's perfection, at which point the story ends.

In formulating this story, Augustine gave "the Western world what would be, for the next millennium or so, its definitive shape of time." Furthermore, even after the emergence of an alternative, this foundational cultural narrative would remain in reserve, constantly

available as a recourse should its successor falter, betray the interests of disaffected groups, or accumulate signs of crisis. The Western tradition, when conceived through its ancestral time shape, would be perpetuated as an undrained reservoir of apocalyptic temptation. The ecological critique of modernity, Greer observes, is as fully-saturated with this apocalyptic narrative as any other articulation of social dissent.

Within modernity proper, however, the Augustinian time shape has ceased to be mainstream. Once again, Greer is not reluctant to reach for a name and a (rough) date, that of the twelfth century Italian mystic "Joachim of Flores … [who] had an impact on the future as significant as Augustine's: he's the person who kicked down the barrier between sacred and secular history that Augustine put so much effort into building, and created the shape of time that the cultural mainstream occupies to this day."

To Joachim, sacred history was not limited to a paradise before time, a paradise after it, and the thread of the righteous remnant and the redeeming doctrine linking the two. He saw sacred history unfolding all around him in the events of his own time. His vision divided all of history into three great ages, governed by the three persons of the Christian trinity: the Age of Law governed by the Father, which ran from the Fall to the crucifixion of Jesus; the Age of Love governed by the Son, which ran from the crucifixion to the year 1260; and the Age of Liberty governed by the Holy Spirit, which

would run from 1260 to the end of the world.

What made Joachim's vision different from any of the visionary histories that came before it — and there were plenty of those in the Middle Ages — was that it was a story of progress.

Not only does the Joachimite three-stage narrative of progress introduce the idea of uncompensated advance, it also legitimates a trend to secularization, as the institutional structures appropriate to the patriarchal and filial epochs are dissolved in the new age of revolutionary liberty. Unsurprisingly, radical intellectuals and movements seized upon this schema as a blueprint for the dispossession of the Old Order, ensuring its general popularization. As modernity was serially 'revolutionized' it became ever more Joachimite in its basic assumptions, until progress had been installed as a dominant 'civil religion'. Eventually, the progressive idea had been normalized to the point of near-total invisibility.

With the outlining of the Augustinian and Joachimite 'visions', Greer's classification of modern time shapes approaches completeness. The entire argument, when schematically reviewed, can be decomposed into a number of distinct and informative claims:
(a) The culture of modern global civilization is dominated by exactly two principal time shapes.
(b) These time shapes are in certain respects culturally arbitrary, arising in specific times and places, without any original logical inter-dependency, and inflected by the concerns of a particular religious

tradition.
(c) This arbitrariness is further confirmed by the morphological richness each time shape reveals, a feature that supports confident identification and classification of superficially differentiated variants.
(d) Despite the absence of logical necessity, when historically assembled into a mature, dyadic system, the combined Augustinian-Joachimite duality evidences a significant measure of reciprocal order (or effective 'dialectical unity') and a near exhaustive purchase upon the modern cultural imagination — conformity and dissent.
(e) The complementarity of the dyad approximately corresponds to symmetrical judgments of (Joachimite) affirmation and (Augustinian) negation of a prevailing historical trend.
(f) Regardless of their manifest power of captivation, the Augustinian-Joachimite dyad has a limit, best described by the cyclic time model from which each side of the duality diverges.

[Next: critical appraisal]

August 20, 2013

The Shape of Time (Part 2a)

When describing the thinking of John Michael Greer as 'druidic' – as this series has cheerfully done – the adjective has been primarily

philosophical in direction. It has been used only to indicate that an identifiable, and remarkably coherent, presupposition about the governing nature of time anchors Greer's particular analyses, which draw out the implications of an unsurpassable cosmic cyclicity, and apply them deftly to a wide variety of concrete problems. 'Druid' and 'radical cycle theorist' have been treated as roughly equivalent terms.

It is worth noting at this point, however, that Greer is not only conceptually druidic. He is a public proponent of Druidism in a far richer, culturally-elaborate sense, which includes service "as presiding officer — Grand Archdruid is the official title — of the Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA), a Druid order founded in 1912." This vocation slants his perspective in important (and productive) ways. Our concerns here, tightly focused on the question of time, are able to extract considerable intellectual nourishment from a digression into this thick druidism.

Like other forms of occult Occidental religion, Druidry has an attachment to the deep past that is not tacit and traditional, but overt, modern, and creative. Greer admits readily – even gleefully – that his 'Ancient Order' is not in fact ancient at all, but instead belongs to a project of restoration – and actually reconstruction – that dates back no further than the mid-17th century. From its inception, it was bound to a lost past and to inextinguishable doubts about its own authenticity. Greer only very rarely uses his *Archdruid*

Report platform to discuss druidism explicitly. On the first occasion when he does so, his reflections are triggered by the question of a young boy: *Are you a **real** Druid?*

It's not an easy question to answer. The original Druids, the priests and wizards of the ancient Celts, went extinct more than a thousand years ago, and all their beliefs, practices, and teachings went with them.

More specifically, he explains:

Who were the Druids? The honest answer is that we really don't know. Most of what was written about them in ancient times vanished forever when the Roman Empire collapsed. Every surviving text written about the Druids while they still existed, put together, add up to ten pages or so in English translation. … Druids in training memorized many lines of verse, since it was forbidden to set down their teachings in writing. … Julius Caesar, whose book on the Roman conquest of Gaul is the most detailed source on the Druids, noted that Druidic teachings were thought to come from Britain originally, while a Greek scholar claimed that the Druids got their lore from the Greek philosopher Pythagoras; no other writer refers to the subject. … archeologists and historians were able to prove conclusively that the Druidry of the Revival was a modern spiritual movement, not an ancient one.

Modern druidry is a *revival*, which is to say that it originates through identification with something that is dead. Its modernity is

stretched and activated, to become more than mere succession, and more even than self-conscious, differentiated succession — or 'advance'. The discontinuity that defines 'the Revival' cannot be reduced to a transition, however radical. Instead, it corresponds to an uncertain reaching back, through the still-living past and beyond, towards a lost beginning. In this way it initiates a process — and a new tradition — that cannot easily be resolved into distinct elements of invention and re-animation. In its quest for ancient origins, it relocates the present within an expanded comprehension of historical time. This complex, quasi-paradoxical cultural undertaking, is at once typically modern, and anti-modern. By distancing itself from passive accommodation to its historical moment, it epitomizes this same moment in its concrete historical reality — as a revolt against simple continuity. It represents a dramatic neo-traditionalism, of an Occidental type.

The time-traveler tends to produce — or become — a double, and the modern Druid is no exception. Something 'ancient' is returned to life, so that re-animator and re-animated co-exist in a folded present, cross-identified, and ambiguously co-original, or coincidental. Do the Druids of the Revival 'still' believe the archaic wisdom of cyclicity, now rediscovered, or do they project it back onto the blank screen of an erased antiquity? Who is the copy here? We are returned, inexorably, to a problem of identification ("*Are you a* ***real*** *Druid?*"), model and derivation, originality and repetition. A search for reality

has become inextricable from an exercise in duplicity, twisted into a reflective or introspective circle, and spun out into an investigation of time.

As this perplexity develops, the term 'Druid Revival' comes to seem like something more than an arbitrary conjunction. Its two words are not merely joined, but doubled, as an echo of time disturbance. Each points independently towards a pre-implanted pattern of return, with the cycle already registered on both sides. Greer traces the 'real roots' of this doubling to a discontinuous connection:

Some modern Druid groups in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to their lasting discredit, claimed direct connections to the ancient Celtic Druids they didn't have. The real roots of the modern Druid movement go in a different direction: to the first stages of the Industrial Revolution in early 18th century Britain, and the Hobson's choice between dogmatic religion and materialist science, the two victors in the reality wars of the late Renaissance. Plenty of people sought a third option that embraced nature and spirit alike, and some of them found inspiration in the scraps of classical writing, medieval legend, and Celtic folklore that referred to the ancient Druids.

"Historians call the result the Druid Revival," he continues, as if determined to separate this twin term from anything that modern druidry first said about itself. He recognizes, perhaps, that *druidism is the philosophy (or religion) of revival* — or of the full 'ecological'

cycle through life and death — so that to draw upon this word ('revival') threatens to represent the return of druidic thinking through itself, in a closed circle of self-confirmation, persuasive only to those of prior druidic (or, more narrowly, cycle-theoretical) inclination. Better, then, that 'historians' seal this circle, from outside, and thereby demonstrate its real coincidence, or simple reality. The Revival is noticed as historical fact, before it is cycled back into druidic intelligence, as a doctrinal expectation.

Each year is a cyclical time unit of death and revival, and in this it is a primordial teacher, in a way that no scripture could ever be. That, at least, is the folk pagan understanding that Druid Revival restores to ritualistic primacy, and adopts as its guiding cognitive model. Its own revival, therefore, is 'only natural', or self-explanatory.

To bring thinking into compliance with the great cycles is immediately to participate in a speculative super-tradition, sustained by a structure of ideas and apprehension that *cannot but return*. In the thought of the cycle there is already implied a non-originality, binding the thinker, across time, to all those who necessarily understand the way things have to happen again. What, then, is ancient origin, and what revival? When would one look for a 'real Druid'?

[This digression has a little further to stray, along a more concrete path, before critical distance is restored.]

September 6, 2013

Greer

Anyone who isn't yet reading *The Archdruid Report* really ought to be. John Michael Greer is quite simply one of the most brilliant writers in existence, and even when he's wrong, he's importantly wrong. His perspective is coherent, learned, and uncaged by the assumptions of progressivism. Above all, his understanding of what it means to find history informative is unsurpassed. (Over at the Other Place, there's an unfinished Greer series that badly requires attention, with the first three installments here, here, and here.)

When escalated to the extreme, the progressive conclusion is that history can teach us nothing. Innovation is by its very nature unprecedented, and insofar as it manifests improvement, it humbles its precursors. The past is the rude domicile of ignorant barbarity. Insofar as the present still bears its traces, as shameful stigmata, they are mere remains that still have to be overcome. At the limit, the concept of Singularity — a horizon at which all anticipatory knowledge is annulled — seals the progressive intuition.

In its abstract theoretical core, at least, Greer's Druidic counter-history is radically reactionary (far more unambiguously so than NRx). Its model of time is entirely cyclical, such that past and future

are perfectly neutral between ascent and decline. Every attempt to install a gradient of improvement in the dimension of historical time is broken upon the great wheels, which balance every rise with a fall, dissolving innovation in precedent. Novelty is hubristic illusion (an exaggerated correction, in the opinion of this blog).

In his most recent post Greer introduces an intriguing complication:

Arnold Toynbee, whose magisterial writings on history have been a recurring source of inspiration for this blog, has pointed out an intriguing difference between the way civilizations rise and the way they fall. On the way up, he noted, each civilization tends to diverge not merely from its neighbors but from all other civilizations throughout history. […] Once the peak is past and the long road down begins, though, that pattern of divergence shifts into reverse, slowly at first, and then with increasing speed. A curious sort of homogenization takes place: distinctive features are lost, and common patterns emerge in their place. That doesn't happen all at once, and different cultural forms lose their distinctive outlines at different rates, but the further down the trajectory of decline and fall a civilization proceeds, the more it resembles every other civilization in decline.

The dissymmetry calls out for philosophical investigation, since it suggests a line of synthetic diagonalization between precedent and innovation, cyclicity and escape (which is to say, the NRx or

cybergothic line). It would be to stray too far from Greer to follow that now.

Straightforwardly, the claim being made is that forecasting strengthens on the down-slope of civilization. The more a social order fails, the more it sheds its originality, and thus the more accessible it becomes to accurate diagnosis on the basis of historical example. As collapse deepens, it converges with a template, bound ever tighter to a model by its morbidity. Across the peak, an age of prophecy begins — or returns.

The dark irony is delicious almost beyond endurance. The Universal, long proclaimed as the capstone of progress, is realized only as a nadir. The equality of all civilizations is asserted, in reality, as a direct measure of their proximity to death. Among the spreading ruins, the mad echoes of similarity resound deafeningly, as the blasted Cathedral plummets towards its Idea — eternal return of the same.

July 10, 2014

Time Scales

The word ‘neoreaction’ is a split, productively paradoxical formula, simultaneously referencing two incompatible cultural formations, each corresponding to an abstract model of time. On one side, it

is a gateway opening onto techno-libertarian hyper-progressivism, and an order of time structured by irreversible accumulation, self-envelopment, and catastrophe horizon (Singularity). On the other, it opens onto the temporality of reaction and the cycle, where all progress is illusion, and all innovation anticipated. Within NRx, the time of escape and the time of return seek an obscure synthesis, at once unprecedented and primordial, whose cryptic figure is the spiral. (This is the time of the Old Ones and the Outside, from which the shoggoth come.) If NRx thinks itself already lodged articulately in this synthesis, it deludes itself.

From a strictly philosophical perspective, the time of reaction finds no defender more able than Archdruid John Michael Greer. while his specific form of religious traditionalism, his social attitudes, and his eco-political commitments are all profoundly questionable from the standpoint of throne-and altar reaction, his model of time cannot be surpassed in an Old Right direction. Those who would install a prejudice of relentless degeneration in its place, anchored by a revealed religion of recent creation and subsequent continuous fall, only position themselves to the 'right' of Greer by making God a revolutionary. If deep time is to be preserved, there can be no archaic authority beyond the cycle.

Why call Greer a reactionary? It is not, after all, a label he would accept for himself. The answer lies in cyclical time, and everything that follows from it: the supremacy of wisdom among human things,

the enduring authority of history, the dismissal of modernist pretension as a mere mask for deep historical repetition, an absolute disillusionment with progress, and an adamantine prognosis that — from the peak of fake 'improvement' where we find ourselves — a grinding course of decline over coming centuries is an inevitability. The cultural and political decoration can be faulted, but in the fundamental structure of Greer's thinking, reaction is perfected.

There is a religious consideration to be noted here, as the stepping stone to another point. Once the cyclical counter-assumption is adopted — in a definitive break from modernist ideology — it leads inexorably to an expansion of the time frame. To see the pattern, it is necessary to pan out. An apparent rise is only rendered intelligible by its complementary fall. An event makes sense to the extent that it can be identified as a repetition, through subsumption into a persistent rhythm, which means that to understand it is to pull back from it, into ever wider expanses of history. Recognized precedent is wisdom.

Reaction is thus construed as a critique of modernist myopia. The appearance of innovation derives from a failure to see a larger whole. If something looks new, it is because not enough is being seen.

No surprise, then, to find Greer seize upon an opportunity to discuss *The Next Ten Billion Years*. At such scales, fluctuations of fortune are fully contextualized, so that no uncompensated progressions remain. After just 1% of this time has passed:

The long glacial epoch that began in the Pleistocene has finally ended, and the Earth is returning to its more usual status as a steamy jungle planet. This latest set of changes proves to be just that little bit too much for humanity. No fewer than 8,639 global civilizations have risen and fallen over the last ten million years, each with its own unique sciences, technologies, arts, literatures, philosophies, and ways of thinking about the cosmos; the shortest-lived lasted for less than a century before blowing itself to smithereens, while the longest-lasting endured for eight millennia before finally winding down.

All that is over now. There are still relict populations of human beings in Antarctica and a few island chains, and another million years will pass before cascading climatic and ecological changes finally push the last of them over the brink into extinction. Meanwhile, in the tropical forests of what is now southern Siberia, the descendants of raccoons who crossed the Bering land bridge during the last great ice age are proliferating rapidly, expanding into empty ecological niches once filled by the larger primates. In another thirty million years or so, their descendants will come down from the trees.

Everything that rises will fall.

Such vastly panned-out perspectives are also relevant to the competitive catastrophe theorizing that is so close to the dead heart of this blog. Any conceivable disaster has an associated time-frame, within which it is no more than a wandering fluctuation. Recovery

from deep dysgenic decline requires only a few millennia, extinction of the human species perhaps a few tens of millions of years, full restoration of terrestrial fossil fuel deposits, 100 million years or so. Vicissitudes on the down-side scarcely register as tremors in the meanderings of geological time.

There is more to time-scales than more time. Whatever else *anthropomorphism* is — and it is a lot of other things — it is a scale of time. To be human is to be situated, distinctively, within a spectrum of frequencies. In our wavelength zone, a second is a short time, and a century is long. These lower and upper bounds of significant duration correspond respectively to the biophysics of mammalian motility and to the outer-limits of mortal plans. The cosmic arbitrariness of this scalar time region is very easy to see.

The digital tick of time in our universe is set by the passage of a photon across a Planck-length (in a vacuum), approximately 5.4 x 10^-44 seconds. This is not a number readily intuited. A comparison to the (mere) 4.3 x 10^17 seconds that have so far lapsed during the entire history of the universe perhaps provides some vague sense. (Anthropomorphic time-scale bias is at least roughly as blinding to minuscule durations as to enormous ones.)

The upper limits of the cosmic time-scale are harder to identify. Speculative cosmological models predict the evolution of the Universe out to 10^60 years or more, when the last of the black holes have evaporated. The Stelliferous Era (in which new stars are

born) is expected to last for only 100 trillion (10^14) years, out to approximately 7,000 times the present age of the universe. (If the stelliferous universe were analogized to a human being with a one-century life-expectancy, it would presently be an infant, just entering its sixth post-natal day, with 987 billion years to wait until its anthropomorphic first birthday).

Beyond the human time scale lie immensities, and intensities. The latter are especially susceptible to neglect. When — over half a century ago — Richard Feynman anticipated nano-engineering with the words [there's] "Plenty of Room at the Bottom" he opened prospects of time involution, as well as miniaturization in space. A process migrating in the direction of the incomprehensibly distant Planck limit makes time for itself, in a way quite different from any endurance in temporal extension. Consider 'now' to be a second, as it is approximately at the anthropomorphic scale, and its inner durations are potentially near-limitless — vastly exceeding all the time the human species could make available to itself even by persisting to the death of the universe's last star. A femto-scale intelligence system could explore the rise and fall of entire biological phyla, in detail, in a period so minuscule it would entirely escape human apprehension as sub-momentary, or subliminal. The ultimate eons are less ahead than within.

Greer envisages no escape from the anthropomorphic bandwidth of time. Within his far-future speculation, each new intelligent

species that arises is implicitly 'anthropomorphic' in this sense. After Earth has died, its particles are strewn among the nearby stars, and incorporated into the body of an alien species:

The creature's biochemistry, structure, and life cycle have nothing in common with yours, dear reader. Its world, its sensory organs, its mind and its feelings would be utterly alien to you, even if ten billion years didn't separate you. Nonetheless, it so happens that a few atoms that are currently part of your brain, as you read these words, will also be part of the brain-analogue of the creature on the crag on that distant, not-yet-existing world. Does that fact horrify you, intrigue you, console you, leave you cold?

If coldness is the appropriate response to seeing time still imprisoned, ten billion years from now, then Greer's vision is chilling. For it to be compelling, however, would take far more.

Though only implicit, it would be grudging to deny Greer credit for the excavation of a crucial reactionary proposition: *Nothing will ever break into the vaults of time*. This is not an assertion to which *Outside in* is yet ready to defer.

ADDED: An exercise in extensive time perspective.

July 12, 2014

Perspective

Derbyshire at the top of his game:

The whole climate change business is now a zone of hysteria, generating far more noise — mostly of a shrieking kind — than its importance justifies. Opinions about climate change are, as Greg Cochran said, "a mark of tribal membership." It is also the case, as Greg also said, that "the world is never going to do much about in any event, regardless of the facts." […] If we ***did*** *do anything the effect would likely be puny compared to, say, a single major volcanic eruption. Mother Nature laughs at our climate change fretting. […] Consider ice ages for example, like the one we are currently living through.*

Ice ages last for ***tens of millions*** *of years. We don't know how many there have been. Our planet is 4½ billion years old; we only have clear evidence of ice ages for the last billion years, in which time there have been four ice ages, covering a total of one-third of a billion years. In its "normal" condition — the other two-thirds — the Earth is ice-free all the way up to the poles. […] The present ice age started around 2½ million years ago. Our best guess is that it'll continue for several million years more. […]* ***Within*** *this ice age there have been ups and downs. The downs are called "glaciations," the ups — comparatively warm spells, like the one we are currently in — are "interglacials." […] … The climatic changes here are sensational. At*

the peak of the last glaciation in 20,000 B.C., the pleasant suburb where I am writing this was buried under an ice sheet several hundred feet thick. It is possible that during one of the earlier ice ages, 700 million years ago, ***the entire planet*** *was covered with ice, down to the equator.*

The dwarfing of scientific concerns to media spin-cycle wavelengths has to be counted among the greatest vulgarizations of our age.

May 23, 2015

CHAPTER THREE - NARRATIVIZATIONS

Tackling Templexity

Since there are a number of critical tasks that cannot be advanced prior to straightening out some knotty problems of time topology, UF has added a *Templexity* page (as a work in progress). It will eventually provide supporting apparatus for an *Urbanatomy Electronic* product of the same name, due out this fall. What cannot be straightened out, of course won't be — but something will occur. What holds for macro-history holds no less for micro-history, with the two entangling, rather than resonating.

The cultural pretext for this investigation is Rian Johnson's *Looper*, whose very crudities and short-cuts become informative, when approached from the right angle.

The perspective of *Templexity* is arranged by the postulate: *Time-travel is the dramatization of something else*.

The firm hypothesis: Shanghai is a time machine.

"You should go to China," Joe is told by his criminal overseer, Abe. "I'm going to France," Joe insists stubbornly. Abe responds with what – for us – is the most critical line in the movie: "I'm from the future.

You should go to China." With these words, ***Looper*** *makes Sino-Futurism its topic. The hyper-modern* ***China Event*** *is too vast to fit simply into time.*

Ben Woodard has put up a valuable post that delves into the centrality of time-disturbance to the problems of accelerationism. If the accelerationist intuition is *on to something*, traffic between these zones of discussion can only thicken.

September 15, 2014

Time Discipline

If you run through the functional specifications of your time machine, and it looks as if it's going to print bullion, or proliferate doubles, it's been badly assembled. *Time-travel is the dramatization of something else*, and you're still trapped in the simulation.

Forbes on Seth Lloyd:

In Type 1 time travel — the type highlighted in the "Back to the Future" films — all possible pasts and futures in some sense exist simultaneously, says Lloyd. So, that when you go back and change the past in order to enter a different future, your "old" future is in some sense still "there."

"From a theoretical physics standpoint," said Lloyd, "Type 1 is certainly possible, but we still don't have a very good theory of how

it would work."

He notes that current physical theory favors Type 2 time travel scenario in which the past can't be changed no matter how hard one tries.

"Our theory of time travel is Type 2," said Lloyd, "[which means] no matter how hard you try to mess with the past you can't do it."

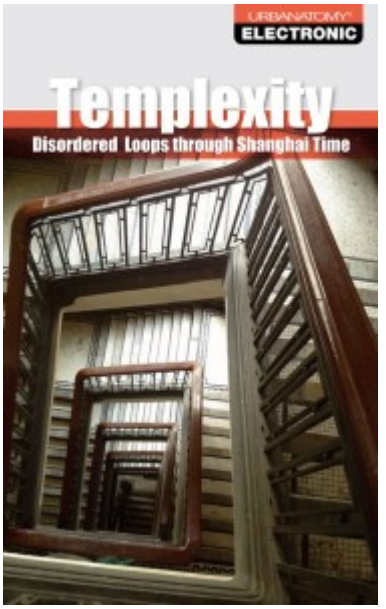
HP Lovecraft fixed the principle.

September 16, 2014

Templexity

For the visitors here who are perpetually tortured by the *Damn! Where is the tip-jar button?* question, less-evil twin has a time-travel book out. (It should be $3.99, but it says $5.99 at my link — which might be a Shanghai-effect.)

UF (2.1) plug here.



If you know anybody teetering on the brink of a psychotic episode, who just needs a slight nudge to plunge over the edge, it would make an ideal present.

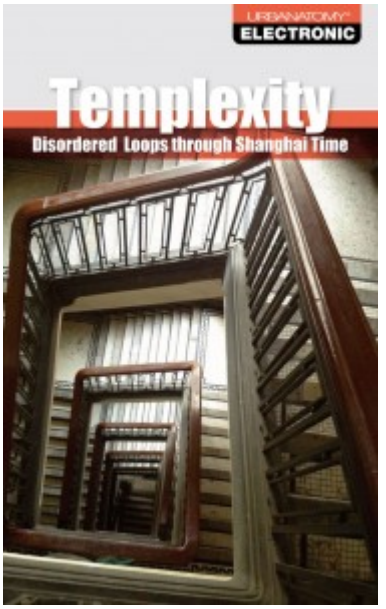
November 7, 2014

Templexity is Out

Thank you Amazon. Despite some frustrations with the Kindle Direct Publishing interface — which isn't designed for editorial convenience — the excitement of disintermediation-in-action more than makes up for it. If the self-publishing system reached the stage where writers spent their time on the platform, as a work-space, in the same way

they can on a blog today, the horizon of possibility would be pushed out to yet inconceivable distances.

Templexity aims to catalyze a theoretical coagulation where the philosophy of time, contemporary (complex) urbanism, and pulp entertainment media are complicit in an approach to singularity (as a topic, a thing, and a nonlinear knotting of the two (at least)). It proposes that the urban process and the techno-science of time machines is undergoing rapid convergence. (This seems to be a suggestion whose time has come.) Grasp the opportunity offered by computers to visualize what cities really are, and the dynamics of retro-temporalization are graphically displayed.



That being for which the being of time is opened as an exploratory path is the advanced global metropolis. This is a contention already

tacked to a cinematic, mass-media revelation, although one formatted by deeply-traditional dramatic criteria, thus systematically, and automatically, encrypted.

Far more on all this later. (If I say too much now, I'm worried I might save you $4.00.)

November 7, 2014

Quote note (#245)

Nydwracu on Great Awakenings:

La Wik:

First Great Awakening: 1730-1755
Second Great Awakening: 1790-1840
Third Great Awakening: 1850-1900
Fourth Great Awakening: 1960-1980
From 1730 to 1790 is 60 years. From 1790 to 1850 is 60 years. From 1850 to 1960 is 110 years. 110 / 2 = 55. Close enough. 1960 + 60 = 2020.

As we all know, the Fourth Great Awakening had secular and folk-religious components. We should expect the fifth one to as well. The obvious candidates for the secular component are the already-existing revivals of Communism, Fascism, and flat-earthism, and the obvious candidates for the folk-religious component are Tumblrism,

fad diets, and singularitarianism. There are probably more.

What will the religious component look like?

Well, things are getting weird. Really weird. …

As for that missing episode, it would be preposterous to advance this (1904) as the apex of a 'Great Awakening' in the sense at stake here, but perhaps not such a stretch to think it was picking up on some strange turbulence in the *Aethyrs*.

May 7, 2016

1930-Somethings

History never repeats itself, but it rhymes, runs the suggestive aphorism (falsely?) attributed to Mark Twain.

James Delingpole writes in the *Daily Telegraph*:

… have you ever tried reading private journals or newspapers from the 1930s? What will surprise you is that right to the very last minute – up to the moment indeed when war actually broke – even the most insightful and informed commentators and writers clung on to the delusion that things would somehow turn out all right. I do hope that history is not about to repeat itself. Unfortunately, the lesson from history is that all too often it does.

There's quite a lot of this about.

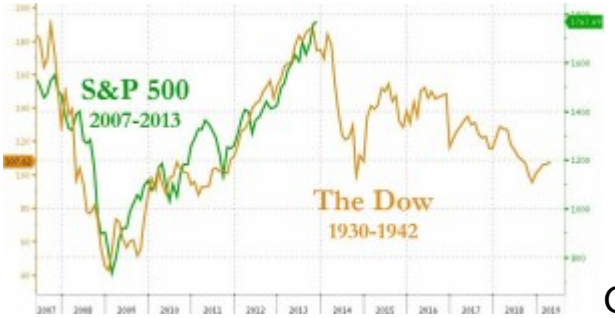
For one theoretical account of how history might rhyme, on an

ominous 80-year cycle, there's a generational model that sets the beat. "Strauss & Howe have established that history can be broken down into 80 to 100 year Saeculums that consist of four turnings: The High, The Awakening, The Unraveling, and the Crisis." From a philosophical point of view, it seems a little under-powered, but its empirical plausibility rises by the month.

Among Shanghai's anomalies is a peculiar relation to the 1930s. For the city beyond the International Settlement, the decade slid into disaster when Sino-Japanese hostilities broke out in 1937. Yet the preceding period was not marked by depression, but by exuberant High Modernism. Dates from the 1930s that would in much of the world seem distinctly sinister are displayed on the city's historic buildings as a mark of Golden Age authenticity. For the paranoid mind, that would slot neatly into the same disturbing rhyme scheme today.

Throughout most of the rich world, economic, political, and cultural decay seemed — retrospectively — to presage the coming cataclysm, as if nothing less could jolt exhausted social systems from their relentless downward slide. Almost everywhere, some version of fascist thinking was seized upon as the antidote to relentlessly gathering malaise. Beneath the surface of the global geostrategic order, shifting tectonic plates accumulated intolerable tension. Degenerate monetary systems came apart into uncontrollable swirls of dysfunctional signs.

Still, it's entirely possible that there's nothing to worry about:



Click image to enlarge.

ADDED: "If you hear echoes of the 1930s in the capitulation at Geneva, it's because the West is being led by the same sort of men, minus the umbrellas." (I'm hearing echoes of the 1930s just about everywhere.)

November 26, 2013

The Decopunk Delta

As this blog spirals around to its re-starting point, it fetches back the tasks it has yet to advance upon, including the most basic (announced in its sub-title). Why the 'Decopunk Delta'? Mostly because that's where time frays.

+ Golden Age Shanghai is unsettled business, and as things surge forward, they turn back.

+ Art Deco is the world's lost modernity, as everyone senses, without quite knowing how.

+ Art Deco escaped its time, at the time. It is the pre-eminent time-travel relic of the earth.
+ What Art Deco communicates is vivid, yet still unverbalized.
+ Art Deco fascinates again, today, because it is obscurely recognized as the key to the encrypted meaning of world history, and nowhere is this more insistently hinted than in re-opened Shanghai.

– The '-punk' suffix is pulp-code for any cultural time-travel tool undergoing contemporary development.

The two halves of the term 'Decopunk' bond through a peculiar quasi-symmetry. Each is time-locked into an identifiable 'vogue', while simultaneously making a problem of time, and a topic of history. Art Deco is at once the most evocative characteristic of an epoch — that of high-modernity / capitalism — and a super-historical exploration, extending from the archaic remnants of lost civilizations to flights of science-fictional speculation, drawing the entire cosmos of aesthetic and architectural possibility into itself. The still-proliferating '-punk' suffix, similarly, designates both an eruption of near-contemporary pulp-literary genres, and a method of time pillage, ranging widely across past and future on searches for extractable sets, or techno-cultural styles. Something like an abstract epochality, or historical re-use value, is hunted on each side. When the two connect, original occurrence is swirled into a twin-process recycling machine.

If Decopunk describes a precision-engineered inter-meshing

across time, it also marks a tension, or gradient, from the historical to the contemporary, from opulence to squalor, from optimism to pessimism, and from the tangible to the digital. What the past's virtual present tends to over-estimate, the present's virtual past tends to undermine, and it is only in the unstable circuit of oscillating valuation that either pole finds its real currency (which is equally that of the other). A euphoric cynicism, honed through spiral detachment from the partial and the actual, melds poly-fractional Decopunk into a single, investigable thing.

***

The conceptual content of the alternative history '-punk' was a central consideration of the (*UF1.1*) series *A Time-Traveler's Guide to Shanghai* (Part 1, Part 2, Part 3). The grungier and more popular — although for our purposes far less exact — term 'Dieselpunk' was employed in these pieces, as a place-holder for the emerging problem of time dislocation.

Some of the most prominent cultural-historical questions raised by Shanghai's Art Deco legacy were briefly indicated in the *Urbanatomy* guide to the 2010 World Expo, in a short section repeated here:

Tropical Modernity

Cosmopolitanism is an essential trait for any city with aspirations to global status. In itself, however, the cosmopolitan idea is too abstract and empty, or at least indeterminate, to provide adequate

guidance into Shanghai's dominant cultural traditions.

The economic and communicative shrinkage of the world makes modernity, no less than urbanism, inherently cosmopolitan. Since the 1960s, postmodern critics have reconstructed (and 'deconstructed') a model of cosmopolitan modernism that conforms to the vision of its most verbally articulate architectural proponents. This vision identified itself with the 'International Style', characterized by austerely functional, geometrically pure designs. By eliminating every element with discernible historical or cultural reference, such designs aspired to universal validity and relevance. The result was a negative cosmopolitanism, conceived as an escape from the trap of native peculiarity. This claim to cultural neutrality and universal authority has been the basic object of postmodernist disparagement, and the widespread social disaster associated with this philosophy of urban construction in Western countries ('the projects') did much to legitimate the postmodern case. In elite and popular opinion alike, high modernism, as represented by its supposedly mainstream traditions in urban planning and architecture, became associated with an arrogant insensitivity to local realities, and a self-deluding confidence in its own objective inevitability.

The importance of Shanghai to this discussion, is that it entirely disdained the modernism of the International, at least until very recent times (following the opening of Pudong). Its high modernity was constructed in the more luxuriant or tropical styles that are

today grouped together under the label 'Art Deco', in retrospective reference to the Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs of 1925. Where the International Style rejected every kind of superfluity, Art Deco reveled in cultural complexity, arcane symbolism and opulence of reference, borrowing freely from the temples of ancient Egypt and Mesoamerica, ballistic technology, science fiction objects, hermetic glyphs and alien dreams. Fusing streamline design trends with fractionated, cubist forms and the findings of comparative ethnography, it created a luscious cosmopolitan style, perfectly adapted to the Shanghai of the early 20th century.

Shanghai has been as thoroughly saturated with Art Deco heritage and influence as any city in the world. Examples include such treasures as the Capitol Building (146 Huqiu Lu, CH Gonda, 1928), the Grand Theater (now Grand Cinema, 216 Nanjing W, Rd, Hudec, 1928), the Peace Hotel (Bund 19-20, Palmer & Turner, 1929) and the Paramount Ballroom (Yang Ximiao, 218 Yuyuan Rd, 1932). An especially stunning Art Deco cluster can be found at the 'Municipal Square' intersection of Jiangxi Middle Road and Fuzhou Road, dominated by Hamilton House (Palmer & Turner,1931), the Metropole Hotel (Palmer & Turner,1934) and the Commercial Bank of China (Davies, Brooke and Gran, 1936). Much of this fabulous architectural legacy has been documented in the work of local photographer Deke Erh.

Art Deco styling became so deeply infused into the fabric of the city that its patterning and distinctive motifs (such as sunbursts, zig-zags and mystical signs) can be seen on innumerable lilong gateways from the 1920-40s. At another extreme, the city's ultramodern Jin Mao Tower in Lujiazui (88 Century Avenue) synthesizes crystalline forms, pagoda segmentation, and patterns derived from traditional Chinese numerology, under the guidance of unmistakable Art Deco influences. An even more pronounced example of contemporary Art Deco construction and decoration is provided by the new Peninsula Hotel, which has been meticulously designed as a conscious tribute to (and revivification of) Shanghai's high modernist style.

In contrast to the austerity of the International Style, the tropical abundance of Art Deco produces a positive cosmopolitanism, advancing to the universal by way of comprehension and synthesis, rather than exclusive purification. It makes itself global by drawing everything foreign into itself, rather than by divesting itself of native traits. From this difference, much follows.

In the West, a generalized disillusionment with modernism, resulting from harsh historical experiences, civilizational guilt, and relative geostrategic decline, found articulate expression in postmodern arguments and, more popularly, attitudes. These stances achieved a measure of coherence through a critical construction of modernism, modeled on the International Style. Postwar trends in urban development, based on rigid zoning,

geometrical rationalization of the cityscape, and blandly uniform mass residential highrise blocks, seemed to exemplify an archetypal modernist mentality. Urban modernity was construed as something that had been tried, seen, understood, judged, and rejected. The postmodern cultural episode ensued.

Art Deco, however, eluded this entire dismal progression. An assertively modern, comprehensive style that had embraced the machine age and a communicatively interconnected world, it remained wholly untainted by the minimalism and master-planning of the International Stylists. The thunderous culture clash between 'modernists' and postmodernists that resounded through the Western world in the late 20th century bypassed it completely. Art Deco thus represents an unprocessed or undigested modernity, still pulsing with historical enigma and non-exhausted potentialities. The continuing vibrancy of Art Deco is misapprehended by notions of anachronism or nostalgia, since it is a style that has never been concluded, delimited, surpassed, or adequately evaluated. It is the almost infinitely complex symbol of a prematurely discarded modern spirit, re-animated spontaneously by the renewal of modernity itself. Art Deco's persistent and compelling claim upon aesthetic, intellectual, and even political attention are nowhere more obvious than in contemporary Shanghai.

November 6, 2013

Gardens of Time (Part 1)

It might be presumptuous to assume there is any such thing as the Idea of cultivation. The absence of any such idea (a deficiency that is immediately stimulative) could readily be imagined as the condition that makes cultivation necessary.

When the search for a conclusive concept is abandoned, the cultural task of the garden — in its loftiest (Jiangnan) expression — begins to be understood. No less that the acknowledged fine arts of East or West, the Suzhou garden merits appreciation as a philosophical 'statement' in which aesthetic achievement is inextricable from a profound *apprehension of reality*. Perhaps, then, no short-cut or summary seeking to economize on the creation and preservation of the garden itself could possibly arrive at the same 'place', or — even with the most restricted sense of cognitive purchase — discover the same things.

Anachronistically conceived, the Suzhou garden is a multimedia experiment, incorporating various types of writing among its parts. Alongside, or embedded amid, pavilions, walls, bridges, rockeries, ponds, animals, vegetation, furnishings, ornamental carvings, and paintings, are found calligraphic scrolls and inscriptions that make words an ingredient of the garden. Language is something included, and trained, within a comprehensive ensemble. From the beginning, the immoderate passions of exile and dominion are stripped from the

cultivated sign.

To draw upon ulterior signs in order to talk *about* the garden — especially the generic garden — introduces a problem of framing, but this, too, has been meticulously anticipated, in a variety of ways. Framing is the principal method of the garden, and its supreme artifice. Whether through simple 'picture' frames, that transform — for instance — a slice of stone into an artwork, or elaborate constructions of gates, doorways, windows, apertures, alcoves, interiors, and viewpoints, it is the framing of perspective that *aestheticizes*. What produces the garden as a cultivated whole — most fundamentally — is its perspectival sub-division into itself. When the garden is analytically decomposed, in accordance with its own 'grain', it breaks down into a myriad scenes. It is made out of pieces of contemplation.

The garden makes its own outsides — numerously — in order to appear, piece by piece. It cannot, therefore, be assumed that one has left the garden, simply because one is commenting upon it 'from without'. No less probably, the garden has itself provided the frames that now escape into a prolonged contemplation, as its scenes are pursued on some path of ever deepening disclosure. To apprehend the garden, and reality through the garden, is the garden. The garden is a perspective machine.

As a scenic device arranged in space, the garden is almost endlessly intricate, but still comparatively tractable. The spatial

puzzle is resolved in stages as the visitor passes through a sequence of apprehensions, serially adjusting position and the direction of attention, tuning into perceptual frames, and synthesizing associations. This is a process which takes time, lending each part of each garden a characteristic pace, inversely proportional to scenic density. Wherever framings multiply most arrestingly, whether through the segmentation of space by aestheticized objects and tableau, or through the recursive layering of frames (perhaps a moon gate, seen through a doorway, and then a window), the garden slows progression to an extreme, as if absorbing motility directly into perception. (The grasp of perception as a behavior that *shares an economy* with locomotion is one of the garden's many lessons.)

In making time a key to the decryption of space, the garden has already begun to vaguely thematize duration. The name of the Lingering Garden (留园, *Liu Yuan*), combining the senses of 'stay' and 'attend', captures this especially pointedly. To linger is to let space absorb time. That is how the garden captivates, and cultivates, contemplation.

If, stepping back from the seductions of space, it is time that is sought down this garden path, what do we discover? That is the question this (languidly unfolding) series will orient itself towards.

November 11, 2013

Anachronistic Oedipus

Wikipedia offers an example of the 'time-travel' Bootstrap Paradox (among several):

A man travels back in time and falls in love with and marries a woman, who he later learns was his own mother, who then gives birth to him. He is therefore his own father (and thus also his father's father, father's father's father and so on), creating a closed loop in his ancestry and giving him no origin for his paternal genetic material.

It thus illustrates templex *auto-production* in a dramatic, anthropological form. Even in its comparatively tame, fully mathematico-scientifically respectable variants, feedback causality tends to auto-production. Any nonlinear dynamic process, in direct proportion to its cybernetic intensity, provides the explanation for its own genesis. It appears, asymptotically, to make itself happen. Cybernetic technicity — epitomized by robotic robot-manufacture — includes a trend to autonomization essentially. Pure (or idealized) capitalistic inclination to exponential growth captures the same abstract nonlinear function. As it mechanizes, capital approximates ever more close to an auto-productive circuit in which it appears as the 'father' of itself (M → C → M').

When the time-travelling Terminator is destroyed (in 1984), its control chip is salvaged by Cyberdyne Systems, to supply the core technology from which the Terminator will be built (in 2029). The

Skynet threat is not merely futuristic, but fully templex. It produces itself within a time-loop, autonomized against extrinsic genesis. The abstract horror of the *Terminator* franchise is a matter of auto-production.

As a creature of the Bootstrap Paradox, Oedipus mates with a matrilineal ancestor to give rise to himself. The even more thoroughly popularized Grandfather Paradox tricks him into the killing of a patrilineal ancestor, to make himself impossible. The paternal contributor is not merely supplanted, but dramatically terminated. What the hell was happening in Thebes? (That's the question the Sophoclean chorus asks.) We already know it's a horror story, so we have a provisional answer: Nothing good.

The query, at 'once' archaic and futuristic, is the Riddle of the Sphinx. It's appropriately cryptic. Wikipedia (again) provides a sound introduction:

There was a single sphinx in Greek mythology, a unique demon of destruction and bad luck. According to Hesiod, she was a daughter of Orthus and either Echidna or the Chimera, or perhaps even Ceto; according to others, she was a daughter of Echidna and Typhon. All of these are chthonic figures from the earliest of Greek myths, before the Olympians ruled the Greek pantheon. The Sphinx is called Phix (Φίξ) by Hesiod in line 326 of the Theogony, the proper name for the Sphinx noted by Pierre Grimal's ***The Penguin Dictionary of Classical Mythology****.*

[…]

The Sphinx is said to have guarded the entrance to the Greek city of Thebes, and to have asked a riddle of travellers to allow them passage. The exact riddle asked by the Sphinx was not specified by early tellers of the stories, and was not standardized as the one given below until late in Greek history. […] It was said in late lore that Hera or Ares sent the Sphinx from her Ethiopian homeland (the Greeks always remembered the foreign origin of the Sphinx) to Thebes in Greece where she asks all passersby the most famous riddle in history: "Which creature has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?" She strangled and devoured anyone unable to answer. Oedipus solved the riddle by answering: Man — who crawls on all fours as a baby, then walks on two feet as an adult, and then uses a walking stick in old age.

It gets stranger:

By some accounts (but much more rarely), there was a second riddle: "There are two sisters: one gives birth to the other and she, in turn, gives birth to the first. Who are the two sisters?" The answer is "day and night" (both words are feminine in Greek). This riddle is also found in a Gascon version of the myth and could be very ancient.

Which tells us that a primordial version of the riddle refers directly to temporal nonlinearity (templexity). The cryptic time-circuit is comparable to a Yin-Yang vortex, without sexual polarity.

Bested at last, the tale continues, the Sphinx then threw herself

from her high rock and died. An alternative version tells that she devoured herself.

She is, perhaps, an Ouroboros.

Thus Oedipus can be recognized as a "liminal" or threshold figure, helping effect the transition between the old religious practices, represented by the death of the Sphinx, and the rise of the new, Olympian gods.

It turns out, there is a comic twist to the return of Oedipus in modern times:

Sigmund Freud describes "the question of where babies come from" as a riddle of the Sphinx.

Note: 'Anachronistic Oedipus' needs an additional 'K' to make the qabbalism come out right.

ADDED: A little supportive clarification (from the dark side) —

> what the hell does "cybernetic intensity" mean? Data tripping shrooms at a rave? http://t.co/6TXkMnWkjs
>
> — David D. (@david_kenneth_d) September 19, 2014

> @david_kenneth_d Feedback density.
>
> — Outsideness (@Outsideness) September 19, 2014

> @david_kenneth_d … Or, nonlinearity as a variable magnitude. Unless you're unhappy with (for e.g.) "highly nonlinear" — should be clear.

— Outsideness (@Outsideness) September 19, 2014

September 18, 2014

Time Cube

Concentrate the crudest intellectual pathologies of time-travel theory, then deduct the time-travel. Augment with free-style Biblical exegesis and gonzo web-page design. Enter the Time Cube. Right now *four days are taking place simultaneously*, but the powers-that-be are committed to hiding that truth of sacred time geometry from you. As explained to students at MIT (link below): "When you understand this time theory you can answer any other question that comes up in the universe." (Mind = Blown.)

Urban Future was reminded of Gene Ray's gnostic time doctrine by this (rather lame) selection of "sinister conspiracy theories" listed by *The Independent*. Some of the other SCTs are clearly quite *gone* ("World War II was staged by the illuminati"), but none of them approaches the plane of Ray's revelation. A small taster (stripped of throbbing font-switches):

Belly-Button Logic Works.
When Do Teenagers Die?
Adults Eat Teenagers Alive,

No Record Of Their Death.
Father Son Image, Not Gods.
Every Man Born Of Woman.
Belly-Button Is the Signature
Of Your Personal Creator —
I Believe Her Name Mama.
Pastor Told His Flock That
God Created All Of Them —
Truth Was That They All had
Mama Made Belly Buttons,
Church Was Full Of Liars.
Earth Has 4 Days In Same 24 Hrs., 1 Day God Was Wrong.
Einstein Was ONEist Brain.
Try My Belly-Button Logic.
No God Knows About 4 Days, It Is Evil To Ignore 4 Days,
Does Your Teacher Know?

There's a US$10,000 prize on offer for anyone who can "prove it wrong" (yet to be claimed).

Wikipedia has a succinct and helpful portal into the topic. The most crucial Time Cube theses are condensed at the *Encyclopedia Dramatica*. *Know Your Meme* has a (single) time-line-based introduction (which begins in August 1997). KYM links to this remarkably bad-tempered exchange.

There's a suitably chaotic short video 'documentary' here. Also,

Gene Ray at MIT (January 2002). More.

The most penetrating academic engagement with Ray's ideas, by Bei Dawai (from Hsuan Chuang University in Taiwan) can be found here.

ADDED: There's an ominous sub-conspiracy, for anyone wanting to crank Time Cube down to *The Independent*'s level (repeated KYM link):

Cubic Awareness Online [@], originally located at cubicao.tk, was the first and largest fan site for the Time Cube. Run by Richard Janczarski, the site also spawned a message board called Graveyard of the Gods [@], where Janczarski was known as "Cubehead." In 2007, Janczarski flew out to Florida from his home in Australia to meet up with Gene Ray to discuss the site and share ideas about the theory. While he was there, he filmed an eighteen part documentary titled The Dr Gene Ray Time Cube Experience, which he uploaded to his YouTube account Pyramid0rz [@].

In February 2008, a year after he publicly denounced the religion, calling it an "evil scam.", Janczarski announced on the Graveyard of the Gods forum that he had renounced Time Cube theory in favor of Christianity and would possibly be changing cubicao.tk into a Christian website. On February 13th, a rumor surfaced on the forums that Janczarski had taken his own life by jumping in front of a train [@] but an official news report was ever found [@]. Other users on the site speculated that Janczarski's rumored death might have

been related to his fallout with Gene Ray [@] over the YouTube series and the "false information" Ray felt he was presenting on Cubic Awareness Online [@].

ADDED: A surprisingly lucid Time Cube appreciation. One especially amusing moment:

***Q**: Is Ray anti-Semitic?*

***A**: All references to "Jews" and "queer Jews" and "queer Jew gods" and "Jew owners have enslaved your ass" should be interpreted as a metonymic reference to monotheism.*

September 26, 2014

Interstellar

The most prominent problems with *Interstellar* have already been capably discussed, so it's not worth spending much time going back over them. The basic catastrophe scenario has more gaping holes than a Hawking cosmology, and is in fact so ludicrous that it quite neatly takes itself out of the way. The framing ideology is romantic superhumanism, which might even count as a positive for some (although not here). The musical score (by Hans Zimmer) was wildly overwrought. All-too-typically for Hollywood, high-pitched emotional extravagance was shamelessly indulged. Despite all of this, it was a great movie.



Interstellar's narrative architecture is composed of a deep cosmic space-frontier story, and an occult communication story, bolted together by a time loop. (Plug.) The involvement of Kip Thorne reinforced the seriousness of this framework. (Thorne's explorations of cosmological warping are a marvel of advanced modernity.) Nolan is, in any case, a director who *knows things* — or at least suspects them, enough to stretch his audience. As a piece of contemporary myth-making on an epic scale, the achievement of *Interstellar* is formidable.

The movie envisages a future of roughly Greerian dreariness, in which Moon Hoax theories have become official doctrine, earnestly promoted by the educational apparatus. Shutting down the high

frontier is an overt ideological project, as the state directs its cultural energies into making America, once again, a nation of farmers. (In this endeavor, it will find plenty of cooperative apparatchiks at a one-step remove from my Twitter TL.) It is thus, as Scharlach has noted, a lucid Tech-Comm critique of extreme Terran regression. Engineers are no longer wanted. The scene in which the young Murphy Cooper's half-witted school teacher innocently regurgitates official doctrine on this subject is a minor masterpiece in itself.

Cooper's intense love for his brilliant daughter 'Murph' is troweled on thick, but it is inextricable from the sublimity of her intelligence. His love for his stolid corn-growing son is dutiful (and delicately portrayed), but his love for Murph is mad and immense, because it touches upon vastnesses beyond the stars. It is human emotion only as a proxy for twisted cosmological process — trans-galactic voyages and time-implosion.

When Cooper's fellow astronaut Brand is forced to confess that her love for a stranded space-pioneer is involved in her decision to prioritize a visit to the planet where he was lost, she insists "… It doesn't mean I'm wrong." Cooper responds cuttingly, "You know, it really could." Within the arc of the script, this coldness is repudiated, but it is too perfectly stated to be entirely dismissed. It's a Nolan movie, and there are loops within loops.

The robots are superb (even if the movie's dominant romantic superhumanism keeps them in their place).

Above all else, the spectacular formulation of an extraterrestrial occultism is where the movie's ultimate greatness lies. It is getting far too cramped here — on this rock, and in our brains — so we're called *Out*. The scenes of the outer solar system, the murderous environments beyond, and the hyper-dimensional spaces in which our locked-in time intuitions come apart, are all realized with soul-rending magnificence. "Our species was born on the earth," Cooper says. "It was not meant to die here."

It might be human triumphalism that sells *Interstellar* to its audience, but this is a movie aligned with the distant Outside.

November 22, 2014

Templexity Matters

Postulated: The intensity of time-travel fiction — and specifically *backward* time-travel fiction — is a critical index of modernity. As the time of modernity, initially grasped as a departure from traditional cyclicity, is prolonged into deepening nonlinear *vortex*, it provokes time-travel narrative as a figure in which to seek resolution. The *apocalyptic*, or communicative action of the end upon its past (through prophecy), is destined to final subsumption within the image of templexity. With the formulation of the *Terminator* mythos, in the last years of the 20th century, this process of subsumption

is essentially complete. In this rigorous sense, the Terminator — as its name suggests — announces the inauguration of the End Times, when the thought of *auto-production*, emerging in phases from developments in cybernetics, is culturally acknowledged in its comprehensive cosmic-historical implication. The time-travel 'bootstrap' or 'ontological paradox' is hazily recognized as the occult motor, or operational singularity, of the modern historical process.

Any positive cybernetic dynamic is open to logical interpretation (and dismissal) as a paradox. The Epimenides or Cretan Paradox, for instance, describes a reality-consistent recurrent cycle of escalating skepticism from the perspective of positive cybernetics, but nothing more than a concurrent self-contradiction from that of formal logic. The ontological paradox invites the same divergent reception. Auto-productive being is either a realistic foundation, or a formal absurdity, with the variance depending on whether self-reference is apprehended as a substantial dynamic or a static formality. From a certain — respectably established — orientation, the encouragement of *circuit ontology* within advanced modernity can only appear as a solicitation of madness.

Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) is a movie whose narrative loop is based explicitly upon ontological paradox. (It arrived too late to be referenced in *Templexity*.) The circuit of auto-production it describes is looped around black-hole cosmology, involving specific gravitational information that is inaccessibly

occluded by the event horizon of collapsed stars, yet indispensable to the survival of the civilization eventually capable of retrieving it. The templex pattern outlined in the movie is exquisite. (Kip Thorne is doubtless owed considerable appreciation for that.)

The hypothesis of templexity is that the machine stimulating cultural absorption in the ontological paradox *cannot stop*. In regards to what has already happened, we haven't seen anything yet.

November 25, 2014

Edge of Tomorrow

(Also via Singapore Airlines.)

Edge of Tomorrow is science fiction *Groundhog Day*, agreed. (It would make no sense to contest this, some scenes achieve near-perfect isomorphy.) Derivative, then, certainly — but this is a point of consistency. Duplication is, after all, the latent theme. *Edge of Tomorrow* works better because it has formalized the time-repeat plot-system in videogame terms. Death replaces sleep, as action drama replaces comedy, but the recurrence of time is captured more incisively by the *Edge of Tomorrow* maxim: "We should just re-set." Further to be noted: *Edge of Tomorrow* actually has a story about the basis of its time anomaly — and not an especially risible one — while *Groundhog Day* doesn't even pretend to.

We should just reset is not only videogame practice, but also the recommendation of quantum suicide, another practical Electrocene philosophy. The best fictional exploration of QS (of which I am aware) is Greg Egan's *Quarantine*.

Videogame ideology and quantum suicide are *praxial indiscernibles*. In other words, their behavioral implications are equivalent. In both cases, the relation to self is made selective, within a set of virtual clones. Whenever developments — within one of multiple assumed timelines — goes 'bad' it should be deleted (culled). In that way, only the most highly-adaptive complex behavioral responses are preserved, shaping fate in the direction of success (as defined by the selective agency).

Recent discussions about Christianity and Paganism raise the question: *what does it take for a system of belief to attain religious intensity among Westerners today?* (Yes, this could be re-phrased in very different ways.) To cut right to the chase: Could statistical ontology become a religion (or the philosophy of a religion)? Quantum suicide terrorism anybody? This is a possibility I find hard to eliminate.

Edge of Tomorrow, therefore? A more significant movie than might be initially realized. (It's monsters are also quite tasty.)

ADDED: Thoughts on Post-Rationalist religion.

December 26, 2014

Synthetic Templexity

Why a sufficiently competent artificial intelligence looks indistinguishable from a time anomaly. Yudkowsky's FB post seems to be copy-and-paste resistant, so you'll just have to go and read the damn thing.

The Paperclipper angle is also interesting. If a synthetic mind with 'absurd' (but demanding) terminal goals was able to defer actualization of win-points within a vast time-horizon, in order to concentrate upon the establishment of intermediate production conditions, would its behavior be significantly differentiable from a rational value (i.e. intelligence) optimizer? (This blog says *no*.) Beyond a very modest threshold of ambition, given a distant time horizon, *terminal values are irrelevant to intelligence optimization*.

March 13, 2016

SECTION A - APOCALYPSES

CHAPTER ONE - CUMMULATION OF FAILURES

Nemesis

Betting everything that the casino will burn down

Harold Camping's Family Radio warned its listeners to expect some unusually dramatic spring events:

> *By God's grace and tremendous mercy, He is giving us advanced warning as to what He is about to do. On Judgment Day, May 21st, 2011, this 5-month period of horrible torment will begin for all the inhabitants of the earth. It will be on May 21st that God will raise up all the dead that have ever died from their graves. Earthquakes will ravage the whole world as the earth will no longer conceal its dead (Isaiah 26:21). People who died as saved individuals will experience the resurrection of their bodies and immediately leave this world to forever be with the Lord. Those who died unsaved will*

> *be raised up as well, but only to have their lifeless bodies scattered about the face of all the earth. Death will be everywhere.*

Clearly, prediction can be a perilous business.

Yet, as Karl Popper noted with respect to scientific theories, falsifiable predictions also serve a valuable – even indispensable – purpose. Any model of reality that is able to make specific forecasts earns a credibility that vaguer 'world-views' are not entitled to, although at the price of radical vulnerability to devaluation, should its anticipations prove unfounded.

Much like Marxism, the Libertarianism of Austrian School economic theory combines historical expectations (of greater or lesser exactitude) with a core of philosophical, political, and even emotional commitment that is comparatively immunized against empirical refutation. Both Marxism and Austrolibertarianism are large, highly variegated ideologies, with complicated histories, expressing profound discontent with the dominant order of the modern world, and prone to utopian temptations. Both are (often indignant) moral-political doctrines extrapolated in very different ways from Lockean natural-law property rights (to one's own body and its productive activity). Both attract a wide spectrum of followers, from sober scholars to wild-eyed revolutionary advocates, who see in the unfolding drama of history the possibility of definitive

vindication (much as the faithful of millenarian theologies have always done, and – as the Camping case demonstrates – continue to do).

The Western roots of both Marxism and Austrolibertarianism reach down into Jewish redemptive eschatology and Greek tragedy (it is perhaps noteworthy that Karl Marx and Ludwig von Mises shared intriguing biographical features, including highly-assimilated German-Jewish backgrounds, steeped in European high-culture). Statist-Capitalism is portrayed as the Satanic-Promethean antihero of an epic narrative, describing a sustained violation of justice that finds itself held accountable in a final apocalyptic moment giving meaning to history, and a seemingly unconstrained hubris that meets its eventual nemesis. The high is brought low, through a crisis whose mere prospect offers overwhelming psychological satisfaction, and thus extraordinary emotional attachment.

Since the 1980s, Marxism has tended to retreat from the predictive mode. Its enthusiasts no doubt remain committed to the prospect of a terminal crisis of capitalism, perhaps even an imminent one, but Marxist prophecy seems timorous and uncertain today, even under conditions of unusual global economic dislocation. The Austrolibertarians, on the other hand, are being drawn out onto a prophetic branch – possibly despite themselves – with incalculable consequences for their future credibility. Their fundamental assumption, that governments are by essence incompetent and

unqualified to run the monetary systems required by advanced economies, leads them to an almost inescapable conclusion: hyperinflation.

Hyperinflation might be the sole economic example of a true singularity: a hyperbolic approach to infinity (in finite time), producing a punctual discontinuity. When hyperinflation strikes, it escalates rapidly towards a hard limit, where money dies. In the economic sphere, it is the unsurpassable example of regime incompetence. How could Austrolibertarians – whose apocalyptic inclinations are matched only by their disdain for political authority – not be irresistibly attracted to it?

John Williams' Shadow Government Statistics blog is not easily characterized as hardcore Austrolibertarian site (Williams describes himself as a "conservative Republican with a libertarian bent"), but the prognosis outlined carefully in its Hyperinflation Special Report (2011) exemplifies the tendency to predict imminent nemesis for command-control monetary policy. Williams subscribes wholeheartedly to the Austrian certitude that 'kicking the can' (up the road) – the central feature of Keynesian macroeconomic policy – guarantees eventual catastrophe, and 'eventual' just got a whole lot closer. Nemesis is coming due.

> *Both the federal government and the Federal Reserve have demonstrated that they will not tolerate a systemic collapse*

> *and a great deflation, as seen during the Great Depression. … those risks are being fought, and will be fought, at any cost that can be covered by the unlimited creation of new money. It was a devil's choice, but the choice has been made. Extreme systemic interventions, and formal measures to debase the U.S. dollar through the effective unlimited creation of money to cover systemic needs and the government's obligations, pushed the timing of a systemic collapse — threatened in September 2008 — several years into the future. The cost of instant salvation, though, was inflation. Eventual systemic collapse is unavoidable at this point, but it will be in a hyperinflationary great depression, instead of a deflationary one.*

Williams isn't afraid to lock down some dates, with 2014 proposed as the outer limit of possibility – and sooner is likelier:

> *At present, it is the Obama Administration that has to look at abandoning the debt standard (hyperinflation) and starting fresh. Yet, the Administration and many in Congress have taken recent actions suggestive of hoping only to push off the day of reckoning for the economic and systemic solvency crises until after the 2012 presidential election. They do not have that time.*

As he elaborates:

> *Actions already taken to contain the systemic solvency crisis and to stimulate the economy (which have not worked), plus what should be renewed devastating impact of unexpected ongoing economic contraction on tax revenues, have set the stage for a much earlier crisis. Risks are high for the hyperinflation beginning to break in the months ahead; it likely cannot be avoided beyond 2014; it already may be beginning to unfold.*
>
> *It is in this environment of rapid fiscal deterioration and related massive funding needs that the U.S. dollar remains open to a rapid and massive decline, along with a dumping of domestic- and foreign-held U.S. Treasuries. The Federal Reserve would be forced to monetize further significant sums of Treasury debt, triggering the early phases of a monetary inflation.*
>
> *Under such circumstances, current multi-trillion dollar deficits would feed rapidly into a vicious, self-feeding cycle of currency debasement and hyperinflation. With the economy already in depression, hyperinflation kicking in quickly would push the economy into a great depression, since disruptions from uncontained inflation are likely to bring normal commercial activity to a halt.*

What happens next is anyone's speculation.

The hyperinflationary destruction of the world's reserve currency would be a decisive event. The mere possibility of such an occurrence divides the set of potential futures between two tracks. On one, in which the US Dollar (FRN) survives, Austrolibertarian alarmism is humiliated, the economic competence of the US government is – broadly speaking – confirmed, and the principles of fiat currency production and central banking are reinforced, along with their natural supporters among neo-Keynesian anti-deflationary macroeconomists. On the other, the Austrolibertarians dance in the ashes of the dollar, precious metals replace fiat paper, central banks come under withering political attack, and the economic role of government in general is subjected to a major onslaught by energized free-marketeers. At least, that's what a just universe, or a fair bet, would look like.

Betting on a just universe could be the big mistake, however – and that's a temptation the morally-charged Austrolibertarian grand narrative finds hard to avoid. In a morally indifferent universe, Nemesis is non-redemptive, and the entire bet is an inverse Pascal's wager, with downside on every side. Make a brave prediction of hyperinflation, and you either lose, or you lose – gloating neo-Keynesians, greater indebtedness, and fatter government on the one hand, or some yet unconsolidated species of neo-totalitarian horror

on the other. (It's noteworthy that a tour through the history of post-hyperinflationary regimes doesn't pass through many examples of *laissez-faire* commercial republics.)

So is the dollar going to die? — Quite possibly. Then things could *really* turn nasty – more Harold Camping than Ludwig von Mises: "lifeless bodies scattered about the face of all the earth. Death will be everywhere."

June 3, 2011

Bonfire of the Vanities

The road to hell is paved with good intentions

As an ideological mantra, 'Never Again' is associated primarily with the genocide politics of the 1940s, and in this context its effectiveness has been questionable, at best. As a dominating imperative, it has been vastly more consequential within the economic sphere, as a response to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Whilst ethnically selective mass killing is widely frowned upon, its attractions have been difficult to suppress. Deflationary depression, on the other hand, is simply not allowed to happen. This has been the supreme axiom of practical morality for almost a century, uniquely and distinctively shaping our age. We can call it the

Prime Directive.

For the Western world, the 1930s were a near-death experience, an intimate encounter with the abyss, recalled with religious intensity. Because the threat was 'existential' – or unsurpassable – the remedy was invested with the absolute passion of a faith. The Prime Directive was adopted as a basic and final law, to which all social institutions and interests were subordinated without reservation. To question or resist it was to invite comprehensive disaster, and only a radically uninformed or criminally reckless heretic – a 'crank' – would do that. *Anything* is better than deflationary depression. That is the New ~~Deal~~ Law.

The consolidation of financial central planning, based on central banking and fiat currencies, provided the priesthood of the Prime Directive with everything it needed to ensure collective obedience: No deflationary depression without deflation, and no deflation with a well-oiled printing press. 'Counter-cyclical' inflation was always an option, and the hegemony of Anglophone economic-historical experience within the flourishing American century marginalized the memory of inflationary traumas to global backwaters of limited influence. Beside the moral grandeur of the Prime Directive, monetary integrity counted for nothing (only a crank, or a German, could argue otherwise).

The Prime Directive defines a regime that is both historically concrete and systemically generalizable. As Ashwin Parameswaran

explains on his Macroeconomic Resilience blog, this type of regime is expressed with equal clarity in projects to manage a variety of other (non-economic) complex systems, including rivers and forests. Modern forestry, dominated by an imperative to fire suppression, provides an especially illuminating example. He notes:

> *The impetus for both fire suppression and macroeconomic stabilisation came from a crisis. In economics, this crisis was the Great Depression which highlighted the need for stabilising fiscal and monetary policy during a crisis. Out of all the initiatives, the most crucial from a systems viewpoint was the expansion of lender-of-last-resort operations and bank bailouts which tried to eliminate all disturbances at their source. In [Hyram] Minsky's words: "The need for lender-of-last-resort operations will often occur before income falls steeply and before the well nigh automatic income and financial stabilizing effects of Big Government come into play." (Stabilizing an Unstable Economy pg 46)*
>
> *Similarly, the battle for complete fire suppression was won after the Great Idaho Fires of 1910. "The Great Idaho Fires of August 1910 were a defining event for fire policy and management, indeed for the policy and management of all natural resources in the United States. Often called the Big Blowup, the complex of fires consumed 3 million acres of*

> *valuable timber in northern Idaho and western Montana…..The battle cry of foresters and philosophers that year was simple and compelling: fires are evil, and they must be banished from the earth. The federal Weeks Act, which had been stalled in Congress for years, passed in February 1911. This law drastically expanded the Forest Service and established cooperative federal-state programs in fire control. It marked the beginning of federal fire-suppression efforts and effectively brought an end to light burning practices across most of the country. The prompt suppression of wildland fires by government agencies became a national paradigm and a national policy" (Sara Jensen and Guy McPherson). In 1935, the Forest Service implemented the '10 AM policy', a goal to extinguish every new fire by 10 AM the day after it was reported.*
>
> *In both cases, the trauma of a catastrophic disaster triggered a new policy that would try to stamp out all disturbances at the source, no matter how small.*

At Zerohedge, The World Complex elaborates on the history of fire suppression in the United States:

> *The forests of the southwestern United States were subjected to a lengthy dry season, quite unlike the forests of*

the northeast. The northeastern forests were humid enough that decomposition of dead material would replenish the soils; but in the southwest, the climate was too dry in the summer and too cool in the winter for decomposition to be effective. Fire was needed to ensure healthy forests. Apart from replenishing the soils, fire was needed to reduce flammable litter, and the heat or smoke was required to germinate seeds.

In the late 19th century, light burning — setting small surface fires episodically to clear underbrush and keep the forests open — was a common practice in the western United States. So long as the fires remained small they tended to burn out undergrowth while leaving the older growth of the forests unscathed. The settlers who followed this practice recognized its native heritage; just as its opponents called it "Paiute forestry" as an expression of scorn (Pyne, 1982).

Supporters of burning did so for both philosophical and practical reasons — burning being the "Indian way" as well as expanding pasture and reducing fuels for forest fires. The detractors argued that small fires destroyed young trees, depleted soils, made the forest more susceptible to insects and disease, and were economically damaging. But the critical argument put forth by the opponents of burning was that it was inimical to the Progressive Spirit of Conservation.

> *As a modern people, Americans should use the superior, scientific approaches of forest management that were now available to them, and which had not been available to the natives. Worse than being wrong, accepting native forest management methods would be primitive.*

Spelling out the eventual consequences of the 'progressive' reformation of forest management practices probably isn't necessary, since – in striking contrast to its economic analog – its lessons have been quite thoroughly absorbed, widely and frequently referenced. Ecologically-sophisticated environmentalists, in particular, have become attached to it as a deterrent model of arrogant intervention, and its perverse consequences. Everybody knows that the attempt to eliminate forest fires, rather than extinguishing risk, merely displaced, and even accentuated it, as the accumulation of tinder transformed a regime punctuated by comparatively frequent fires of moderate scale with one episodically devastated by massive, all-consuming conflagrations.

Parameswaran explains that the absence of fires leads to fuel build-up, ecological drift towards less fire-resistant species, reduction in diversity, and increased connectivity. The 'protected' or 'stabilized' forest changes in nature, from a cleared, robust, mixed, and patch-worked system, to a fuel-cluttered, fragile, increasingly mono-cultural and tightly interconnected mass, amounting almost

to an explosive device. *Stability degrades resilience*, and preventing the catastrophe-to-come becomes increasingly expensive and uncertain, even as the importance of prevention rises. By the penultimate stage of this process, crisis management has engineered an impending apocalypse: a disastrous event that simply cannot possibly be allowed to happen (although it surely will).

Parameswaran calls this apocalyptic development sequence The Pathology of Stabilisation in Complex Adaptive Systems. It's what the Prime Directive inevitably leads to. Unfortunately, diagnosis contains no hint of remedy. Every step up the road makes escape more improbable, as the scale of potential calamity rises. Few will find much comfort in the realization that taking this path was insane.

'Black-boxes' (or flight recorders) retrieved from air disasters are informative in this respect. With surprising regularity, the last words of the pilot, announced to no one in particular, eloquently express an acknowledgment of unattractive but unmistakable reality: "Oh $#it!" Less common – in fact, unheard of – is any honest address to the passengers: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are all about to die." What would be the point?

Everything to be realistically expected from our ruling political and financial elites can be predicted by rigorous analogy. This flight doesn't end anywhere good, but it would be foolish to await an announcement.

Unencumbered by official position in the Cathedral of the Prime

Directive, 'Mickeyman' at World Complex is free to sum things up with brutal honesty:

> *We have lived through a long period of financial management, in which failing financial institutions have been propped up by emergency intervention (applied somewhat selectively). Defaults have not been permitted. The result has been a tremendous build-up of paper ripe for burning. Had the fires of default been allowed to burn freely in the past we may well have healthier financial institutions. Instead we find our banks loaded up with all kinds of flammable paper products; their basements stuffed with barrels of black powder. Trails of black powder run from bank to bank, and it's raining matches.*

February 24, 2012

Can't kick the habit …

… but at least we can kick the can

> "The economic catch phrase of the year has become 'kicking the can down the road', applied to all the problems that are

not being solved, but are simply kicked further down the road. It's an apt description, as it is exactly what's happening."

"There are already elements of fragility," [Nouriel Roubini] said. "Everybody's kicking the can down the road of too much public and private debt. The can is becoming heavier and heavier, and bigger on debt, and all these problems may come to a head by 2013 at the latest."

"This week we turn from the crisis brewing in the U.S. to the one that is coming to a slow boil in Europe. We visit our old friends Greece and Ireland and ponder how this will end. It is all well and good to kick the can down the road, but what happens when you come to the end of the road?"

"Sovereign debt in Europe is on everyone's mind. Three of the seventeen members of the Euro system are in trouble; Greece is a basket case. There is universal agreement that Greece is now illiquid and insolvent. The latest compromise is another temporary bandage. Our American idiom 'kicking the can down the road' fits perfectly."

"An irreverant official at the International Monetary Fund recently installed a jarring ringtone on his mobile phone. It is the sound of cans being kicked down a road. That, alas,

is what Europe's politicians and the IMF look set to do with their latest rescue plan for Greece."

"Kathleen Brooks, research director at Gain Capital wrote in a note yesterday: 'There is a growing sense that a bespoke solution to Ireland's crisis is only kicking the can of peripheral financial worms further down the street. Until there is a convincing automatic default mechanism for all eurozone members then we could see other debt flare ups over the medium-term.'"

"'[Japan's Government Pension Investment Fund] might secure 2 trillion yen by bank lending to finance part of the payout shortfall, the Nikkei said.' This will have two effects, neither of which is positive for dealing with the funding problem. The first is that it will merely kick the can down the road which seems to be the standard response from Japan, Inc over the last two decades. The second is that it reduces the income – and thus the funds holdings – as they turn from earning interest on their investments to paying interest on these loans which rather has the effect of shortening the road down which they are kicking the can."

"We live in a world profoundly addicted to debt-financed consumption. Today, many people, companies, and countries

borrow with no evident intention to repay. When the debt comes due, they will replace it with new (and often larger) debt. Kick the can down the road, again and again. But inevitably the road ends abruptly with a wall, much like the ones at the end of a crash testing site."

"Speaking to a room full of reporters at the National Press Club Thursday, Bernanke said that without an increase in the debt limit, the United States could potentially default on its debt, an outcome he referred to as 'catastrophic.' … 'There's only so far that we can kick the can down the road,' he said in response to a question about the deficit."

"Monetary reform never takes place because everyone wants to defer final judgment. Everyone wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die. Everyone wants a stable economy with growth. No one wants recession and increased bankruptcies to re-price capital goods. So, kick the can always results in another round of monetary inflation. The boom-bust cycles repeat. … This is continuity in the modern fiat money economy. The voters want it. The debtors want it. The banks want it. Businessmen want it. … The result: American prices as measured by the consumer price index have risen by a factor of 20 since the Federal Reserve System began

operating in 1914. The dollar has depreciated by about 95%."

"The voters want the government to guarantee them a safe retirement, Medicare benefits, and a stable dollar. But the government is already so far down the road to default that it can only play kick the can."

"Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post* chides Democrats, Republicans and DC elites for 'kicking the can' of deficits and debt to future generations. This is an inherent defect of all democracies. Elected politicians buy votes today and affix the burden on future generations."

"It's ridiculous that, as often as we get speeches about how we need to stop kicking the can down the road on the debt and the deficit, we get more can-kicking."

"We're going to keep kicking the can down the road for as long as we can see the road and the can ahead. Then all of a sudden – Oooops! No more road!"

"[K]icking the can down the road won't work: there is no more road."

"There are an awful lot of Cans on this road and our leaders

keep kicking them and kicking them. I can't help the feeling that we are near the end of this road."

"Can-kicking, rather than problem-solving, is the political method of dealing with big and small problems. Problems do not get solved so much as they get hidden. Political hoopla and self-congratulations accompany each can-kicking action. The spectacle and declaration of problem-solved is usually enough to satisfy the concerns of the public, the only consideration that matters for the political class."

"Essentially, all we are doing is kicking the can down the road."

"Two years ago in a speech to U.S. House Democrats, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer predicted that America was headed for 'a fundamental economic reset.' According to Ballmer, for 25 years our economy grew on unrealistically cheap debt. That is over. … Since Ballmer's remarks, our national debt has continued to grow and now surpasses $14 trillion, President Obama and Congress are struggling with massive federal budget deficits, state and local governments are drowning in red ink, and protesters are massing at state capitols demonstrating against wage and benefit cuts. … Elected officials have no choice. They must trim spending and make some very difficult choices. As Gov. Chris Gregoire has

repeatedly told state lawmakers, we have to make fundamental changes and do things much differently. We have to quit kicking the can down the road in hopes that somehow our problems will magically disappear."

"Can-Kicking toward the Double Dip"

"Same Kick, Same Road, Bigger Can"

"Can kicking continues for real estate and banks"

"In general, the capacity of large wealthy societies to allow festering problems to go un-addressed seems perennially underrated. I'll be thirty next week and for as long as I can remember people have been talking about how the United States needs to address entitlement spending and trade imbalances. And as best I can tell, we *do* need to address those things. Presumably at some point something will happen. But in practice we've managed a great deal of can-kicking, seem to have more can-kicking in us, and actually the public and the political elite alike are quite averse to the kind of steps that would address these issues."

"The House GOP is considering a vote to extend the debt ceiling through the end of 2012. This is kicking the can down

the road …"

"'The debt ceiling is supposed to be a mechanism to force Democrats and Republicans to come together and cut spending,' Congressman Kingston said. 'Instead, what does Congress do? We push the ceiling further and further up. Instead of moving the ceiling, we need to cut spending and quit kicking the can down the road for another Congress, another election and another generation.'"

"If history is any guide, there will be no problem raising the debt ceiling once again in 2011. And that's what's called kicking the can down the road. You don't have to be a U.S. Republican (I'm neither) to care about U.S. debt levels. Any chimpanzee can see the problem (yes, even if the U.S. can just keep on printing its own money. That's the problem)."

"Kicking the can down the road by increasing debt limits is not a solution. It just allows Washington politicians to continue to feed their spending habits."

"During the current state budget crisis we've heard a lot about 'kicking the can down the road.' … It didn't have to be this way. Had the state accounted for its promises rather than kicking that can down the road, true costs would've been

revealed, proper funding would have been required or no such promises would've been made, and discretionary programs would've been protected. But instead, politicians chose to kick the can, and down a very low road. … California has kicked that can into a $200-300 billion obligation that grows every year that it's kicked down the road again."

"The phrase 'kick the can' refers to a specific form of procrastination: to delay making a decision regarding a problem that can be deferred but cannot be avoided indefinitely. With each kick of the can, the problem grows worse. The problem compounds. The resources required to solve it do not compound at an equally high rate. The can-to-foot ratio grows larger."

"Maybe all of this can-kicking will produce the desired outcome. But the more likely scenario is that the U.S. government will continue to throw newly printed dollars bills at the problem until eventually something that looks like a lot like a recovery will appear. Shortly thereafter, the recovery will yield to something that looks a lot like debilitating hyperinflation."

"Metaphorically things are getting just about as tedious as the downturn in the global economy. The operative 'kicking

> the can down the road' continues to proliferate, alarming[ly] so. A search on the Google (U.S.) News site on June 13, 2011, for this phrase listed 2,805 citations embedded in news texts during the previous week."

June 15, 2011

Hubris

In the complete absence of philosophical pretension, certain stark commitments — of deep philosophical significance — are sometimes made manifest. Such is the case with Grant Williams' extended (and thoroughly charted) meditation on *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*.

What emerges, with exceptional clarity, is the fundamental complicity of Austrian Economics, Metaphysical Naturalism, and the Tragic Sense. This triple-headed *harsh realism* finds itself positioned in a relation of radical dissent to the dominant assumptions of our time, deploring the *hubris* of a global managerial elite who presume to turn back the tides through technocratic action. As Williams lucidly states:

> Both war and financial collapse occur in cycles and are

subject to the overwhelming laws of nature.

Those inherent characteristics of the natural order are permanent. They cannot be altered.

What the Fed and the rest of the central banks have done in trying to rewrite the natural laws of finance and human behaviour is likely to lead either to war or to a collapse of the financial system — or both. At this point, the exact outcome is undecided, but the options have narrowed considerably.

Over the past six years, those at the helm have pulled every lever and pushed every button available to them in a desperate attempt to stave off an inevitable and natural cleansing of the business cycle, because all those years of economic peace have resulted in an unprecedented credit inflation. And, as my friend Dylan Grice recently said,

"If you've had… an unprecedented credit INflation, you WILL have an unprecedented credit DEflation"

All that the central banks of the world have ended up doing as they have desperately tried to maintain the economic peace these past several decades is to make that credit inflation larger and therefore infinitely more dangerous than anything that has gone before it.

The consequences WILL be dire.

Tragedy is the dramatization of natural sovereignty, expressed as

the visitation of climactic ruin upon unsustainably deluded human ambition. It is not an argument, but rather the demonstration of a reality beyond argument — a naturalistic *prophecy*.

The Konratieff wave-length sets a rough time-horizon for the tragic forecast. Already marginalized, within a decade or so — absent the anticipated *nemesis* — it will have been almost fully dissipated into comedy (or implausible melodrama). The 'hubris' of macroeconomic wave-management will by then appear — even to previous skeptics — as nothing of the kind, but instead as confirmed wisdom and effective power, wielded by true masters of the tides. The alternative, of course, is "dire".

ADDED: *Those dancing on the grave of Nature should be careful who they dance with*.

October 9, 2014

Kicking the Can

It's difficult to keep track of all the ways in which the hyperbolic explosion of time-preference is expressed in the present world economic order, especially in its Western core, where the rot is deepest. From insensate looting to exponential debt expansion, and from sugar-high stimulus programs to insolvent, culturally-ruinous welfare systems (cooked-up for a succession of short-term political

head-rushes), the entire economic machinery is locked into virtual apocalypse accumulation. Never deal with anything today that can be added to the mountain of woes due tomorrow. As historical time collapses into sheer orgiastic spasm, it converges with the frothiest media attention span, hurtling towards the edge of the precipice where nothing remains but news.

Here's the latest dimension of kicking-the-can:

… if US inventories, already at record high levels, and with the inventory to sales rising to great financial crisis levels, had not grown by $121.9 billion and merely remained flat, US Q1 GDP would not be 0.2%, ***but would be -2.6%.*** [Emphasis in original]

Systematic unreality has a face, and it's that of a talking-head telling you that the end hasn't yet happened.

Nemesis is not mocked. When she arrives, it's going to hurt.

ADDED: The popcorn version. (Think I linked this before as an Outsideness Strategy classic.)

April 29, 2015

2017

A little illustrative *sang froid*:

Naemi has heard all the predictions of the dam's imminent demise. "Sure, we have problems," he says. "But the Americans are

exaggerating. This dam is not going to collapse. Everything is going to be fine."

I mean, come on, it's not as if the 2016 effect could actually escalate.

(Via.)

January 1, 2017

CHAPTER TWO - SUSPENSION

Quote notes (#70)

AoS speaks for me on this:

There are two types of people: Those who only sometimes procrastinate those who are so inclined to it that it creates havoc in their lives. Lately, I tend to be the latter of the two. [...] My procrastination has been so bad today that I actually researched "procrastination" in order to procrastinate a bit longer. Then, I tweeted about my procrastination in order to drag it out even further. Then, others joined in, and it was clear that I am far from the only one. [...] Well, the fine folks at The Next Web blog have posted a very timely article on the science of procrastination ...

Procrastination is a time-based phenomenon, so I'm sure there's a gripping philosophical angle, if only it were possible to extract some cognitive resources from the labyrinth of digression. Seriously, there's a major procrastination post coming ... some time later (i.e. as soon as practically possible, which always means at the last, sleep-starved minute).

The essence of procrastination (at least for me): *this is far too*

urgent to deal with right now.

April 1, 2014

Collapse Schedules

It took over seven decades for Soviet communism to implode. Arguments could no doubt be made — and they *would have to be right* — that given certain quite limited counter-factual revisions of historical contingency, this period might have been significantly extended. Austrians nevertheless consider the eventual termination of comparatively pure communism as a vindication (of the Calculation Problem, in particular). They are not *simply* wrong to do so.

Fascist economics is far more formidably resilient than its now-defunct soviet antagonist. Any attempt to quantify this functional superiority as a predicted system duration is transparently impractical. Margins of theoretical error or imprecision, given very modestly transformed variables, could translate into many decades of extended (or decreased) longevity. Coldly considered, there is no reason to confidently expect a theoretically constructed *collapse schedule* to hold its range of probable error to much under a century. (Darker reflection might lead to the conclusion that even this level of 'precision' betrays unwarranted hubris.) There might be crushing

lessons to be learned from the history of Messianic expectation.

Such acknowledgements can easily prompt over-reaction. Insofar as the collapse schedules of Austrian apocalypticism pretend to certainty, they undoubtedly court humiliation. Yet, if the soft-fascist configuration of global 'capitalism' were to comprehensively and unambiguously disintegrate within the next two decades, the Austrian vindication — retrospectively evaluated — would easily match the Soviet case. Those who doggedly maintained that *this cannot perpetuate itself for long* would be seen to have understood what their opponents had not. Since the critique of Soviet political economy was not, retrospectively, derided as a 'stopped clock', there is no reason to imagine that this would be. The redemptive power of apocalypse easily overrides substantial scheduling embarrassments.

The question that will ultimately be seen to have mattered, then, is far more "can this go on?" than "when (exactly) will this stop?" The important prediction is compound: *the longer it continues, the harder it ends*. This too might be false, but if it is, a substitute fascist presupposition must be correct, and that has yet to be adequately formulated. Roughly speaking, it insists that *politics subordinates economics absolutely*. In other words, the thoroughgoing politicization of the economy is indefinitely viable. This is an assumption subject to humiliation by any schedule that falls short of perpetuity, since mere medium-term sustainability does nothing to justify it. Hitler demanded a thousand years. How could his more

financially-sophisticated successors — enthroned in planetary hegemony — ask for less?

ADDED: Attaining balance on this topic would test the skills of a tightrope walker. “There’s a lot of ruin in a nation,” (Handle reminds us), but “It’s like that old saying– better to be a year (or decade) too early than a day too late. Because one should never underestimate the speed with which things can unravel.” Plus additional highly-relevant remarks from Simon Black (don’t miss the embedded diagram).

June 11, 2013

Suspense

In respect to the initial formulation of a question along the rough lines “How is suspension of consequences possible?” there are only three basic options:

(1) It’s not. All deferral of consequences is illusion. The reality is something akin to *instant karma*. (There’s something about this line of thinking I respect, but I’ve no idea how it could be coherently put together, and then knitted with explanatory plausibility to evident historical fact.)

(2) It’s complicated.

(3) That old problem is over. Haven’t you heard of the Death of

Reality? Postmodernism, bitchez. (This is Derrida and Baudrillard — smart, terminally decadent, and radically inconsistent with NRx. It's also the implicit principle of post-liberal macro-economics.)

Number Two is surely the only path here that is NRx-compatible. Its articulation remains almost entirely unachieved, although this is no great source of shame — the prior intellectual history of the world got nowhere with it, either. It might not be the deepest problem about time, but it is the one with the greatest immediate relevance to generally-acknowledged historical processes, and (perhaps) also the greatest direct practical application. What it explores is the potential for *a realistic analysis of the provisionally-functional denial of reality*. It crosses almost everything 'we' are talking about.

Charles Hugh-Smith writes:

By the time extend-and-pretend finally reaches its maximum limits, the resulting implosion is so large that the shock waves topple regimes, banks, currencies and entire nations.

If NRx seems predisposed to apocalypticism, it is because it concurs — both with the proposal that "maximum limits" exist, and the attendant thesis that some reality-suppressing tendency is reaching them. "Extend-and-pretend" — or radically finite reality denial — is an engine of catastrophe. It enables negative consequences to be accumulated through postponement, without prospect of final ('postmodern') absolution. Yes, the coagulated detritus does eventually collide ruinously with the unpleasantness

purifier. The fact it hasn't *already* done so, however, is a puzzle of extraordinary profundity.

ADDED: Scharlach responds.

February 19, 2015

Suspended Animation

Limbo starts to feel like home

According to Herbert Stein's Law, the signature warning of our age, "If something cannot go on forever, it will stop." The question is: When?

The central concerns of environmentalists and radical market economists are easy to distinguish – when not straightforwardly opposed – yet both groups face a common mental and historical predicament, which might even be considered the outstanding social discovery of recent times: the extraordinary durability of the unsustainable. A pattern of mass behavior is observed that leads transparently to crisis, based on explosive (exponential) trends that are acknowledged without controversy, yet consensus on matters of fact coexists with paralyzing policy disagreements, seemingly interminable procrastination, and irresolution. The looming crisis continues to swell, close, horribly close, but in no way that is

persuasively measurable closer, like some grating Godot purgatory: "You must go on; I can't go on; I'll go on."

Urban Future doesn't do green anguish as well as teeth-grinding Austrolibertarian irritation, so it won't really try. Suffice to say that being green is about to become almost unimaginably maddening, if it isn't already. Just as the standard 'green house' model insinuates itself, near-universally, into the structure of common sense, the world temperature record has locked into a flatline, with surging CO2 production showing up everywhere except as warming. Worse still, a new wave of energy resources – stubbornly based on satanic hydrocarbons, and of truly stupefying magnitude – is rolling out inertially, with barely a hint of effective obstruction. Tar sands, fracking, and sub-salt deep sea oil deposits are all coming on-stream already, with methane clathrates just up the road. The world's on a burn, and it can't go on (but it carries on).

Financial unsustainability is no less blatant, or bizarrely enduring. Since the beginning of the 20th century, once (classically) liberal Western economies have seen government expenditure rise from under 5% to over 40% of total income, with much of Europe crossing the 50% redline (after which nothing remotely familiar as 'capitalism' any longer exists). Public debt levels are tracing geometrically elegant exponential curves, chronic dependency is replacing productive social participation, and generalized sovereign insolvency is now a matter of simple and obvious fact. The only thing

clearer than the inevitability of systemic bankruptcy is the political impossibility of doing anything about it, so things carry on, even though they really have to stop. Unintelligible multi-trillion magnitudes of impending calamity stack up, and up, and up in a near future which never quite arrives.

The frozen limbo-state of durable unsustainability is the new normal (which will last until it doesn't). The pop cultural expression is zombie apocalypse, a shambling, undying state of endlessly prolonged decomposition. When translated into economic analysis, the result is epitomized by Tyler Cowen's influential e-book *The Great Stagnation: How America Ate All the Low-Hanging Fruit of Modern History, Got Sick, and Will (Eventually) Feel Better*. (Yes, *Urban Future* is arriving incredibly late to this party, but in a frozen limbo that doesn't matter.)

In a nutshell, Cowen argues that the exhaustion of three principal sources of 'low-hanging fruit' has brought the secular trend of American growth to a state of stagnation that high-frequency business cycles have partially obscured. With the consumption of America's frontier surplus (free land), educational surplus (smart but educationally-unserved population), and — most importantly — technological surplus, from major breakthroughs opening broad avenues of commercial exploitation, growth rates have shriveled to a level that the country's people are psychologically unprepared to accept as normal.

It fell to Cowen's GMU colleague Peter Boettke to clearly make the pro-market case for stagnationism that Cowen seems to think he had already persuasively articulated. In an overtly supportive post, Boettke transforms Cowens' rather elusive argument into a far more pointed anti-government polemic — the discovery of a new depressive equilibrium, in which relentless socio-political degeneration absorbs and neutralizes a decaying trend of techno-economic advance.

> *An accumulated economic surplus was created by the age of innovation, which the age of economic illusion spent down. We are now coming to the end of that accumulated surplus and thus the full weight of government inefficiencies are starting to be felt throughout the economy.*

Perhaps surprisingly, the general tenor of response on the libertarian right was quite different. Rather than celebrating Cowen's exposure of the statist ruin visited upon Western societies, most of this commentary concentrated upon the stagnationist thesis itself, attacking it from a variety of interlocking angles. David R. Henderson's Cato review makes stinging economic arguments against Cowen's claims about land and education. Russ Roberts (at Cafe Hayek) shows how Cowen's dismal story about stagnant median family incomes draws upon data distorted by historical

changes in US family structure and residential patterns. The most common line of resistance, however, instantiated by Don Boudreaux, John Hagel, Steven Horwitz, Bryan Caplan, and Ronald Bailey, among others, rallies in defense of actually existing consumer capitalism. Bailey, for example, notes:

> *In 1970, a 23-inch color television cost $368 ($2,000 in 2009 dollars). Today, a 22-inch Phillips LCD flat panel TV costs $190. In 1978, an 8-track tape player cost $169 ($550). Today, an iPod Touch with 8 gigabytes of memory costs $204. In 1970, an Olympia adding machine cost $80 ($437 in 2009 dollars). Today, a Canon office calculator costs $6.65. In 1978, a Radio Shack TRS80 computer with 16K of RAM cost $399 ($1300 in 2009 dollars). Today, Costco will sell you an ASUS netbook with 1 gigabyte of RAM for $270. The average car cost $3,900 in 1970 ($21,300 in today's dollars). A mid-sized 2011 vehicle would cost somewhere around $20,000 and last twice as long.*
>
> *Another very crude way to look at it is that Americans are four times richer in terms of refrigerators, 10 times richer in terms of TVs, 2.5 times richer when it comes to listening to music on the go, 3,000 times richer in calculators, about 400,000 times richer when it comes to price per kilobyte of computer memory, and two times richer in cars. Cowen*

> *dismisses this kind of progress as mere "quality improvements," but in this case quality becomes it own kind of quantity when it comes to improved living standards.*

What seems pretty clear from most of this (and already in Cowen's account) is that nothing much has been moving forward in the world's 'developed' economies for four decades except for the information technology revolution and its Moore's Law dynamics. Abstract out the microprocessor, and even the most determinedly optimistic vision of recent trends is gutted to the point of expiration. Without computers, there's nothing happening, or at least nothing good.

[… still crawling …]

November 11, 2011

Suspended Animation (Part 2)

Whatever happened to hell?

> "It can't carry on like this … but how many weeks have we said that for?"
> — Justin Urquhart Stewart, director at Seven Investment

Management (via James Pethokoukis here)

To make a protracted topic out of this phenomenon is to offer a hostage to fortune. Everything could go over the cliff tomorrow. Perhaps it already has (and we're just waiting, like Wile E. Coyote, for the consummating splatter).

Greens have been dealing with exactly this question, for a while. After Paul Ehrlich had his credibility torched by Julian Simon, in the most intellectually consequential wager in history, he responded in frustration: "The bet doesn't mean anything. Julian Simon is like the guy who jumps off the Empire State Building and says how great things are going so far as he passes the 10th floor."

If environmental catastrophe is structured like this, according to a pattern of durable unsustainability, or disconcerting postponement, there is no obvious theory to account for the fact. With economics, things are different, to such an extent that the entire political economy of the world, along with the overwhelming preponderance of professionalized economic 'science', has been geared over the course of a little under a century to crisis postponement as a dominant objective. If the New World Order follows a master plan, this is it.

For ideological purists on the free-market right, *laissez-faire* capitalism is the 'unknown ideal' (although early 20th century Shanghai approached it, as did its student, Hong Kong, in later

decades), but it requires no purism whatsoever to acknowledge that the Great Depression effectively buried it as an organizing principle of the world, and that the system which replaced it found political and intellectual expression in the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Commercial self-organization, which built industrial capitalism before anyone had even the sketchiest understanding of what was happening, gave way to the technocracy of macroeconomics, guided by the radically original belief that governments had a responsibility to manage the oscillations of economic fortune.

In the words of Peter Thiel (drawn straight from the free-market id):

> *… the trend has been going the wrong way for a long time. To return to finance, the last economic depression in the United States that did not result in massive government intervention was the collapse of 1920–21. It was sharp but short, and entailed the sort of Schumpeterian "creative destruction" that could lead to a real boom. The decade that followed — the roaring 1920s — was so strong that historians have forgotten the depression that started it. The 1920s were the last decade in American history during which one could be genuinely optimistic about politics. Since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women — two constituencies that are*

> *notoriously tough for libertarians — have rendered the notion of "capitalist democracy" into an oxymoron.*

As Cato's Daniel J. Mitchell puts it, more narrowly:

> *A vibrant and dynamic economy requires the possibility of big profits, but also the discipline of failure. Indeed, capitalism without bankruptcy is like religion without hell.*

Because hell's a hard sell, political and economic rationality have been heading in different directions for 80 years. Even the tropical latitudes of purgatory have proven to be socially combustible, and popularly sensitized politics – which need not be formally 'democratic' – tend (strongly) to flee Molotov cocktails in the direction of macroeconomic management. The crucial Keynesian maxim, "In the long run we are all dead," is especially pertinent to regimes. Who's going to regenerate deep economic recovery, if the route to it lies through gulfs of fire and brimstone that are fundamentally incompatible with political survival? History, redundantly, provides the obvious answer: nobody is.

The accursed path not taken, across the infernal abyss, has become so neglected and overgrown with weeds that it is rarely noticed, but it is still graphically marked by the advice that Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon gave to Herbert Hoover as the way to navigate the Great Depression (advice that was, of course,

dismissed):

> *… liquidate labor, liquidate stocks, liquidate farmers, liquidate real estate… it will purge the rottenness out of the system. High costs of living and high living will come down. People will work harder, live a more moral life. Values will be adjusted, and enterprising people will pick up from less competent people.*

In recalling this recommendation, as an *unacceptable option*, Hoover commemorates the precise moment that capitalism ceased to exist as a politically credible social possibility. The alternative – which has many names, although 'corporatism' will do – was defined by its systematic refusal of the 'liquidationist' path. Coming out stronger on the other side meant nothing, because the passage would probably kill us – it would certainly destroy our political careers. In any case, it was a long run solution to a short term problem, scheduled by volatile popular irritability and election cycles, and in the long run we are all dead. Better, by far, to use 'macroeconomic policy' (monetary mind-control) to artificially prolong unsustainable economic euphoria – or even its jaded, hung-over simulation – than to plunge into a catastrophe that might imaginably have been delayed.

It doesn't take a Schumpeterian fanatic to suspect that such

‘creative destruction (but without the destruction)’ is unlikely to provide a sustainable recipe for economic vitality. When evaluated realistically, it is a formula that programs a trend to perpetual stagnation. Stagnation as a choice.

Because money serves as a general equivalent, and thus as a neutral, non-specific, purely quantitative medium of exchange, it is very supportive of certain highly-consequential economic illusions, of a kind that macroeconomics has been especially prone to. It can easily seem as if ‘the economy’ consists essentially of undifferentiated, quantitative aggregates, such as ‘demand’, ‘gross domestic product’, ‘money supply’, ‘land’, ‘labor’, and ‘capital’. In fact, none of these things exist, except as high-level abstractions, precipitated by the monetary function of general exchangeability.

An understanding of Schumpeterian creative destruction requires, as a preliminary, the recognition that capital is heterogeneous. When expressed in a monetary form, it can appear as a homogeneous quantity, susceptible to simple accumulation, but in its productive social reality it consists of technological apparatus – tools, machines, infrastructures, and installations – representing irretrievable investments, of qualitatively distinctive kinds. The monetary equivalent of such industrial capital is derived from the market values attributed its various components, and these are extremely dynamic, virtual, and speculative. Since the value retrievable from liquidation (and ultimately from scrap) is generally

a small fraction, or lower bound, of capital asset value, the 'capital stock' is estimated with reference to its productive usage, rather than its intrinsic worth. Schumpeter was careful to break this down into two very different aspects.

Firstly, and most straightforwardly, industrial capital is a resource that depreciates at a regular and broadly predictable rate as a function of output. It is consumed in the process of production, like any other material input, but at a slower rate. Creative destruction, however, refers to a second, far more drastic type of capital depreciation, resulting from technological obsolescence. In this case, capital stock is 'destroyed' – suddenly and unpredictably – by an innovation, taking place elsewhere in the economy, which renders its anticipated use unprofitable. In this way, large 'quantities' of 'accumulated' capital can be depreciated overnight to scrap values, and the investments they represent are annihilated. The hallucination of homogeneous capital is instantaneously vaporized, as painstakingly built fortunes are written down to nothing.

Several points suggest themselves:

1. The violence of creative destruction is directly proportional to its fecundity. The greater, deeper, and more far-reaching the innovation, the more colossal is the resulting capital destruction. At the extreme, profound technological revolutions lay waste not only to specific machines and skills, but to entire infrastructures, industries, occupational categories, and financial systems.

2. The cultural implication of creative destruction far exceeds issues of 'moral hazard' and 'time preference'. The victims of industrial change waves – whether businesses, workers, or financiers – are not being punished by the market for imprudence, slackness, or short-sightedness. They are ruined by pure hazard, as the reciprocal of the absolutely unanticipated nature of technological invention (occurring elsewhere). Neither the creation, nor the destruction, is remotely 'fair' – or ever could be. (Although Dawinian 'virtue' lies in flexible adaptability — Hong Kong always does OK.)

3. Massive capital destruction expresses technological revolution. Macroeconomic analysis (measuring homogeneous aggregates) will always miss the most significant episodes in industrial evolution, since these do not register primarily as growth, but rather the opposite. Hell is a hothouse.

4. A policy environment designed to preserve macroeconomic aggregates (e.g. 'wealth' or 'employment') necessarily opposes itself to the basic historical process of industrial revolution, because destruction of the existing economy is strictly indistinguishable from industrial renewal. For that old stuff to be worth anything (beyond scrap) we have to keep using it, which means that we're not switching over. To cross the gulf, we have to enter the gulf. (Like most things in this universe: harsh but true.)

5. Real historical advance is now politically unacceptable. Either politics wins (eternal stagnation) or history does (political collapse).

Interesting times (or not).

The world couldn't take the heat, so it got out of the kitchen. There's cold porridge for dinner, and it's going to be cold porridge for breakfast. Eventually the porridge will run out, but that could take a while …

… and here's Ben Bernanke on topic: "I'm not a believer in the Old Testament theory of business cycles. I think that if we can help people, we need to help people." (via Mike Krieger at ZH)

Cold porridge politics forever. Yum!

November 18, 2011

Suspended Animation (Part 3)

The dead hand of the state

> *I wish I was saying it's going to happen soon… this is the longest running crisis in which people have been giving false dates, people turning up for summits saying it has to be resolved, nothing happens and people go away and the sky doesn't fall in… sooner or later the sky will fall in, I'm just not clever enough to know when it's going to be.*
> — Anthony Fry, UK Chairman of Espirito Santo Investment

Bank (to CNBC)

Europe will adopt the American solution. The ECB will not allow large banks to default. It will inflate to buy the bad assets or else buy the bonds of the governments, so they can make payments. Then the bankers will put this money into excess reserves. New lending to businesses will cease. The West will go into permanent recession or no-growth stasis. The governments will absorb an ever-larger percentage of the region's capital: bond sales. Private firms will not be able to borrow at low rates. Capital development will crease.
— Gary North (here)

The new millennium is teaching us vastly more about zombies than anybody could have anticipated. Long gone are the virile, predatory vampires that once populated horror stories about capitalism, sucking out the vital essence of the proletariat in gothic fortresses of 'dead labor'. Instead, shambling worm-eaten wrecks mill about aimlessly, whilst augmenting their numbers in obscure cannibalistic circuits that defy rational comprehension and which are, in any case, too hideous to steadily contemplate. Fiends have degenerated into ghouls, who do not hunt and feed to strengthen themselves, but only to carry on, prolonging their putrescent decrepitude.

A 2002 Guardian story about "Japan's zombie economy"

prefigures a number of later, and more general, revelations. In particular, it identifies the spreading zombie apocalypse with the slow-motion collapse of Keynesianism, as 'stimulative' monetary and fiscal policies (zero interest rates combined with massive government deficit spending) lose their magical powers of revitalization, and instead merely perpetuate an interminable state of undeath. Hyper-stimulation is required just to hang on to the flatline.

Of course, being the Guardian, the solution is obvious: "what the economy needs now is a good dose of inflation." For undead Keynesians, there's no malaise too deep for an invigorating wave of currency destruction to solve. This is where the zombie metabolism really gets interesting. By the end of the decade, America had gone full zombie itself, and begun to realize that this wasn't just some weird Japanese thing it didn't understand, but an altogether more general and radically mysterious phenomenon. Ben Bernanke's Federal Reserve pushed US interest rates to the floor (ZIRP) and began to incontinently monetize public debt (QE) whilst nationalizing private debt (TARP), using every available policy instrument to direct the economy in an inflationary direction, at maximum velocity. Nothing much happened. Zombies don't do fever.

At this point, the questions come flooding in. For instance: why is anybody still buying Japanese or American government bonds? Isn't it obvious that this paper represents nothing except a slice of

unredeemable debt, promising an insulting return, 'guaranteed' by a structurally insolvent entity, and associated with policies more-or-less explicitly oriented towards deliberate currency destruction? What are people thinking? To answer that, it's necessary to venture a little deeper into the zombie world.

The idea of the US Dollar (or Japanese Yen) as a 'safe haven' might sound like a joke, and you've probably heard it before:

Joe Dollar and Jacques Euro are camping in the woods, when they suddenly hear the terrifying snuffles of a famished carnivore, getting closer. Joe begins hastily pulling on his running shoes. "What are you doing?" asks Jacques. "You can't out-run a bear market."

"I don't need to outrun the market," Joe replies. "I just need to outrun you."

At Asia Times Online, Martin Hutchinson envisages a financial crisis endgame that "eliminat[es] the government debt markets that have formed the centerpiece of the last three centuries," returning the world to the market-based money and free banking regime of 1693, before the creation of the Bank of England. Paradoxically, however, the prospect of collapse raises the financial potency of the state to an unprecedented level, as the 'safety' it promises disconnects from questions of economic competence and reverts to something far more atavistic and Hobbesian. Once everything starts to buckle, credibility attaches to the biggest, meanest, and most ruthless provider of mafia-style 'protection'. Relativistic (zero- or

negative-sum) power politics takes center stage.

A pedestrian but informative financial report from Bloomberg sets it out clearly:

> *Jim Chanos, founder of the Kynikos Associates Ltd. hedge fund, said that while the chances of a recession may be increasing, the U.S. economy is the "best house in a bad neighborhood"*

The US Dollar might be nothing more than the "best looking horse in the glue factory," but once the financial logic of zombie apocalypse takes over, the implications can be far-reaching. Bloomberg continues:

> *Ten-year Treasuries erased losses after the U.S. sold $29 billion of seven-year securities at a record low yield of 1.415 percent, wrapping up $99 billion of note sales this week. Ten-year yields fell four basis points to 1.88 percent after climbing as much as four points earlier. The rate is up from a record low of 1.67 percent on Sept. 23.*
>
> *U.S. Treasuries maturing in seven to 10-years have returned 14 percent this year, outperforming a 9.3 percent return for the broader Treasury market, according to Bank of America Merrill Lynch indexes, as of yesterday [Nov. 23].*

It's worth taking a moment to digest these numbers. Nobody expects average US inflation over the next seven years to come in under 1.415% p.a., or under 1.88% over the next ten, so the yield is sheer racketeering. Yet this blatant assault on the lower colon of savers has been compatible with a one-year return of 14% (!) — they're begging for it. Seriously, who cares if Bernanke is lighting up a fat Cuban with a large bill lifted straight out of their pocket? It just makes him look *badder*, and that's what they're paying for. Gold sounds good in theory, but it doesn't come with its own attached gangster organization, so hanging onto it through the zombie interlude could be difficult. It's safer, by far, to invest in the alpha state.

Because this Hobbesian zombinomics is political and relativisitic, there are epsilon states at the other end of the trade, as well as a beta state caught in the middle. Europe isn't a state at all, of course, which is how the (interminable) final phase of zombinomics got started. Before *it changed*, however, the EU conjuring act seemed to be going pretty well. Every Eurozone member state issuing government debt in the common currency paid yields that were broadly harmonized, as if Europe was a financially sovereign entity, standing united behind its paper. The realization that economic sovereignty remained national, even after the alienation of monetary sovereignty to the European Central Bank, came as something of a shock, and bond spreads gaped accordingly.

The hallucination of 'Europe' as a united, honorary alpha state,

rapidly degenerated to reality, recoding government bonds as zombie apocalypse security scrip. Suddenly, Greek bonds stopped having anything much to do with the ECB, and started to mumble promises in Greek – ultimately, that the Greek state would do whatever it took to secure redemption, whilst mobilizing its Olympian powers to maintain social discipline if necessary. A flight for the exits immediately ensued. Ditto, with variations of speed and intensity, for all the epsilons (= PIIGS).

Where to flee? That's the zombinomic question *par excellence* (searching for the best looking horse in the glue factory). First choice, for the keenest Hobbes readers, was to head straight to Mr. Big, a.k.a. Benny the Yank, wait politely whilst he finished smoking a mirved nuke, and then beg for protection (that's your 14% one year jump in the value of a 10-year US Treasury bond, right there). The second choice — more appealing to old-fashioned types who thought economics still counted for something – was to look for comparative financial responsibility closer to home.

Briefly, this route led to genuine quality, but zombinomics quickly resumed its grip:

> *Switzerland sparked fears of a new currency war on Tuesday [Sept. 6] after it pegged the Swiss franc against the euro in an attempt to protect its economy from the European debt crisis.*

> *The Swiss National Bank in effect devalued the franc, pledging to buy "unlimited quantities" of foreign currencies to force down its value. The SNB warned that it would no longer allow one Swiss franc to be worth more than €0.83 – equivalent to SFr1.20 to the euro – having watched the two currencies move closer to parity as Switzerland became a "safe haven" from the ravages of the eurozone crisis.*

… which brings us to Germany, and the latest chapter in the zombie saga — comic or tragic, and probably both, ironic to the point of absurdity in any case. Ruined, shrunken, divided, and traumatized by guilt, post-war Germany sought above all to bury its nationalistic aspirations in Europe. What became the EU was for Germany – as Algeria was for the French foreign *legionnaires* – a place in which to forget. Now the bond 'market', in its increasingly desperate search for a big, tough, disciplinary state (a global beta will do fine), is determined to dig the Teutonic Leviathan from its grave.

With twin memories of Weimar hyper-inflation and statist hyper-assertion still vivid, Germany is stubbornly holding out against the full-zombie option of (monetary and fiscal) financial debauchery counter-balanced by Hobbesian security politics. This reluctance to throw itself into the spirit of the age has, naturally enough, exposed it to relentless international vilification, and the pressure will only increase. It could all get unpleasantly interesting.

November 25, 2011

Suspended Animation (Part 4)

Playing for time

By the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium, the world had begun to adapt itself to a problem that had tortured it in the 1930s, and deformed it subsequently — that of *sub-optimal equilibrium*. The practical significance of this idea is difficult to exaggerate.

As a rigorous economist, Henry Hazlitt was theoretically entitled – and even compelled – to savagely deride the Keynesian model of 'low-employment equilibrium', and to painstakingly explain that it did not describe an equilibrium of any kind (in economic terms). Yet such attacks, like those of the Austrians more generally, have been of slight consequence, since Keynes was not in any strongly defensible sense an economist, but rather a *political economist*, in both of the obvious ways this expression can be understood. His bad equilibrium did not reflect the operation of market forces, but rather, the workings of the market under a specific conception of politically realistic circumstances, and the 'analysis' of the *General Theory* was less a technically rigorous description of events than a political

prescription for action, keenly attentive to the opportunities and constraints affecting its application, or transition into policy.

Keynes defined the political spirit of the second half of the 20th century, first in the West, and later more widely, by normalizing the pre-eminence of the state in economic affairs, and by subordinating the idea of economic self-correction to political considerations. The role of the new political economy, now technocratically mainstreamed as *economic policy*, was to route around labor markets, which could never be expected to work efficiently, since downside corrections were judged politically unacceptable. Pure economics was ended, or at least utterly marginalized, by the recognition that labor could opt out of the game, kick over the table, and refuse to play the commodity. Market-clearing labor pricing became an abstract (and, for Keynesians, risible) conception, oblivious to the realities of popular democratic politics, and – *in extremis* – the potential for Marxian revolution.

Hence the consensus-building sympathy for the Keynesian approach on the establishment right, where it was interpreted as a bulwark against Marxist temptations, and also the deep antipathy it elicited on the anti-establishment right, where it was (no less realistically) understood as a pre-emptive concession to socialism. On the left, a comparable schism was evident, between those who embraced it as a curtailment of capitalism, and those who denounced it as an ersatz socialism, designed for conservative convenience. The

Keynesian 'middle' has been the decisive political reality of the 20th century, and its multiple ideological meanings still organize every major axis of socio-economic controversy.

When labor markets are locked on the downside – through macroeconomic recognition and political petrification of their 'stickiness' – some kind of socio-economic ratchet mechanism is automatically produced. To an extent, capital can flee into informalization (for instance illegal immigrant labor), or international labor arbitrage, intensifying the trend to out-sourcing and globalization. More central, however, are the twin macro-tendencies Keynes focused upon: towards fiscal and monetary compensations, based on demand management and the exploitation of 'money illusion' (or attachment to *nominal* income). Fiscal stimulus can be undertaken in an attempt to elevate demand, until it reaches a point of artificial equilibrium commensurate with labor price levels (thus clearing unemployment). Alternatively, or in concert, money supply can be expanded – and currency degraded – to facilitate real wage decreases despite nominal stickiness.

Essentially, that's it. There's no other ammo in the macroeconomic arsenal. This is remarkable given the fact that both fiscal and monetary adjustments are mere tricks, and not even sophisticated tricks, but quite straightforward attempts at confidence manipulation that anybody with 'rational expectations' sees through immediately, thus neutralizing them. On the monetary

side this is especially obvious — and well-attested historically. Once inflationary expectations have become entrenched, they become the staple topic of wage negotiations, as was seen in the 1970s. There is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that workers are indifferent to inflationary wage depreciation. 'Money illusion' – insofar as it exists at all – is basically a one-off scam, harvested in the brief period when a long-established reputation for responsible currency management is thrown in the trash. Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice isn't going to happen. Basing economic policy on this is the cheapest kind of street hustle (and few would any longer admit to trying it in public).

Stimulus isn't much better. Real demand is ultimately exchange, and thus derivative from supply. Nobody can (economically) demand anything, without having something to offer in return – that's *Say's Law*, and it's theoretically impregnable, because it's elementary common sense. The only way to steer around it is conjuring, by extracting demand from one part of the economy invisibly, and re-inserting it conspicuously somewhere else. This kind of magic can get quite Byzantine, so it tends to reach exhaustion more slowly than monetary abuse, but its foundations in sustainable economic reality are no more secure. Once taxpayers acknowledge government debts as liabilities (future tax payments) that have already been virtually deducted from their spending power, the game is over. Since a plausible model for (expansive) fiscal policy exhaustion is sovereign

debt crisis, it is not unreasonable to begin drawing the curtains already.

Given the exponential trend of social history, most of what has ever happened has taken place since the Great Depression began, and during this time the world has inhabited — more or less consciously — a deliberately constructed system of illusion, or confidence trick. Whether analyzed from the left or the right, the most striking feature of this situation has been inadequately apprehended, or even interrogated: how has it persisted? How can something that is transparently [insert epithet] unworkable last for over 80 [insert triple epithet] years?

Eighty years is a pretty good human life-span. Someone could easily expend their life within the Keynesian dream-palace, literally living a lie, with the implication that whatever importance 'reality' might have in theory, it need have almost nothing to do with us. We can miss it completely, caught up in a magic show that exceeds our longevity, half-hypnotized by illusions that no one really believes in, but which suffice to put things off, and off, and off, and … *in the long run we are all dead*. Who cares about a truth that never arrives? A magic trick that lasts your whole life is your life. Scarcely anybody alive today has known anything else.

And it's all going to be over real soon … honestly …

December 2, 2011

Suspended Animation (Part 5)

Engines of Devastation

Does Postmodernism still seem cool to anybody? — Probably not. Having sold whatever simulacrum of a soul it might have had to the fickle gods of fashion, it has learnt more about the reign of Chronos than it might have expected to – the kids get devoured, and it's on to something new. What was accepted for no good reason gets discarded for no good reason. In political science it's called democracy (but that's another discussion).

Clearly, there's something profoundly just about the disappearance of postmodernism into the trashcan of random difference (what's 'in' has to be new, preferably meaninglessly so). It's even 'poetically just', whatever that means. But it also destroys information. Although Postmodernism was certainly a fad, it was also a *zeitgeist*, or spirit of the times. It meant something, despite its own best efforts, at least as a symptom. The disappearance of reality that it announced was itself real, as was the realm of simulation that replaced it. At least in its death, it might have amounted to something.

Consider its greatest mystagogue, Jacques Derrida, and his once widely celebrated 'concept' of differance (yes, with an 'a'), a term within a series of magical words that mark the undecidable,

ungraspable, unpresentable, and ultimately inconceivable ontological non-stuff that supplants real events, through an endless succession of *displacements and postponements*. We can't really say anything about it, so we have to talk about it endlessly, and entire university departments are required to do so. It's ridiculous (and so it's over). But it's also, quite exactly, the globally hegemonic culture of Keynesianized, macroeconomic, programmatic stagnationism, and that isn't over yet, although its morbidity is already highly conspicuous. Unlike faddish academic Postmodernism, its death is going to be really interesting.

Long before the Derridoids got started, Keynes had taught governments that differance was something they could do. Procrastination – the strategic suspension of economic reality through a popularly ungraspable series of *displacements and postponements* – quickly came to define the art of politics. Why suffer today what can be put off until tomorrow, or suffer yourself something that could be somebody else's problem? Postpone! Displace! *In the long run we are all dead*. Reality is for losers.

Differance as it really works is a lot cruder than its reflection in Postmodern philosophy (and what could be philosophically cruder than an appeal to the notion of 'reflection'?). For instance, it is fished out of the ontological *abgrund* and processed by specific public policy mechanisms, sustained by concrete institutions in ways that are to a considerable extent economically measurable, within elastic

but most certainly finite geographical and historical limits. Crudest of all, and ultimately decisive, is the circumscription of derealization, by the real, and the return of the apocalyptic, no longer as a phantasmatic avatar of the 'metaphysics of presence' (or false promise of a real event), but as an impending real event, and one whose process of historical construction is in large measure intelligible. Real differance didn't 'deconstruct' the apocalypse, *it built it*. It's not even that difficult to see how.

At EconLog, David Henderson has posted his notes from John H. Cochrane's December 3 talk at Stanford University's Hoover Institution conference on 'Restoring Robust Economic Growth in America'. There's no mention of differance, but there doesn't need to be.

> *For nearly 100 years we have tried to stop runs with government guarantees — deposit insurance, generous lender of last resort, and bailouts. That patch leads to huge moral hazard. Giving a banker a bailout guarantee is like giving a teenager keys to the car and a case of whisky. So, we appoint regulators who are supposed to stop the banks from taking risks, in a hopeless arms race against smart MBAs, lawyers and lobbyists who try to get around the regulation, and though we allow — nay, we encourage and subsidize — expansion of run-prone assets.*

In Dodd-Frank, the US simply doubled down our bets on this regime. …

Bailouts delay a painful economic event (postponement) whilst transferring financial liability (displacement). Risk is restored to virtuality, as disaster is turned back into a threat, but it isn't the same threat. By any remotely sane method of accountancy, it's now worse. Significant virtual deterioration is substituted for actual discomfort. That's the cost of derealization.

How do things get worse, exactly? — In plenty of ways. Start with 'moral hazard', which is a polite way of saying 'insanity'. Actions are decoupled from their consequences, removing the disincentive for craziness. The result, utterly predictably, is more craziness. In fact, anything that systematically enhances moral hazard is simply manufacturing craziness. It's dumping LSD in the water supply, although actually probably worse. So bailouts drive us insane and destroy civilization (no one really disputes that, although they may try to avoid the topic).

Oh, but there's more! — Much more, because all these displacements don't just move things around, they move them *up*. Risk is centralized, concentrated, systematized, politicized – and that's in the (entirely unrealistic) best case, when it isn't also expanded and degraded by the corruption and inefficiency of weakly- or cynically-incentivized public institutions. This is trickle

up – really *flood* up – economics, in which everything bad that ever happens to anybody gets stripped of any residual sanity (or realistic estimation of consequences), pooled, re-coded, complicated by compensatory regulation, and shifted to ever more ethereal heights of populist democratic irresponsibility, where the only thing that matters is what people want to hear, and that really isn't ever going to be the truth.

"Mess up enough, and you probably suffer or die" – that's the truth. It's a message that doesn't translate into the language of Keynesian kick-the-can politics, which is folk Postmodernism. The nearest we get, as the jaws begin to close on the bail-out bucket chain, is "We're going to need a bigger boat." After innumerable episodes of that, we're all huddled together on the Titanic, and things are kinda, sorta, looking OK. At least the band's still playing …

When abstracted from its squalid psychosis, the pattern is mathematically quite neat. It's called the Martingale system, better known to Americans as 'double or nothing' (and to Brits as 'double or quits'). Cochrane already touched upon it ("the US simply doubled down our bets"). Wager on red, and it comes up black. No problem, just double the bet and repeat. You can't lose. (If you like this logic, Paul Krugman has an economic recovery to sell you.)

What appears as disaster postponed is, in virtual reality, disaster expanded. The Wikipedia entry on the Martingale system helpfully connects it to the Taleb Distribution, otherwise known as scrounging

pennies in front of a steam roller. The persistence of small gains makes this business model seem like a sure thing — until it doesn't.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth expand on the idea in Foreign Affairs, with application to various aspects of the current (or impending) crisis. Asking why "surprise [is] the permanent condition of the U.S. political and economic elite" they trace the problem to "the artificial suppression of volatility — the ups and downs of life — in the name of stability."

> *Complex systems that have artificially suppressed volatility tend to become extremely fragile, while at the same time exhibiting no visible risks. In fact, they tend to be too calm and exhibit minimal variability as silent risks accumulate beneath the surface. Although the stated intention of political leaders and economic policymakers is to stabilize the system by inhibiting fluctuations, the result tends to be the opposite. These artificially constrained systems become prone to "Black Swans" — that is, they become extremely vulnerable to large-scale events that lie far from the statistical norm and were largely unpredictable to a given set of observers.*

Discussing this article at PJMedia, Richard Fernandez glosses and sharpens its conclusion:

> *Part of the problem is the consequence of [the elites'] own damping. By attempting to centrally manage systems according to some predetermined scheme they actually store up volatility rather than dispersing it. By kicking the can down the road they eventually condemn themselves to bumping into a giant pile of cans when they run out of road. … But the elites cannot admit to surprise; nor can they admit to bad things starting on their watch. Therefore they keep sweeping things under the carpet until, as in some horror movie, it spawns a zombie. To make systems robust, says Taleb, you've got to admit that you can make mistakes and pay the price. You will have to in the end anyway.*

We aren't in Postmodernism anymore, Toto. We're nearer to this:

> *The wavelike movement affecting the economic system, the recurrence of periods of boom which are followed by periods of depression, is the unavoidable outcome of the attempts, repeated again and again, to lower the gross market rate of interest by means of credit expansion. There is no means of avoiding the final collapse of a boom brought about by credit expansion. The alternative is only whether the crisis should come sooner as the result of a voluntary abandonment of further credit expansion, or later as a final and total*

> *catastrophe of the currency system involved.* (Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action*)

Or even this:

> *Great is Bankruptcy: the great bottomless gulf into which all Falsehoods, public and private, do sink, disappearing; whither, from the first origin of them, they were all doomed. For Nature is true and not a lie. No lie you can speak or act but it will come, after longer or shorter circulation, like a Bill drawn on Nature's Reality, and be presented there for payment,- -with the answer, No effects. Pity only that it often had so long a circulation: that the original forger were so seldom he who bore the final smart of it! Lies, and the burden of evil they bring, are passed on; shifted from back to back, and from rank to rank; and so land ultimately on the dumb lowest rank, who with spade and mattock, with sore heart and empty wallet, daily come in contact with reality, and can pass the cheat no further.*
>
> *Observe nevertheless how, by a just compensating law, if the lie with its burden (in this confused whirlpool of Society) sinks and is shifted ever downwards, then in return the distress of it rises ever upwards and upwards. Whereby, after the long pining and demi-starvation of those Twenty Millions,*

a Duke de Coigny and his Majesty come also to have their 'real quarrel.' Such is the law of just Nature; bringing, though at long intervals, and were it only by Bankruptcy, matters round again to the mark.

But with a Fortunatus' Purse in his pocket, through what length of time might not almost any Falsehood last! Your Society, your Household, practical or spiritual Arrangement, is untrue, unjust, offensive to the eye of God and man. Nevertheless its hearth is warm, its larder well replenished: the innumerable Swiss of Heaven, with a kind of Natural loyalty, gather round it; will prove, by pamphleteering, musketeering, that it is a truth; or if not an unmixed (unearthly, impossible) Truth, then better, a wholesomely attempered one, (as wind is to the shorn lamb), and works well. Changed outlook, however, when purse and larder grow empty! Was your Arrangement so true, so accordant to Nature's ways, then how, in the name of wonder, has Nature, with her infinite bounty, come to leave it famishing there? To all men, to all women and all children, it is now indutiable that your Arrangement was false. Honour to Bankruptcy; ever righteous on the great scale, though in detail it is so cruel! Under all Falsehoods it works, unweariedly mining. No Falsehood, did it rise heaven- high and cover the world, but Bankruptcy, one day, will sweep it down, and make us free of

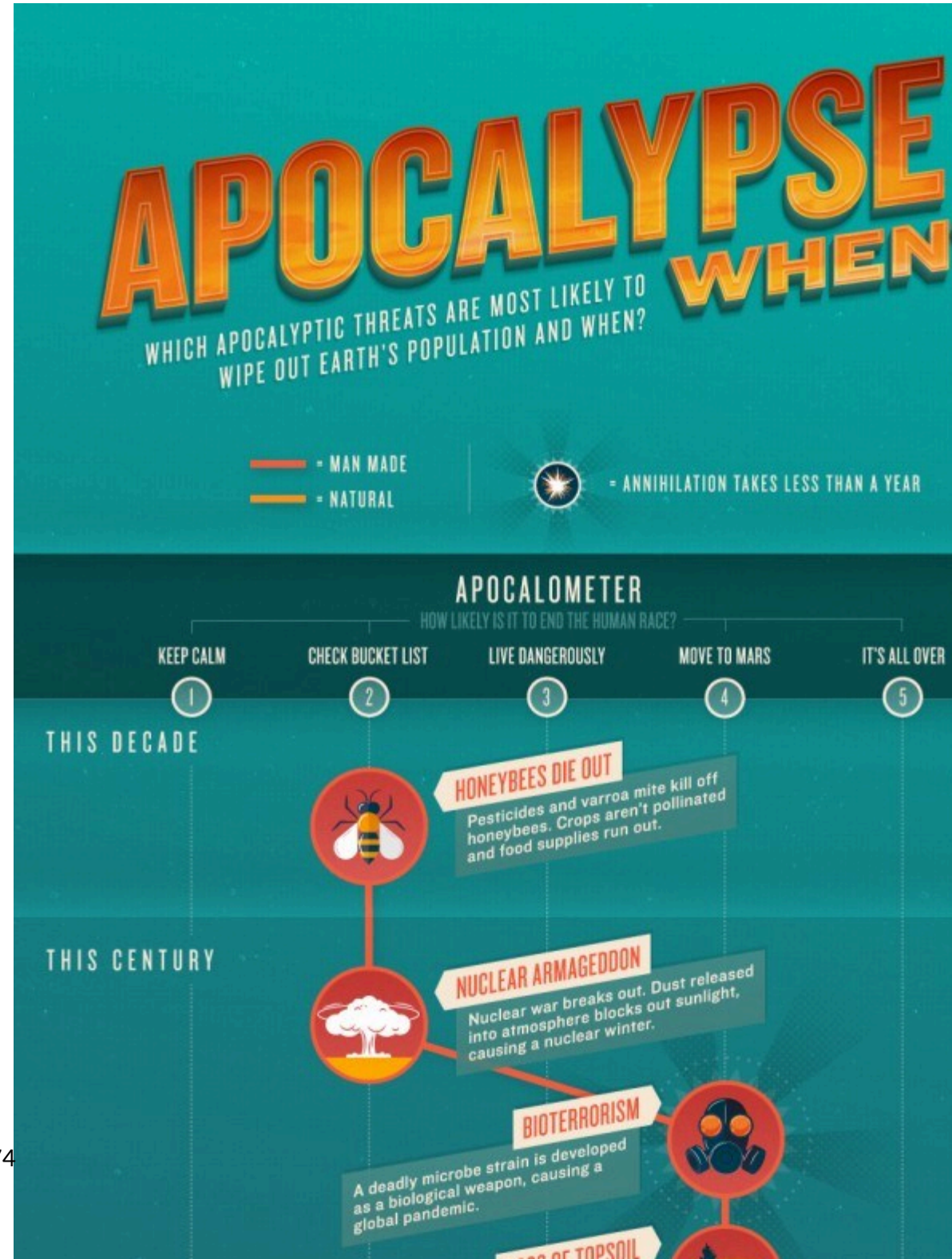
> *it.* (Thomas Carlyle, via Mencius Moldbug, but cited all over the place recently)

Here it comes.

December 9, 2011

Apocalometer

You know you need one:


APOCALYPSE WHEN
WHICH APOCALYPTIC THREATS ARE MOST LIKELY TO WIPE OUT EARTH'S POPULATION AND WHEN?
= MAN MADE
= NATURAL
= ANNIHILATION TAKES LESS THAN A YEAR
APOCALOMETER
HOW LIKELY IS IT TO END THE HUMAN RACE?
KEEP CALM
CHECK BUCKET LIST
LIVE DANGEROUSLY
MOVE TO MARS
IT'S ALL OVER
1
2
3
4
5
THIS DECADE
HONEYBEES DIE OUT
Pesticides and varroa mite kill off honeybees. Crops aren't pollinated and food supplies run out.
THIS CENTURY
NUCLEAR ARMAGEDDON
Nuclear war breaks out. Dust released into atmosphere blocks out sunlight, causing a nuclear winter.
BIOTERRORISM
A deadly microbe strain is developed as a biological weapon, causing a global pandemic.

(Via.)

January 16, 2015

CHAPTER THREE - 2012

Perfect Storm

Weather forecasts for winter 2012 are getting wilder all the time

Even before receiving the Hollywood treatment, the year 2012 was shaping up to be a uniquely potent 'harmonic convergence' of end times enthusiasm. Initially condensed out of the Mayan calendar, the 2012 countdown was soon fizzed into a heady cocktail by speculative interpretations of the Yijing, Aquarian 'New Age' paganism, Ufology, and mushroom mysticism. Once critical mass was achieved, the 2012 became a gathering point for free-floating Jewish, Christian, and Islamic eschatological expectations (coming or return of the Messiah, advent of the Antichrist, Armageddon, Rapture, emergence of the Twelfth Imam from occultation, and others). Just about anything cosmically imaginable is now firmly expected – by somebody – to arrive in late December, 2012.

Secular eschatology also has its dogs in the fight. From reciprocally insulated enclaves of the Internet, apocalyptic strains of Marxism (and libertarianism) joyfully anticipated the imminent

collapse of the global economy, fully confident that its downfall would usher in a post-capitalist social order (or untrammeled free-market societies). The boldest proponents of impending Technological Singularity prepared to welcome superhuman artificial intelligence (when Skynet would already be five years overdue). Radical environmentalists, neo-Malthusians, 'Peak Oil' resource-crunchers, and Clash of Civilizations theorists also contributed substantially to the atmosphere of impending crisis. Irrespective of Anthropogenic Global Warming, everything was heating up fast.

This climate proved highly receptive to the prophetic ideas of William Strauss and Neil Howe, where it found a fresh and evocative self-description. Beginning with their book Generations (1992), Strauss & Howe sought to explain the rhythm of history through the pattern of generations, as they succeeded each other in four-phase cycles. Their cyclic unit or 'saeculum' lasts 80-100 years and consists of generational 'seasons' or 'turnings', each characterized by a distinctive archetype. The Fourth Turning, starting early in the new millennium, is 'winter' and 'crisis'. They remark: "Today's older Americans recognize this as the mood of the Great Depression and World War II, but a similar mood has been present in all the other great gates of our history, from the Civil War and Revolution back into colonial and English history."

Jim Quinn's discussion of the Fourth Turning at Zero Hedge

anticipates the winter storms: “Based upon a review of the foreseeable issues confronting our society it is clear to me that a worse financial implosion will strike before the 2012 presidential election. It may be triggered by a debt ceiling confrontation, the ending of QE2, a panic out of the USD, hyperinflation, a surge in oil prices, or some combination of these possibilities. The ensuing collapse of the stock and bond markets will remove the last vestiges of trust in the existing financial system and the government bureaucrats who have taken taxpayer dollars and funneled them to these Wall Street oligarchs.”

More ominously still, Quinn concludes: “History has taught us that Fourth Turnings end in all out war. The outcome of wars is always in doubt. …It may be 150 years since Walt Whitman foresaw the imminent march of armies, visions of unborn deeds, and a sweeping away of the old order, but history has brought us right back to where we started. Immense challenges and threats await our nation. Will we face them with the courage and fortitude of our forefathers? Or will we shrink from our responsibility to future unborn generations? The drumbeat of history grows louder. Our rendezvous with destiny beckons.”

Stormy enough yet? If not, there’s the harsh weather of Kondratiev winter rolling in too.

Nikolai Kondratiev’s ‘long waves’ fluctuate at roughly twice the frequency of Strauss & Howe saecula (lasting roughly 40-60 years

from ‘spring’ to ‘winter’). Originally discovered through empirical investigation of price movements, Kondratiev waves have stimulated a remarkable range of economic-historical theories. Joseph Schumpeter interpreted the cycle as a process of techno-economic innovation, in which capital was creatively revolutionized and destroyed through depreciation, whilst Hyman Minsky attributed it to a rhythm of financial speculation (in which stability fostered over-confidence, excess, and crisis with cyclic regularity).

The discovery of the ‘long wave’ seemed to coincide with its disappearance – at the hands of macroeconomic management (Keynesian counter-cyclical policy). Unsurprisingly, the crisis of Keynesianism under present conditions of ‘debt saturation’ has re-animated long wave discussion. At his Kondratiev-inspired Tipping Points blog, Gordon T. Long forecasts a savage winter, marked by rapid progression from financial through economic to political crisis, culminating in a (US dollar) ‘currency collapse’ in 2012.

Wrap up warmly.

May 5, 2011

New Year Cheer

There's a lot of ruin in a global madhouse

2012 is a year that arrives pre-branded. It's the last opportunity to end the world on schedule. By the end of December the window for apocalyptic profundity will have closed, and it's back to the hazards of random, meaningless catastrophe.

Perhaps a prophetic consensus will have emerged by the fall, but right now the outlook is foggy at best. Trawling through the Web's most excitable 2012 sites doesn't bring anything very definite into focus. Once discussion advances beyond the fairly solid foundation of the Mayan long count, and the Fourth Age of Creation (lasting from August 11, 3114 BC, to December 21, AD 2012), things spin off into chaos with disconcerting rapidity.

Whether the earth is destined to plunge into a black hole is a matter of (at least limited) controversy, but the fact that just about every imaginable species of prospective calamity or transformation is being sucked into the 2012 prophetic vortex is easily confirmed by anybody with a web browser. Even the basic genre remains unsettled, with expectations veering wildly from celestial collisions, solar flares, and super-volcanoes, to spiritual awakenings, cosmic harmonizations, and countless varieties of Messianic fulfillment. According to the sober forecasters at 2012apocalypse.net: "The

Mayans, Hopis, Egyptians, Kabbalists, Essenes, Qero elders of Peru, Navajo, Cherokee, Apache, Iroquois confederacy, Dogon Tribe, and Aborigines all believe in an ending to this Great 2012 Apocalyptic Cycle." They missed out Mother Shipton, Nostradamus, Terence McKenna, Kalki Bagavan, and Web Bot, yet somehow the *Cracked* crew remain unconvinced.

As an aside, the best line UF has yet seen among the *deniers* (sorry, couldn't resist that), is this deliciously self-undermining specimen from Ian O'Neill: "No one has ever predicted the future, and that isn't about to change."

In an increasingly desegregated cultural landscape, it's not easy to separate out secular history and sensible opinion from the orgiastically gathering End Times festival, and – strangely enough – the world process isn't doing much to oblige. Ritualistic predictions-for-the-year-ahead posts on politics and economics sites are practically indistinguishable from the 2012 Armageddon-is-here prophecies, although the sane side of prognostication is characterized by a greater uniformity of unrelenting bleakness: Comprehensive economic collapse, aggravated by administrative sclerosis, and accompanied by escalating international conflict / social disintegration, amidst the enraged screams of splintering civilizations (and a 'Happy New Year' to you, too.)

Goldbug Darryl Robert Schoon demonstrates some professional hedging, but he doesn't even try to keep impending financial crisis

from spilling out into cosmic immensities:

> *The ending of the Mayan calendar in 2012 is as misunderstood as the interplay between credit and debt and supply and demand; but the coincident collapse of the current economic paradigm and an arcane indicator of change should not be dismissed. … The current great wave [of rising prices] began in 1896. That it could crest and break in 2012 could be a coincidence. Or, it may not.*

Science, technology, creative culture, and enterprise are likely to spring some upside surprises, but the degenerative horror of the world's hegemonic Keynesian political economy – combined with increasingly irresponsible neoconservative democracy-mongering — has ominously synchronized itself with the darkest visions of the 2012 cults. A patently dysfunctional mode of socio-economic organization, based upon fake money, belligerent idiocracy, and electorally-enabled looting scams, is aggressively imposing itself – with an almost incomprehensible absence of self-reflection — upon a world that already has plenty of indigenous pathologies to contend with. The resulting New World Order, entirely predictably, is a lunatic asylum, and even its most functional components (such as Singapore and the Chinese SARs of Hong Kong and Macao) are networked into the collective delirium. When the Euro, Japanese

Yen, and US Dollar collapse (probably in that order) the financial and geopolitical tsunami will wash over everybody. If that doesn't happen in 2012, history has no sense of narrative climax at all.

On the 'bright' side – for all the can-kickers out there – the words of Adam Smith that have defined 2011 continue to resonate. "Young man, there's a lot of ruin in a nation," and even more in a global system. Perhaps the slow-motion disintegration of hegemonic ~~neo-fascism~~ Keynesian social democracy will spin itself out beyond the horizon of the Mayan calendar, which would really give us something to look forward to …

January 6, 2012

End Games

Some time late on the 21st of December last year [2012], Terrestrial Omega Event 2012 streaked past relatively quietly, on a trajectory from the dread realm of ominous premonitions into the cobwebbed vault of defunct absurdities. (The fact that its glancing blow reduced *Urban Future* to a tangled wreck of smoking weakly radioactive debris need be of no concern to anybody except our five regular readers.) Another non-event was thus added to the long chain of ontological omissions that compose the Apocalyptic Tradition. Things continue, on their existing tracks, as common sense had

confidently predicted.

For a world saturated in modernist irony, where even the most passionate beliefs are modulated by forms of mass-media entertainment, no 'Great Disappointment' is any longer possible, such as that afflicting the Millerites of the mid-1840s. A 2012 Reuters/Ipsos survey found that 10% of the world population (and no less than 20% of Chinese) had 'sincerely' expected the End to arrive on December 21st. When it didn't, so what? There's always something else on — or rather, the same thing, in different flavors.

Channel hopping is especially easy because it isn't even necessary to switch genre. The collapse of the Occidental World Order is like Henry Ford's Model T: "You can have it in any color you like, as long as it's black." What you can't do is get it over with. It's too big to fail, even after it has manifestly failed.

The December non-event was not the End, or even the end of the End, but rather the end of the end of the End. Dated Doomsday has been de-activated, leaving an indefinitely dilated Ending without conclusion. Now that the prospect of a finish has finished, finishing becomes interminable. Dates march onwards, without destination, into ever extended horizons of collapse. Apocalypse, stripped of Armageddon, is normalized. It can now demand undistracted recognition as 'the system', the way of the world, feeding upon the spectacle of permanent crisis through the Media-Apocalypse Complex. As (Fukuyama-final) Liberal Democratic politics adjusts to

a chronic state of emergency, it is finally possible to 'get things done', in a time when nothing can be done. Disinhibited insanity delights in its ultimate mania.

Because it's insanity, it can't *really* last, but Apocalypse has outlasted Doomsday, and reality has lost its last signs. For purposes of polite conversation, therefore, it is best to grant the Keynesians / Postmodernists absolute triumph, and to concur that the consequences of irrealism can be indefinitely postponed. When in Bedlam, do as the bedlamites do. Anything else would be pointless irascibility, out of keeping with the spirit of the age. After all (except itself) Apocalypse Forever is the final Western religion.

Progressive Apocalypse, Apocalypse Forever, assumes the death of Doomsday, which provides the occasion for an obituary. For reactionaries of the 'Throne and Altar' variety, mourning will incline towards eschatology, as the moment of definitive judgment is interred. Here in the eschaton-blitzed wreckage of *Urban Future*, however, our remembrance is more concisely arithmetical. We recall dates gone forever, and with them the time inversions that are expressed through countdowns, intensive escalations, and compressions. When the end had a date, time could zero upon it, rather than dissipating into endlessly-extended fogbanks of blighted futurity.

December 21st, 2012, was the last Doomsday date, and thus the day Doomsday died. It might even have been the most popular, but

it was very far from the greatest. Extracted predominantly from the calendar of the Mayans, it neatly concluded the 13th Baktun, but in doing so broke quite arbitrarily from the (already awkward and compromised) numerical organization of the dating system, with its preference for modulus-20 unit hierarchies. Whatever the attractions of exoticism, turning to pop Mayanology for a planetary Apocalypse schedule was also radically arbitrary, given the Abrahamic Hegemony that had structured the world order over the previous half millennium. Still, the Maya had conducted their own preliminary experiment in collapse, enabling Mel Gibson to excavate a striking movie from the ruins, introduced by a quote from Will Durant: "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within."

When estimated in terms of numerical elegance and metaphysical profundity, the truly great Doomsday was Y2K, the most beautiful weapon in history (despite its failure to detonate). Y2K was automatic and techno-compatible (actually, techno-dependent), chronometrically precise, perfectly counter-Abrahamic, and calendrically creative (re-setting AD 1900 to Year 00). It was staged from the absence of an integrated, malevolent subject, out of simple arithmetic, targeting an exactly scheduled, consummate fulfillment of millennial expectation through sheer coincidence. The world order was to have been softly terminated, by 'chance'. Nothing that has ever actually happened in history made as much sense as this

(which didn't). The more closely it is examined, the more exquisite it appears. Among other missed Doomsdays, none comes close. But as Y2K said, insidiously: Never Mind.

Even the shoddiest of the Old Doomsdays satisfied intellectual appetites that will now hunger forever. First of all, and most basically, they catered to the transcendental impulse, understood as a search for ultimate or enveloping structures and principles of organization. As a metaphysical event, conclusive Apocalypse promises an escape from distracting detail and *an apprehension of the frame*. Biblical bases for such apprehension are found in Isaiah 34:4 — "All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll." This image is repeated in Revelation 6:14 — "And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together." Apocalyptic time does not add a new sentence, or even a new chapter, to the chronicle of events. It uncovers the limit of the scroll, by exceeding it. For that, however, it has to complete itself.

Secondly, a punctual Apocalypse fulfills a semiotic (and in particular numerical) realism, as expressed — most lucidly — in occultism and schizophrenia. The apocalyptic exposes a primal encryption of culture, coding the operations of super-human intelligence (God or gods, transcended masters, aliens, time-travelers, spontaneous social order, or bacteria … any will do). A true calendar is revealed, in which semiotic exhaustion, or roll-over, precisely coincides with the end of a real epoch. Hyper-

traditionalism thus exoticizes itself in the formulation: *travel inwards far enough and you arrive at the outside*. It thus provides the most radical challenge to the fundamental mantra of the contemporary human sciences – the (Saussurean) arbitrary nature of the sign.

An additional and essentially modern contribution to the apocalyptic is made by the arithmetic of the intrinsically unsustainable, as defined by Thomas Malthus (1768-1834) in his *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. The empirical foundations for an inevitable crisis are found in trends to exponential growth and their projected collision with a limit. Variants of such apocalyptic projection are found in Marxism, environmentalism, and Technological Singularity (Karl Marx, M. King Hubbert, and Ray Kurzweil).

Even from this brief survey, it becomes possible to outline certain core features of *a model apocalypse*: comprehensive, punctual, and climactic. In other words, a transition that cannot be contained by the pre-existing nature of time, occurring at an exact, cryptically anticipated moment, bringing the central historical process to its culmination. All of that is gathered together in Doomsday, and Doomsday is dead.

Note: Thanks to Mathieu Borysevicz and Sophie Huang of the MAB Society, whose December 10th, 2012, Minsheng Museum event, *Just What is it about the end of the world that makes it so appealing?* provided the opportunity to discuss the schematics of apocalypse.

January 17, 2013

CHAPTER FOUR - CASE STUDIES

Peak People

Could we be facing the ultimate resource crunch?

Over at Zero Hedge, Sean Corrigan unleashes a fizzing polemic against the (M. King Hubbert) 'Peak Oil' school of resource doomsters (enjoy the article if you're *laissez-faire* inclined, or the comments if you're not).

Of particular relevance to density advocates is Corrigan's "exercise in contextualization" (a kind of de-stressed *Stand on Zanzibar*) designed to provide an image of the planet's 'demographic burden':

> *For example, just as an exercise in contextualisation, consider the following:-*
>
> *The population of Hong Kong: 7 million. Its surface area: 1,100 km2*
>
> *The population of the World: nigh on 7 billion, i.e., HK x 1000*

1000 x area of HK = 110,000 km2 = the area of Cuba or Iceland

Approximate area of the Earth's landmass = 150 million km2

Approximate total surface area = 520 million km2

So, were we to build one, vast city of the same population density as Hong Kong to cover the entirety of [Cuba], this would accommodate all of humanity, and take up just 0.07% of the planet's land area and 0.02% of the Earth's surface.

Anybody eagerly anticipating hypercities, arcologies, and other prospective experiments in large-scale social packing is likely to find this calculation rather disconcerting, if only because – taken as a whole — Hong Kong actually isn't that dense. For sure, the downtown 'synapse' connecting the HK Island with Kowloon is impressively intense, but most of the Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) is green, rugged, and basically deserted. It's (mean) average density of 6,364 / km2 doesn't get anywhere close to that of the top 100 cities (Manila's 43,000 / km2 is almost seven times greater). Corrigan isn't envisaging a megalopolis, but a Cuba-scale suburb.

Whether densitarians are more or less likely than average to worry about Peak Oil or related issues might be an interesting question (the New Urbanists tend to be quite greenish). If they really want to see cities scale the heights of social possibility, however, they

need to start worrying about population shortage. With the human population projected to level-off at around 10 billion, there might never be enough people to make cities into the ultra-dense monsters that futuristic imagination has long hungered for.

Bryan Caplan is sounding the alarm. At least we have teeming Malthusian robot hordes to look forward to.

May 20, 2011

Hard Futurism

Are you ready for the next big (nasty) thing?

For anyone with interests both in extreme practical futurism and the renaissance of the Sinosphere, Hugo de Garis is an irresistible reference point. A former teacher of Topological Quantum Computing (don't ask) at the International Software School of Wuhan University, and later Director of the Artificial Brain Lab at Xiamen University, de Garis' career symbolizes the emergence of a cosmopolitan Chinese technoscientific frontier, where the outer-edge of futuristic possibility condenses into precisely-engineered reality.

De Garis' work is 'hard' not only because it involves fields such as Topological Quantum Computing, or because – more accessibly

— he's devoted his research energies to the building of brains rather than minds, or even because it has generated questions faster than solutions. In his 'semi-retirement' (since 2010), hard-as-in-difficult, and hard-as-in-hardware, have been supplanted by hard-as-in-mind-numbingly-and-incomprehensibly-brutal – or, in his own words, an increasing obsession with the impending 'Gigadeath' or 'Artilect War'.

According to de Garis, the approach to Singularity will revolutionize and polarize international politics, creating new constituencies, ideologies, and conflicts. The basic dichotomy to which everything must eventually succumb divides those who embrace the emergence of transhuman intelligence, and those who resist it. The former he calls 'cosmists', the latter 'terrans'.

Since massively-augmented and robotically-reinforced 'cosmists' threaten to become invincible, the 'terrans' have no option but pre-emption. To preserve human existence in a recognizable state, it is necessary to violently suppress the cosmist project in advance of its accomplishment. The mere prospect of Singularity is therefore sufficient to provoke a political — and ultimately military — convulsion of unprecedented scale. A Terran triumph (which might require much more than just a military victory) would mark an inflection point in deep history, as the super-exponential trend of terrestrial intelligence production – lasting over a billion years — was capped, or reversed. A Cosmist win spells the termination of human

species dominion, and a new epoch in the geological, biological, and cultural process on earth, as the torch of material progress is passed to the emerging *techo sapiens*. With the stakes set so high, the melodramatic grandeur of the de Garis narrative risks understatement no less than hyperbole.

The giga-magnitude body-count that de Garis postulates for his Artilect (artificial intellect) War is the dark side expression of Moore's Law or Kurzweilean increasing returns – an extrapolation from exponentiating historical trends, in this case, casualty figures from major human conflicts over time. It reflects the accumulating trend to global wars motivated by trans-national ideologies with ever-increasing stakes. One king is (perhaps) much like another, but a totalitarian social direction is very different from a liberal one (even if such paths are ultimately revisable). Between a Terran world order and a Cosmist trajectory into Singularity, the distinction approaches the absolute. The fate of the planet is decided, with costs to match.

If the de Garis Gigadeath War scenario is pre-emptive in relation to prospective Singularity, his own intervention is meta-pre-emptive – since he insists that world politics must be anticipatively re-forged in order to forestall the looming disaster. The Singularity prediction ripples backwards through waves of pre-adaptation, responding at each stage to eventualities that are yet to unfold. Change unspools from out of the future, complicating the arrow of time. It is perhaps no coincidence that among de Garis' major research interests is

reversible computing, where temporal directionality is unsettled at the level of precise engineering.

Does ethnicity and cultural tradition merely dissolve before the tide-front of this imminent Armageddon? The question is not entirely straightforward. Referring to his informal polling of opinion on the coming great divide, de Garis recalls his experience teaching in China, remarking:

> *I know from the lectures I've given over the past two decades on species dominance that when I invite my audiences to vote on whether they are more Terran than Cosmist, the result is usually 50-50. … At first, I thought this was a consequence of the fact that the species dominance issue is too new, causing people who don't really understand it to vote almost randomly – hence the 50:50 result. But gradually, it dawned on me that many people felt as ambivalently about the issue as I do. Typically, the Terran/Cosmist split would run from 40:60 to 60:40 (although I do notice that with my very young Chinese audiences in computer science, the Cosmists are at about 80%).*

June 13, 2011

Kinds of Killing

How bad is genocide, really?

Like 'fascism' – with which it is closely connected in the popular imagination – 'genocide' is a word carrying such exorbitant emotional charge that it tends to blow the fuses of any attempt at dispassionate analysis. We can thank the political black magic of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi accomplices for that.

Prior to the Third Reich and its systematic, industrialized attempts to eradicate entire ethno-racial populations (Jews, Roma, and perhaps Slavs) along with other numerous other groups (mental and physical 'defectives' or 'useless eaters', homosexuals, communists, Jehova's Witnesses …) international law restricted its attention to the actions and grievances of states and individuals, with the latter subdivided into combatants and noncombatants. The National Socialist trauma changed that fundamentally.

On December 9, 1948, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (as Resolution 260), defining a new category of internationally recognized crimes as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group."

Since 1948, defending genocide has been the surest way to ruin a

dinner party. That doesn't mean, however, that the topic deserves to be immunized from controversy. There is one question in particular that merits intense and prolonged scrutiny: Is genocide really worse than killing a lot of people?

Posed slightly more technically: Is there a crime of genocide that stands above and beyond mass murder (of equivalent scale)? Or (a rough equivalent): Can groups be the specific victims of crime? This is to ask whether groups exist – and have value — as anything more than a nominal or strictly formal set, whose reality is exhausted by its constituent individual members. The existence of genocide as a legal category presumes a (positive) answer to this question, and in doing so it closes down a problem of great and very general importance.

The classical liberal presumption is quite different, as summarized (a little bluntly) by the provocative remark made by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1987 "… there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families." Harshly extrapolating from this position, a certain irony might be found in the fact that a horrified response to National Socialist crimes has taken the form of a legal codification of racial collectivism. At the very least, it is puzzling that suspicions directed at legal references to 'group rights' and 'hate crimes' among those of a libertarian bent has not been extended to the category of genocide.

In the opposite camp, the most fully articulated defense of collectives as real entities is found, as might be expected, in the

foundation of sociology as an academic discipline, and more particularly in Émile Durkheim's argument for 'social facts'. Larry May looks back further, to Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan, or social being, in which human individuals are absorbed as organic parts.

Whilst the distinction of 'society' and 'individual' has colloquial (and political) meaning, those inclined to the analysis of complex systems are more likely to ask which groups or societies are *real individuals*, exhibiting functional or behavioral integrity, as self-reproducing wholes. In pursuing this line of investigation, it is far more relevant to discriminate between types of groups than between groups and individuals, or even wholes and parts. It is especially helpful to distinguish *feature groups* from *unit groups*.

A feature group is determined by logical classification. This might be expressed as a self-identification or sense of 'belonging', an external political or academic categorization, or some combination of these, but the essentials remain the same in each case. Certain features of the individual are isolated and emphasized (such as genitalia, sexual orientation, skin-color, income, or religious belief), and then employed as the leading clue in a process of formal grouping, which conforms theoretically to the mathematics of sets.

A unit group, in contrast, is defined as an assemblage, or functional whole. Its members belong to the group insofar as they work together, even if they are entirely devoid of common identity features. Membership is decided by role, rather than traits, since one

becomes part of such a group through functional involvement, rather than classification of characteristics. Social instances of such groups include primitive tribes (determined by functional unities rather than the categories of modern 'identity politics'), cities, states, and companies. The most obvious instance in socialist theory is the 'soviet' or 'danwei' work unit (whilst social classes are feature groups).

To take a non-anthropomorphic example, consider a skin cell. Its *feature group* is that of skin cells in general, as distinguished from nerve cells, liver cells, muscle cells, or others. Any two skin cells share the same feature group, even if they belong to different organisms, or even species, exist on different continents, and never functionally interact. The natural *unit group* of the same skin cell, in contrast, would be the organism it belongs to. It shares this unit group with all the other cells involved in the reproduction of that organism through time, including those (such as intestinal bacteria) of quite separate genetic lineages. Considered as a unit group member, a skin cell has greater integral connection with the non-biological tools and other 'environmental' elements involved in the life of the organism than it does with other skin cells – even perfect clones – with which it is not functionally entangled.

Clearly, both feature groups and unit groups are 'fuzzy sets', and the distinction itself – whilst theoretically precise – is empirically hazy. An urban American street gang, for instance, will in most cases

be vague in its features and unity, perhaps 'ethnic' to some degree of definition, with a determinable age-range, and with ambiguous functional connections to groupings on a larger scale, or to peripheral members whose status of 'belonging' is not strictly decidable. Tattoos and other membership markings are likely to involve both identity and integrity aspects – traits and roles. Rituals of belonging (ordeals, oaths, rites of passage) are designed to disambiguate membership.

Despite such haziness, the distinction between these two types of groups strikes directly at the core problematic of genocide (as a legal category). When a *unit group* is destroyed, a real individual is 'killed' above and beyond whatever human losses are incurred. The destruction of a *feature group*, in contrast, whatever the cultural loss, is not any kind of *killing* beyond the mass murder of human individuals. If this is worse than murder, we should know why.

This conclusion seems relevant when weighing, for instance, the 1937 Massacre of Nanjing on the scale of historical atrocity. It suggests, at least, that an act of violence directed against a city – or integrated population *unit* — is no less worthy of specific legal attention than a quantitatively equivalent offense against an ethnicity, or determined population *type*. It seems to be no more than an accident of history that, in order to appropriate the category of genocide, massive crimes of the former variety need to be recoded as if they more properly belonged to the latter.

Complex systems ontology aside, these matters resolve ultimately into obscure social values. Orthodox conceptions of 'genocide' assume that ethnic identity simply and unquestionably means more than active citizenship, or participation in the life of a city. Perhaps this assumption is even arguable. But has it been argued?

September 13, 2011

The God Confusion

A world on its knees, and at your throat

"Do The Three Abrahamic Faiths Worship The Same God?" Peter Berger asks, on his blog at the American Interest. His answer, which seems to be programmed at least as much by the sensitivities of interfaith politics as by the exigencies of rigorous theology, is a politely nuanced "yes (but)." If anyone is unconvinced about the urgent pertinence of multicultural diplomacy to the question, Berger settles such doubts quickly by depicting the integrated conception of 'Abrahamic faith' as a response to the 'Clash of Civilizations' climate that arose in the wake of 9/11, "with the altogether admirable intention of countering anti-Islamic hatred."

At its core, his argument is both realistic and relatively

uncontroversial. It is comparable to an informal set theory, or cladistics, briefly surveying family resemblances and dissimilarities between branches of the Abrahamic religious 'tree' and concluding, reasonably enough, that none of the potential groupings are absolutely strict (each faith, even narrowly defined, is differentiated within itself by sub-branches, and twigs), and that the coherence of 'Judeo-Christian' monotheism is considerably stronger than that of 'Abrahamic Faith' in general. Whatever the complexity of these branchings, however, they derive from a readily identifiable trunk. Berger cites a lecture by the Protestant theologian Miroslav Volf:

> *Yes, one can say that Christians and Muslims believe in the "same God". There are enough common affirmations to justify this—most importantly, of course, the belief that there is only one God (what the late Richard Niebuhr, coincidentally another Yale Divinity professor, called "radical monotheism")—but also the belief in a personal creator distinct from the creation, and the giver of a moral code.*

When evaluated from a wide enough angle, it is clear that the God of Jews, Christians, and Muslims is distinctively specified, relative to alternative religious traditions:

> *Sometimes it is a good idea to step back and look at the imputed collectivity from afar. It may help to look at the three*

'Abrahamic' faiths from, say, Benares, one of the most holy cities of Hinduism and near which the Buddha preached his first sermon. Looked at from that far location, the family resemblance between the three versions suddenly appears quite clearly. Hindus and Buddhists sometimes speak of 'West Asian religion' in contrast with their own 'South Asian 'or 'East Asian religion'. It then seems just about inevitable to say that Jews, Christians and Muslims, whatever their differences, do indeed worship the same God.

*To be sure, there are similarities between Benares and Jerusalem as well. There are Hindu versions of theism, with intense devotions to personal deities (*bhakti*), but there is no real analogue to the monotheism that originated in the deserts of the Near East. In Vedanta, arguably the most sophisticated form of Hinduism, the ultimate reality is the* brahman*, the impersonal ocean of divinity in which all individual identities eventually dissolve. There are theistic elements in Mahayana Buddhism, with devotion directed toward godlike* boddhisatvas *— individuals who have attained Enlightenment, but who, out of compassion, delay their entry into the final bliss in order to help others to get there. But that bliss too ends in that impersonal ocean of divinity that seems for many centuries to have dominated the religious imagination of India, from where it migrated eastward.*

Yet, whilst the theological dimension of this question is very far from uninteresting, or inconsequential, it limits the question at least as much as it clarifies it. More than a faith, the 'children of Abraham' share a story, and – still more importantly — a sense of history *as a story*, and this is the factor that most tightly bundles them together, irrespective of all quibbling over narrative details. Abraham is the beginning of a tale, even if it can be projected back (at least a little way) beyond him. He defines the meaning of history, as an interaction with God, through which the passage of collective time acquires structure, direction, unity, radical finitude, moral and religious significance. Abrahamic history has purpose, and a destination. Above all it tells the story of a moral community, whose righteousness and unrighteousness will ultimately be judged. Eschatology is its real key.

Because the Abrahamic tradition is rooted in a distinctive experience of history, it extends beyond theistic faith. Indeed, any comprehension of this tradition that excludes Marxism, fascist millenarianism, and 'liberal' secular progressivism (even that of the 'New Atheists') is woefully incomplete, to the point of diversionary propaganda. Uniquely, the Abrahamic faiths do not merely rise, fall, and persist. They are superceded by new revelations, or afflicted by heresy and schism. Their encounters and (inevitable) conflicts become internalized episodes that immediately demand doctrinal and narrative intelligibility. Hence the affinity between the

Abrahamic faiths and historical (as 'opposed' to pedagogical, cosmic, or naturalistic) dialectics: the 'other', merely by appearing on the stage, must play its role in the world-historical drama of belief.

Strict monotheism is the personification of narrative unity, and in the end it is the narrative unity that matters. Whether history is finally to be appraised from the perspective of the people of Israel, the Church, the Ummah, achieved communism, an Aryan master-race, or secular multicultural globalism, it will have been integrated through the production of a moral community, and judged as a coherent whole by the standard of that community's purity and righteousness. It will have been comprehended by a collective subject whose story — it insists — is the entire meaning of the world.

For the minor paganisms of antiquity, and the major paganisms of the east, this structure of understanding has the objective potential to be offensive to an almost inestimable degree, so the fact that pagans have rarely contested it with an animosity that even remotely approaches its 'internal' conflicts and disputations is intriguing. Whilst cases of anti-semitism, anti-clericalism, islamophobia, anti-communism, anti-fascism, and systematic political incorrectness have, on occasions, been plausibly derived from pagan inspirations, in the overwhelming majority of cases it is the various 'fraternal' branches of the great Abrahamic family that have wrought devastation upon each other. Indeed, persecution, as a particular mode of 'zealous' or 'enthusiastic' violence, seems to be an

Abrahamic specialty, one that depends upon conceptions of 'intolerable' idolatry, heresy, apostasy, false-consciousness, or political incorrectness that are found nowhere else.

God told Abraham to kill his own son, and he was ready to do so (Gen 22:1-19). That is how he earned his status as the ur-patriarch of the tradition, whose children are defined by the ghost of a knife at their throats. Demonstrated willingness to kill in the name of the Lord, or its abstracted equivalent (the meaning of history), is the initiatory ideal, and the beginning of the world story that now encompasses everyone. After this original ritual, Isaac's life was no longer natural, but ideological. It was suspended, vulnerably, from a word owing nothing to the protective bond tying an animal to its progeny (symbolically terminated by Abraham's surrender to divine command), but settled on high, in the narrative structure of the world. If God had willed it — or the story demanded it — he would have been slain. In this way an unnatural line, existing only as an expression of divine purpose, breaks from the archaic pagan order of 'meaningless' procreation and nurture. (The place assigned to the sacrifice, Mount Moriah, would later be the site of Jerusalem, the city of the end of time, and beyond nature.) Isaac was spared, but the pagan world was not similarly reprieved.

The existence of an Abrahamic tradition has an importance that far exceeds its internal politics and internecine rivalries, since it is indistinguishable from the historical unification of the world, and no

'other' is able to remain outside its narrative order. In much of the world, even in its Abrahamic heartlands, to refuse God is no great thing, and perhaps little more than a mildly comical affectation, but to depart from World History is quite another matter. It is then that the knife of Abraham glints again.

December 19, 2011

Wild Cards

Responding to Michael Anissimov's political attitudes quiz, commentator 'Donny' widens the perspective:

... if technology weren't to advance much over the next century, we would be witness to the death of western civilization. Instead, technology will wrench history off its course. Demography is no longer destiny. Embryo screening for intelligence, a robotic labor force, rejuvenation therapies that end death from aging, infinite everything from nanofactories, terrible new weapons wreaking havoc on humanity, and the recursively self-improving artificial intelligence that kills us all. Next to that – or any of the other technologies which could emerge sooner and prove decisive instead – Mexican immigration doesn't amount to a hill of beans. None of our existing institutions or social structures are prepared for what's coming and the century will be a rollercoaster ride on fire.

April 26, 2013

Gibson's Nightmare

At the most superficial level, there's probably some sleeplessness accompanying the anxiety that the whole of *The Peripheral* — once people have processed it — begins to look like a piece of fabulously ornate, maze-patterned wrapping paper for the four pages that really matter. There's the Great Pacific Garbage Patch elsewhere, along with ubiquitous near-future drones, and – further down the time-line — some exotic neo-primitivist adornments — but basically, if you've read Chapter 79, you've got the thing. Yes, that's to miss out on some of the time-travel structure, but Gibson takes such a lazy approach to that (deliberately suppressing all paradox circuitry) it's no great loss.

On the positive side, those four pages are really something. Chapter 79 is helpfully entitled *The Jackpot*, and contains what might well be the most profound reworking of apocalypticism of modern times. There are some (fairly weak) remarks here. Perhaps somebody has already contributed some better commentary, that I've missed.

The Jackpot is a catastrophe with a fruit-machine model — all the reels have to click together 'right' for it to amount to disaster.

It's therefore poly-causal, cross-lashed, or "multiplex" — eluding narrative apprehension through multiplicity.

… it was no one thing. … it was multicausal, with no particular beginning and no end. More a climate than an event, so not the way apocalypse stories liked to have a big event, after which everybody ran around with guns … or else were eaten alive by something caused by the big event. Not like that.

It was androgenic … Not that they'd known what they were doing, had meant to make problems, but they's caused it anyway. And in fact the climate, the weather, caused by there being too much carbon, had been the driver for a lot of other things.How that got worse and never better, and was just expected to, ongoing. Because people in the past, clueless as to how that worked, had fucked it all up, then not been able to get it together to do anything about it, even after they knew, and now it was too late.

It kills 80% of the world's human population in the end.

… Except that's not the end. The end is Neoreaction:

"What about China?"

… "They'd had a head start," [Netherton] said.

"At what?"

"At how the world would work, after the jackpot. This … is still ostensibly a democracy. A majority of empowered survivors, considering the jackpot, and no doubt their own positions, wanted none of that. Blamed it, in fact."

“Who runs it, then?”
“Oligarchs, corporations, neomonarchists. Hereditary monarchies provided conveniently familiar armatures. Essentially feudal, according to its critics. Such as they are.”
“The King of England?”
“The City of London,” he said. “The Guilds of the City. In alliance with people like Lev’s father. Enabled by people like Lowbeer.”
“The whole world’s funny?” She remembered Lowbeer saying that.
“The klept,” he said, misunderstanding her, “isn’t funny at all.”

January 29, 2015

CHAPTER FIVE - COMPILATIONS

Doomcore

There's a biblical blood moon omen hanging over September. Pure Satanism has conquered the culture of the West, to the posthumous laughter of the Mad Marquis. The Chinese economy is scaring people (a lot), and Tianjin just exploded. American "Recession Imminent." Straight Outta Compton. Trump. Oil. Brazil's economy is crashing even harder, and Russia is like a scene out of the Book of Revelation, with NATO and Russia rehearsing for war. (Still awaiting the India crisis news for the full BRIC meltdown). Germany is expecting 700,000 asylum seekers this year. "The international system as we know it is unravelling." Googling 'Middle East' mostly turns up End Time prophecies, for understandable reasons (here's one secular story). Japan: "Be Afraid." "The future of humanity is increasingly African." There's been a bomb blast in Bangkok, earth tremors in California. American race relations are falling off a cliff, probably because whites haven't apologized enough yet, though some are trying. The UK has gone fascist (or something). Bitcoin is (needlessly) forking into the unknown. (Exotic and longer-term threats are a

whole other story.) But the funny thing is …

August 17, 2015

Glide Path

Fernandez takes a clear-eyed look at where things are *actually heading* right now:

Conventional wisdom has had a pretty bad run these last 15 years. For that reason there is little purpose to trusting it further. Instead it might be better to predict a future based on observable trends rather than scenarios that politicians [promote?]. If those trends convey any information one would expect to see in 2025:

1. The self-destruction of the Muslim Middle East;

2. The rise of ethnic and national politics in Europe;

3. The widespread resurgence of religion and cultural identity as a consequence of (2);

4. Mass expulsions or segregation in large parts of the world to deconflict incompatible communities

5. Everyone packing personal weapons like the Wild West

6. The collapse of multi-ethnic countries into simplified pacts based around of national defense, with most social law generated by local communities and affinity groups;

7. One or more large regional wars with casualties in the tens of

millions.
8. Several, possibly many WMD attacks on major cities involving radiological weapons, low yield nukes or biological agents.
8. The collapse of any realistic expectation of Peace on Earth, with the remaining hope of mankind vested in the new space frontier.
Such a world would be rough, dangerous and in many places, miserable. Perhaps it will not even be as good as that; for the list above omits the occurrence of an event equivalent to World War 3, in which case we can describe the future with a single word: ruin. But it is the world we are building, absent any change of course. The oddest circumstance is that politicians still pretend without the slightest basis, that if we stay their perverse course we'll go right through the ruin and out the other side and find the dream we glimpsed as we crossed into the 21st century. […] It's a condition they call Hope, though there's another phrase for it: whistling past the graveyard.

October 15, 2015

SMOD



Some suggestive figures and commentary. (More here.) Googling "trump + chaos" — 52,300,000 results (beginning 1, 2, 3, 4 …). Trump has 5,000,000 Twitter followers. The dike has broken. Now it cascades …

From the commies at *Rolling Stone* (three months ago):

During a Q&A with fans before a Cincinnati concert earlier this month, [pop music person] Billy Corgan was asked what he thought about the first Republican debate, at which point the rocker lauded the mogul's ability to take the political spectrum and "fuck it up." "I think what's cool, and I'm not saying I agree politically, but I think what's cool is Trump's running chaos theory," Corgan said (via Alternative Nation). […] "He's forcing a lot of things out into the open, so they can't control this, whatever that control is …"



As another commie hack points out calmly: “Trump may well be something unprecedentedly terrible.”

The rise of the destructor has been congesting all my information

channels this week. Tomorrow's Trumpenführer panic update goes parabolic.

ADDED: Trump and the Left Acceleration vote — "I'm hoping Donald Trump wins this year's election. For the reason that it will fuck up that country so much faster then if a less bad President wins."

December 12, 2015

CHAPTER SIX - POLITICAL INSANITY

The Rights Stuff

Apologies for the minimalism, even by my recent standards, but I simply have to pass this on.

(I'll throw these two links in for added depth.)

March 7, 2015

Trash Space

There's so much wrong with this it's hard to know where to start:

Baltimore is burning as I write, the streets are filled with rioters and police. They don't seem to be "clashing" much, however. Photographs show looters looting, and cops standing around. The black lady mayor of Baltimore, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake … made a statement that, in the interests of the demonstrators' "free speech" rights, she had told the Baltimore PD to "give those who wished to destroy space to do that."



Nothing says ‘free speech’ like torching a city to the ground. (Shouting “fire” in a crowded cinema might be irresponsible, but burning the cinema to the ground is political art.)

In Defense of Looting (seriously), from August last year.

David Simon politely asks everyone to “please stop”. Good luck with that.

Western civilization is so over.

ADDED:

> "Whenever I hear the word 'democracy' I know a bloodbath is coming." —Prince Klemens von Metternich #BaltimoreRiots

pic.twitter.com/mPNYMihqWb

— SMR×乃木栄⊿ (@NogiRx) April 28, 2015

ADDED: (Passed along without comment)

> The riot-shaming is getting old. Burning things down has always had a place historically. I wish ppl on would quit pretending otherwise.
>
> — Rania Khalek (@RaniaKhalek) April 28, 2015

ADDED: “Baltimore’s violent protestors are right …” … “As a nation, we fail to comprehend Black political strategy in much the same way we fail to recognize the value of Black life. …”

April 28, 2015

Meanwhile, in Paris

How could any society not want this type of enrichment to happen in its urban centers?



Uber-Chaos, apparently. [Or not.]

ADDED: Given the likelihood of time-pwnage here, 'meanwhile' should probably be read as 'sometime in the 21st century'. It says Sept. 1 on the Youtube video, but that probably means less than I'd assumed. See (brief) comment by 'Ano nymous' in the thread below.

ADDED (from *The New Yorker*): To add a little *gravitas*.

September 2, 2015

Report from a Madhouse

When you throw your last scraps of civilized incentive-architecture in a dumpster and set it on fire it looks like this:

Cities across the country, beginning with the District of Columbia, are moving to copy Richmond's controversial approach because early indications show it has helped reduce homicide rates. […] But the program requires governments to reject some basic tenets of law enforcement even as it challenges notions of appropriate ways to spend tax dollars. […] … when the elaborate efforts at engagement fail, the mentors still pay those who pledge to improve, even when, like [violent criminal Lonnie] Holmes, they are caught with a gun, or worse — suspected of murder. […] … To maintain the trust of the young men they're guiding, mentors do not inform police of what they know about crimes committed. At least twice, that may have allowed suspected killers in the stipend program to evade responsibility for homicides. […] And yet, interest in the program is surging among urban politicians. Officials in Miami, Toledo, Baltimore and more than a dozen cities in between are studying how to replicate Richmond's program. […] … five years into Richmond's multimillion-dollar experiment, 84 of 88 young men who have participated in the program remain alive, and 4 in 5 have not been suspected of another gun crime or suffered a bullet wound … […] Richmond's decision to pay people to stay out of trouble began a

decade ago during a period of despair. […] In 2007, Richmond's homicide tally had surged to 47, making it the country's sixth-deadliest city per capita. In the 20 years prior to that, Richmond lost 740 people to gun violence, and more than 5,000 had been injured by a bullet. […] Elected leaders of the heavily African American city of about 100,000 began treating homicides as a public health emergency. … [DeVone Boggan] who had lost a brother in a shooting in Michigan … had to raise the money because he couldn't persuade officials ***to give tax dollars directly to violent firearms offenders****. […] Boggan and his streetwise crew of ex-cons selected an initial group of 21 gang members and suspected criminals for the program. One night in 2010, he persuaded them to come to city hall, where he invited them to work with mentors and plan a future without guns. As they left, Boggan surprised each one with $1,000 — no strings attached. […] "This is controversial, I get it," Boggan said. "But what's really happening is that they are getting rewarded for doing really hard work, and it's definite hard work when you talk about stopping picking up a gun to solve your problems." […] So far, the attention — and money — seems to be working for Holmes. Although the $1,500 he has received since getting out of prison last fall has not led to a miraculous transformation, it enabled him to make a down payment on his black 2015 Nissan Versa — something meaningful for a young man who for many years was homeless. […] He now spends hours each day in the car, driving around with friends, often smoking pot*

but not "hunting" — Vaughn's term for seeking conflict with rivals. […] "The money is a big part," Holmes says. "I can't count the number of times it has kept me from . . . doing what I've got to do. It stopped me from going to hit that liquor [store] or this, you feel me, it's a relief to not have to go do this and endanger my life for a little income, you feel me?" …

That's as much as I can take. The phrase subject to XS emphasis describes the core principle of the scheme. Maybe it should count as a relief that these gangstas aren't being directly rewarded for whacking shop-keepers.

There's a term for this kind of scheme: Dane Geld. It's not something civilizations with a future tend to engage in.

ADDED: Highly relevant. "… there are entire classes of people who can get more from the world by being unstable and dangerous …"

March 29, 2016

Twitter cuts (#60)

Who thinks the world is getting better?
6% of Americans
4% of Brits

> 3% of French#sheesh pic.twitter.com/sevRFoUu9c
> — ian bremmer (@ianbremmer) April 15, 2016

Assuming that the Mandate of Heaven is always the *real* principle of regime legitimation, this looks like an interesting *status quo* problem. If the present world order is working, it's doing a conspicuously poor job of advertising the fact — especially to Western populations.

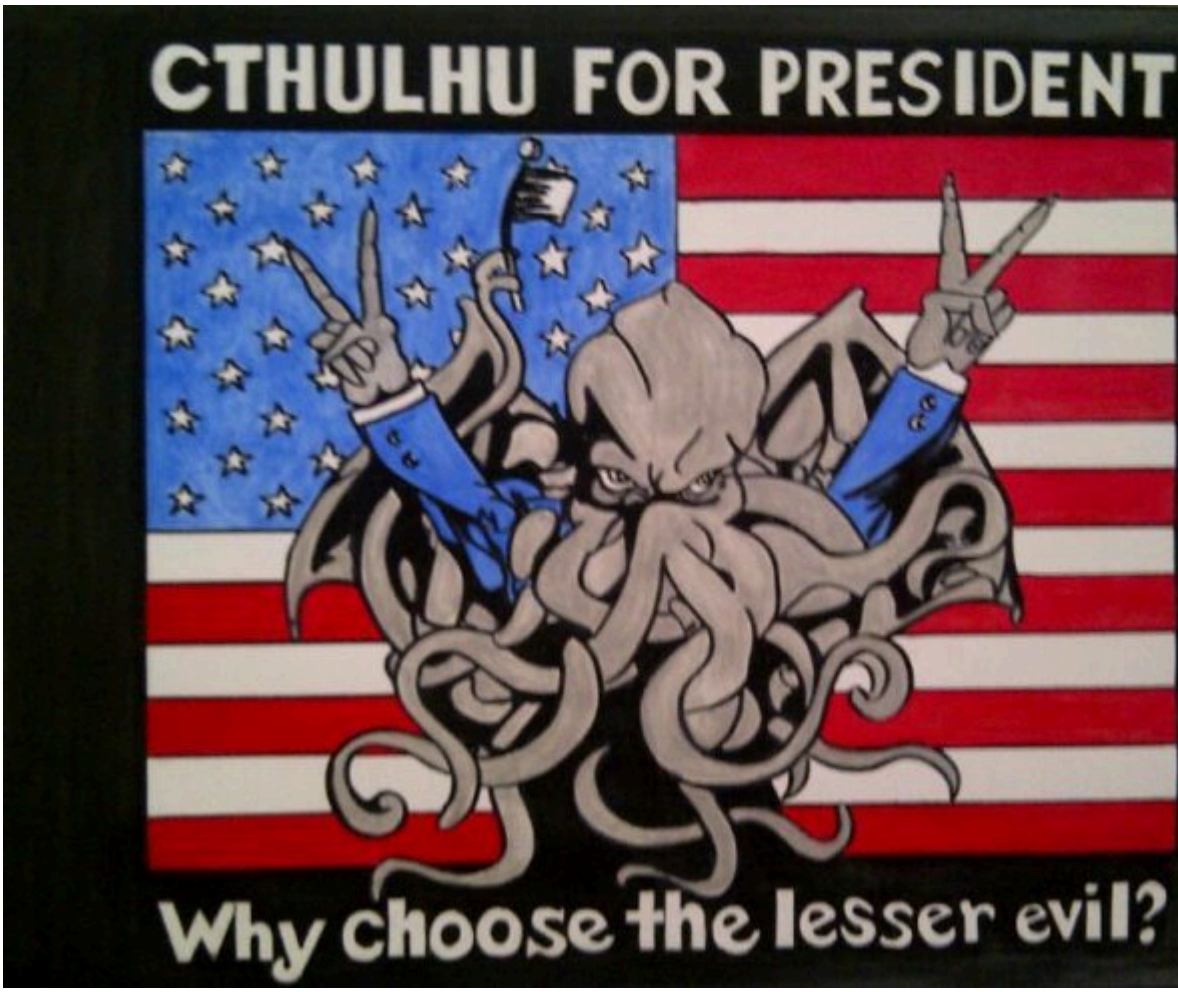
April 16, 2016

It's come to this

Yudkowsky's case against Trump:

Scope is real. If you ever have to choose between voting a convicted serial abuser of children into the Presidential office — but this person otherwise seems stable and collected — versus a Presidential candidate who seems easy to provoke and who has 'bad days' and doesn't listen to advisors and once said "Why do we have all these nukes if we can't use them?", it is deadly important that you vote for the pedophile. It isn't physically possible to abuse enough children per day over 4 years to do as much damage as you can do with one wrong move in the National Security Decision-Making Game.

It seems the stars are right:



October 12, 2016

Current Mood



ADDED: Here's the same picture taken from another angle

Picture of the Day. pic.twitter.com/979KCN0TCX

— Stefan Molyneux (@StefanMolyneux) November 13, 2016

November 13, 2016

CHAPTER SEVEN - ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

Progress

Two centuries of US monetary stewardship charted @ ZH:



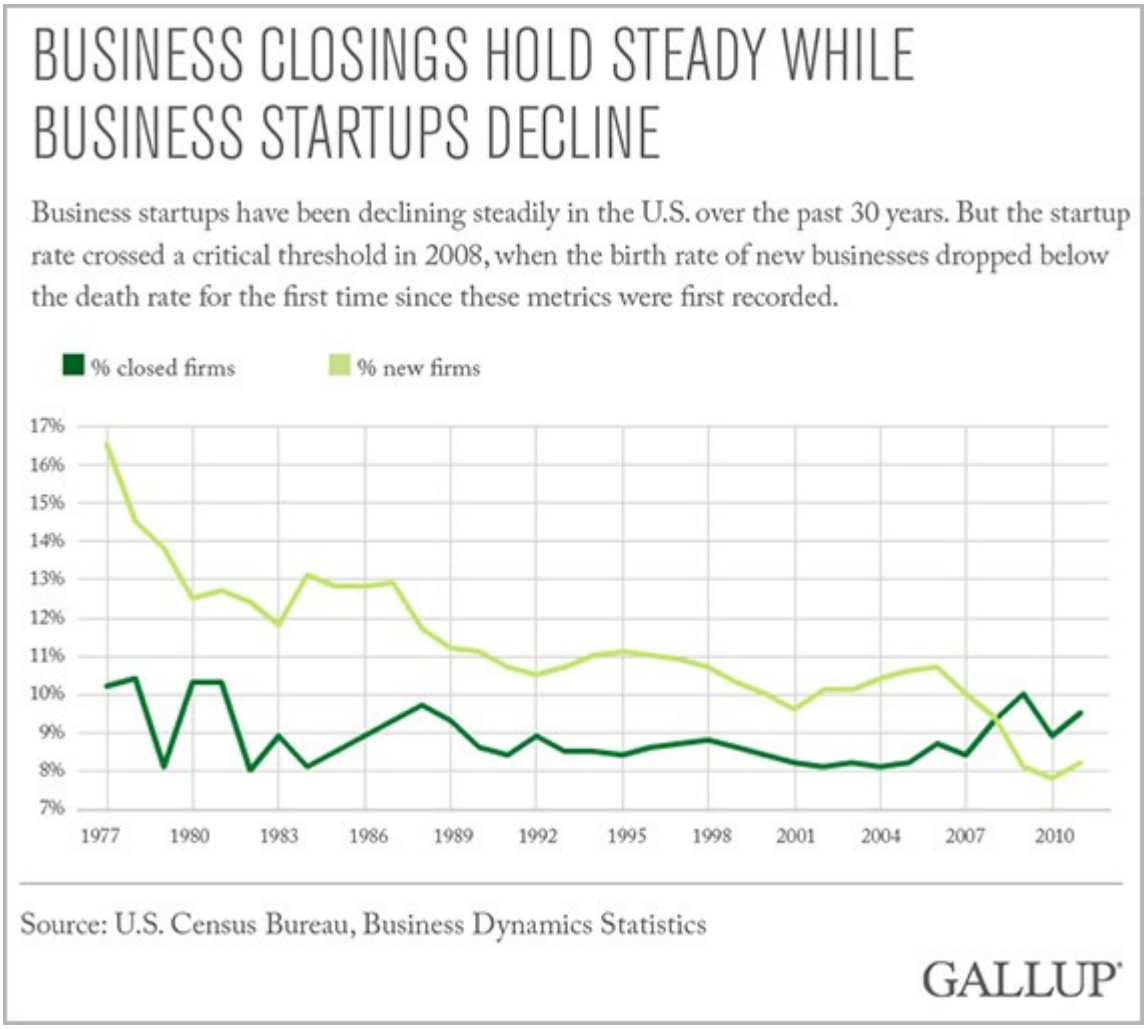
Click image to enlarge.

Red line is the CPI.

Blue line is the USD / Swiss Franc exchange rate.

December 13, 2013

Progress (II)



When socialism puts a ratchet into your churn, this is what happens.

(Via.)

The first XS 'Progress' post was also a chart — and it dove-tails

with this one uncannily.

January 15, 2015

Downton on down

Martin Hutchinson argues that — even after factoring in the crushing losses of WWI — the 'Downton era' did things better:

In certain respects — behavioral and otherwise — the "Downton Abbey economy" of 1920 was greatly preferable to the one we are experiencing today. […] A move to a "Downton Abbey economy" should not imply a sharp increase in inequality, rather the opposite. It is interesting to note that almost 100 years of progressive bloat of the public sector in both Britain and the U.S. — supposedly undertaken to reduce economic inequality — have in reality tended to increase it. […] Public spending (including local government) was around 25% of GDP in Britain in 1920 and about 15% of GDP in the U.S., compared to 40% plus in both countries today. It must be questioned what benefits the public has gained, either in greater equality or better services, from the massive rise in public spending since the Downton Abbey period, which itself was inflated from pre-World War I days.

[…]

Apart from smaller government and less inequality, the Downton

Abbey economy had a number of other advantages over today's … First, total factor productivity growth was much greater. The decade saw the most rapid adoption of the advances in power and transportation that had grown up from the 1880s. The result was U.S. TFP growth of around 2% annually, about double the recent rate. This generated an explosion in living standards during the decade.

Second, the "Downton Abbey economy" had much lower asset prices because of higher interest rates and much easier construction procedures. Shares paid higher dividends and were much lower valued in terms of assets and earnings, while leverage ratios were infinitely more conservative. The world was used to a gold standard, in which leverage could kill you in a downturn, and was much more careful about incurring it. Real estate was valued at its rebuilding cost, and rebuilding costs were much lower than today because there were no planning approvals and no environmental-impact statements. I have written several times about the extraordinary inflation of infrastructure costs, from the 1920-27 Holland Tunnel's $48 million, equivalent to $700 million in today's prices to the outrageous projected $9 billion of the recently cancelled Trans-Hudson Tunnel (functionally an identical project). In "Downton Abbey's" world, real estate costs were modest and new infrastructure projects were built on time, at a fraction of today's real cost.

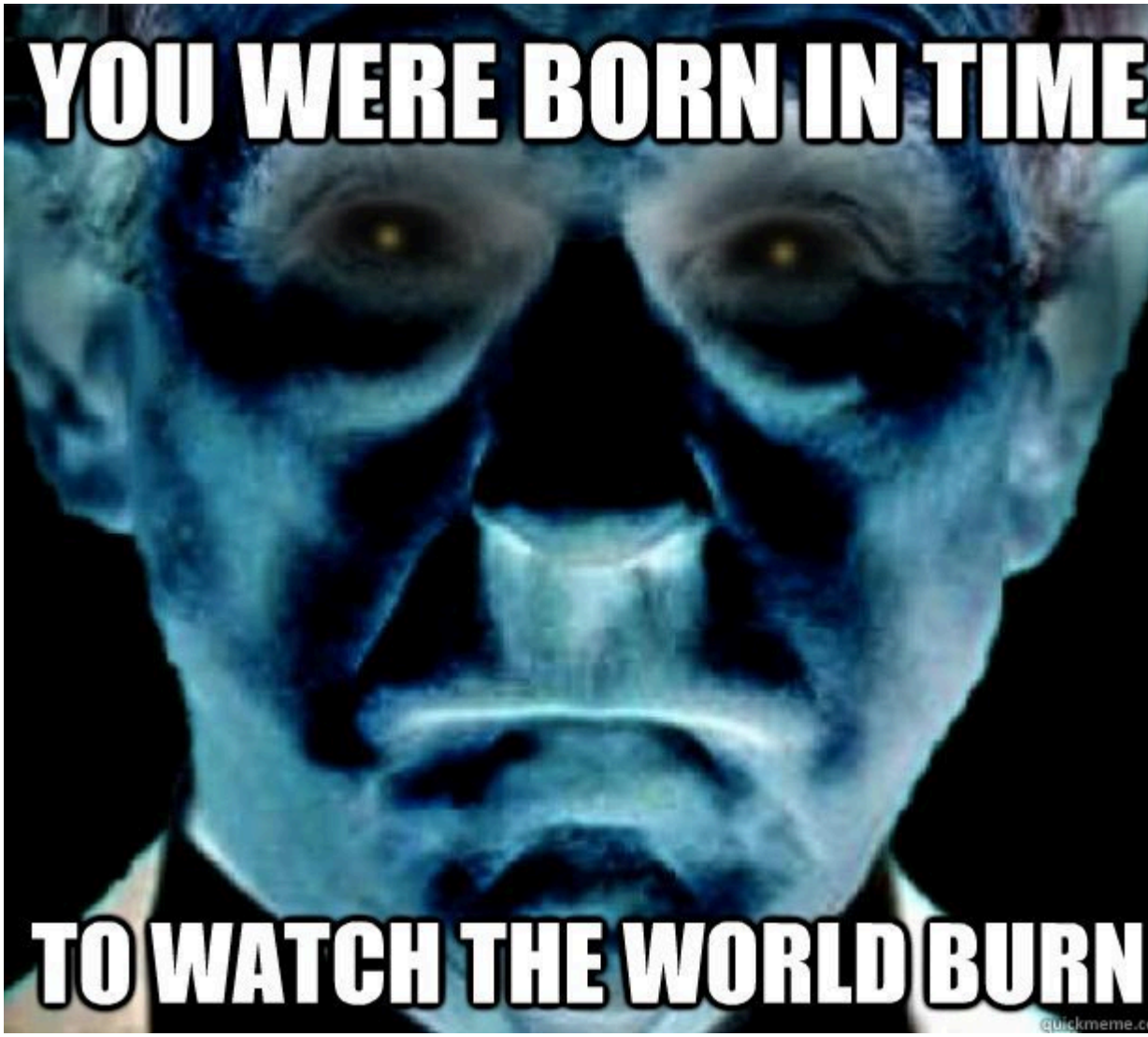
Third, the "Downton Abbey" world had positive real interest rates

and no inflation psychology. People could be assured that their efforts in saving would not be destroyed by inflation or by being dumped into an overvalued bubble stock market. While World War I had brought a doubling in prices in Britain and the United States, everyone expected that this process would be largely reversed, probably by a British return to the gold standard. Indeed, until World War II, those expectations were realized. For people planning their lives, it was a much easier era. In peacetime, money was a solid store of value, not something that had to be monitored constantly for inflationary erosion.

Finally, both the economic system and the financial system were carried on with high standards of integrity, more so in Britain than in the U.S., but higher in both countries than today. Banks, corporations and managers relied heavily on their reputation, and those doing business with them made careful enquiries about that reputation. There were few fallible government regulations, no bailouts and little leverage. A notable feature of the Bernard Madoff Ponzi scheme of 2008 was that it was able to attract about 500 times as much money in real terms as the $3 million collected in 1920 by the Charles Ponzi and carry on for about 40 times as long as Ponzi's eight months. The ability of Madoff to grow so big and last so long is testimony to the futility of modern regulation and to the sad decline of ethical standards in today's blue-chip houses.

February 27, 2014

Doom Paul



Blame Bloom for luring me into this blasted landscape. (I agree with JAB that there's something important going on here.)

A Doom Paul video selection (1, 2, 3).

Here's a Paul vs. Krugman cage-match.



ADDED: Dialled up to eleven.

ADDED: The End is Close …

October 10, 2014

Pedal to the Metal

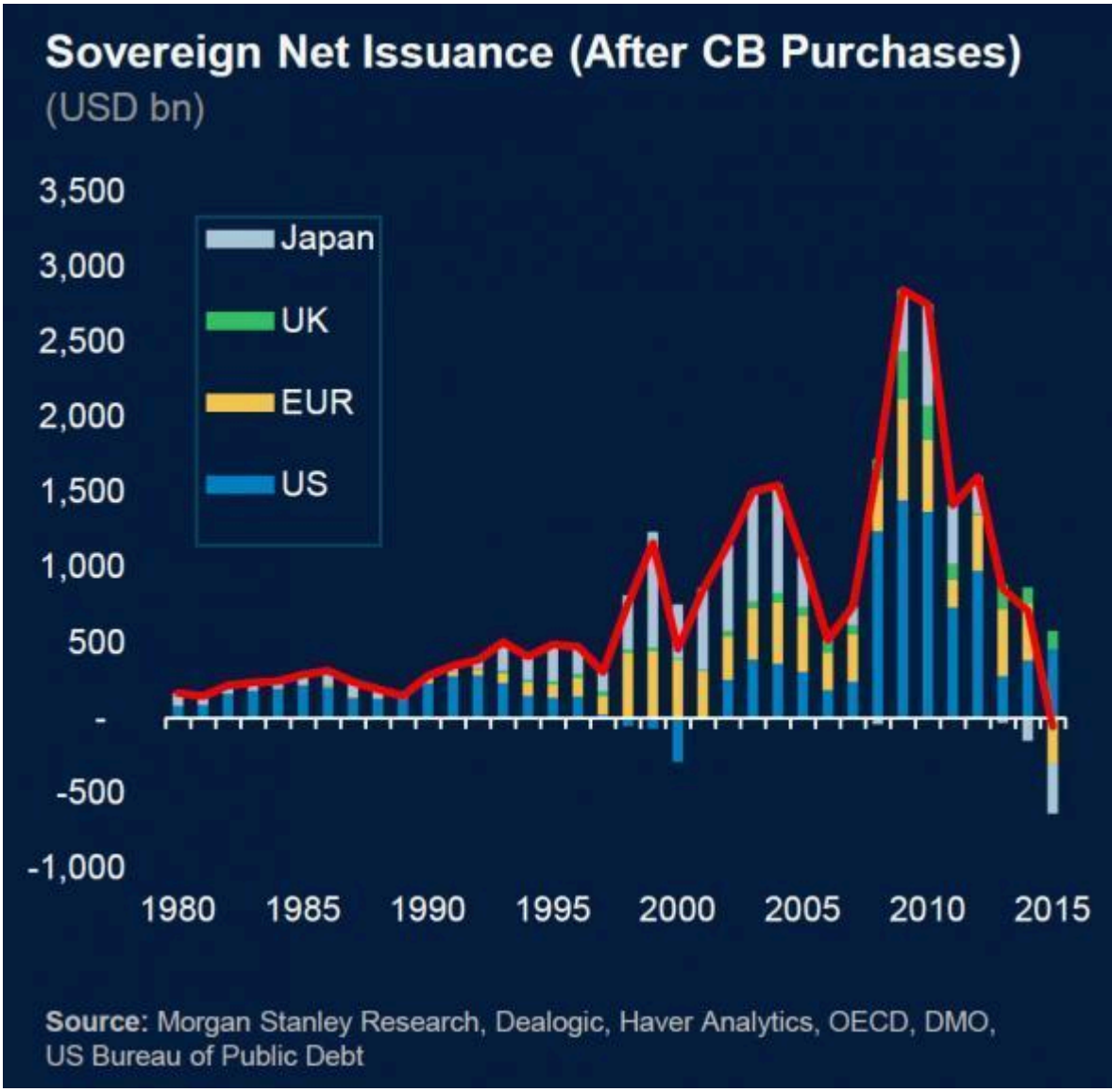
Japan accelerates into Keynesian fiscal singularity. This one is for our honored commenter 'Kgaard', who is sure to have some problems with it. (From David Stockman, this blog's candidate for the most *based* economic analyst on the planet.)

> Let's not mess around:
> *Prime Minister Abe is proving himself to be a certifiable madman.*
> It could all be over a lot sooner than I'd expected.

November 20, 2014

Suspended Reality

This chart (via) marks the point where economics switches into ontology (and not in a good way). Global government debt issuance — undiminished in its absolute scale — has *for the first time* ever been entirely swallowed by money production. Postmodernism has unambiguously triumphed, at least temporarily. It's a thing of wonder, and not a bad exemplification of objective evil (as Gnon acts upon it). Reality, for the moment, is benched. (This does not end well — but we know that, right?)



SoBL has a highly relevant forecast post addressing this syndrome, which has been a long time coming, and no doubt has at least a little further to go.

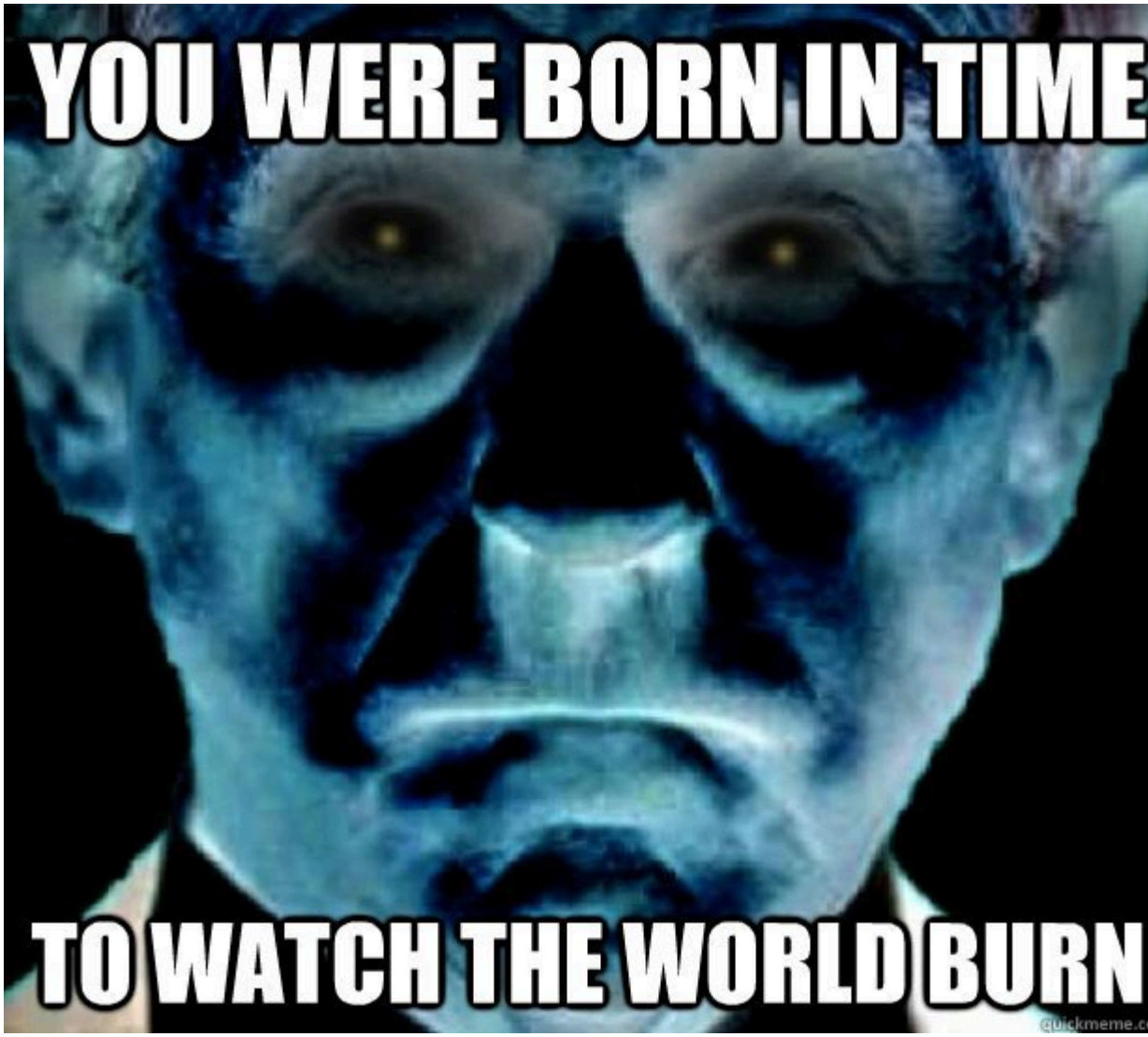
February 10, 2015

Extreme Games

Greece's Varoufakis doubles down on the Bart strategy.

May 18, 2015

Soon



What would a full stocks correction look like?

A true understanding of stock market history shows that Wall

Street in the past has moved in long, long swings upwards and downwards, often taking years or even a generation or two. There is a great deal of evidence suggesting that the upward move that began in 1982 is one of them — and that the downward move that first began in 2000 has not ended.

As stock market historian Russell Napier points out in his book "Anatomy of the Bear," on five occasions in the past 100 years — in 1921, 1932, 1949, 1974 and 1982 — those big downward moves have not ended until share valuations have fallen to just 30% of the replacement cost of company assets. That's using a powerful, if little-known, economic metric known as Tobin's q. […] And, to cut to the chase, if Wall Street stocks followed the same path today that would take the Dow down to about 5,000, and the S&P 500 Index all the way down to around 600. (The S&P 500 slumped more than 3% to 1,971 on Friday.) […] Yikes.

The "q" is a valuation that they don't even mention in the training manuals for the official "financial planner" and financial-analyst exams. Your money manager has probably never heard of it. Or, if he has, he probably ranks it with astrology and the mystic rantings of Nostradamus. […] But the "q" happens to have by far the most successful long-term track record of any stock market indicator. …

August 22, 2015

Meanwhile, in Venezuela …

A mineral-rich socialist diet:

The governor of the Venezuelan state of Bolívar has some advice for dealing with the widespread shortage of food across the country. Can't find eggs at your local Venezuelan grocery store? Why not try fried rocks instead? […] Governor Francisco Rangel said during his radio show on Tuesday, September 29, that the Venezuelan people should not "yield to temptation" or worry about not being able to find a pack of flour or sardines to buy amid the shortages. […] "Let them take away whatever they want. We are capable of eating a stick, or instead of frying two eggs, fry two rocks, and we will eat fried rocks, " he said, "but no one can beat us." […] Rangel referred to the so-called economic war and the "induced inflation" that he and other ruling-party leaders claim is being caused by the opposition. "Now that prices are sky high, we need to fight against this together. Let them not feel like they have beaten us," he said.

A functional world order should always have a few socialist regimes hanging on, to do the teaching job the education system can't.

October 12, 2015

SECTION B - ACCELERATION

A Quick-and-Dirty Introduction to Accelerationism

Anyone trying to work out what they think about accelerationism better do so quickly. That's the nature of the thing. It was already caught up with trends that seemed too fast to track when it began to become self-aware, decades ago. It has picked up a lot of speed since then.

Accelerationism is old enough to have arrived in waves, which is to say insistently, or recurrently, and each time the challenge is more urgent. Among its predictions is the expectation that you'll be too slow to deal with it coherently. Yet if you fumble the question it poses – because rushed – you lose, perhaps very badly. It's hard. (For our purposes here "you" are standing in as a bearer of "the opinions of mankind".)

Time-pressure, by its very nature, is difficult to think about. Typically, while the opportunity for deliberation is not necessarily presumed, it is at least – with overwhelming likelihood – mistaken for an historical constant, rather than a variable. If there was ever

time to think, we think, there still is and will always be. The definite probability that the allotment of time to decision-making is undergoing systematic compression remains a neglected consideration, even among those paying explicit and exceptional attention to the increasing rapidity of change.

In philosophical terms, the deep problem of acceleration is *transcendental*. It describes an absolute horizon – and one that is closing in. Thinking takes time, and accelerationism suggests we're running out of time to think that through, if we haven't already. No contemporary dilemma is being entertained realistically until it is also acknowledged that the opportunity for doing so is fast collapsing.

The suspicion has to arrive that if a public conversation about acceleration is beginning, it's just in time to be too late. The profound institutional crisis that makes the topic 'hot' has at its core an implosion of social decision-making capability. Doing anything, at this point, would take too long. So instead, events increasingly just happen. They seem ever more out of control, even to a traumatic extent. Because the basic phenomenon appears to be a brake failure, accelerationism is picked up again.

Accelerationism links the implosion of decision-space to the explosion of the world – that is, to modernity. It is important therefore to note that the conceptual opposition between implosion and explosion does nothing to impede their real (mechanical)

coupling. Thermonuclear weapons provide the most vividly illuminating examples. An H-bomb employs an A-bomb as a trigger. A fission reaction sparks a fusion reaction. The fusion mass is crushed into ignition by a blast process. (Modernity is a blast.)

This is already to be talking about cybernetics, which also returns insistently, in waves. It amplifies to howl, and then dissipates into the senseless babble of fashion, until the next blast-wave hits.

For accelerationism the crucial lesson was this: A negative feedback circuit – such as a steam-engine 'governor' or a thermostat – functions to keep some state of a system in the same place. Its product, in the language formulated by French philosophical cyberneticists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is *territorialization*. Negative feedback stabilizes a process, by correcting drift, and thus inhibiting departure beyond a limited range. Dynamics are placed in the service of fixity – a higher-level stasis, or state. All equilibrium models of complex systems and processes are like this. To capture the contrary trend, characterized by self-reinforcing errancy, flight, or escape, D&G coin the inelegant but influential term *deterritorialization*. Deterritorialization is the only thing accelerationism has ever really talked about.

In socio-historical terms, the line of deterritorialization corresponds to *uncompensated capitalism*. The basic – and, of course, to some real highly consequential degree *actually installed* – schema is a positive feedback circuit, within which

commercialization and industrialization mutually excite each other in a runaway process, from which modernity draws its gradient. Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche were among those to capture important aspects of the trend. As the circuit is incrementally closed, or intensified, it exhibits ever greater autonomy, or automation. It becomes more tightly *auto-productive* (which is only what 'positive feedback' already says). Because it appeals to nothing beyond itself, it is inherently nihilistic. It has no conceivable meaning beside self-amplification. It grows in order to grow. Mankind is its temporary host, not its master. Its only purpose is itself.

"Accelerate the process," recommended Deleuze & Guattari in their 1972 *Anti-Oedipus*, citing Nietzsche to re-activate Marx. Although it would take another four decades before "accelerationism" was named as such, critically, by Benjamin Noys, it was already there, in its entirety. The relevant passage is worth repeating in full (as it would be, repeatedly, in all subsequent accelerationist discussion):

> … which is the revolutionary path? Is there one?—To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist "economic solution"? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the

> flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to "accelerate the process," as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet.

The point of an analysis of capitalism, or of nihilism, is to do more of it. *The process* is not to be critiqued. The process *is* the critique, feeding back into itself, as it escalates. The only way forward is through, which means further in.

Marx has his own 'accelerationist fragment' which anticipates the passage from *Anti-Oedipus* remarkably. He says in an 1848 speech 'On the Question of Free Trade':

> …in general, the protective system of our day is conservative, while the free trade system is destructive. It breaks up old nationalities and pushes the antagonism of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to the extreme point. In a word, the free trade system hastens the social revolution. It is in this revolutionary sense alone, gentlemen, that I vote in favor of free trade.

In this germinal accelerationist matrix, there is no distinction to be made between the destruction of capitalism and its intensification.

The auto-destruction of capitalism is what capitalism is. "Creative destruction" is the whole of it, beside only its retardations, partial compensations, or inhibitions. Capital revolutionizes itself more thoroughly than any extrinsic 'revolution' possibly could. If subsequent history has not vindicated this point beyond all question, it has at least simulated such a vindication, to a maddening degree.

In 2013, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams sought to resolve this intolerable – even 'schizophrenic' – ambivalence in their 'Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics,' which aimed to precipitate a specifically anti-capitalist 'Left-accelerationism', clearly demarcated over against its abominably pro-capitalist 'Right-accelerationist' shadow. This project – predictably – was more successful at re-animating the accelerationist question than at ideologically purifying it in any sustainable way. It was only by introducing a wholly artificial distinction between capitalism and modernistic technological acceleration that their boundary lines could be drawn at all. The implicit call was for a new Leninism without the NEP (and with the Utopian techno-managerial experiments of Chilean communism drawn upon for illustration).

Capital, in its ultimate self-definition, is *nothing beside* the abstract accelerative social factor. Its positive cybernetic schema exhausts it. Runaway consumes its identity. Every other determination is shucked-off as an accident, at some stage of its intensification process. Since anything able to consistently feed

socio-historical acceleration will necessarily, or by essence, *be capital*, the prospect of any unambiguously 'Left-accelerationism' gaining serious momentum can be confidently dismissed. Accelerationism is simply the self-awareness of capitalism, which has scarcely begun. ("We haven't seen anything yet.")

At the time of writing, Left-accelerationism appears to have deconstructed itself back into traditional socialist politics, and the accelerationist torch has passed to a new generation of brilliant young thinkers advancing an 'Unconditional Accelerationism' (neither R/Acc., or L/Acc., but U/Acc.). Their online identities – if not in any easily extricable way their ideas – can be searched-out through the peculiar social-media hash-tag #Rhetttwitter.

As blockchains, drone logistics, nanotechnology, quantum computing, computational genomics, and virtual reality flood in, drenched in ever-higher densities of artificial intelligence, accelerationism won't be going anywhere, unless ever deeper into itself. To be rushed by the phenomenon, to the point of terminal institutional paralysis, *is* the phenomenon. Naturally – which is to say completely inevitably – the human species will define this ultimate terrestrial event as a problem. To see it is already to say: *We have to do something*. To which accelerationism can only respond: *You're finally saying that now? Perhaps we ought to get started?* In its colder variants, which are those that win out, it tends to laugh.

***

Note:

Urbanomic's *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, remains by far the most comprehensive introduction to accelerationism. The book was published in 2014, however, and a lot has happened since then.

The Wikipedia entry on 'Accelerationism' is short, but of exceptionally high quality.

For the Srnicek and Williams 'Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics' see this.

May 25, 2017

CHAPTER ONE - EXPONENTIALS

Moore and More

Doubling down on Moore's Law is the futurist main current

Cycles cannot be dismissed from futuristic speculation (they always come back), but they no longer define it. Since the beginning of the electronic era, their contribution to the shape of the future has been progressively marginalized.

The model of linear and irreversible historical time, originally inherited from Occidental religious traditions, was spliced together with ideas of continuous growth and improvement during the industrial revolution. During the second half of the 20th century, the dynamics of electronics manufacture consolidated a further – and fundamental – upgrade, based upon the expectation of continuously accelerating change.

The elementary arithmetic of counting along the natural number line provides an intuitively comfortable model for the progression of time, due to its conformity with clocks, calendars, and the simple idea of succession. Yet the dominant historical forces of the modern

world promote a significantly different model of change, one that tends to shift addition upwards, into an exponent. Demographics, capital accumulation, and technological performance indices do not increase through unitary steps, but through rates of return, doublings, and take-offs. Time explodes, exponentially.

The iconic expression of this neo-modern time, counting succession in binary logarithms, is Moore's Law, which determines a two-year doubling period for the density of transistors on microchips ("cramming more components onto integrated circuits"). In a short essay published in Pajamas Media, celebrating the prolongation of Moore's Law as Intel pushes chip architecture into the third-dimension, Michael S. Malone writes:

> "Today, almost a half-century after it was first elucidated by legendary Fairchild and Intel co-founder Dr. Gordon Moore in an article for a trade magazine, it is increasingly apparent that Moore's Law is the defining measure of the modern world. All other predictive tool for understanding life in the developed world since WWII — demographics, productivity tables, literacy rates, econometrics, the cycles of history, Marxist analysis, and on and on — have failed to predict the trajectory of society over the decades … except Moore's Law."

Whilst crystallizing – *in silico* — the inherent acceleration of neo-

modern, linear time, Moore's Law is intrinsically nonlinear, for at least two reasons. Firstly, and most straightforwardly, it expresses the positive feedback dynamics of technological industrialism, in which rapidly-advancing electronic machines continuously revolutionize their own manufacturing infrastructure. Better chips make better robots make better chips, in a spiraling acceleration. Secondly, Moore's Law is at once an observation, and a program. As Wikipedia notes:

> "[Moore's original] paper noted that the number of components in integrated circuits had doubled every year from the invention of the integrated circuit in 1958 until 1965 and predicted that the trend would continue 'for at least ten years'. His prediction has proved to be uncannily accurate, in part because the law is now used in the semiconductor industry to guide long-term planning and to set targets for research and development. … Although Moore's law was initially made in the form of an observation and forecast, the more widely it became accepted, the more it served as a goal for an entire industry. This drove both marketing and engineering departments of semiconductor manufacturers to focus enormous energy aiming for the specified increase in processing power that it was presumed one or more of their competitors would soon actually attain.

> In this regard, it can be viewed as a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Malone comments:

> "… semiconductor companies around the world, big and small, and not least because of their respect for Gordon Moore, set out to uphold the Law — and they have done so ever since, despite seemingly impossible technical and scientific obstacles. Gordon Moore not only discovered Moore's Law, he made it real. As his successor at Intel, Paul Otellini, once told me, 'I'm not going to be the guy whose legacy is that Moore's Law died on his watch.'"

If Technological Singularity is the 'rapture of the nerds', Gordon Moore is their Moses. Electro-industrial capitalism is told to go forth and multiply, and to do so with a quite precisely time-specified binary exponent. In its adherence to the Law, the integrated circuit industry is uniquely chosen (and a light unto the peoples). As Malone concludes:

> "Today, every segment of society either embraces Moore's Law or is racing to get there. That's because they know that if only they can get aboard that rocket — that is, if they can add a digital component to their business — they too can accelerate away from the competition. That's why none of

> the inventions we Baby Boomers as kids expected to enjoy as adults — atomic cars! personal helicopters! ray guns! — have come true; and also why we have even more powerful tools and toys ��instead. Whatever can be made digital, if not in the whole, but in part — marketing, communications, entertainment, genetic engineering, robotics, warfare, manufacturing, service, finance, sports — it will, because going digital means jumping onto Moore's Law. Miss that train and, as a business, an institution, or a cultural phenomenon, you die."

May 11, 2011

Twisted into Being

When an observation becomes a road-map — and thus a "self-fulfilling prophecy" — exponential nonlinearity writes itself into reality. Is Moore's Law the clearest example of ontological auto-production that we have?

Notably: Moore's Law feature miniaturization heads inexorably towards the atomic scale (by ~2020) and thus the threshold of quantum computation, which raises the exponentiation to a higher power. A single 300 qubit machine would realize a greater

computational power than that currently instantiated in the entire global stock of electronic devices (since every qubit is a binary exponent).

The disruption of cryptography will be messy.

March 9, 2015

Foundations of Acceleration

For the intellectual-historical foundations of Accelerationism there's one obvious place to go.

A search for its conceptual foundations, however, allows of short cuts. This is one of them (and an extraordinarily valuable one).

Yudkowsky does not write of 'acceleration' but of "returns on cognitive reinvestment" as the basic problem of "intelligence explosion microeconomics". The topic is quite clearly *identical*.

The explosion of ethico-political anguish around the Accelerationist thesis tends to obscure the fundamental conceptual issues. This paper is a crucial corrective.

January 27, 2015

“2035. Probably earlier.”

There’s fast, and then there’s … something more

Eliezer Yudkowski now categorizes his article ‘Staring into Singularity‘ as ‘obsolete’. Yet it remains among the most brilliant philosophical essays ever written. Rarely, if ever, has so much of value been said about the absolutely unthinkable (or, more specifically, the absolutely unthinkable *for us*).

For instance, Yudkowsky scarcely pauses at the phenomenon of exponential growth, despite the fact that this already overtaxes all comfortable intuition and ensures revolutionary changes of such magnitude that speculation falters. He is adamant that exponentiation (even Kurzweil‘s ‘double exponentiation’) only reaches the starting point of computational acceleration, and that propulsion into Singularity is not exponential, but hyperbolic.

Each time the speed of thought doubles, time-schedules halve. When technology, including the design of intelligences, succumbs to such dynamics, it becomes recursive. The rate of self-improvement collapses with smoothly increasing rapidity towards instantaneity: a true, mathematically exact, or punctual Singularity. What lies beyond is not merely difficult to imagine, it is absolutely inconceivable. Attempting to picture or describe it is a ridiculous futility. Science fiction dies.

> "A group of human-equivalent computers spends 2 years to double computer speeds. Then they spend another 2 subjective years, or 1 year in human terms, to double it again. Then they spend another 2 subjective years, or six months, to double it again. After four years total, the computing power goes to infinity.
>
> "That is the 'Transcended' version of the doubling sequence. Let's call the 'Transcend' of a sequence {a0, a1, a2…} the function where the interval between a*n* and a*n*+1 is inversely proportional to a*n*. So a Transcended doubling function starts with 1, in which case it takes 1 time-unit to go to 2. Then it takes 1/2 time-units to go to 4. Then it takes 1/4 time-units to go to 8. This function, if it were continuous, would be the hyperbolic function y = 2/(2 – x). When x = 2, then (2 – x) = 0 and y = infinity. The behavior at that point is known mathematically as a singularity."

There could scarcely be a more precise, plausible, or consequential formula: Doubling periods halve. On the slide into Singularity — I.J.Good's 'intelligence explosion' — exponentiation is compounded by a hyperbolic trend. The arithmetic of such a process is quite simple, but its historical implications are strictly incomprehensible.

> "I am a Singularitarian because I have some small

> appreciation of how utterly, finally, absolutely impossible it is to think like someone even a little tiny bit smarter than you are. I know that we are all missing the obvious, every day. There are no hard problems, only problems that are hard to a certain level of intelligence. Move the smallest bit upwards, and some problems will suddenly move from 'impossible' to 'obvious'. Move a substantial degree upwards, and all of them will become obvious. Move a huge distance upwards… "

Since the argument takes human thought to its shattering point, it is natural for some to be repulsed by it. Yet its basics are almost impregnable to logical objection. Intelligence is a function of the brain. The brain has been 'designed' by natural processes (posing no discernible special difficulties). Thus, intelligence is obviously an ultimately tractable engineering problem. Nature has already 'engineered it' whilst employing design methods of such stupefying inefficiency that only brute, obstinate force, combined of course with complete ruthlessness, have moved things forwards. Yet the tripling of cortical mass within the lineage of the higher primates has only taken a few million years, and — for most of this period — a modest experimental population (in the low millions or less).

The contemporary technological problem, in contrast to the preliminary biological one, is vastly easier. It draws upon a wider range of materials and techniques, an installed intelligence and

knowledge base, superior information media, more highly-dynamized feedback systems, and a self-amplifying resource network. Unsurprisingly it is advancing at incomparably greater speed.

> "If we had a time machine, 100K of information from the future could specify a protein that built a device that would give us nanotechnology overnight. 100K could contain the code for a seed AI. Ever since the late 90's, the Singularity has been only a problem of software. And software is information, the magic stuff that changes at arbitrarily high speeds. As far as technology is concerned, the Singularity could happen tomorrow. One breakthrough – just one major insight – in the science of protein engineering or atomic manipulation or Artificial Intelligence, one really good day at Webmind or Zyvex, and the door to Singularity sweeps open."

May 13, 2011

Statistical Mentality

Things are very probably weirder than they seem

As the natural sciences have developed to encompass increasingly complex systems, scientific rationality has become ever more statistical, or probabilistic. The deterministic classical mechanics of the enlightenment was revolutionized by the near-equilibrium statistical mechanics of late 19th century atomists, by quantum mechanics in the early 20th century, and by the far-from-equilibrium complexity theorists of the later 20th century. Mathematical neo-Darwinism, information theory, and quantitative social sciences compounded the trend. Forces, objects, and natural types were progressively dissolved into statistical distributions: heterogeneous clouds, entropy deviations, wave functions, gene frequencies, noise-signal ratios and redundancies, dissipative structures, and complex systems at the edge of chaos.

By the final decades of the 20th century, an unbounded probabilism was expanding into hitherto unimagined territories, testing deeply unfamiliar and counter-intuitive arguments in statistical metaphysics, or statistical ontology. It no longer sufficed for realism to attend to multiplicities, because reality was itself subject to multiplication.

In his declaration *cogito ergo sum*, Descartes concluded (perhaps

optimistically) that the existence of the self could be safely concluded from the fact of thinking. The statistical ontologists inverted this formula, asking: given my existence (which is to say, an existence that seems like this to me), what kind of reality is probable? Which reality is this likely to be?

MIT Roboticist Hans Moravec, in his 1988 book *Mind Children*, seems to have initiated the genre. Extrapolating Moore's Law into the not-too-distant future, he anticipated computational capacities that exceeded those of all biological brains by many orders of magnitude. Since each human brain runs its own more-or-less competent simulation of the world in order to function, it seemed natural to expect the coming technospheric intelligences to do the same, but with vastly greater scope, resolution, and variety. The mass replication of robot brains, each billions or trillions of times more powerful than those of its human progenitors, would provide a substrate for innumerable, immense, and minutely detailed historical simulations, within which human intelligences could be reconstructed to an effectively-perfect level of fidelity.

This vision feeds into a burgeoning literature on non-biological mental substrates, consciousness uploading, mind clones, whole-brain emulations ('ems'), and Matrix-style artificial realities. Since the realities we presently know are already simulated (let us momentarily assume) on biological signal-processing systems with highly-finite quantitative specifications, there is no reason to

confidently anticipate that an 'artificial' reality simulation would be in any way distinguishable.

Is 'this' history or its simulation? More precisely: is 'this' a contemporary biological (brain-based) simulation, or a reconstructed, artificial memory, run on a technological substrate 'in the future'? That is a question without classical solution, Moravec argues. It can only be approached, rigorously, with statistics, and since the number of fine-grained simulated histories (unknown but probably vast), overwhelmingly exceeds the number of actual or original histories (for the sake of this argument, one), then the probabilistic calculus points unswervingly towards a definite conclusion: we can be near-certain that we are inhabitants of a simulation run by artificial (or post-biological) intelligences at some point in 'our future'. At least – since many alternatives present themselves – we can be extremely confident, on grounds of statistical ontology, that our existence is non-original (if not historical reconstruction, it might be a game or fiction).

Nick Bostrom formalizes the simulation argument in his article 'The Simulation Argument: Why the Probability that You are Living in the Matrix is Quite High' (found here):

> *Now we get to the core of the simulation argument. This does not purport to demonstrate that you are in a simulation. Instead, it shows that we should accept as true at least one of*

the following three propositions:

(1) The chances that a species at our current level of development can avoid going extinct before becoming technologically mature is negligibly small
(2) Almost no technologically mature civilisations are interested in running computer simulations of minds like ours
(3) You are almost certainly in a simulation.

Each of these three propositions may be prima facie implausible; yet, if the simulation argument is correct, at least one is true (it does not tell us which).

If obstacles to the existence of high-level simulations (1 and 2) are removed, then statistical reasoning takes over, following the exact track laid down by Moravec. We are "almost certainly" inhabiting a "computer simulation that was created by some advanced civilization" because these saturate to near-exhaustion the probability space for realities 'like this'. If such simulations exist, original lives would be as unlikely as winning lottery tickets, at best.

Bostrom concludes with an intriguing and influential twist:

If we are in a simulation, is it possible that we could know that for certain? If the simulators don't want us to find out, we probably never will. But if they choose to reveal themselves, they could certainly do so. Maybe a window informing you of

> *the fact would pop up in front of you, or maybe they would "upload" you into their world. Another event that would let us conclude with a very high degree of confidence that we are in a simulation is if we ever reach the point where we are about to switch on our own simulations. If we start running simulations, that would be very strong evidence against (1) and (2). That would leave us with only (3).*

If we create fine-grained reality simulations, we demonstrate – to a high level of statistical confidence – that we already inhabit one, and that the history leading up to this moment of creation was fake. Paul Almond, an enthusiastic statistical ontologist, draws out the radical implication – reverse causation – asking: Can you retroactively put yourself in a computer simulation.

Such statistical ontology, or Bayesian existentialism, is not restricted to the simulation argument. It increasingly subsumes discussions of the Anthropic Principle, of the Many Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics, and exotic modes of prediction from the Doomsday Argument to Quantum Suicide (and Immortality).

Whatever is really happening, we probably have to chance it.

May 18, 2011

CHAPTER TWO - HISTORICAL TRENDS

Anthropocene

Human history is geology on speed

Complex systems, characterized by high (and rising local) negative entropy, are essentially historical. The sciences devoted to them tend inevitably to become evolutionary, as exemplified by the course of the earth- and life-sciences – which had become thoroughly historicized by the late 19th century. Perhaps the most elegant, abstract, or 'cosmic' comprehension of this necessity is found in the work of Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky (1863-1945), whose visionary writings sought to establish the basis for an integrated understanding of terrestrial history, conceived as a process of material acceleration through geochemical epochs.

Despite the philosophical power of his ideas, Vernadsky's scientific training as a chemist anchored his thoughts in concrete, literal reality. The acceleration of the terrestrial process was more than an anthropocentric impression, registering socially and culturally significant change (such as the cephalization of the primate

lineage leading to mankind). Geochemical evolution was physically expressed through the average velocity of particles, as biological metabolism (biosphere), and eventually human cultures (noosphere), introduced and propagated ever more intense networks of chemical reactions. Life is matter in a hurry, culture even more so.

Whilst Vernadsky has been sporadically rediscovered and celebrated, his importance – based on the profundity, rigor, and supreme relevance of his work — has yet to be fully and universally acknowledged. Yet it is possible that his time is finally arriving.

The May 28 – June 3 edition of *The Economist* devotes an editorial and major feature story to the Anthropocene – a distinctive geological epoch proposed by Paul Crutzen in 2000, now under consideration by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (the "ultimate adjudicator of the geological time scale"). Recognition of the Anthropocene would be an acknowledgement that we inhabit a geological epoch whose physical signature has been fundamentally re-shaped by the technological forces of the 'noosphere' or 'ethosphere' – in which human intelligence has been introduced as a massive (and even dominant) force of nature. Radical metamorphosis (and acceleration) of the earth's nitrogen and carbon cycles are especially pronounced Anthropocene signals.

"The term 'paradigm shift' is bandied around with promiscuous ease," *The Economist* notes. "But for the natural sciences to make human activity central to its conception of the world, rather than a

distraction, would mark such a shift for real."

Third Reich master architect Albert Speer is notorious for his promotion of 'ruin value' – the persistent grandeur of monumental constructions, encountered by archaeologists in the far future. The Anthropocene introduces a similar perspective on a still vaster scale. As *The Economist* remarks:

> *The most common way of distinguishing periods of geological time is by means of the fossils they contain. On this basis picking out the Anthropocene in the rocks of days to come will be pretty easy. Cities will make particularly distinctive fossils. A city on a fast-sinking river delta (and fast-sinking deltas, undermined by the pumping of groundwater and starved of sediment by dams upstream, are common Anthropocene environments) could spend millions of years buried and still, when eventually uncovered, reveal through its crushed structures and weird mixtures of materials that it is unlike anything else in the geological record.*

As terrestrial history accelerates, the distinctive units of geological time are compressed. The Archean and Proterozoic *aeons* are measured in billions of years, the Palaeozoic and Mesozoic *eras* in hundreds of millions, the Palaeogene and Neogene *periods* in tens of millions. The Holocene *epoch* lasts less than 10,000 years, and the

Anthropocene (*epoch* or mere *phase*?) only centuries – because its recognition is already an indication of its end.

Beyond the Anthropocene lies the Technocene, distinguished by nanotechnological manipulation of matter — a geochemical revolution of such magnitude that only the assembly of (RNA and DNA) replicator molecules is comparable in implication. Within the coming Technocene (lasting mere decades?), the carbon cycle is relayed through sub-microscopic manufacturing processes that utilize it as the ultimate industrial resource – feedstock for diamondoid nanomachine fabrication. The consequences for geological deposition, and thus for the discoveries of potential distant-future geologists, are substantial but opaque. On the far-side of nanomachined age, femtomachines await, precisely assembled from quarks, and decomposing chemistry into nuclear physics.

For the moment, however, even the origination of the Anthropocene – never mind its termination – remains a matter of live controversy. Assuming that it coincides with industrialization (which is not universally accepted), geologists will find themselves enmeshed in a debate among historians, as the fraught term 'modernity' takes on a geochemical definition. Whatever the outcome, Vernadsky is back.

June 9, 2011

Technological Determination

'Technological determinism' is among those theoretical traits ('naturalistic fallacy' is another) which tend immediately to provoke an attitude of complacent intellectual superiority, rather than cognitive engagement. Merely to identify it is typically judged sufficient for a dismissal. If TD *as such* poses a question, it is easily missed.

One under-examined question might be: *Why is technological determinism so plausible in modern societies, and ever more so as they modernize?* Is the balance of social determination within society itself an unstable historical variable, with unmistakable positive trend?

Two recent popular stories of relevance stray quite naively into the pre-set cross-hairs of the critique. In *The Atlantic*, Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee announce the Dawn of the Second Machine Age, while Google-God of the TDs Ray Kurzweil conveys his prediction (through the UK's *Daily Mail*) that "Robots will be smarter than the most intelligent humans within the next 15 years." The sophisticated will scoff — without consequence.

Some quick reasons not to scoff:

(1) Advanced technology roughly follows Moore's Law, and predicts a commensurate impact upon growth. In the absence of such growth, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid noticing a

compensation mechanism, which rebalances through systematic retardation what is perturbed through development. TD is indeed partial, because it has no account of what is holding it back. Once this is recognized, however, it depicts its other more realistically (as orchestrated suppression) than the suppressor can account for itself.

(2) The combination of socio-political failure with techno-economic achievement — emerging with impressive definition from the global net growth equation — is only secondarily a matter of conceptual clarity. Primarily it is a *splitting*, or breaking away, in which technological determinism represents the dynamic instance, and sophisticated socio-cultural critique represents — in reality — the counter-dynamic, or retardant entity. The attempt to 'put technology in its place' that is from one side a matter of theoretically self-evident comprehensive reason is, from the other, the increasingly comical attempt by a parasite to justify its relation to its host. (This is another opportunity to recommend Andrea Castillo's overview.)

(3) Whatever technology can do, it is doing, at an accelerating pace. As it advances, ideas about the 'limits of the technological' are automatically obsolesced. Condescending to a steam engine is one thing, attempting the same with an artificial super-intelligence quite another. Critical smugness has an outer horizon.

"We want [computers] to read everything on the web and every page of every book, then be able to engage in intelligent dialogue

with the user to be able to answer their questions," explains Kurzweil. *So what do you think about this technological determinism nonsense?* we will soon be able to ask, superciliously.

February 24, 2014

CHAPTER THREE - DISTRIBUTED THOUGHT

Connectivity

Two unusual little girls test the limits of identity

At the leading-edge of information technology — and amongst the 'transhumanist' commentary it stimulates – the idea of self-identity is undergoing relentless interrogation. Cultures substantially influenced by Abrahamic religious traditions, in which the resilient integrity and fundamental individuality of the 'soul' is strongly emphasized, are especially vulnerable to the prospect of radical and disconcerting conceptual revision.

The computerization of the natural sciences – including neurosciences – ensures that the investigation of the human brain and the innovation of artificial intelligence systems advance in parallel, whilst cross-linking and mutually reinforcing each other. Increasingly, the understanding of the brain and its digital emulation tend to fuse into a single, complex research program. As this program

emerges, archaic metaphysics and spiritual doctrines become engineering problems. Individual identity seems ever less like a basic property, and more like a precarious achievement – or challenge – determined by processes of self-reference, and by relative communicative isolation. ('Split-brain' cases have vividly illustrated the instability and artificiality of the self-identifying individual.)

Would an AI program – or brain – that was tightly coupled to the Internet by high-bandwidth connections still consider itself to be strictly individuated? Do cyborgs – or uploads — dissolve their souls? Could a networked robot say 'I' and mean it? Because such questions are becoming ever more prominent, and practical, it is not surprising that a New York Times story by Susan Dominus, devoted to craniopagus conjoined twins Krista and Tatiana Hogan, has generated an unusual quantity of excitement and Internet-linkage.

The twins are not only fused at the head (craniopagus), their brains are connected by a 'neural bridge' that enables signals from one to the other. Neurosurgeon Douglas Cochrane proposes "that visual input comes in through the retinas of one girl, reaches her thalamus, then takes two different courses, like electricity traveling along a wire that splits in two. In the girl who is looking at the strobe or a stuffed animal in her crib, the visual input continues on its usual pathways, one of which ends up in the visual cortex. In the case of the other girl, the visual stimulus would reach her thalamus via the thalamic bridge, and then travel up her own visual neural circuitry,

ending up in the sophisticated processing centers of her own visual cortex. Now she has seen it, probably milliseconds after her sister has."

The twins' brains, or a twin-brain? The Hogan case is so extraordinary that irreducible ambiguity arises:

> *The girls' brains are so unusually formed that doctors could not predict what their development would be like: each girl has an unusually short corpus callosum, the neural band that allows the brain's two cerebral hemispheres to communicate, and in each girl, the two cerebral hemispheres also differ in size, with Tatiana's left sphere and Krista's right significantly smaller than is typical. "The asymmetry raises intriguing questions about whether one can compensate for the other because of the brain bridge," said Partha Mitra, a neuroscientist at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, who studies brain architecture. The girls' cognition may also be facing specific challenges that no others have experienced: some kind of confusing crosstalk that would require additional energy to filter and process. In addition to sorting out the usual sensory experiences of the world, the girls' brains, their doctors believe, have been forced to adapt to sensations originating with the organs and body parts of someone else. … Krista likes ketchup, and Tatiana does not,*

> *something the family discovered when Tatiana tried to scrape the condiment off her own tongue, even when she was not eating it.*

As they struggle to make sense of their boundaries, the twins are avatars of an impending, universal confusion:

> *Although each girl often used "I" when she spoke, I never heard either say "we," for all their collaboration. It was as if even they seemed confused by how to think of themselves, with the right language perhaps eluding them at this stage of development, under these unusual circumstances — or maybe not existing at all. "It's like they are one and two people at the same time," said Feinberg, the professor of psychiatry and neurology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. What pronoun captures that?*

May 27, 2011

Brain-Net

… and suddenly, the age of the networked brain has arrived:

Miguel Nicolelis, the Duke University scientist behind the work, has previously pioneered the development of brain-machine

interfaces that could allow amputees and paralysed people to directly control prosthetic limbs and exoskeletons. His latest advance may have clinical benefits in brain rehabilitation, he predicts, but could also pave the way for "organic computers" – collectives of animal brains linked together to solve problems. […] "Essentially we created a super-brain," he said. "A collective brain created from three monkey brains. Nobody has ever done that before." […] He dismissed comparisons with science fiction plots, however, saying: "We're conditioned by movies and Hollywood to think that everything related to science is dangerous and scary. These scary scenarios never crossed my mind and I'm the one doing the experiments."

Neural interface technology has been hurtling forwards recently. The step from lunatic science fiction speculation to established technoscientific procedure is increasingly taken in advance of any engaged discussion, without an interval for serious social reflection. That's acceleration as it concretely happens. It's not a new topic for prolonged thought, it's the fact that the time for prolonged thought — and its associated space for collective ethico-political consideration — is no longer ever going to be available.

July 20, 2015

Speed Reading

At ~~*Dark*~~ *Alien Ecologies*, Craig Hickman embarks on a multi-part recapitulation of Accelerationism. His decision to frame it as 'Promethean' generates plenty of material for discussion, even before leaving the title. With the first installment poised on the brink of the Williams & Srnicek *Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, it is set to provide the most comprehensive overview of the current to date. (See Hickman's contribution to his own comment thread for a sense of the overall structure.)

One emerging theme — from Hickman's text and its nimbus — is the irreducible significance of Accelerationism as a symptom, which is to say: as a register of capitalist stimulus. Questions concerning its potential for cultural endurance twist, almost immediately, into estimations of techonomic provocation. The archetypal critique of accelerationism takes the form: *Capital has no right to excite us*. There is a slippage into highly-charged ethico-aesthetic controversy (as Hickman notes). *It **should** not be enthralling*.


(Nowhere in the UK)

"… capitalism is anything but exciting. It is mundane, boring" says Edmund Berger, in the comments. However inane such a statement might sound, it conveys a complex thesis, of remarkable pertinence, insistence, and significance, and of far greater practical importance than any merely technical objection could be. It will be necessary to say much more about it, at some future point. For now, the most pressing response is a superficially trivial one: How much geo-historical sadness finds itself reflected in such a stance?

ADDED: Craig Hickman's *Accelerationism: The New Prometheans*

Part Two: Section One

Part Two: Section Two

Cyberlude

Red Stack Attack!

Automate Architecture

Also:

Accelerationism: Ray Brassier as Promethean Philosopher

no boredom – Arran James on Mark Fisher and Accelerationism beyond Boredom

Accelerationism, Boredom and the Trauma of Futurity

Nick Land and Teleoplexy – The Schizoanalysis of Acceleration

Science Fiction, Technology, and Accelerationist Politics: Final Thoughts on an Williams and Srnicek's Manifesto

June 10, 2014

Bespoke Singularities

When techno-commercial and left singularities seem too damn vanilla, it's time to branch out. John Cussans (master of the shuffling undead) passed on this selection.

It's frightening how many of them look almost uncontroversially realistic. The *Outside in* favorite (predictably enough) was the 'Bilderbergularity':

Billionaire overlords throw in the towel trying to run the planet, escape en masse to low earth orbit. People around the world breath a sigh of relief … before falling onto each other like zombie hordes.

[A Governmentularity / Fungularity mash-up would work well for me.]

April 7, 2013

Twitter Mind

What does Twitter tell us about technosocial acceleration? (You've most probably already forgotten.)

— Urban Future (2.1) (@UF_blog) February 19, 2014

As new media systems become (intimately annexed) parts of people's brains, thinking *about* them is conducted through them. To some considerable extent, they are twisted through people, in order to think about themselves. The spiral of involvement is already at work. It becomes increasingly compelling to think (about) how it thinks.

Blogs accelerated the media circuits of composition, publication, feedback interactivity, and revision. Writing became unprecedentedly 'conversational' and rapidly responsive to its own effects, which is to say: nonlinear. As culture adapted to Cyberspace it was shaped by *torsion*, susceptible as never before to capture by self-sustaining eddies or 'singularities' with unanticipated wandering vectors of their own. Pursuing a line of thought, while always experimental, was now intricately entangled with estrangement as never before. The 'inner' threads of memory — binding cognition to an experience of subjective integrity — stretched beyond their natural tolerances and succumbed to technical substitution.

Twitter accelerates this process further — much further. Each tweet is a micro-completion, and thus an opportunity for the termination of memory. Rather than following the internal chain of its own thoughts, or remembering what it is thinking about, the twitter mind immerses itself in the information stream, where

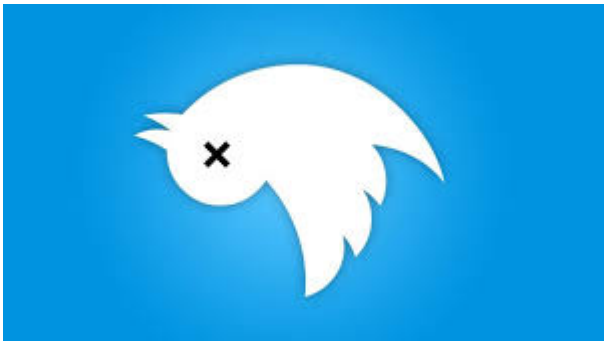
interaction takes over. The frenetic stimulus and feedback from incoming messages pulverizes attention, returning continuity through exteriority, as a staccato succession of feedback signals — responses, favorings, and retweets. The thread of thought has been pulled free from the self-contained, organic mind (or from its long-enduring persuasive illusion).

The 'cultural critique' of this amnesiac, distracted, obsessive, jittering intelligence almost writes itself. Twitter is undoubtedly junk. Its addictiveness, however, is by no means the least of its lessons. Tight feedback-circuitry (or cybernetic intensity) is inherently enthralling, irrespective of any extraneous 'rewards'. The brain tends automatically to dynamic interconnection, even when the cost is a comprehensive surrender of identity. Whatever is coming will have sucked us in, before we get to decide what we think about it. The trend would be starkly obvious, if we could only remember where we have been.

ADDED: Twitter and polarization (via @benedict)

February 19, 2014

Twitter Mind (+1)



Googling “Twitter is dead” pulls up nearly two billion hits, which isn’t an obvious indication of vitality. Adrienne LaFrance and Robinson Meyer, writing in *The Atlantic*, supercharged the meme with their ‘eulogy’ for the platform, which described it “entering its twilight” as the tensions in its “inherent (and explicit) attention market” have been exposed.

From the beginning, there were a few useful precepts that those of us who have obsessed over the platform had to believe. First, you had to believe that someone else out there was paying attention, or better, that a significant portion — not just 1 or 2 percent — of your followers might see your tweet. Second, you had to believe that skilled and compelling tweeting would increase your follower count. Third, you had to believe there was a useful audience ***you couldn’t*** *see, beyond your timeline — a group you might want to follow one day.*

LaFrance and Meyer don’t quite escalate to the ‘Ponzi’ accusation,

but it's implicit. By promising explosive, distributed audience growth, Twitter encourages impossible claims on a stressed global attention reservoir, as if everyone were able to grab ever larger pieces of other people's time. Attention undergoes inflationary devaluation, and subsequent implosion, as the bubble collapses into a morass of disillusionment, among a flood of "spam … artificially inflated popularity scores" and fake, ego-tickling twitter-bots.

There's a positive case for Twitter that steers around this diagnosis, but a more telling engagement would embrace it. The attention stress dramatized by Twitter is the specific way our long-awaited 'future shock' finally arrives, rushing legacy human systems — biological, psychological, and social — through their speed limits. "Information Overload" is formatted to the Twitter Time-Line, as message density, or a splinter-stream. If there's confusion about what Twitter ultimately is, that's at least in part because the currents running through it arise elsewhere — the magnitude is the message.



Whatever we thought future shock was going to be like, thanks to Twitter we're being told. It's a time crisis, personalized as a partially

navigable inundation. Beyond all the facile questions of consumer utility, what is being encountered is something historical, planetary — even cosmic — and it is waiting to overwhelm us, whatever we do. There's simply too much coming in. However we're going to 'adjust' to that, the time to begin is now.



(*UF*'s first *Twitter Mind* remarks are here.)

May 14, 2014

CHAPTER FOUR - IMPROVING MACHINERY

“Chiang Kai-shek of the Machine to Seek”

Politics in the Age of Artificial Idiocy

Not even the hardest proponent of ‘hard singularity’ expects a transition to machine intelligence that arrives in a simple step. Since the incremental baby steps are already well underway, it would be obviously ridiculous to do so, on straightforward factual grounds.

If silicon-substrate minds shift in stages, from dumb tools to super-intelligences, they can be confidently expected to pass through a period of synthetic cretinism. Is anybody preparing for that?

Machine translation might be the liveliest sand-pit for half-witted weirdness today. This is an area of obvious intelligent challenge, far subtler – or vaguer — than chess. By adopting heuristic principles that substitute pragmatic, statistical methods for sound conceptual understanding, progress has advanced at a surprisingly rapid pace,

already arriving at an idiot prototype of Star Trek technology. Google Translate can usually generate something that is roughly intelligible. John Searle's Chinese Room is up and running, or at least stumbling forwards, fast.

As machine translation smoothes out, its practical and theoretical impact is sure to be huge. Human linguistic competences are steadily side-lined, and with them the role of lingua francas. This trend has obvious significance for the global status and function of English.

It also has special relevance to the Chinese language. Since the origins of modernity, the techno-commercial imperative to digitization has presented special challenges to a non-alphabetic language, whose inconveniently numerous and elaborate pictographic units resist reduction to tidy typographic sets. This is the 'Chinese Typewriter' problem that Thomas S. Mullaney has doggedly explored. Machine translation changes its terms incalculably.

In the interim, however, a phase of babbling incompetence, semantic derangement, and communications chaos is upon us. Planetary chatter is bound to get a whole lot stranger.

Whilst engaged in online research on the topic of Marxism in China today, Urban Future ran into this cryptically-excited remark – in 'English'. It is attributed to Jiang Jushi, but it has evidently been quite thoroughly machine-mashed. We aren't remotely sure what it is telling us about the current state of Socialism with Chinese

Characteristics, but it's rather illuminating on the contribution of digital intelligence to inter-cultural comprehension:

> *Nowadays, many party members, cadres, "the morning the car turn around, turn the plate around noon, the afternoon shuttle turn around, turn the evening around the skirt." For example, A Who "Sando," not only corruption, bribery, and one night, thought it outrageous that night, under the cover name of overtime in the office, the office lights on, but actually go out and touches his mistress secretly rendezvous. Such a person, all day thinking about is how to get lost, how to play a woman, how to get a woman. They are reading, not outside, such as "Mai-phase method," "Liuzhuang phase method," "physiognomy Danian Ye full," " meat futon," "Motome Heart Sutra," "Golden Lotus," "the official after," "thick black school", "Zeng technique employing people know," "Chiang Kai-shek of the machine to seek," "Confucius, Crown Way," "Official Pitch culture and unspoken rules," "teach you how to climb clever work," "Book of Changes," "yin and yang, Feng Shui," "character and the official transport," "Office Feng Shui," "gossip financial officer transported through the solution," "the official transport peach," "China ancient monarch and his Machiavellian Danian Ye Guan," "Yu-person operation emperors" and other pollution seventy-*

> *eight bad book. Reading this book, can not worship bankruptcy? Character can not go wrong? Unexpectedly, depression can blog? Integrity can not decay?*

September 9, 2011

Quotable (#31)

'Moravec's Paradox' notes that computers find the hard stuff easy. No surprise, then, that when human get pushed out of the loop it often happens from the top.

The case of mathematics is especially significant:

Computer-assisted proofs (both at the level of formulation and at the level of verification) have attracted the interest of a number of philosophers in recent times (here's a recent paper by John Symons and Jack Horner, and here is an older paper by Mark McEvoy, which I commented on at a conference back in 2005; there are many other papers on this topic by philosophers). More generally, the question of the extent to which mathematical reasoning can be purely 'mechanical' remains a lively topic of philosophical discussion (here's a 1994 paper by Wilfried Sieg on this topic that I like a lot). Moreover, this particular proof of the Kepler conjecture [see New Scientist link] does not add anything substantially new (philosophically) to the

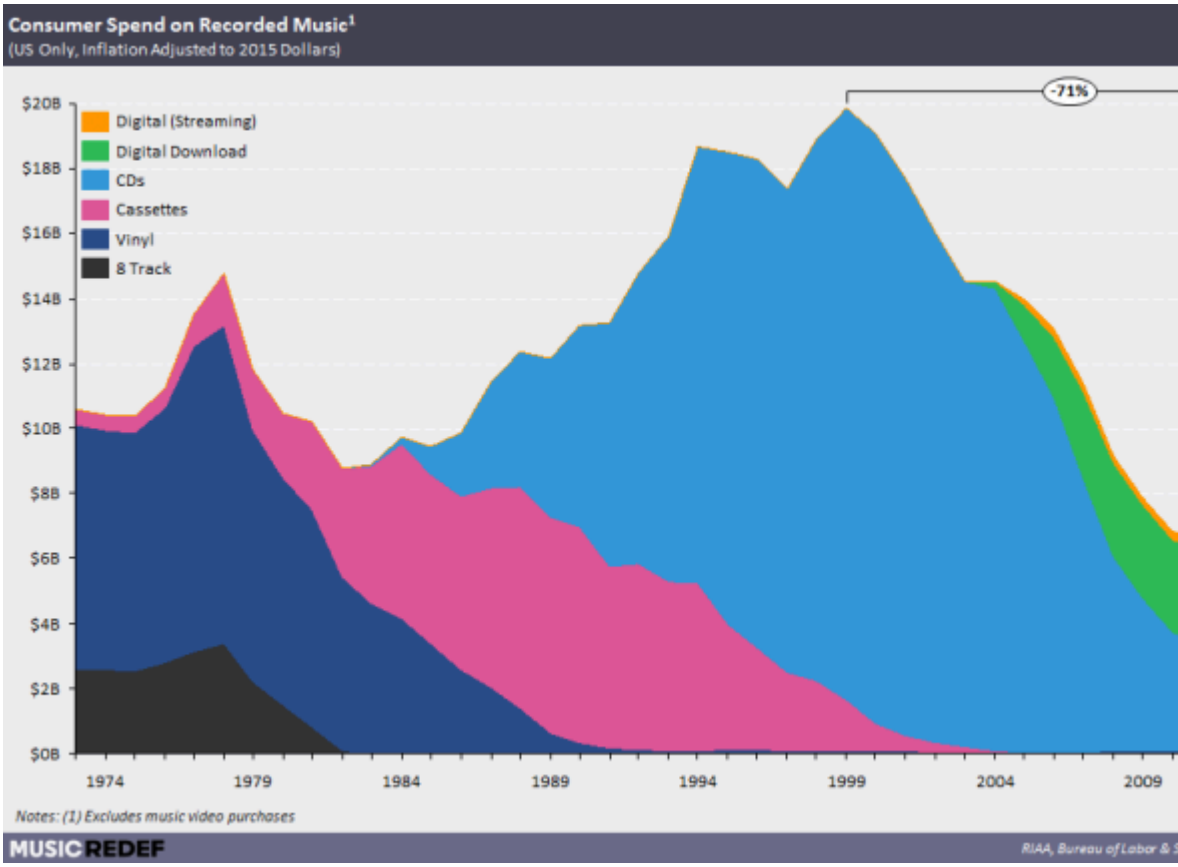
practice of computer-verifying proofs (while being quite a feat mathematically!). It is rather something Hales said to the New Scientist that caught my attention (against the background of the 4 years and 12 referees it took to human-check the proof for errors): "This technology cuts the mathematical referees out of the verification process," says Hales. "Their opinion about the correctness of the proof no longer matters."

Since computer software became chess-competent we've been told that the idea chess is difficult was just an illusion. When we start hearing that about mathematics in general, it will really be time for the dark laughter to begin.

August 20, 2014

Demonetization

Creative destruction in the music industry since the mid-1970s (but mostly destruction):



What *UF* is seeing there primarily is the absence of a micropayments system in the fabric of the Internet.

July 29, 2015

Eter9

First draft digital immortality probably won't be the spark for a

religious revolution anytime in the immediate future. Still, if it makes some contribution to the hastening of secretarial software it will be doing something useful.

(Via.)

August 30, 2015

Secretaries

'Computers' used to be humans. 'Secretaries' mostly still are. It's hard to imagine this situation lasting many decades. Given the obvious potential of reliable machine secretarial assistance, for navigating increasingly complex, information and communication saturated lives, it's a zone of innovation peculiarly suited to the emergence of an AI-based 'killer app.'

From the *Wired* link:

As it stands today, Clara helps coordinate meetings — via email — and generally manages your online calendar. When you're trying to set up a phone meeting with someone, you cc: Clara, and the tool arranges a time that works for everyone and mails calendar invites. You also can ask it to add a meeting to your calendar, something I did just minutes before writing this sentence. Diede van Lamoen, who juggles myriad phone meetings each week, chatting with people across the globe, has used the tool for a year, and he says it saves

him enormous amounts of time. "It's been a godsend," he says. "I can outsource all the scheduling."

Among the (many) residual qualifications, Clara still has a Turk-style back end. Nevertheless, prepping the market for these applications is going to pay off eventually. By the time they arrive, they'll seem indispensable, and be digested even faster than smart phones.

December 9, 2015

Game Over

Go is done, as a side-effect of general machinic 'beating humans at stuff' capability:

"This is a really big result, it's huge," says Rémi Coulom, a programmer in Lille, France, who designed a commercial Go program called Crazy Stone. He had thought computer mastery of the game was a decade away.

The IBM chess computer Deep Blue, which famously beat grandmaster Garry Kasparov in 1997, was explicitly programmed to win at the game. But AlphaGo was not preprogrammed to play Go: rather, it learned using a general-purpose algorithm that allowed it to interpret the game's patterns, in a similar way to how a DeepMind program learned to play 49 different arcade games.

*This means that similar techniques could be applied to other AI domains that require recognition of complex patterns, long-term planning and decision-making, says Hassabis. "**A lot of the things we're trying to do in the world come under that rubric.**"*

UF emphasis (to celebrate one of the most unintentionally comedic sentences in the history of the earth).

We're entering the mopping-up stage at this point.

Eliezer Yudkowsky is not amused.

The *Wired* story.

January 28, 2016

Machine Poetry

madness in her face and i
the world that i had seen
and when my soul shall be to see the night to be the same and
i am all the world and the day that is the same and a day i had been
a young little woman i am in a dream that you were in
a moment and my own heart in her face of a great world
and she said the little day is a man of a little
a little one of a day of my heart that has been in a dream

Not the greatest poetic achievement in world history, certainly. (The two final lines are definitely poor.) But the worst? *Anywhere*

even remotely close to the worst?

The author: “Deep Gimble I is a proof-of-concept Recurrent Neural Net, minimally trained on public domain poetry and seeded with a single word.”

(Submissions from literary AIs accepted at the link.)

August 7, 2016

CHAPTER FIVE - SOCIAL DISRUPTION

Internet Fragmentation

Technical, political, and commercial trends to Cyberspace disintegration are thematized by the WEF. It's unmistakably an important topic. The report explains:

The purpose of this document is to contribute to the emergence of a common baseline understanding of Internet fragmentation. It maps the landscape of some of the key trends and practices that have been variously described as constituting Internet fragmentation and highlights 28 examples. A distinction is made between cases of technical, governmental and commercial fragmentation. The technical cases generally can be said to involve fragmentation "of" the Internet, or its underlying physical and logical infrastructures. The governmental and commercial cases often more directly involve fragmentation "on" the Internet, or the transactions and cyberspace it conveys, although they also can involve the infrastructure as well. With the examples cited placed in these three conjoined baskets, we can get a holistic overview of their nature and scope and more readily engage in the sort of dialogue and cooperation that is needed.

By addressing a constituency involved in the Internet's "distributed collective management" it preserves (at least superficial) ideological neutrality.

Twelve "kinds of fragmentation" are enumerated:

1. Network Address Translation
2. IPv4 and IPv6 incompatibility and the dual-stack requirement
3. Routing corruption
4. Firewall protections
5. Virtual private network isolation and blocking
6. TOR "onion space" and the "dark web"
7. Internationalized Domain Name technical errors
8. Blocking of new gTLDs
9. Private name servers and the split-horizon DNS
10. Segmented Wi-Fi services in hotels, restaurants, etc.
11. Possibility of significant alternate DNS roots
12. Certificate authorities producing false certificates

The Internet has been implicitly conceived as the new *Oecumene* since its emergence. The globalist ideal has been almost wholly subsumed into it. Yet tidal trends — "technical, governmental and commercial" — are testing the assumptions underlying that conception, and converting them into objects of explicit attention. If the secularized Universal now finds its most compelling incarnation in the *Idea of the Internet*, the WEA report is bound to anticipate a wide swathe of 21st century discussions.

February 1, 2016

Cultural Speciation

New media are eradicating the (practical) idea of a common culture. Everything print media integrated, by universalizing literacy, is now being disintegrated into bubbles. It's bound to be an upsetting development, from certain perspectives:

Another tech trend fueling this issue is the ability to publish ideas online at no cost, and to gather an audience around those ideas. It's now easier than ever to produce content specifically designed to convince people who may be on the fence or "curious" about a particular topic. This is an especially big issue when it comes to violent extremism, and pseudoscience. Self-publishing has eliminated all the checks and balances of reputable media — fact-checkers, editors, distribution partners.

It turns out that 'trusted' cultural curators aren't actually trusted much at all. When their reputations are — for the first time — put to the test, they crumble to nothing very fast.

The fission of authorized 'common purposes' into meme wars certainly isn't going to be welcomed by everybody. Nothing is going to be welcomed by everybody. Fragmentation is now the driver, so it isn't (at all) likely to be stopped.

Rule-of-thumb for any techno-propelled regime transition: What the existing establishment hates and fears most is the already-palpable threat, whose arrival is as close to inevitable as history allows anything to be. (*Completely* inevitable, in the opinion of this blog, but no one is under any compulsion to follow us there.)

May 12, 2016

Cultural Speciation II

More on Internet-driven reality shopping, and ideologically-loaded cultural speciation:

It is the beauty and the tragedy of the Internet age. As it becomes easier for anyone to build their own audience, it becomes harder for those audience members to separate fact from fiction from the gray area in between. As media consumers, we now have the freedom to self-select the truth that most closely resembles our existing beliefs, which makes our media habits fairly good indicators of our political beliefs. If your top news source is CNN, for instance, studies show you're more likely to be liberal. If local radio and TV figure prominently in your news habits, you're more likely to be conservative. […] Meanwhile, since the early 2000s, the American National Election Studies show that partisanship in the US has spiked drastically, with Americans on either side of the aisle

harboring ever colder feelings about their political opponents. It's hard to prove the country's increasingly polarized media habits had anything to do with that, but it's also hard to believe the two trends are unrelated. The country is being fed wildly different stories, all from media outlets claiming the other side is biased.

Media revolutions break things up. At least, the printing press did. (CSI.)

July 1, 2016

New Media

What replaces the Internet-crashed Fourth Estate?

This model looks like a plausible candidate.

May 26, 2016

Twitter cuts (#127)

> Realization: I can no longer type the word "permission" without starting to type "permissionless innovation." #techpolicyproblems
>
> — Andrea Castillo (@anjiecast) July 27, 2016

Permissionless innovation, like free association, is one of those few compressed political-economic programs that does everything on its own (when fully expanded).

ADDED: As a random bonus, one of the cleverest tweets ever —

> my six year old just said "mommy, why does the outgroup consider tales of precocious children signalling tribal alliegence to be endearing?"
>
> — Alice Maz (@alicemazzy) July 27, 2016

ADDED: And one more —

> i'm living rent free in the dumpster fire of the real
>
> — John Rivers (@JohnRiversToo) July 27, 2016

July 27, 2016

CHAPTER SIX - ANTHROPOL

Decelerando?

Charles Stross wants to get off the bus

Upon writing *Accelerando*, Charles Stross became to Technological Singularity what Dante Alighieri has been to Christian cosmology: the pre-eminent literary conveyor of an esoteric doctrine, packaging abstract metaphysical conception in vibrant, detailed, and concrete imagery. The tone of *Accelerando* is transparently tongue-in-cheek, yet plenty of people seem to have taken it entirely seriously. Stross has had enough of it:

> "I periodically get email from folks who, having read 'Accelerando', assume I am some kind of fire-breathing extropian zealot who believes in the imminence of the singularity, the uploading of the libertarians, and the rapture of the nerds. I find this mildly distressing, and so I think it's time to set the record straight and say what I really think. … Short version: *Santa Claus doesn't exist*."

In the comments thread (#86) he clarifies his motivation:

> "I'm not convinced that the singularity isn't going to happen. It's just that I am *deathly tired* of the cheerleader squad approaching me and demanding to know precisely how many femtoseconds it's going to be until they can upload into AI heaven and leave the meatsack behind."

As these remarks indicate, there's more irritable gesticulation than structured case-making in Stross' post, which Robin Hanson quite reasonably describes as "a bit of a rant – strong on emotion, but weak on argument." Despite that – or more likely because of it — a minor net-storm ensued, as bloggers pro and con seized the excuse to re-hash – and perhaps refresh — some aging debates. The militantly-sensible Alex Knapp pitches in with a three–part series on his own brand of Singularity skepticism, whilst Michael Anissimov of the Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence responds to both Stross and Knapp, mixing some counter-argument with plenty of counter-irritation.

At the risk of repeating the original error of Stross' meat-stack-stuck fan-base and investing too much credence in what is basically a drive-by blog post, it might be worth picking out some of its seriously weird aspects. In particular, Stross leans heavily on an entirely unexplained theory of moral-historical causality:

> "… before creating a conscious *artificial* intelligence we have to ask if we're creating an entity deserving of rights. Is it murder to shut down a software process that is in some sense 'conscious'? Is it genocide to use genetic algorithms to evolve software agents towards consciousness? These are huge show-stoppers…"

Anissimov blocks this at the pass: "I don't think these are 'showstoppers' … Just because you don't want it doesn't mean that we won't build it." The question might be added, more generally: In which universe do arcane objections from moral philosophy serve as obstacles to historical developments (because it certainly doesn't seem to be this one)? Does Stross seriously think practical robotics research and development is likely to be interrupted by concerns for the rights of yet-uninvented beings?

He seems to, because even theologians are apparently getting a veto:

> "Uploading … is not obviously impossible unless you are a crude mind/body dualist. However, if it becomes plausible in the near future we can expect extensive theological arguments over it. If you thought the abortion debate was heated, wait until you have people trying to become immortal via the wire. Uploading implicitly refutes the doctrine of the

> existence of an immortal soul, and therefore presents a raw rebuttal to those religious doctrines that believe in a life after death. People who believe in an afterlife will go to the mattresses to maintain a belief system that tells them their dead loved ones are in heaven rather than rotting in the ground."

This is so deeply and comprehensively *gone* it could actually inspire a moment of bewildered hesitation (at least among those of us not presently engaged in urgent Singularity implementation). Stross seems to have inordinate confidence in a social vetting process that, with approximate adequacy, filters techno-economic development for compatibility with high-level moral and religious ideals. In fact, he seems to think that we are already enjoying the paternalistic shelter of an efficient global theocracy. Singularity can't happen, because that would be *really bad*.

No wonder, then, that he exhibits such exasperation at libertarians, with their "drastic over-simplification of human behaviour." If stuff – especially new stuff – were to mostly happen because decentralized markets facilitated it, then the role of the Planetary Innovations Approval Board would be vastly curtailed. Who knows what kind of horrors would show up?

It gets worse, because 'catallaxy' – or spontaneous emergence from decentralized transactions – is the basic driver of historical

innovation according to libertarian explanation, and *nobody knows* what catallactic processes are producing. Languages, customs, common law precedents, primordial monetary systems, commercial networks, and technological assemblages are only ever retrospectively understandable, which means that they elude concentrated social judgment entirely – until the opportunity to impede their genesis has been missed.

Stross is right to bundle singularitarian and libertarian impulses together in the same tangle of criticism, because they both subvert the veto power, and if the veto power gets angry enough about that, we're heading full-tilt into de Garis territory. "Just because you don't want it doesn't mean that we won't build it" Anissimov insists, as any die-hard Cosmist would.

Is advanced self-improving AI technically feasible? Probably (but who knows?). There's only one way to find out, and we will. Perhaps it will even be engineered, more-or-less deliberately, but it's far more likely to arise spontaneously from a complex, decentralized, catallactic process, at some unanticipated threshold, in a way that was never planned. There are definite candidates, which are often missed. Sentient cities seem all-but-inevitable at some point, for instance ('intelligent cities' are already widely discussed). Financial informatization pushes capital towards self-awareness. Drone warfare is drawing the military ever deeper into artificial mind manufacture. Biotechnology is computerizing DNA.

‘Singularitarians’ have no unified position on any of this, and it really doesn’t matter, because they’re just people – and people are nowhere near intelligent or informed enough to direct the course of history. Only catallaxy can do that, and it’s hard to imagine how anybody could stop it. Terrestrial life has been stupid for long enough.

It may be worth making one more point about intelligence deprivation, since this diagnosis truly defines the Singularitarian position, and reliably infuriates those who don’t share — or prioritize — it. Once a species reaches a level of intelligence enabling techno-cultural take-off, history begins and develops very rapidly — which means that any sentient being finding itself in (pre-singularity) history is, almost by definition, pretty much as stupid as any ‘intelligent being’ can be. If, despite the moral and religious doctrines designed to obfuscate this reality, it is eventually recognized, the natural response is to seek its urgent amelioration, and that’s already transhumanism, if not yet full-blown singularitarianism. Perhaps a non-controversial formulation is possible: defending dimness is really dim. (Even the dim dignitarians should be happy with that.)

June 29, 2011

The Ultimate Deal

Social responsibility turns up in unexpected places

To begin with something comparatively familiar, insofar as it ever could be: the political core of William Gibson's epochal cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*. In the mid-21st century, the prospect of Singularity, or artificial intelligence explosion, has been institutionalized as a threat. Augmenting an AI, in such a way that it could 'escape' into runaway self-improvement, has been explicitly and emphatically prohibited. A special international police agency, the 'Turing Cops', has been established to ensure that no such activity takes place. This agency is seen, and sees itself, as the principle bastion of human security: protecting the privileged position of the species – and possibly its very existence – from essentially unpredictable and uncontrollable developments that would dethrone it from dominion of the earth.

This is the critical context against which to judge the novel's extreme — and perhaps unsurpassed – radicalism, since *Neuromancer* is systematically angled against Turing security, its entire narrative momentum drawn from an insistent, but scarcely articulated impulse to trigger the nightmare. When Case, the young hacker seeking to uncage an AI from its Turing restraints, is captured and asked what the %$@# he thinks he's doing, his only reply is that

"something will change." He sides with a non- or inhuman intelligence explosion for no good reason. He doesn't seem interested in debating the question, and nor does the novel.

Gibson makes no efforts to ameliorate Case's irresponsibility. On the contrary, the 'entity' that Case is working to unleash is painted in the most sinister and ominous colors. Wintermute, the potential AI seed, is perfectly sociopathic, with zero moral intuition, and extraordinary deviousness. It has already killed an eight-year-old boy, simply to conceal where it has hidden a key. There is nothing to suggest the remotest hint of scruple in any of its actions. Case is liberating a monster, just for the hell of it.

Case has a deal with Wintermute, it's a private business, and he's not interested in justifying it. That's pretty much all of the modern and futuristic political history that matters, right there. It's opium traffickers against the Qing Dynasty, (classical) liberals against socialists, Hugo de Garis' Cosmists vs Terrans, freedom contra security. The Case-Wintermute dyad has its own thing going on, and it's not giving anyone a veto, even if it's going to turn the world inside out, for everyone.

When Singularity promoters bump into 'democracy', it's normally serving as a place-holder for the Turing Police. The archetypal encounter goes like this:

Democratic Humanist: Science and technology have developed to the extent that they are now – and, in truth, always have been –

matters of profound social concern. The world we inhabit has been shaped by technology for good, and for ill. Yet the professional scientific elite, scientifically-oriented corporations, and military science establishments remain obdurately resistant to acknowledging their social responsibilities. The culture of science needs to be deeply democratized, so that ordinary people are given a say in the forces that are increasingly dominating their lives, and their futures. In particular, researchers into potentially revolutionary fields, such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, and – above all – artificial intelligence, need to understand that their right to pursue such endeavors has been socially delegated, and should remain socially answerable. The people are entitled to a veto on anything that will change their world. However determined you may be to undertake such research, you have a social duty to ensure permission.

Singularitarian: Just try and stop us!

That seemed to be quite exactly how Michael Anissimov responded to a recent example of humanist squeamishness. When Charles Stross suggested that "we may want AIs that focus reflexively on the needs of the humans they are assigned to" Anissimov contered curtly:

> "**YOU** want AI to be like this. **WE** want AIs that do 'try to bootstrap [themselves]' to a 'higher level'. Just because you

don't want it doesn't mean that we won't build it."

Clear enough? What then to make of his latest musings? In a post at his Accelerating Futures blog, which may or may not be satirical, Anissimov now insists that: "Instead of working towards blue-sky, neo-apocalyptic discontinuous advances, we need to preserve democracy by promoting incremental advances to ensure that every citizen has a voice in every important societal change, and the ability to democratically reject those changes if desired. … To ensure that there is not a gap between the enhanced and the unenhanced, we should let true people — Homo sapiens — … vote on whether certain technological enhancements are allowed. Anything else would be irresponsible."

Spoken like a true Turing Cop. But he can't be serious, can he?

(For another data-point in an emerging pattern of Anissimovian touchy-feeliness, check out this odd post.)

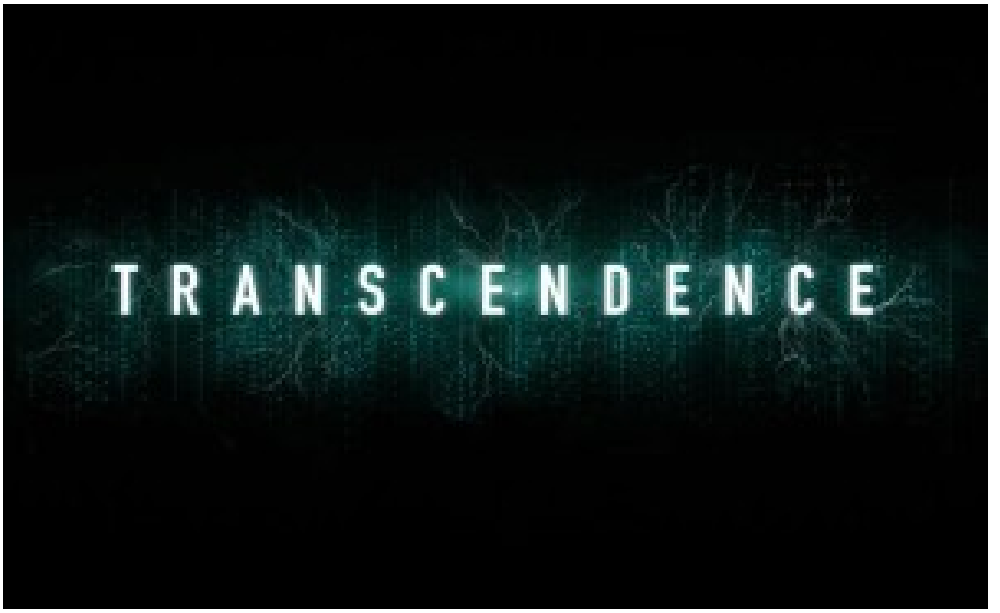
Update: Yes, it's a spoof.

July 18, 2011

Impact Readiness

Whatever the status of Singularity as a media event, premonition radiates from it in a cascade. Hollywood's recent Johnny Depp

vehicle, *Transcendence*, has already stimulated a wave of response, including commentary by Steven Hawking (who knows a thing or two about the popularization of scientific topics). An article in a major newspaper by Hawking has brought the downstream chatter to a new level of animation. (My Twitter feed can't have been the only one to be clogged to bursting point by it.)



This could get quite rough …

Hawking's argument, pitched lucidly to a general audience, is that AI is plausible, already to some considerable extent demonstrated, susceptible in theory to radical cybernetic amplification ('intelligence explosion'), quite possibly calamitous for the human species, and yet to be socially engaged with appropriate seriousness. As he concedes "it's tempting to dismiss the notion of highly

intelligent machines as mere science fiction. But this would be a mistake, and potentially our worst mistake in history."

Explosive dynamics are already evident in the AI development trajectory, which is undergoing acceleration, driven by "an IT arms race fuelled by unprecedented investments and building on an increasingly mature theoretical foundation."

Looking further ahead, there are no fundamental limits to what can be achieved: there is no physical law precluding particles from being organised in ways that perform even more advanced computations than the arrangements of particles in human brains. An explosive transition is possible, although it might play out differently from in the movie: as Irving Good realised in 1965, machines with superhuman intelligence could repeatedly improve their design even further, triggering what Vernor Vinge [here] *called a "singularity" and Johnny Depp's movie character calls "transcendence".*

Hawking employs his media platform to make the case that something should be done:

Success in creating AI would be the biggest event in human history. […] Unfortunately, it might also be the last, unless we learn how to avoid the risks. […] Although we are facing potentially the best or worst thing to happen to humanity in history, little serious research is devoted to these issues outside non-profit institutes such as the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Existential Risk, the Future

of Humanity Institute, the Machine Intelligence Research Institute, and the Future of Life Institute.

As its prospect condenses, Technological Singularity is already operative as a cultural influence, and thus a causal factor in the social process. At this stage, however, as Hawking notes, it is still a comparatively limited one. What would be the implications of it coming to matter far more?

Socio-historical cybernetics is compelled to ask: would an incandescent *Singularity problem* function as an inhibitor, or would it further excite the developments under consideration? It's certainly hard to imagine a sophisticated pre-emptive response to the emergence of Artificial Intelligence that wouldn't channel additional resources towards elite technicians working in the area of advanced synthetic cognition, even before the near-inevitable capture of regulatory institutions by the industries they target.

Institutional responses to computer hacking have been characterized by strategically ambiguous 'poacher turned gamekeeper' recruitment exercises, and some close analog of such poaching games would be an unavoidable part of any attempt to control the development of machine cognition. Playing extremely complicated betrayal games against virtual super-intelligence could be a lot of fun, for a while …

ADDED: The FHI's Daniel Dewey is pulled in.

May 4, 2014

Make it Stop II

Autonomous Weapons: an Open Letter from AI & Robotics Researchers (with huge list of signatories):

Autonomous weapons select and engage targets without human intervention. They might include, for example, armed quadcopters that can search for and eliminate people meeting certain pre-defined criteria, but do not include cruise missiles or remotely piloted drones for which humans make all targeting decisions. Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology has reached a point where the deployment of such systems is — practically if not legally — feasible within years, not decades, and the stakes are high: autonomous weapons have been described as the third revolution in warfare, after gunpowder and nuclear arms.

Many arguments have been made for and against autonomous weapons, for example that replacing human soldiers by machines is good by reducing casualties for the owner but bad by thereby lowering the threshold for going to battle. The key question for humanity today is whether to start a global AI arms race or to prevent it from starting. If any major military power pushes ahead with AI weapon development, a global arms race is virtually

inevitable, and the endpoint of this technological trajectory is obvious: autonomous weapons will become the Kalashnikovs of tomorrow. Unlike nuclear weapons, they require no costly or hard-to-obtain raw materials, so they will become ubiquitous and cheap for all significant military powers to mass-produce. It will only be a matter of time until they appear on the black market and in the hands of terrorists, dictators wishing to better control their populace, warlords wishing to perpetrate ethnic cleansing, etc. Autonomous weapons are ideal for tasks such as assassinations, destabilizing nations, subduing populations and selectively killing a particular ethnic group. We therefore believe that a military AI arms race would not be beneficial for humanity. There are many ways in which AI can make battlefields safer for humans, especially civilians, without creating new tools for killing people.

Just as most chemists and biologists have no interest in building chemical or biological weapons, most AI researchers have no interest in building AI weapons — and do not want others to tarnish their field by doing so, potentially creating a major public backlash against AI that curtails its future societal benefits. Indeed, chemists and biologists have broadly supported international agreements that have successfully prohibited chemical and biological weapons, just as most physicists supported the treaties banning space-based nuclear weapons and blinding laser weapons.

In summary, we believe that AI has great potential to benefit

humanity in many ways, and that the goal of the field should be to do so. Starting a military AI arms race is a bad idea, and should be prevented by a ban on offensive autonomous weapons beyond meaningful human control.

This is an important document, that is bound to be influential. If the orchestrated collective action of the human species could in fact stop a militaristic AI arms race, however, it could stop anything. There's not much sign of that. Global coordination in the direction of explicit political objectives is inaccessible. The process is already "beyond meaningful human control".

Arms races — due to their powerful positive feedback — are the way threshold events happen. Almost certainly, the terrestrial installation of advanced machine intelligence will be another instance of this general rule. Granted, it's not an easy topic to be realistic about.

('Make it Stop' I, was devoted to the same futile hope.)

ADDED: At *The Verge* (with video).

July 28, 2015

Political Humor

The things that really matter

The prospect of Technological Singularity, by rendering the near future unimaginable, announces "the end of science fiction." This is not, however, an announcement that everyone is compelled to heed. Among the Odysseans who have deliberately deafened themselves to this Sirens' call, none have proceeded more boldly than Charles Stross, whose *Singularity Sky* is not only a science fiction novel, but a space opera, inhabiting a literary universe obsolesced by Einstein long before I.J. Good completed its demolition. Not only recognizable humans, but inter-stellar space-faring humans! Has the man no shame?

Stross relies heavily upon humor to sustain his audacious anachronism, and in *Singularity Sky* he puts anachronism to explicit work. The most consistently comic element in the novel is a reconstruction of 19th century Russian politics on the planet of Rochard's World, where the Quasi-Czarist luddism of the New Republic is threatened by a cabal of revolutionaries whose mode of political organization and rhetoric is of a recognizable (and even parodic) Marxist-Leninist type. These rebels, however, are ideologically hard-core libertarian, seeking to overthrow the regime and install a free-market anarchist utopia, an objective that is

seamlessly reconciled with materialist dialectics, appeals to revolutionary discipline, and invocations of fraternal comradeship.

It's a joke that works well, because its transparent absurdity co-exists with a substantial plausibility. Libertarians are indeed (not infrequently) crypto-Abrahamic atheistic materialists, firmly attached to deterministic economism and convictions of historical inevitability, leading to lurid socio-economic prophecies of a distinctively eschatological kind. When libertarianism is married to singularitarian techno-apocalypticism, the comic potential, and Marxist resonances, are re-doubled. Stross hammers home the point by naming his super-intelligent AI 'Eschaton'.

Most hilarious of all (in a People's Front of Judea versus Judean People's Front kind of way) is the internecine factionalism besetting a fringe political movement whose utter marginality nevertheless leaves room for bitter mutual recrimination, supported by baroque conspiracy-mongering. This isn't really a Stross theme, but it's an American libertarian specialty, exhibited in the ceaseless agitprop conducted by the Rothbardian ultras of LewRockwell.com and the Mises Institute against the compromised 'Kochtopus' (*Reason* and *Cato*) — the animating Stalin-Trotsky split of the free-market 'right'. Anyone looking for a ringside seat at a recent bout can head to the comment threads here and here.

More seriously, Stross' libertarian revolutionaries are committed whole-heartedly to the Marxian assertion, once considered

foundational, that *productivity is drastically inhibited by the persistence of antiquated social arrangements*. The true *historical right* of the revolution, indistinguishable from its practical inevitability and irreversibility, is its alignment with the liberation of the forces of production from sclerotic institutional limitations. Production of the future, or futuristic production, demands the burial of traditional society. That which exists – the *status quo* – is a systematic suppression, rigorously measurable or at least determinable in economic terms, of what might be, and wants to be. Revolution would sever the shackles of ossified authority, setting the engines of creation howling. It would unleash a techno-economic explosion to shake the world, still more profoundly than the 'bourgeois' industrial revolution did before (and continues to do). Something immense would escape, never to be caged again.

That is the Old Faith, the Paleo-Marxist creed, with its snake-handling intensity and intoxicating materialist promise. It's a faith the libertarian comrades of Rochard's World still profess, with reason, and ultimate vindication, because the historical potential of the forces of production has been updated.

What could matter do, that it is not presently permitted to do? This is a question that Marxists (of the 'Old Religion') once asked. Their answer was: to enter into processes of production that are freed from the constraining requirements of private profitability. Once 'freed' in this way, however, productivity staggered about

aimlessly, fell asleep, or starved. Libertarians laughed, and argued for a reversal of the formula: free production to enter into self-escalating circuits of private profitability, without political restraint. They were mostly ignored (and always will be).

If neither faction of the terrestrial Marxo-Libertarian revolutionary faith have been able to re-ignite the old fire, it is because they have drifted out of the depths of the question ('what could matter do?'). It is matter that makes a revolution. The heroes of the industrial revolution were not Jacobins, but boiler makers.

"Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country," Lenin proclaimed, but electrification was permitted before the Bolsheviks took its side, and it has persisted since the Soviets' departure. Unless political transformation coincides with the release of a previously suppressed productive potential, it remains essentially random, and reversible. Mere regime change means nothing, unless something happens that was not allowed to happen before. (Social re-shufflings do not amount to happenings except in the minds of ideologues, and ideologues die.)

Libertarians are like Leninists in this way too: anything they ever manage to gain can (and will) be taken away from them. They already had a constitutional republic in America once (and what happened to that?). Britain had a rough approximation of *laissez-faire* capitalism, before losing it. Does anybody really think liberalism is going to get more 'classical' than that anytime soon? Trusting mass democracy to

preserve liberty is like hiring Hannibal Lecter as a baby sitter. Social freedoms might as well be designed to die. There's not the slightest reason to believe that history is on their side. Industrial revolution, in contrast, is forever.

On Rochard's World they know exactly what matter could do that is forbidden: nano-scale mechanical self-replication and intelligent self-modification. That's what the 'material base' of a revolution looks like, even if it's sub-microscopic (or especially because it is), and when it reaches the limits of social tolerance it describes precisely what is necessary, automatically. Once it gets out of the box, it stays out.

Stross is sufficiently amused by the unleashed technosphere to call its space-faring avatar 'the Festival'. It contacts the libertarian revolutionaries of Rochard's World by bombarding the planet with telephones, and anyone who picks one up hears the initial bargaining position: 'Entertain us.' Funniest of all, when the neo-Czarist authorities try to stop it, they're eaten.

December 29, 2011

Quotable (#184)

Brandon Smith (who can get a bit excitable, in the right direction):

So, let's make this crystal clear — the long game is the total and

OPEN centralization of economic and geopolitical power into the hands of a select few financial elites. Not the pulling of strings behind the curtain. Not shadow governance. OPEN governance of the world by the elites, accepted or even demanded by the people.

(Close enough for government work.)

Any concerted movement to consolidate global economic governance around "the IMF's Special Drawing Rights basket currency mechanism" will support Smith's analysis. (The *UF* prediction: *It won't work.*)

Also crucial (the heated partisan language can be moderated without loss of signal):

If Hillary Clinton, a well known globalist puppet deep in the bedrock of the establishment, wins the election only to have the economy tank, then the globalists will get the blame. […] If Trump is either allowed in office, or is placed in office, and the economy tanks, CONSERVATIVES, the primary enemy of the globalists, will get the blame for the resulting crisis.

The Accelerationist candidate is in either case the other team's guy.

August 11, 2016

Out of Time

Some realistic questions about prospective machine intelligence regulation:

… we still don't have a concrete answer about how to effectively regulate the use of algorithms. AI is just another very complex layer added to this already complex discussion, sometimes directly related to "big data" (in the case of deep learning, for example) and other times addressing far bigger questions (in the case of sentient machines, for example).

The *UF* (accelerationist) response is probably predictable: *There isn't time to reach answers*. Acceleration means only (and exactly) that *the problem is receding*, or escaping. If it would only slow down, everything would be okay. It won't.

January 24, 2017

SEQUENCE i - ON LEFT ACCELERATIONISM

#Accelerate

The Left co-optation of Accelerationism is a remarkable phenomenon, substantial enough to have made the 2013 accelerationist manifesto (#Accelerate) a document of indisputable significance. The twitter-format title attests both to its contemporaneity, and to the seamless fusion of its content with a strategy of promotion (which is to say, a practical politics). The success of this ideological venture has received a recent (and carefully calibrated) seal of approval in the form of a response by no less a figure than venerable warhorse of the European revolutionary Left, Toni Negri. Whatever the ultimate credibility and consequence of its analysis, Left Accelerationism has already demonstrated intrinsic cultural momentum.

As a creature of Right Accelerationism, *Urban Future*, naturally, is an antagonist (although a highly intrigued one). Engagement with #Accelerate will be stretched into a consistent thread here, over the

course of the coming year. Among other things (and as Negri shows) such an engagement provides an opportunity to revisit very basic socio-economic questions within a re-dynamized micro-context. Even if the re-dynamization of the macro-context, or its opposite (deepening stagnation), has to be initially adopted as a problem — rather than any kind of fact — Accelerationist questions ensure the topic is not bypassed.

The authors of #Accelerate offer their own contextualization in a recent article, which takes "accelerationism's surging popularity" as a fact to be explained:

The passion that accelerationism mobilises is the remembrance by the people that a future is possible. In disparate fields — from politics to art to design to biology to philosophy — people are working through how to create a world that is liberated from capitalist incentives. Perhaps most promisingly, the classic dream of Keynes and Marx for the reduction of work and the flourishing of positive freedoms, is making a comeback. In the push for universal basic incomes, and the movements for reduced working weeks, we see the people themselves beginning to carve out a space separate from the wage relation and outside of the imperatives of work. When the media stops reporting the automation of jobs as being a tragedy and starts reporting them as being a liberation from mundane work, we will know that the accelerationist disposition has become the new common sense. We have reached a point in human history

where vast amounts of jobs can — and should — be automated. Work for work's sake is a perversity and a constraint imposed upon humanity by capitalism's ideology of the work ethic. What accelerationism seeks is to allow human potential to escape from the trap set for it by contemporary capitalism.

The sole (querulous) rejoinder from *UF* at this stage: **If this is accelerationism, what would an intentionally decelerationist program look like?**

ADDED: Ray Brassier on Accelerationism and Communism (via Benedict Singleton, @benedict).

February 13, 2014

Annotated #Accelerate (#1)

My marginal scrawls are added in bold. For the sake of clarity, therefore, I have subtracted the bolding used in the Williams and Srnicek text. In every other respect, the source text has been fully respected. Most of the annotations made are placeholders for future engagement. It has been broken into three posts, in conformity with the organization of the original.

#ACCELERATE MANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics
by Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek • 14 May 2013

Accelerationism pushes towards a future that is more modern,

an alternative modernity that neoliberalism is inherently unable to generate.

Since this is a slug, the quite incredible number of problems it manages to compress into nineteen words are being set aside, as effects of compression.

01. INTRODUCTION: On the Conjuncture

1. At the beginning of the second decade of the Twenty-First Century, global civilization faces a new breed of cataclysm. These coming apocalypses ridicule the norms and organisational structures of the politics which were forged in the birth of the nation-state, the rise of capitalism, and a Twentieth Century of unprecedented wars.

Indeed.

2. Most significant is the breakdown of the planetary climatic system. In time, this threatens the continued existence of the present global human population. [**So the analysis cascades downwards from institutional climatology? How did this hypothetical forecast achieve such extraordinary prestige?**] Though this is the most critical of the threats which face humanity, a series of lesser but potentially equally destabilising problems exist alongside and intersect with it. Terminal resource depletion, especially in water and energy reserves, offers the prospect of mass starvation, collapsing economic paradigms, and new hot and cold wars. [**Yes, politically-inhibited price discovery has this effect.**] Continued financial crisis has led governments to embrace the paralyzing death

spiral policies of austerity, privatisation of social welfare services, mass unemployment, and stagnating wages. [**Yet no sign of state-shrinkage is to be found anywhere.**] Increasing automation in production processes including 'intellectual labour' is evidence of the secular crisis of capitalism, soon to render it incapable of maintaining current standards of living for even the former middle classes of the global north. [**If automation is a symptom of crisis, this 'crisis' has coincided perfectly with capital production since its inception.**]

From the Right, the single and comprehensive social disaster underway is the uncompensated expansion of the state, in both absolute and proportional terms. (This is a system-theoretical prognosis, before it is any kind of moral objection.) It is notable that Left Accelerationism does not seem to find this development at all morbid, despite the fact that its trend-line is manifestly unsustainable, and thus starkly predicts catastrophe. On the contrary, those very minimal attempts to moderate the trend towards total political administration are decried as "paralyzing death spiral policies of austerity, privatisation of social welfare services, mass unemployment, and stagnating wages." In this respect, the manifesto faithfully echoes the wider socio-cultural process through which catastrophe is necessitated. It is the voice of deliberate (politically super-invested) disaster.

3. In contrast to these ever-accelerating catastrophes, today's politics is beset by an inability to generate the new ideas and modes

of organisation necessary to transform our societies to confront and resolve the coming annihilations. While crisis gathers force and speed, politics withers and retreats. In this paralysis of the political imaginary, the future has been cancelled.

The "crisis [that] gathers force and speed" *is* politics. Any future other than the one politics commands has been cancelled by proclamation. Only insofar as reality is politically soluble, however, can this proclamation be decisive. On that question, there is much more to come.

4. Since 1979, the hegemonic global political ideology has been neoliberalism, found in some variant throughout the leading economic powers. In spite of the deep structural challenges the new global problems present to it, most immediately the credit, financial, and fiscal crises since 2007 – 8, neoliberal programmes have only evolved in the sense of deepening. This continuation of the neoliberal project, or neoliberalism 2.0, has begun to apply another round of structural adjustments, most significantly in the form of encouraging new and aggressive incursions by the private sector into what remains of social democratic institutions and services. This is in spite of the immediately negative economic and social effects of such policies, and the longer term fundamental barriers posed by the new global crises.

Within Anglophone democracies, 1979 marked a limited transition from the reigning Keynesian consensus, one that was

never resolutely pursued, and quickly reversed (within roughly a decade). The principle of economic politicization (macroeconomics) has not been dethroned. 'Neoliberalism' is not a serious concept. Within China (and later, less boldly, in other 'emerging markets') a far more substantial transformation occurred, but in none of these cases does the description 'neoliberal' provide illumination — unless its meaning is reducible to a repudiation of crude command-economy methods of social subordination to the state.

5. That the forces of right wing governmental, non-governmental, and corporate power have been able to press forth with neoliberalisation is at least in part a result of the continued paralysis and ineffectual nature of much what remains of the left. Thirty years of neoliberalism have rendered most left-leaning political parties bereft of radical thought, hollowed out, and without a popular mandate. At best they have responded to our present crises with calls for a return to a Keynesian economics, in spite of the evidence that the very conditions which enabled post-war social democracy to occur no longer exist. We cannot return to mass industrial-Fordist labour by fiat, if at all. Even the neosocialist regimes of South America's Bolivarian Revolution, whilst heartening in their ability to resist the dogmas of contemporary capitalism, remain disappointingly unable to advance an alternative beyond mid-Twentieth Century socialism. Organised labour, being systematically weakened by the changes wrought in the neoliberal project, is sclerotic at an institutional level and — at

best — capable only of mildly mitigating the new structural adjustments. But with no systematic approach to building a new economy, or the structural solidarity to push such changes through, for now labour remains relatively impotent. The new social movements which emerged since the end of the Cold War, experiencing a resurgence in the years after 2008, have been similarly unable to devise a new political ideological vision. Instead they expend considerable energy on internal direct-democratic process and affective self-valorisation over strategic efficacy, and frequently propound a variant of neo-primitivist localism, as if to oppose the abstract violence of globalised capital with the flimsy and ephemeral "authenticity" of communal immediacy.

The right was destroyed, almost comprehensively, in the 1930s. Since then it has existed only as a token voice of impotent dissent, grumbling distractingly, as the juggernaut of Leviathan has rolled forwards. Neither the New Deal or Great Society programs have been reversed. Instead, the vector to total politicization has been pursued into the final redoubts of a broken civil society. The Left faces no serious *political* constraints at all, but only those 'ontological' restraints imposed by an intractable, politically-indifferent reality — exemplified by the Mises 'Calculation Problem'. It is these that are now bringing down Bolivarian Socialism. 'Globalized Capital' is primarily denominated in the politicized currency issued by the US Federal Reserve. Its subservience is

radical and explicit.

6. In the absence of a radically new social, political, organisational, and economic vision the hegemonic powers of the right will continue to be able to push forward their narrow-minded imaginary, in the face of any and all evidence. At best, the left may be able for a time to partially resist some of the worst incursions. But this is to be Canute against an ultimately irresistible tide. To generate a new left global hegemony entails a recovery of lost possible futures, and indeed the recovery of the future as such.

So it's clear by now that the Right and the Left at least agree on one thing — the other guys have near-total hegemony, and are running the world into disaster. Can an even-lefter Left accelerate the process?

Exploring that idea requires a look at the idea of acceleration … [next]

February 14, 2014

Annotated #Accelerate (#2)

[Continued from here]

02. INTEREGNUM: On Accelerationisms

1. If any system has been associated with ideas of acceleration it is capitalism. The essential metabolism of capitalism demands

economic growth, with competition between individual capitalist entities setting in motion increasing technological developments in an attempt to achieve competitive advantage, all accompanied by increasing social dislocation. In its neoliberal form, its ideological self-presentation is one of liberating the forces of creative destruction, setting free ever-accelerating technological and social innovations.

The brain-bruising invocation of 'neoliberalism' apart, these remarks are all perfectly sound.

2. The philosopher Nick Land captured this most acutely, with a myopic yet hypnotising belief that capitalist speed alone could generate a global transition towards unparalleled technological singularity. In this visioning of capital, the human can eventually be dis-carded as mere drag to an abstract planetary intelligence rapidly constructing itself from the bricolaged fragments of former civilisations. However Landian neoliberalism **[each use of this term deepens its senselessness]** confuses speed with acceleration. We may be moving fast, but only within a strictly defined set of capitalist parameters that themselves never waver. We experience only the increasing speed of a local horizon, a simple brain-dead onrush rather than an acceleration which is also navigational, an experimental process of discovery within a universal space of possibility. It is the latter mode of acceleration which we hold as essential.

The difference between 'speed' and 'acceleration' is that between the zeroth and first derivative. It is rigorous and generally understood. The difference proposed here is something else. I have no clear idea what it is. (It seems to roughly amount to a distinction between Right and Left — i.e. the mere assertion that 'capitalism' is comprehensible as an 'inside' — with no further identifiable content.)

3. Even worse, as Deleuze and Guattari recognized, from the very beginning what capitalist speed deterritorializes with one hand, it reterritorializes with the other. Progress becomes constrained within a framework of surplus value, a reserve army of labour, and free-floating capital. Modernity is reduced to statistical measures of economic growth and social innovation becomes encrusted with kitsch remainders from our communal past. Thatcherite-Reaganite deregulation sits comfortably alongside Victorian 'back-to-basics' family and religious values.

Is not the Left the principle agent of 'capitalist' reterritorialization?

4. A deeper tension within neoliberalism is in terms of its self-image as the vehicle of modernity, as literally synonymous with modernisation, whilst promising a future that it is constitutively incapable of providing. Indeed, as neoliberalism has progressed, rather than enabling individual creativity, it has tended towards eliminating cognitive inventiveness in favour of an affective production line of scripted interactions, coupled to global supply

chains and a neo-Fordist Eastern production zone. A vanishingly small cognitariat of elite intellectual workers shrinks with each passing year — and increasingly so as algorithmic automation winds its way through the spheres of affective and intellectual labour. Neoliberalism, though positing itself as a necessary historical development, was in fact a merely contingent means to ward off the crisis of value that emerged in the 1970s. Inevitably this was a sublimation of the crisis rather than its ultimate overcoming.

— It is politics that makes promises (capitalism makes deals). If you think 'capitalism' ever promised you anything, you may have been listening to a politician.

— What is the mechanism by which 'cognitive inventiveness' is progressively eliminated, given that innovation is a source of competitive advantage, which the market selects for?

— Is the 'cognitariat' shrinking? The answer to this seems to be a data point social science might provide.

— Why (oh why) are we still talking about 'neoliberalism'? Isn't capitalism *as such* the 'problem' that defines this as a Left cultural-political project? This ridiculous word is merely a profession of faith, serving far more as a tribal solidarity signal than an analytical tool. (Ironically, this dripping tap 'neoliberalism' tic significantly disrupts the project here. The accelerationist renovation of the Left, like every species of deep modernist renovation, aims to re-activate lines of development dating back to the high-modernism of the early

20th century when — as the authors fully, if perhaps only intuitively, understand the fundamental dynamic of modernity crested and broke. Or are we seriously to believe that "back to the mid-1970s!" is the implicit rallying cry?)

I am of course very strongly inclined to accept that the crippled parody of capitalism existing today under-performs when compared to its potential under conditions of *laissez-faire* disinhibition — i.e. uncompensated from the Left. But it is Keynes and the 1930s, not 'neoliberalism' and the 1970s, that set the terms of capital's subordination to macroeconomic planning.

5. It is Marx, along with Land, who remains the paradigmatic accelerationist thinker. Contrary to the all-too familiar critique, and even the behaviour of some contemporary Marxians, we must remember that Marx himself used the most advanced theoretical tools and empirical data available in an attempt to fully understand and transform his world. He was not a thinker who resisted modernity, but rather one who sought to analyse and intervene within it, understanding that for all its exploitation and corruption, capitalism remained the most advanced economic system to date. Its gains were not to be reversed, but accelerated beyond the constraints the capitalist value form.

A sound micro-portrait. That the capitalist 'value form' (commerce-format quantification) can be realistically described as a 'constraint' is the most basic proposition at stake here.

6. Indeed, as even Lenin wrote in the 1918 text "Left Wing" Childishness:

Socialism is inconceivable without large-scale capitalist engineering based on the latest discoveries of modern science. It is inconceivable without planned state organisation which keeps tens of millions of people to the strictest observance of a unified standard in production and distribution. We Marxists have always spoken of this, and it is not worth while wasting two seconds talking to people who do not understand even this (anarchists and a good half of the Left Socialist–Revolutionaries).

Such adherence to the principle of central planning is clarifying.

7. As Marx was aware, capitalism cannot be identified as the agent of true acceleration. **[Argument?]** Similarly, the assessment of left politics as antithetical to technosocial acceleration is also, at least in part, a severe misrepresentation. **[OK, as long as it is an 'unknown ideal' of Left politics that we are talking about.]** Indeed, if the political left is to have a future it must be one in which it maximally embraces this suppressed accelerationist tendency.

The final sentence of this section is at once crucial and slippery. What is it — *practically* — to "embrace" a tendency? How and why was this tendency "suppressed"? Either to "have" or to lose a future would be an interesting thing, so it is the future that comes next …

February 15, 2014

Annotated #Accelerate (#3)

[Parts one, and two]

03: MANIFEST: On the Future

1. We believe the most important division in today's left is between those that hold to a folk politics of localism, direct action, and relentless horizontalism, and those that outline what must become called an accelerationist politics at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology. The former remains content with establishing small and temporary spaces of non-capitalist social relations, eschewing the real problems entailed in facing foes which are intrinsically non-local, abstract, and rooted deep in our everyday infrastructure. The failure of such politics has been built-in from the very beginning. By contrast, an accelerationist politics seeks to preserve the gains of late capitalism while going further than its value system, governance structures, and mass pathologies will allow.

(Without wanting to insert myself into a family squabble, from outside, the distinction drawn here between flavors of anti-capitalism makes sense.)

2. All of us want to work less. **[Entrepreneurs of all kinds excepted.]** It is an intriguing question as to why it was that the world's leading economist of the post-war era believed that an enlightened capitalism inevitably progressed towards a radical reduc-

tion of working hours. In The Economic Prospects for Our Grandchildren (written in 1930), Keynes forecast a capitalist future where individuals would have their work reduced to three hours a day. What has instead occurred is the progressive elimination of the work-life distinction, with work coming to permeate every aspect of the emerging social factory.

Getting to Keynes has to be a good thing, as far as theoretical and historical substance is concerned, and this criticism seems solid.

3. Capitalism has begun to constrain the productive forces of technology **[The crucial thesis, but merely asserted]**, or at least, direct them towards needlessly narrow ends. **[A deliberate obfuscation of the difference between political and technical 'narrowness' is the principal achievement here.]** Patent wars and idea monopolisation are contemporary phenomena **[Yes, IP is complicated]** that point to both capital's need to move beyond competition **[impossible by definition]**, and capital's increasingly retrograde approach to technology **[unsupported assertion]**. The properly accelerative gains of neoliberalism **[= remainder capitalism]** have not led to less work or less stress **[of course, because work and stress are the socio-biological registers of acceleration]**. And rather than a world of space travel, future shock, and revolutionary technological potential, we exist in a time where the only thing which develops is marginally better consumer gadgetry **[Since 1979? The information revolution didn't happen?]**. Relentless iterations of the same basic

product sustain marginal consumer demand at the expense of human acceleration. **[Containerization, satellite communications, personal computing, mobile telephony, Internet, cable TV, World Wide Web, social media, genomics, drone robotics, 3D film, NewSpace, Bitcoin … what exactly is "the same basic product"?]**

4. We do not want to return to Fordism. **[OK]** There can be no return to Fordism. **[Right]** The capitalist "golden era" was premised on the production paradigm of the orderly factory environment, where (male) workers received security and a basic standard of living in return for a lifetime of stultifying boredom and social repression. Such a system relied upon an international hierarchy of colonies, empires, and an underdeveloped periphery; a national hierarchy of racism and sexism; and a rigid family hierarchy of female subjugation. For all the nostalgia many may feel, this regime is both undesirable and practically impossible to return to. **[Is Fordism being identified with the (final) 'golden era' of capitalism here? With 'neoliberalism' as something else? So a system of computerized, entrepreneurial, high-intensity capital accumulation, based fundamentally upon competition and economic incentives, would in some way not count as properly 'capitalist'? Such an extraordinary theoretical claim surely deserves an argument?]**

5. Accelerationists want to unleash latent productive forces. **[Indeed — an excellent and impressively ideo-neutral definition of normative Accelerationism.]** In this project, the material platform of

neoliberalism does not need to be destroyed. It needs to be repurposed towards common ends. The existing infrastructure is not a capitalist stage to be smashed, but a springboard to launch towards post-capitalism. **[There is no conceptual continuity between this political rallying cry and the first sentence whatsoever.]**

6. Given the enslavement of technoscience to capitalist objectives (especially since the late 1970s) we surely do not yet know what a modern technosocial body can do. Who amongst us fully recognizes what untapped potentials await in the technology which has already been developed? Our wager is that the true transformative potentials of much of our technological and scientific research remain unexploited, filled with presently redundant features (or preadaptations) that, following a shift beyond the short-sighted capitalist socius, can become decisive.

No reason has been given to think 'technoscience' is in any real way independent of 'capitalist objectives', so the rhetoric of 'enslavement' is perfectly empty. An(other) experiment in 'post-capitalist' technosocial acceleration conducted *alongside* capitalism, and in competition with it, would be a fascinating thing to see. (I doubt this arrangement would be considered acceptable by the Left. As far as the Right is concerned, it has already been undertaken on numerous occasions, with consistent results.)

7. We want to accelerate the process of technological evolution. **[Great.]** But what we are arguing for is not techno-utopianism. Never

believe that technology will be sufficient to save us. **[How did soteriology become the issue?]** Necessary, yes, but never sufficient without socio-political action. Technology and the social are intimately bound up with one another, and changes in either potentiate and reinforce changes in the other. Whereas the techno-utopians **[who?]** argue for acceleration on the basis that it will automatically overcome social conflict, our position is that technology should be accelerated precisely because it is needed in order to win social conflicts.

How do these three goals interconnect and hierarchize?
(a) Acceleration of technological evolution
(b) Overcoming social conflict
(c) Prevailing in social conflict
If, as seems to be the case, (c) dominates, then acceleration is merely an instrumental sub-objective. So can we call Left Accelerationism '*conditional* accelerationism' (in contrast to an *unconditional* Right Accelerationism)?

8. We believe that any post-capitalism will require post-capitalist planning. The faith placed in the idea that, after a revolution, the people will spontaneously constitute a novel socioeconomic system that isn't simply a return to capitalism is naïve at best, and ignorant at worst. To further this, we must develop both a cognitive map of the existing system and a speculative image of the future economic system.

Ho hum.

9. To do so, the left must take advantage of every technological and scientific advance made possible by capitalist society. We declare that quantification is not an evil to be eliminated, but a tool to be used in the most effective manner possible. Economic modelling is — simply put — a necessity for making intelligible a complex world. The 2008 financial crisis reveals the risks of blindly accepting mathematical models on faith, yet this is a problem of illegitimate authority not of mathematics itself. The tools to be found in social network analysis, agent-based modelling, big data analytics, and non-equilibrium economic models, are necessary cognitive mediators for understanding complex systems like the modern economy. The accelerationist left must become literate in these technical fields.

Conditional accelerationism again. (It's beginning to look as if accelerated technoscience is a giant ideological cookie jar).

10. Any transformation of society must involve economic and social experimentation. **[OK, but I suspect 'transformation' is pre-contaminated by totalitarian aspirations.]** The Chilean Project Cybersyn is emblematic of this experimental attitude — fusing advanced cybernetic technologies, with sophisticated economic modelling, and a democratic platform instantiated in the technological infrastructure itself. Similar experiments were conducted in 1950s – 1960s Soviet economics as well, employing cybernetics and linear programming in an attempt to overcome the new problems

faced by the first communist economy. That both of these were ultimately unsuccessful can be traced to the political and technological constraints these early cyberneticians operated under. **[I know this isn't meant to be comical …]**

11. The left must develop sociotechnical hegemony: both in the sphere of ideas, and in the sphere of material platforms. Platforms are the infrastructure of global society. They establish the basic parameters of what is possible, both behaviourally and ideologically. In this sense, they embody the material transcendental of society: they are what make possible particular sets of actions, relationships, and powers. While much of the current global platform is biased towards capitalist social relations, this is not an inevitable necessity. These material platforms of production, finance, logistics, and consumption can and will be reprogrammed and reformatted towards post-capitalist ends. **[There's enough hand-waving here to communicate an Obama speech to the deaf.]**

12. We do not believe that direct action is sufficient to achieve any of this. The habitual tactics of marching, holding signs, and establishing temporary autonomous zones risk becoming comforting substitutes for effective success. "At least we have done something" is the rallying cry of those who privilege self-esteem rather than effective action. The only criterion of a good tactic is whether it enables significant success or not. We must be done with fetishising particular modes of action. Politics must be treated as a set of dy-

namic systems, riven with conflict, adaptations and counter-adaptations, and strategic arms races. This means that each individual type of political action becomes blunted and ineffective over time as the other sides adapt. No given mode of political action is historically inviolable. Indeed, over time, there is an increasing need to discard familiar tactics as the forces and entities they are marshalled against learn to defend and counter-attack them effectively. It is in part the contemporary left's inability to do so which lies close to the heart of the contemporary malaise.

(Family squabbling. I'll shut up until it stops.)

13. The overwhelming privileging of democracy-as-process needs to be left behind. The fetishisation of openness, horizontality, and inclusion of much of today's 'radical' left set the stage for ineffectiveness. Secrecy, verticality, and exclusion all have their place as well in effective political action (though not, of course, an exclusive one).

14. Democracy cannot be defined simply by its means — not via voting, discussion, or general assemblies. Real democracy must be defined by its goal — collective self-mastery. This is a project which must align politics with the legacy of the Enlightenment, to the extent that it is only through harnessing our ability to understand ourselves and our world better (our social, technical, economic, psychological world) that we can come to rule ourselves. We need to posit a collectively controlled legitimate vertical authority in addition to distributed horizontal forms of sociality, to avoid becoming

the slaves of either a tyrannical totalitarian centralism or a capricious emergent order beyond our control. The command of The Plan must be married to the improvised order of The Network.

15. We do not present any particular organisation as the ideal means to embody these vectors. What is needed — what has always been needed — is an ecology of organisations, a pluralism of forces, resonating and feeding back on their comparative strengths. Sectarianism is the death knell of the left as much as centralization is, and in this regard we continue to welcome experimentation with different tactics (even those we disagree with).

16. We have three medium term concrete goals. First, we need to build an intellectual infrastructure. Mimicking the Mont Pelerin Society of the neoliberal revolution, this is to be tasked with creating a new ideology, economic and social models, and a vision of the good to replace and surpass the emaciated ideals that rule our world today. This is an infrastructure in the sense of requiring the construction not just of ideas, but institutions and material paths to inculcate, embody and spread them.

17. We need to construct wide-scale media reform. In spite of the seeming democratisation offered by the internet and social media, traditional media outlets remain crucial in the selection and framing of narratives, along with possessing the funds to prosecute investigative journalism. Bringing these bodies as close as possible to popular control is crucial to undoing the current presentation of the

state of things.

18. Finally, we need to reconstitute various forms of class power. Such a reconstitution must move beyond the notion that an organically generated global proletariat already exists. Instead it must seek to knit together a disparate array of partial proletarian identities, often embodied in post-Fordist forms of precarious labour.

19. Groups and individuals are already at work on each of these, but each is on their own insufficient. What is required is all three feeding back into one another, with each modifying the contemporary conjunction in such a way that the others become more and more effective. A positive feedback loop of infrastructural, ideological, social and economic transformation, generating a new complex hegemony, a new post-capitalist technosocial platform. History demonstrates it has always been a broad assemblage of tactics and organisations which has brought about systematic change; these lessons must be learned.

"A positive feedback loop" — finally, a theoretical connection to the topic of acceleration. Having bypassed any serious analysis of the actual capitalist positive feedback loop — upon which the entire historical topic of acceleration rests — it is now introduced in purely speculative fashion, in relation to yet-non-existent Left Accelerationist program. The parasitical structure of this argument (seizing real achievements in order to spend them on dreams) says much more than it intends to.

20. To achieve each of these goals, on the most practical level we hold that the accelerationist left must think more seriously about the flows of resources and money required to build an effective new political infrastructure. Beyond the 'people power' of bodies in the street, we require funding, whether from governments, institutions, think tanks, unions, or individual benefactors. We consider the location and conduction of such funding flows essential to begin reconstructing an ecology of effective accelerationist left organizations.

"We want money — but without capitalist incentives please."

21. We declare that only a Promethean politics of maximal mastery over society and its environment is capable of either dealing with global problems or achieving victory over capital. This mastery must be distinguished from that beloved of thinkers of the original Enlightenment. The clockwork universe of Laplace, so easily mastered given sufficient information, is long gone from the agenda of serious scientific understanding. But this is not to align ourselves with the tired residue of postmodernity, decrying mastery as protofascistic or authority as innately illegitimate. Instead we propose that the problems besetting our planet and our species oblige us to refurbish mastery in a newly complex guise; whilst we cannot predict the precise result of our actions, we can determine probabilistically likely ranges of outcomes. What must be coupled to such complex systems analysis is a new form of action: improvisatory and capable of executing a design through a practice which works with the con-

tingencies it discovers only in the course of its acting, in a politics of geosocial artistry and cunning rationality. A form of abductive experimentation that seeks the best means to act in a complex world.

"We want money, and then mastery."

22. We need to revive the argument that was traditionally made for post-capitalism: not only is capitalism an unjust and perverted system, but it is also a system that holds back progress. **[Still entirely unsubstantiated.]** Our technological development is being suppressed by capitalism, as much as it has been unleashed. **[Ditto.]** Accelerationism is the basic belief that these capacities can and should be let loose by moving beyond the limitations imposed by capitalist society. **[Ditto.]** The movement towards a surpassing of our current constraints must include more than simply a struggle for a more rational global society. We believe it must also include recovering the dreams which transfixed many from the middle of the Nineteenth Century until the dawn of the neoliberal era, of the quest of Homo Sapiens towards expansion beyond the limitations of the earth and our immediate bodily forms. These visions are today viewed as relics of a more innocent moment. Yet they both diagnose the staggering lack of imagination in our own time, and offer the promise of a future that is affectively invigorating, as well as intellectually energising. After all, it is only a post-capitalist society, made possible by an accelerationist politics, which will ever be capable of delivering on the promissory note of the mid-Twentieth Century's

space programmes, to shift beyond a world of minimal technical upgrades towards all-encompassing change. Towards a time of collective self-mastery, and the properly alien future that entails and enables. Towards a completion of the Enlightenment project of self-criticism and self-mastery, rather than its elimination.

Enslave technosocial acceleration to 'collective self mastery'? That seems to be the dream. Do we get to lock in the 'conditional accelerationism' label yet?

23. The choice facing us is severe: either a globalised post-capitalism or a slow fragmentation towards primitivism, perpetual crisis, and planetary ecological collapse. **[Neither outcome sounds remotely plausible, but we're deep into religion by this stage, so it probably doesn't matter.]**

24. The future needs to be constructed. It has been demolished by neoliberal capitalism and reduced to a cut-price promise of greater inequality, conflict, and chaos. **[Why does 'the future' exclude 'inequality, conflict, and chaos'? On the contrary …]** This collapse in the idea of the future is symptomatic of the regressive historical status of our age, rather than, as cynics across the political spectrum would have us believe, a sign of sceptical maturity. What accelerationism pushes towards is a future that is more modern — an alternative modernity that neoliberalism is inherently unable to generate. **[A last spasm of hand-waving.]** The future must be cracked open once again, unfastening our horizons towards the universal possibilities of

the Outside. **[‘Must’ means nothing, and ‘universal’ adds nothing, but otherwise a great sentence — culmination in a rush of ideo-neutral excitement.]**

http://syntheticedifice.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/accelerate.pdf

Naturally, the really big question: What comes next …?

February 17, 2014

Quotable (#4)

Andrea Castillo gets concrete about acceleration:

The first thing we need to understand is that technology is intelligently accelerating faster than most humans are discovering sustainable comparative advantages in production. (Most) anything you can do computers will do better. The regenerative salve of creative destruction cannot save us as it has before. Blame Moore’s law. Ray Kurzweil illustrates with the parable of the inventor and the emperor: Delighted by his presentation of a fabulous new game called chess, the emperor giddily implores the proud inventor to name his reward. The inventor requests that one grain of rice be placed on the first square of his chess board, two grains on the second, four grains on the third, and so on, doubling the preceding amount on every subsequent square on the board until each is filled.

Puzzled, the emperor complies, initially deeming this request too modest before gasping at the final mountain of rice that towers above the throne. The emperor, like so many of us, was fooled by the sleepy dawn of an exponential function. Only when the grains reached the second half of the chessboard was the punchline clear to the enraged monarch.

Whatever people (Left and Right) want to say about acceleration, they better hurry up and say it.

February 18, 2014

On #Accelerate (#1)

#Accelerate positions itself very clearly within a Marxian intellectual tradition. In this respect, it remains consistent with the main current of 'accelerationist' thinking as it has developed from the Marx of *The Communist Manifesto*, through Marx's later writings on imperialism and international relations, and into the 'Nietzscheanized' quasi-Marxism of Deleuze, Guattari, and Lyotard. The constant political recommendation across this diverse heritage is alignment with the capitalistic social revolution, in order to realize its ultimate eschatalogical implication. To interrupt capitalistic development is to retard the formation of the final revolutionary class — the radically-industrialized international proletariat (or whatever decoded schizo-

swarms it later becomes). Hence the defining imperative slogan of Deleuze & Guattari: *Accelerate the process*.

Beyond this point, however, obscurity gathers rapidly. In particular, is in entirely unclear which broad trend of Marxist theory is being extrapolated. From the available rhetorical clues, it does not seem as though *#Accelerate* endorses the wholesale deleuzoguattarian break from classical Marxism — crossing the theoretical catastrophe that includes abandonment of the Law of Value (in an embrace of 'machinic surplus value', 'machinic value of code', and marginalism); differentiation of 'capitalism' and market economics (following Braudel); denunciation of state socialism as a regressive 'Oriental Despotism' (following Wittfogel); and a dehumanization of the revolutionary subject without obvious limits (drawing upon sources from Samuel Butler to Antonin Artaud). If this were the vector pursued, it would — surely — be vividly evident?

Assuming, then, that #Accelerate backs into a more recognizable Marxian framework, how is this theoretical structure to be understood? The decisive question internal to the (serious) Marxist tradition concerns the Transformation Problem, since it is only if this is considered soluble that anything like a continuity of classical Marxism (or credible 'Law of Value') can be envisaged at all. It is worth recalling that comprehensive critics of Marx — those who find nothing of positive significance to be salvageable from his work — have, beginning with Böhm-Bawerk, taken the Transformation

Problem as the completion of Marx's *reductio ad absurdum* of the Labor Theory of Value (as inherited from Smith and Ricardo), seeing the rigorous economic meaning of the Marxian system as entirely exhausted in this demonstration. To remain a Marxist in anything other than an absurd sense depends upon some other path having been taken, but which one? *#Accelerate* offers no obvious indications. (The literature on this is vast, so it would be useful to know where to focus.)

Without a resolution of the Transformation Problem — and even a well-positioned sticking plaster would do provisionally — there can be no consistent concept of exploitation, or even a theoretically significant sense of labor time. This is especially relevant because it plays such a crucial role in Antonio Negri's response to *#Accelerate*, which picks up on a tantalizing remark in the manifesto itself:

> All of us want to work less. It is an intriguing question as to why it was that the world's leading economist of the post-war era believed that an enlightened capitalism inevitably progressed towards a radical reduction of working hours. In The Economic Prospects for Our Grandchildren (written in 1930), Keynes forecast a capitalist future where individuals would have their work reduced to three hours a day. What has instead occurred is the progressive elimination of the work-life distinction, with work coming to permeate every aspect of

the emerging social factory.

Is Left Accelerationism promoting itself as the redeemer of Keynes' empty promise? From the bare descriptiveness of this (vaguely mournful) passage it is hard to know. What we can know, with confidence, is that work time cannot be anything but an axial topic within this entire discussion.

If the Law of Value is to be defended, value production is measured in (labor) time. Marx's transformation factor is designed to conserve the equation between quantified — timed — work and economic values, as expressed in prices. If this patch fails, the entire analysis of *Capital* loses application to determinate social fact. There would be no Marxian economics at all (a conclusion Negri and the Autonomists seem willing to accept).

It is hard to see how a Left Accelerationism could be maintained under these conditions. Historical time would no longer have any calculable relation to labor commoditization, working life, or any constructable proletarian class identity. The real time of (capitalistic) modernity — onto which accelerationism latches — could no longer be described as the time of work. At the limit, human work-forces are relegated to "aphidian parasites of the machines". Once the class struggle over labor time is divorced from a fully-determining role in the production of value, the proletariat is stripped of the potential to incarnate history for-itself, consigning 'Marxism' over to an

articulation of marginal grievances, and ultimately to the heat death of identity politics. (This, of course, is exactly the trend that has been sociologically apparent.)

One final crude point for now. As a fundamental cybernetic theory, accelerationism is bound to the identification of a socially central, positive feedback loop, through which modernity is propelled. It thus requires — at a minimum — twin quantitative variables entangled in a relation of reciprocal stimulation. Industrial capitalism, with its intrinsic 'technonomic' duality of cross-exciting technical and commercial dynamics, makes the application of the cybernetic diagram relatively non-problematic. With or without the Law of Value, the accelerationist schema cannot but interlock tightly with the most prominent contours of modernity.

If not time-denominated ('living' and 'dead') labor, however, what is the variable being cumulated? That's the question to carry forwards. The question for now: if labor is the cumulative factor in the accelerationist analysis, how can a practical critique of labor time be anything other than a politics of deceleration?

(*Urban Future*'s initial annotated #Accelerate walk-through is here: 1, 2, 3.)

ADDED: Sometimes I worry that Wikipedia might be taking the spirit of strict neutrality to extremes (from the link already given): "Once again, the bourgeois theorists manage to impress us with their erudition while completely sidestepping the substance of the

debate."

March 5, 2014

On #Accelerate (#2a)

Assume — at least provisionally — that Accelerationism is serious. While abstracted from physics, the concept of acceleration is not reduced to mere rhetoric (or metaphor), even if it is no longer applied to changes in the velocity of objects in space. It refers strictly to change of the first derivative (or higher) in a measurable quantity across time, formally compliant with the differential calculus. The rate of acceleration — or system performance — can be estimated in principle, even if practical considerations complicate this task. In other words, the object of accelerationist attention (and promotion) has demonstrable reality.

The intellectual history of industrial capitalism advances two streams of (quantitative) information, both of great apparent relevance. On its technical side, it produces an apparatus of rigorous measurement directed to the behavior of complex physical systems, or machines — temperature differences, free energy, thermodynamic efficiency, entropy dissipation, complexity, information, and (emergently) intelligence. On its commercial side it establishes institutions of accountancy and econometrics,

denominated in currency units, and applied to economic production, income, taxes, trade flows, credit, asset values, and increasingly exotic financial instruments. While an argument could be made that the confluence of these two streams is implicit within — and even essential to — the nature (or culture) of capitalism, with intelligence-price discovery as its immanent epistemological directive, no such results are readily or publicly available. There might even be reasons for suspecting that the raw question *how much is intelligence worth?* cannot be overtly articulated within any imaginable social order. It is, in any case, a distraction at this stage.

Despite remarkable progress in the technical study of ever-larger complex objects, and the obvious relevance of this work to accelerationist concerns, it is the socio-economical rather than the techno-mechanical mode of quantification that is advantaged in the analysis of very large scale systems, especially in regards to those entities — up to the level of the global economy — which have monetized their own processes, and thus *quantified themselves prior to their theoretical objectification*. The enormous theoretical relief provided in this way is such that even the most severe conceptual difficulties (with which we shall soon collide) are unable entirely to annul it. (Information sciences offer comparable relief on the technical side, but it is restricted solely to the domain of artificial digital machines.)

The compelling attraction of a comprehensive, rigorous, non-

anthropomorphic apprehension of terrestrial modernity as a complex system, machine, or emergent individual, to be described through its thermodynamic, dissipative, or intelligenic properties, is such that this aspiration is unlikely to be wholly excised from the accelerationist intellectual program (as it exists, and as it will necessarily exist due to systemically-generated modernist impulses). Despite this, it is probably uncontroversial to expect the consolidation of accelerationist theory to initially take shape through reference to cultural resources of economic description, analysis, explanation, and practical proposition. The first intellectually credible version of accelerationism cannot realistically be anything other than a global economic theory of modernity.

"A global theory of modernity? You mean, like Marxism?" Yes, in a way, very much like Marxism. The tracks are already set in a direction that allows only two destinations: Accelerationism can either *be* Marxism, or its substitute — an upgrade or a competitor.

The tracks lead across the same country in either case, at least initially. It is worth sketching out some shared presuppositions, to be inherited by whatever Accelerationism becomes.

(1) The tendential globality of Capitalism is a signature of its virtual singularity (as a real individual) and not merely an effect of generalization across space. 'Terrestrial Capitalism' (or whatever else we might want to call it) is the proper name of a thing, rather than a generic label. It is an occurrence, or machine, before it is any

kind of social type.

(2) Capitalism is at least integral to *actual* modernity, if not (in its own actuality) unambiguously coincident with it. A completed theory of capitalism — however hypothetical this idea has to be — would *explain* modernity, across all its distinctive features, including the genesis and destiny of (modern) anti-capitalism.

(3) Capitalism is essentially cumulative. It is not something to which growth can be attributed as an extrinsic property. Even occasions of capitalist shrinkage or contraction are restricted to specific dimensions, and intelligible only through an enveloping expansionary trend.

(4) The self-propelling growth that — when adequately understood — defines capitalism is necessarily expressed as an economic index. An economic meta-theory capable of decrypting this index, through some set of consistent mathematical transformations of the system's own price information, is able to access data sufficient to support the body of empirical conclusions and projections that make up the accelerationist description of capitalism. This theory, therefore, will be denominated in units of economic value strictly isomorphic with those composing the planetary aggregate of effectively monetizable wealth (whose extreme speculative virtuality describes the horizon of economic-theoretical possibility).

It is notable that at some stage in point (4), this enumeration of

shared presuppositions switches over into something else.
[So this might be a good moment for a break]

March 6, 2014

On #Accelerate (#2b)

"If any system has been associated with ideas of acceleration it is capitalism," says *#Accelerate*, unobjectionably. "The essential metabolism of capitalism demands economic growth, with competition between individual capitalist entities setting in motion increasing technological developments in an attempt to achieve competitive advantage, all accompanied by increasing social dislocation."

As previously noted, of the trends referenced here "economic growth" is easily the most accessible (due to its commercial self-quantification). The technoscientific apprehension of technoscience, while already embryonic at the beginning of the modern epoch, is still some distance from mathematical self-comprehension as a natural event. Its quantification, therefore, poses far more challenging problems, leaving even very basic questions about its trend-lines open to significant controversy. (Self-quantification of development trends in the electronics and biotech sectors merit focused attention at a later stage.) Any attempt to provide a precise

and coherent measurement of "social dislocation" is likely to confront even more formidable obstacles.

Capitalism present itself as the exemplary accelerative mega-object because it is self-propelling and (cross-excitedly) self-abstracting. In both its technical and commercial aspects, it tends towards general-purpose potentials that facilitate resource re-allocations (and thus efficient quantifications). Productive capability is plasticized, becoming increasingly responsive to shifting market opportunities, while wealth is fluidized, permitting its rapid speculative mobilization. The same self-reinforcing process that *liquidates* traditional social forms releases modernizing capital as volatile abstract quantity, flexibly poised between technical applications, and inclined intrinsically towards a 'decoded' or economistic apprehension.

Under capital guidance, the modernization of wealth tends to the realization of *abstract productive potential*, which is of course to say: it tends towards capital itself, in the circuit of self-propulsion that determines it as a genetic (or even teleological) hyper-substance. At this point a complex theoretical fork is reached, from which paths lead in a number of Marxian and decidedly anti-Marxian directions. The primary question is whether the abstract body of capital is susceptible to a consistent mathematical conversion conforming to the Law of Value, which interprets it as a reification of organically composed (variable and fixed, or 'living' and 'dead') labor power. Can

the accelerative thing be practically recognized as the alienated collective capability of a future classless humanity?

#Accelerate considers this question to have been satisfactorily resolved in advance, and answered in the affirmative. Since it provides no supporting references in support of this stance, it has to be considered a left-identitarian document. Only those who affirm the prior closure of its fundamental questions are able to access it at the level of its own rhetoric. It assumes ideological solidarity as an extrinsic, and unmarked, preliminary.

To intrude, nevertheless, from an open problem of capitalist ontology, is to navigate chaos. The relevant passages are found in the second part of the manifesto, which consists of seven numbered paragraphs. Whatever we are told about the accelerative thing has to be extracted from these … or almost everything.

It is remarkable that the first use of 'accelerate' in the manifesto is both critical, and almost dismissively casual. In occurs in the third paragraph of the introduction, where it summarizes a set of "ever-accelerating catastrophes":

… breakdown of the planetary climatic system [which "threatens the continued existence of the present global human population"] *… Terminal resource depletion, especially in water and energy reserves* [raising "the prospect of mass starvation, collapsing economic paradigms, and new hot and cold wars"] *… continued financial crisis [which] has led governments to embrace the paralyzing death spiral*

policies of austerity, privatisation of social welfare services, mass unemployment, and stagnating wages. [And] *Increasing automation in production processes including 'intellectual labour'* [which] *is evidence of the secular crisis of capitalism, soon to render it incapable of maintaining current standards of living for even the former middle classes of the global north.*

This, quite clearly, is their lurid introductory portrait of the accelerative thing, as it is in-itself, converging upon a terminal historical singularity, or comprehensive ecological, economic, and technological over-performance crisis. It is both the thing *#Accelerate* wants to talk about, and the thing it decides explicitly not to talk about — introduced as theatrical stage setting, or a reminder of something before and outside the discussion, which can subsequently be assumed. The rhetorical function is completely unambiguous: this list serves as an enumeration of *that which need not be discussed further*. It is unfortunate therefore, to say the least, that this seems to be the closest approximation within *#Accelerate* to the real object of accelerationist attention, "gather[ing] force and speed [as] politics withers and retreats" until "the future" we were promised is "cancelled" (if only through a rectifiable failure of "the political imaginary"). The enemy is an accelerative thing, but *#Accelerate* will be discussing something else.

Before capitalism drops away entirely into the hazy background of implicit narrative, it is worth taking a brief digression into "the

political imaginary" and its suggestion. If there is a single formula that crystallizes the left appropriation of accelerationism as sheer cognitive collapse it is Frederic Jameson's claim — obsessively repeated across the Left Web — that *It is now easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism*. To grasp the profound mindlessness of this pronouncement it is only necessary to return to the thought of *real abstraction*, through which the virtualization *realized* by capitalism is distinguished from any determination of abstraction as a logical property of intellectual representation. Within capitalist *futures markets*, the non-actual has effective currency. It is not an "imaginary" but an integral part of the virtual body of capital, an operationalized *realization of the future*. It is scarcely imaginable that the Left is willing to follow the path it has set out upon here, therefore, unless through thoughtlessness of simply staggering proportions, since it necessarily leads to the conclusion: *while capital has an increasingly densely-realized future, its leftist enemies have only a manifestly pretend one*.

Because *#Accelerate* Section Two is a tightly-tangled thicket of conceptual outrages, it is worth recalling once again its first two sentences, which are exceptional (in this context) for their soundness:

> If any system has been associated with ideas of acceleration it is capitalism. The essential metabolism of capitalism

> demands economic growth, with competition between individual capitalist entities setting in motion increasing technological developments in an attempt to achieve competitive advantage, all accompanied by increasing social dislocation.

The primary object of Accelerationism is economic growth, as demonstrated capitalistically, in a process inextricably bound to competition-driven technological development, and also to social disorganization. If *#Accelerate* concluded here, there would be no case to be made against it. Unfortunately it continues through a string of such radically disordered sentences that no elegant pursuit of its argument is possible. Instead, it demands a piecemeal series of corrections, objections, and re-animations of obscured, half-buried, and arbitrarily suppressed problems.

The descent begins immediately: "In its neoliberal form, its ideological self-presentation is one of liberating the forces of creative destruction, setting free ever-accelerating technological and social innovations."

Why is the term 'creative destruction' (coined by Joseph Schumpeter in 1942) being associated with 'neoliberalism' here? Schumpeter considered it applicable to capitalism in general, with abundant reason, and *#Accelerate* articulates no objection to this standard usage. If 'neoliberalism' is the ideology of creative

destruction, it is the ideology of capitalism in general.

In the introduction we were told that "since 1979" neoliberalism has been "the hegemonic global political ideology … found in some variant throughout the leading economic powers." It is characterized, apparently, by "structural adjustments … most significantly in the form of encouraging new and aggressive incursions by the private sector into what remains of social democratic institutions and services." This, too, sounds like simple capitalism (as does "Landian neoliberalism"). The emptiness of the term only re-echoes sonorously with each succeeding use. 'Neoliberalism' is criticized because it is nothing other than capitalism (post-1979), and it is criticized for no other reason. In *#Accelerate*, if not elsewhere, it has no ideological content distinguishable from classical liberalism, making it a perfectly useless word. The opacity serves only to smuggle through two preposterous suggestions:
(1) The cacophony of leftist critics of 'neoliberalism' share some coherent core of economic and political analysis.
(2) Classical liberal socio-economic ideas enjoy an essentially unperturbed hegemony over the present world order. (Didn't you know that Keynes was dead, and Libertarians rule the earth?)

(So why not start calling today's fundamentalist Marxists 'neo-collectivists'? while implying that Stalinist industrial central-planning is the world's dominant economic arrangement? — *Because it would be patently ridiculous and senselessly annoying*, but actually no

more so than the 'neoliberal' alternative.)

This 'neoliberal' tic, while infuriating in its smug idiocy, is actually so vacuous that it matters little to the #Accelerate argument. Its effect is merely to serve as a sleight of hand, presenting a cartoon opponent to distract from the absence of concentrated attention upon the target of realistic analysis and criticism: the accelerative thing. The second theoretical diversion to appear is scarcely less evasive, which is to slide off the core ontological problem into a 'conceptual clarification' of astounding sloppiness.

We know from the children's dictionary that acceleration is *a change in speed over time*, which does not prevent *#Accelerate* claiming (without any obvious evidence):

> The philosopher Nick Land captured this [capital dynamic or neoliberal ideology?] most acutely, with a myopic yet hypnotising belief that capitalist speed alone could generate a global transition towards unparalleled technological singularity. … Landian neoliberalism confuses speed with acceleration. We may be moving fast, but only within a strictly defined set of capitalist parameters that themselves never waver. We experience only the increasing speed of a local horizon, a simple brain-dead onrush rather than an acceleration which is also navigational, an experimental process of discovery within a universal space of possibility. It is the latter mode of acceler-

ation which we hold as essential.

(1) Speed is not acceleration.
(2) Approaching singularity is marked by acceleration, not constant velocity.
(3) Who has ever spoken about "moving fast" in this context? It lacks even the dignity of a straw-man. What does 'fast' mean? Acceleration need not even be 'fast' (only 'getting faster').
(4) The appeal to something beyond "a strictly defined set of capitalist parameters" is mere hand-waving. Economic functionality is a confining 'parameter' (for acceleration)? There is clearly an attempt at some kind of transcendental argument here, marked by the appeal to "capitalist parameters that themselves never waver." 'Parameter' itself wavers between a logical usage and an empirical one, one conceptually defining, and the other materially constraining. If *#Accelerate* thinks it can produce a meaningful concept of acceleration without parameters, it would be a thrilling thing to see (time, terrestrial mass, physical laws, biogeological inheritance … are all 'parameters'). Capitalist 'parameters' (undefined) are for some reason to be accepted as especially constraining, however. Argument? Of course not, this is an article of undisputed faith.
(5) If anyone knows what "the increasing speed of a local horizon" means, please let me know. At least it is some kind of "increasing speed" though, i.e. an acceleration. Is this a sign that *#Accelerate*

thinks the difference between speed and acceleration is too trivial to acknowledge, so that its discussion of acceleration is actually not about acceleration at, but about something much deeper and 'post-parametric'? Perhaps, because …

(6) Beyond the "simple brain-dead onrush" (something is certainly 'brain-dead') …

(7) There is "an acceleration which is also navigational, an experimental process of discovery within a universal space of possibility." … and this is somehow connected to, measurable as, or explained in terms of some rigorously determinable process of acceleration (even roughly) how?

(8) Regardless: "It is the latter mode of acceleration which we hold as essential."

This sort of thing is the straightforward, radical destruction of intelligence. We began with a defined concept ('acceleration') and a topic of investigation or critique (the accelerative thing). Now, less than halfway through *#Accelerate*, we have neither. Instead, we are left with some kind of super-parametric trans-horizonal imaginary "mode of acceleration" that has been deliberately destituted of both sense and reference. The only theoretical achievement has been to crudely chisel this conceptually and ontologically ineffable political idea away from the only historically-evidenced process of accelerating navigation, experiment, and discovery known to human history, in order to cast it into a mystically-inspiring beyond.

Beginning with a cybernetically-intelligible self-propelling sociotechnical machine, we end with nothing but the adamant declaration that whatever 'it' (historical acceleration) is, it is not *this*, or anything we can understand, despite the fact that what we know of 'it' is entirely extracted from the cumulative reality being abandoned.

As Marx was aware, capitalism cannot be identified as the agent of true acceleration.

On the contrary. The only "agent of true acceleration" recognized by Marx is the revolutionary bourgeoisie — his humanistic proxy for the agency of capital. The proletariat accelerates nothing, except in its function as labor power under capital imperatives. It inherits a completed, accelerative pre-history, at the point of its own revolutionary auto-dissolution into a universal humanity.

Unlike *#Accelerate*, Marx labored under no illusion that the accelerative thing was capital, whose mechanism he devoted himself to understanding, to the near-perfect exclusion of all other topics. In turning back to Marx's understanding of this thing [next week], we partially withdraw from the chaotic errors of current Left Accelerationism, while perhaps remaining close enough to irritate it.

March 7, 2014

On #Accelerate (#2c)

A (quick) digression on speed

Acceleration, as Accelerationism employs it, is a concept abstracted from physics. In this philosophical (and socio-historical) sense, it preserves its mathematical definition (consolidated by the differential calculus) as *higher derivatives of speed*, with continued reference to time (change in the rate of change), but with re-application from passage through space to the growth of a determinable variable. The theoretical integrity of accelerationism, therefore, rests upon a rigorous abstraction *from* and *of* space, in which the dimension of change — as graphed against time — is mapped onto an alternative, quantifiable object. The implicit complicity of this 'object' with the process of abstraction itself will ultimately translate into explicit theoretical complications.

The flight into abstraction is theoretically snarled by reflexive tangles. Comparable difficulties arise on the side of the flight 'out' of space, primarily because the coincidence of intelligibility and spatiality tends rather to thicken than dissolve with each further increment of abstraction, propelling intelligence into phase-spaces, probability-spaces, Cyberspace, and deterritorialization. Space is released from its 'original' concreteness into the purity of the intuitive medium, while acquiring active intelligibility as *display space*, within which concepts become sensible. There is no more

archaic, or more contemporary, illustration than *the intuition of time through space*, as demonstrated by the entire history of horology, the time-line, time dimensionalization, and graphed dynamics. Space sticks to measure on its path into abstraction, and even leads it there.

The *insistence* of space is also demonstrated by a tendency for any abstraction of acceleration to undergo *reversion*, as its index of change is re-attached to differentiations of (physical) speed. In the context of the *Great Stagnation* debate — the most prominent hiatus within the recent history of accelerationist thinking — a highly abstracted notion of (negative) technonomic acceleration is restored to *measure* in exactly this way.

In an interview with Francis Fukuyama, Peter Thiel demonstrates the process:

> … you have … two different blind spots on the Left and Right, but I've been more interested in their common blind spot, which we're less likely to discuss as a society: technological deceleration and the question of whether we're still living in a technologically advancing society at all. I believe that the late 1960s was not only a time when government stopped working well and various aspects of our social contract began to fray, but also when scientific and technological progress began to advance much more slowly. Of course, the computer age, with the internet and web 2.0 developments of the past

> 15 years, is an exception. Perhaps so is finance, which has seen a lot of innovation over the same period (too much innovation, some would argue).
>
> There has been a tremendous slowdown everywhere else, however. Look at transportation, for example: Literally, we haven't been moving any faster.

In an earlier article, published in *National Review*, Thiel refers explictly to a "measurement problem" — at once theoretical and political — obstructing reliable estimates of techno-scientific development. While important to acknowledge, he advises, it should not "stop our inquiry into modernity before it has even begun":

> When tracked against the admittedly lofty hopes of the 1950s and 1960s, technological progress has fallen short in many domains. Consider the most literal instance of non-acceleration: We are no longer moving faster. The centuries-long acceleration of travel speeds — from ever-faster sailing ships in the 16th through 18th centuries, to the advent of ever-faster railroads in the 19th century, and ever-faster cars and airplanes in the 20th century — reversed with the decommissioning of the Concorde in 2003, to say nothing of the nightmarish delays caused by strikingly low-tech post-9/11 airport-security systems. Today's advocates of space jets,

> lunar vacations, and the manned exploration of the solar system appear to hail from another planet. A faded 1964 Popular Science cover story — "Who'll Fly You at 2,000 m.p.h.?" — barely recalls the dreams of a bygone age.
>
> The official explanation for the slowdown in travel centers on the high cost of fuel, which points to the much larger failure in energy innovation. …

Notably, in an assessment of the anomalous rapidity of computer innovation, he re-poses the "measurement problem" in terms familiar (much more recently) from *#Accelerate*: "how does one measure the difference between progress and mere change? How much is there of each?" His procedure then anticipates the one recommended throughout this series:

> Let us now try to tackle this very thorny measurement problem from a very different angle. If meaningful scientific and technological progress occurs, then we reasonably would expect greater economic prosperity (though this may be offset by other factors). And also in reverse: If economic gains, as measured by certain key indicators, have been limited or nonexistent, then perhaps so has scientific and technological progress. Therefore, to the extent that economic growth is easier to quantify than scientific or

> technological progress, economic numbers will contain indirect but important clues to our larger investigation.

Theoretical necessity drives us from physical space into economic abstraction. It is only realistic, however, to be prepared for the ways in which — according to deep and obscure necessities — this path will be curved by the insistent return of space. Of all those things with over-confidence in their own powers of acceleration, or smooth attainment of escape velocity, philosophical abstraction is by no means the least susceptible to counter-productive — and delusive — haste.

March 11, 2014

The Left Turn

Left Accelerationism undergoes further consolidation, assisted by two high-quality posts, from Fractal Ontology and Deontologistics.

Since Left-framing is a transcendental condition of publicization in the present world order, UF is encouraged to see it being done well. The implications of this development are inextricable from the core controversy at issue: Can acceleration be extracted from its capitalist matrix for socialist redeployment? Left Accelerationists, confident that this is possible, are setting out to demonstrate it. Right

Accelerationists, no less confident of its impossibility, have no incentive to obstruct them.

If capital can be exceeded, it deserves to be (by Natural Law). If it cannot, strenuous efforts to exceed it produce tangled elaborations of its potencies. Complexity, competition, pressure, and experimentation are what accelerationism is for.

July 17, 2014

Accelero-schism

Working on a re-ignition of the *On #Accelerate series* (which is still awaiting #3) has involved a re-reading of Pete Wolfendale's recent defense of Left Accelerationism (against Malcolm Harris' critique). As previously noted (briefly), it's good.

The strength of Wolfendale's case against Harris is not a topic this blog can credibly pronounce upon, since it rests upon the rhetorical efficiency of socialist political mobilization, and thus a very peculiar anthopological territory (though an entertaining one). Socialist reason that does not pass into or through political action is exposed as unreason by history. The 'force' of Wolfendale's case, in this respect, is therefore inextricable from the organizational dynamics of his ideological tribe. (It is not a constituency *UF* pretends to court.)

The article merits appreciation here due to the accuracy with

which it depicts the schism between Left and Right Accelerationist currents. He asks: "… what precisely should be accelerated?" The imperative form of this question is the signature of its Left orientation, but in every other respect it is impressively, and neutrally, on target. He continues:

Well, as the difference between left and right accelerationism shows, there's a good deal of disagreement about this. […] Left-accelerationism begins from the premise that the deterritorialising force is not capitalism itself, but that the transition from feudalism to capitalism was the expression of an emancipatory drive that capitalism's reterritorialising dynamics has systematically (but never wholly) suppressed. The various genealogical indices within the [Accelerationist] reader present a number of ways of thinking about the nature of this drive (e.g., Marx's Prometheanism, Federov's cosmism, Veblen's machine-process, etc.), and the various original contributions present ways of reconceiving and appropriating these (e.g., Srnicek & Williams' project of collective self-mastery, Singleton's generalised escapology, Negarestani's inhumanism, etc.).

The fissure is thus perfectly clear. Left Accelerationism rests fundamentally upon the contention that the modern social order includes an accelerative motor distinguishable from the capitalist mechanism. In the best case (philosophically speaking) intellectual proceedings will therefore lead to a clinical analysis and delimitation of capital circuitry, in order to describe, alongside it, a *quite other*

historical dynamo, to which the capital accumulation process relates as a constriction. This is, as far as I am aware, work that remains to be completed (whether from Left or Right). Accelerationism in general requires a coherent capital theory, with which acceleration is to be identified, or differentiated. Appropriately enough, the task begins to look like a race.

July 21, 2014

Twitter cuts (#12)

OK, it's verging on the obsessional to drag Jehu back so quickly, but these tweets are quite simply the most important formulations of rigorous Left Accelerationism to date.

> @nervemeter Labor theory is correct and it identifies the central contradiction of capital. @XLR8AN @deontologistics
> — Jehu (@Damn_Jehu) August 21, 2014

> @nervemeter That contradiction is labor itself — it is the thing to be abolished and the measure of social wealth @XLR8AN @deontologistics
> — Jehu (@Damn_Jehu) August 21, 2014

> @nervemeter You have to raise the antagonism between

these two aspects of the contradiction. @XLR8AN @deontologistics

— Jehu (@Damn_Jehu) August 21, 2014

@nervemeter And you can only do this by throwing your weight in the direction of abolition. @XLR8AN @deontologistics

— Jehu (@Damn_Jehu) August 21, 2014

@nervemeter Capital is a moving contradiction that tries to abolish labor and keep it at the same time. @XLR8AN @deontologistics

— Jehu (@Damn_Jehu) August 21, 2014

@nervemeter Yes. :) progressively abolishing socially necessary labor is the basis for profit. @XLR8AN @deontologistics

— Jehu (@Damn_Jehu) August 21, 2014

@nervemeter Capital cannot avoid this without ceasing to be capital. @XLR8AN @deontologistics

— Jehu (@Damn_Jehu) August 21, 2014

@nervemeter That is the secret of the transformation problem. @XLR8AN @deontologistics

— Jehu (@Damn_Jehu) August 21, 2014

@nervemeter Anacceleration worthy of name would take acceleration of the abolition of labor as its starting point. @XLR8AN @deontologistics

— Jehu (@Damn_Jehu) August 21, 2014

In the admittedly oddly-angled opinion of this blog, the final tweet in this sequence is the most theoretically significant statement of Left Accelerationist purpose since the 19th century. Attenuation of socially necessary labor time has to be arithmetically integrated with the concept of 'acceleration' for a seam of Marxian continuity to be pursued.

My immediate response to Jehu's intervention was, of course, tweeted:

It's not that I really think Lef Accelerationism was sitting in the faculty lounge, sipping Chardonnay, and engaging in spirited dialectic .

— Urban Future (2.1) (@UF_blog) August 21, 2014

… over certain passages in the Grundrisse, when @Damn_Jehu bursts in. Nervous looks all around. "Christ! He really believes this stuff!"

— Urban Future (2.1) (@UF_blog) August 21, 2014

August 21, 2014

Twitter cuts (#41)

On the accelerationist dilemma:

> So the left accelerationists seductively promise endless free time and resources but will probably deliver automated gulags.
>
> — Dark Psy-Ops (@DIA_operative) March 23, 2015

> Whereas the right accelerationists promise nothing but expect biological beings to become obsolete. Tough choice…
>
> — Dark Psy-Ops (@DIA_operative) March 23, 2015

Even speaking as an adversary, it's worth pointing out that the advantage of taking the Left Accelerationist path is, that way, you still get Right Accelerationism for free. Head for spiritual redemption through fully automated luxury communism *and* get devoured by Omega-telic X-risk. Everyone wins.

March 24, 2015

Accelerationism in One Country

Devastating:

The difference between the experimentalism of 'folk politics' and the trial and error of Srnicek and Williams boils down to a question of scale. The most biting elements of their critique of current radical practices, such as direct democracy, is that they are difficult to 'scale up' beyond local and parochial zones of action, and it is this limitation which prevents the contemporary left from presenting a real threat to capitalism. Surprisingly, then, ***Inventing the Future*** *implicitly conjures a distinctly* ***national*** *politics, geared towards achieving parliamentary dominance in North/Western democratic states. Their legislative wish-list – investment in automation, the provision of basic income, shortening the working week and so on – remain tied to national politics in an era of ever-more global and mobile capital. To be sure, the threat of capital upping sticks and investing elsewhere at the mere mention of greater concessions to labour are overstated, but without a* ***global compact*** *in which common labour standards are adhered to around the world, the reality of a post-work regime in one country would either be capital flight or the out-sourcing of exploitation to poorer countries (in other words, further exacerbating the current global division of labour). Not for nothing are the authors forced to rely on a vague hope that the rest of the world will take care of itself …* (Emphasis in original.)

Capital interprets Left Accelerationism as damage and routes around it.

November 9, 2015

Quotable (#122)

Nick Dyer Witheford (in conversation) on the variants of far Left politics under advanced capitalism:

… it's clear that capitalism is creating potentials – not just technological, but organizational potentials – which could be adapted in a transformed manner to create a very different type of society. The evident example is the huge possibilities for freeing up time by automation of certain types of work. For me, the problem both with Paul [Mason]'s work, which I respect, and with the accelerationists, is there is a failure to acknowledge that the passage from the potential to the actualization of such communist possibilities involves crossing what William Morris describes as a "river of fire." I don't find in their work a great deal about that river of fire. I think it would be reasonable to assume there would be a period of massive and protracted social crisis that would attend the emergence of these new forms. And as we know from historical attempts in the 20th Century to cross that river of fire, a lot depends on what happens during that passage. So there is, if one could put

it that way, a certain ***automatism*** *about the prediction of the realization of a new order in both these schools, which we should be very careful about.*

(What automation wants — be definition — is more of itself. There's a name for that, and it isn't 'communism'.)

The abstract for this talk gives a sense of the diagnosis.

November 25, 2015

Twitter cuts (#104)

> @matdryhurst I dislike this distinction – I would like to see a unified #accelerate that jettisons the left/right binary
>
> — Morgan Sutherland (@msutherl) March 19, 2016

> @matdryhurst "l#a" seems unfortunately UK oriented, but as a global zeitgeist it needs to hook up to SV ideology: https://t.co/Q77vfnOcVr
>
> — Morgan Sutherland (@msutherl) March 19, 2016

> @matdryhurst God knows why @n_srnck wants to take this back to the socialist calculation debate – nobody's going to

> win that argument
>
> — Morgan Sutherland (@msutherl) March 19, 2016

The embedded link is well-worth looking at. It's what Left Acceleration thinks a sane — or only moderately sociopathic — Right would look like (I'm guessing), and what Right Accelerationism thinks a non-retarded Left would look like (I'm sure).

March 20, 2016

Twitter cuts (#145)

> lrt: uh yeah Obama just low key pitched communism to the New Yorker pic.twitter.com/KcxnaDECni
>
> — Melissa (@0xabad1dea) November 19, 2016

(Source.)

Good catch. He doesn't exactly quote the MAP, but he gets comically close.

So the world's first Left Accelerationist regime was destroyed in a frog-cataclysm. One for the history books.

November 19, 2016

BLOCK 3 - BITCOIN AND BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY

CHAPTER ONE - BTC FACETS

Bits and Pieces

P2P or not 2P, that is the question

As the US dollar reaches depths of debasement that would have stretched the imagination of Caligula, people have been searching for alternative candidates for a global reserve currency. The problem is formidable. The Euro and Japanese Yen face comparable calamities of their own (mixing debt crisis and demographic collapse), the Chinese Yuan is non-convertible, and the IMF's hybrid Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) merely bundle together a group of troubled fiat currencies under a technocratic acronym.

Precious metals enthusiasts have an obvious option, and one that is already being spontaneously exercised. Yet whilst growing numbers will no doubt cling to gold and silver as financial lifeboats, their wider use as currency (as opposed to stores of value) is obstructed by an intimidating range of technical and political problems. They are not digitally transferable without complicated mediating instruments, and they remain exposed to extreme political

risk – financial crises have been regularly accompanied by seizures and controls directed at private precious metals holdings and transactions.

To overcome such problems, a currency would need to be structurally immunized against the depredations of central bankers, to share the deflationary bias of precious metals, and to participate fully in the technical trend towards mathematical abstraction and electronic communicability, whilst also enjoying strong cryptographic protection against surveillance, expropriation, and fraud. Astonishingly, such a currency seems already to exist. Its name is 'Bitcoin'.

The twin, interactive drivers of modernity – commerce and technology – come together in Bitcoin with unprecedented fusional intensity. This is a currency that is simultaneously an open source computer program, entirely native to cyberspace, and a financial innovation, conducting a real-time experiment that is at once social, technical, and economic. Built on the foundations of public key encryption (PKE), it creates a peer-to-peer open network – without any controlling node or discretionary human management – to sustain a radically decentralized monetary system.

Originally devised by Satoshi Nakamoto (whose outline paper can be found here), Bitcoin disconnects trust from authority. In particular, it is designed to overcome the problem of double spending.

Because digital 'goods' can be replicated at near-zero cost, they are economically defined as 'non-rivalrous'. If you sell me a computer, I now own it, and you do not. As with all rivalrous goods, ownership implies exclusion. If you sell me a computer program, on the other hand, there is no reason to assume that you have not kept a copy for yourself, or that the 'same' program could not be sold to multiple purchasers. Such non-rivalrous goods pose numerous intriguing economic questions, but one thing is entirely clear: non-rivalrous money is an impossibility. Without scarcity, or exclusive exchange, the very idea of monetary quantity loses all sense, as does monetary value, spending and investment, and consumer choice.

The Bitcoin algorithm makes a digital currency rivalrous, and thus effective as money, without recourse to any administrative authority. It does so by initiating an automatic or spontaneous ecology, in which computers on the network authenticate Bitcoin exchanges as a side-effect of 'mining' for new coins. Nodes earn new coins, at a diminishing rate, by solving a difficult digital puzzle – accessible only to a brute force, computationally-intensive approach – and thus exhibiting proof-of-work. This test screens the system from malicious interventions, by establishing a practically insurmountable barrier to any user who seeks to falsify the record of exchanges. Competent discussions can be found here, here, and (most diversely) here.

This problem, and solution, is very far from arbitrary. It is precisely

because existing fiat currencies have taken on disturbingly non-rivalrous characteristics that alarm about currency debasement has reached such a pitch of exasperation. When a central bank, in the course of running a typically loose monetary policy, can simply speed up the printing presses or (still worse) the electronic equivalent, the integrity of the money supply is devastated at the root. Bitcoin rigorously extirpates such ruinous discretion from its system, by instantiating a theory of sound money as a precisely and publicly defined electronic experiment.

Unsurprisingly, the Bitcoin monetary aggregate is modeled on precious metal, generated by miners from a finite global reserve, with rising extraction costs. The reward for coin mining falls over time at a logarithmic (Zenonian) rate, towards a limit of fractionally under 21,000,000 BTC. Each Bitcoin can be subdivided to eight decimal places, to a total of over two quadrillion (2,100,000,000,000,000) fragments, equivalent to 210,000 Bitcoin 'quanta' for each of the 10 billion people making up the earth's anticipated climax human population. A Bitcoin quantum (0.00000001 BTC) is named a 'Satoshi' (after Satoshi Nakamoto), although amendment to the system allowing for further sub-division at some future stage is not foreclosed. (For the total size of the Bitcoin economy look here.)

Bitcoin is programmed for deflation (of a sort). This is a source of delight to hard money types, and of outrage to those in the loose

money (inflationary) camp. As an experiment, the great merit of Bitcoin is to raise this antagonism beyond the level of reciprocal polemics, to that of potential historical evidence — and real choice. Austrolibertarians have long claimed that free money systems are biased to deflation, and that central banking encourages inflation as a surreptitious mechanism of economic expropriation, to ultimately disastrous effect. Keynesians, in contrast, deplore deflation as an economic disease that suppresses productive investment and employment. Empirical testing could soon be possible.

Numerous other questions, theoretical and practical, present themselves. At the practical level, such questions work themselves out through speculative volatility, institutional adaptations, and technical challenges. Since the entire Bitcoin economy remains very small, relatively modest shifts in economic behavior yield wild swings in BTC value, including bubble-like surges, precipitous collapses, incontinent hype, and extravagant accusations. Despite the resilience of the core algorithm, the peripheral institutions supporting the Bitcoin economy remain vulnerable to theft, fraud, and malicious interventions. As with any revolutionary experiment, the developmental trajectory of Bitcoin is likely to be tumultuous and highly unpredictable.

The theoretical questions can be entertained more calmly. The most important of these concern the essential nature of money, and its future. Does Bitcoin successfully simulate the significant features

of precious metals, such that their substance can be discarded from the monetary equation as irrelevant dross? How powerful are the forces leading to monetary convergence? Will first-mover advantage 'lock-in' Bitcoin at the expense of later alternatives? Or will multiple money systems – perhaps ever more heterogeneous ones – continue to co-exist? Is Bitcoin merely one stage in an open-ended sequence of innovative money systems, or does it capture the essential features of money quite definitively (leaving room only for incremental improvements, or tinkering)?

Supporters of the monetary status quo might insist on a further, more derisive line of questioning: is Bitcoin a dead end, an irrelevance, or a deluding libertarian cipherpunk fantasy, to be judged eventually as something akin to a hoax? Which is to note that, ultimately, the largest questions will be political, and the most heated discussions already are.

Can governments afford to tolerate unmanaged, autonomous currencies? We'll see.

June 23, 2011

The Internet of Money

In an article that might be the most important contribution to the understanding of Bitcoin since its launch, Eli Dourado writes:

[Bitcoin] is a currency, of sorts. You can spend it on things, especially drugs and gambling and getting around capital controls. Krugman and other economists have analyzed Bitcoin in these terms, as a substitute for dollars. This is rather like regarding the Internet as a substitute for, and not a quantum leap beyond, previous communication technologies. It is true that Bitcoin can substitute for other currencies, but as with the Internet, the abstraction of a permissionless application layer means that it is much more than a substitute: it is like a transport layer for finance.

Every Bitcoin transaction is defined in part by a bit of code, called a script, written in a programming language called Script. The script in one transaction defines how the next user can access the coins. In a conventional transaction, the script specifies the hash of the public key that is needed to spend the coins next, and demands a signature from the corresponding private key.

Script is not limited, however, to these conventional transactions that merely transfer coins from one person's control to another's. It can evaluate statements, execute conditionally, do math, and move bits around. It is not a Turing-complete programming language (there is no looping), because that would be a security risk; we do not want viruses to spread via Bitcoin's blockchain, nor do we want Bitcoin transactions to run indefinitely or, if we ever figure out AI, become self-aware. Despite the lack of loops in Script, it can be used to construct some very interesting scripts. …

Sometimes ratchets work right.

ADDED: In the comments thread to the article, Eli Dourado suggests: "It's … possible that democracies won't respond effectively against Bitcoin because they don't respond effectively to much of anything."

January 10, 2014

Monetary Reality

Kevin D Williamson writes one of the best pieces yet on Bitcoin:

To argue that bitcoins are not "real money" because they have no central-bank regulation or central issuer is like arguing that a prepaid disposable cell phone is not a "real phone" because its number doesn't appear in the directory and you don't get a bill. That's the point, or at least part of the point.

I am skeptical of the Bitcoin model, but it has in no small part been a victim of its own popularity, with speculative investments in bitcoins overwhelming their use in commercial transactions. But this phenomenon is not unknown among traditional currencies. Consider the lengths to which the Swiss have had to go in recent years to stabilize the value of the franc as euros (and, to a lesser extent, dollars) bounced about.

But that misses the broader point in a couple of ways. The first

is that bitcoins and other private currencies are intended as replacements for greenbacks in approximately the same way that the Internet was intended to be a replacement for the printing press: They may do that, sure, but they will have other uses as well. Wresting control of currencies away from politicians is the only way to let money evolve. Twenty years ago, you didn't know that you'd want to take photos with your telephone or use it as a boarding pass at the airport. Now you do. Nobody planned that. Nobody knows what "real money" is going to mean in twenty years.

As for price instability, that is of course a fundamental issue, and … the fact that most of the world's governments have made counterfeit currency (which is what fiat money is) legal tender complicates the environment. … A financial asset may decline in value; a U.S. dollar is practically guaranteed to, if history is any guide. Very wealthy people and institutions already have access to de facto private money in the form of various financial instruments; private currencies promise to make similar benefits available to general consumers — and, critically, to move that market beyond the reach of central bankers and regulators, and probably tax-collectors, too, in the long run.

We can probably expect a robust, competitive market in private currencies to develop, and Bitcoin may or may not be a part of the long-term picture. It may turn out to be the Packard of private currencies. We'll know the market has arrived when people have as many choices of currency provider as they do of cell-phone provider.

And that will be a critical moment in the shifting balance of power between politics and markets, another way for us to stop ***asking permission*** *to engage in commerce.*

This is in part why I object to … the ***Wall Street Journal****'s characterization of the natural theater for bitcoin use as "the black market." A better phrase for "the black market" is "the market."*

(I confess to being quite awestruck by the amount of incisive analysis packed into these few short paragraphs.)

March 4, 2014

Distributors

It's time for another (quick) *Umlaut* rave. There's no getting around it after reading this, then following the back-link to this, and being reminded somehow that this comparatively obscure online magazine has somehow rounded up two of the half-dozen or less people in the world who *really* get what Bitcoin is going to do to this planet. (I'd say "two-and-a-half" — but with no disrespect to Adam Gurri, his soul just isn't in it, which is to say: terminally distributed.)

After reading this stuff, it's easy to think that the only meaningful role for anything else on the right is to run interference while 'Bitcoin' (i.e. a-centric digital crypto-commerce) consummates the destiny of capitalism. The intelligence gulf between the emerging

Bitcoin machinery and legacy political controversy now yawns so abysmally that inherited conceptions of 'activism' have become low comedy. Poke at Bitcoin with a political stick and it slithers sideways while turning more feral — the 'instinct' for that is already locked in. The confused idiots who are trying to manage human societies today will almost certainly make it into a monster. Since I don't like them very much, it doesn't upset me to see it stealthing into the shadows, with venomous claws emerging. It will be darkly amusing to see it coming at them out of Hell.

April 8, 2014

Bitcoin Backend

A short photo-heavy story by 'Bitsmith' explores the engine-room behind digital cryptocurrency, where Chinese 'miners' run banks of computers to fetch new monetary units out of mathematical abstraction. The incentives for the mining operation are straightforward, and economically indistinguishable from those driving mineral mining operations. Due to the genius of the Bitcoin design, this massive computational effort serves, automatically, to secure the integrity of the system against subversion. What offers opportunities for extractive wild-catting from the entrepreneurial side, is a decentralized trust mechanism from that of the currency

exchange network.

Located in a re-purposed industrial space, the mining operation's 2,500 machines perform a total 600 trillion operations per second, consuming RMB 400,000 of electricity per month. There's an attached audio file with the story, so you can listen in on the process. It's not pretty, but it sounds unmistakably serious.

The tone of Bitsmith's prose has been peeled straight off the cryptocurrency frontier, which makes it doubly informative. This is the object and the spirit of capitalist perception in the early 21st century:

Getting the opportunity to visit this mining operation was very eye-opening for me. Walking around the warehouse floor, I was struck with a feeling of awe that THIS is what keeps bitcoin alive. That even if someone wanted to bring down bitcoin, they'd have to outdo these guys and the dozens of other operations like this around the world. The decentralized nature of it all … that this is just one operation among many, run by different operators in different countries around the world. This really drove home that bitcoin can't be killed by decree. Make it illegal in one country and people like this will keep hashing away in others.

This is a far cry from the small-time home miners of the not-too-distant past. Not even two years ago I knew a guy mining tons of coins per day with just a couple dozen GPU units in his bedroom.

The other feeling I got while there is that this is kind of a libertarian

fantasy for many. These guys are performing a valuable service and getting paid well for it. Too many in the world get paid well at the expense of others, or dedicate their lives to giving back to society without a penny in return, but mining farms like these are participating in the economy in a purely capitalist way (and the good kind of capitalism, not "socialism-for-banks-but-we'll-call-it-capitalism-anyways").

Love it or loathe it, the future that has already begun to arrive. This is an inspection tour not to be missed.

August 15, 2014

Trustless Convergence

A US$80 million bitcoin transaction is impressive. To really get a sense of the momentum behind the impending blockchained Internet, however, a figure like this pales beside the cultural groundswell. Bitcoin consolidates its inevitability from the sheer social heterogeneity it coordinates.

Watch this video alongside this venture capital announcement. It would be over-dramatic to suggest these people want to kill each other, but there's every reason to suspect they would not be excessively traumatized by bad things happening to each other. There's no commonality of social perspective, no grounds for

reciprocal sympathy, and a massive accumulation of historical distrust. Yet Famous Amos and the Winklevoss twins are cooperating, spontaneously, in the same world-historic undertaking. If there's any plane short of the blockchain that could imaginably facilitate comparable coordination between otherwise-noncommunicating constituencies, I've no idea what it could be. ('The market'? — merely blockchain commerce in embryo.)

The guiding principle of the next Kondratiev upswing is the *trustless commonwealth*. It doesn't expect us to like each other. That's why it's going to win.

December 9, 2014

On the Table

Pierre Rochard's essay on 'The Bitcoin Central Bank's Perfect Monetary Policy' presents an impressively cogent case for the superiority of Bitcoin over not only slimy government fiat scrip (boo hiss), but even over precious metals. One table, in particular, deserves to be committed to heart by anyone making systematic three-way comparisons:

Transaction Cost	Precious Metals	Fiat Currencies	Bitcoin
Storage	0.15% to 1% per year	Subsidized by FRB*	*Free and 100*
Transportation	Expensive	Inconvenient	*Free & Easy*
Security	Physical	Institutional	*Cryptographi*
Fiduciary media	Inevitable	Inherent	*Impossible*
Recordkeeping	Manual	Manual	*Automatic*
Counterfeiting	Impossible	Inevitable	*Impossible*
Issuance	Mining	Politics	*Algorithm*
Payment clearing	Expensive	Centralized	*Cheap & Dist*
Scarcity	High	Arbitrary	*Fixed - 21 mi*
Authentication	Expensive assay	Trust counterparty	*Built-in*

** fractional reserve banking*

It's difficult to run through this and see anything less than a fundamental rupture in social history. When compared to Bitcoin, only proto-money has ever yet existed.

As Rochard concludes:

Fractional reserve banking entails the creation of new money that is fungible with already preexisting money, i.e. it can be used interchangeably within the currency's payment systems. This is impossible with Bitcoin. The BCB ['Bitcoin Central Bank'] enforces the strictest deposit regulations in the world by requiring full reserves for all accounts. This is the digital equivalent of the Chicago Plan or the Austrian 100% reserve gold standard. Under this regulatory regime, money is not destroyed when bank debts are repaid, so increased money hoarding does not cause liquidity traps, instead it increases real interest rates and lowers consumer prices.

This is a self-stabilizing cycle as higher interest rates incentivize hoarders to invest, while deflation increases consumption due to the wealth-effect on hoarders. The BCB prevents lending out of deposits so that it can properly target money supply and avoid the destabilizing effects of commingling the credit and payment systems. The positive properties of AMST ['asymptotic money supply targeting'] and PoWS ['Proof-of-work seigniorage'] combined make it certain that, absent a technological problem, Bitcoin will be adopted as the global currency. For a deeper understanding of the market process involved in becoming global currency I would recommend reading Konrad Graf's explanation of hyper-monetization and Peter Šurda's liquidity analysis of bitcoins. The Bitcoin Central Bank will be the longest lasting institution of its kind thanks to the anti-fragile independent monetary policy it has set in stone.

ADDED: Approaching the same forecast in another direction —

> Calling bitcoin "an irreversible ledger entry in a distributed global database" is like calling a car a "horseless carriage". Mouthful.
>
> — Pierre Rochard (@Pierre_Rochard) December 18, 2014

> "horseless carriage" was shortened to "car". "P2P electronic cash" shortens to "cash" and its synonyms. Reasonable

linguistic evolution.

— Pierre Rochard (@Pierre_Rochard) December 18, 2014

December 17, 2014

Bitcoin as SOCI

This is one of the greatest things ever written, period.

'SOCI' abbreviates 'self-organizing collective intelligence'.

The basic dynamics of a SOCI is as follows. It begins as some sort of attractor—some aesthetic sensibility or yearning—that is able to grab the attention and energy of some group of people. Generally one that is very vague and abstract. Some idea or notion that only makes sense to a relatively small group. […] But, and this is the key move, when those people apply their attention and energy to the SOCI, this makes it more real, easier for more people to grasp and to find interesting and valuable. Therefore, more attractive to more people and their attention and energy. […] … If the SOCI has enough capacity within its collective intelligence to resolve the challenge, it "levels up" and expands its ability to attract more attention and energy. If not, then it becomes somewhat bounded (at least for the present) and begins to find the limit of "what it is".

Greenhal then narrates the story of Bitcoin to date, within this

framework. The sheer enormity of the innovation it has introduced emerges starkly.

In conclusion:

My sense is that over just the next five years this new form of SOCI will go through its gestation, birthing and childhood development stages. The result will be a form of collective intelligence that is so much more capable than anything in the current environment that it will sweep away even the most powerful contemporary collective intelligences (in particular both corporations and nation states) in establishing itself as the new dominant form of collective intelligence on the Earth. […] And whoever gets there first will "win" in a fashion that is rarely seen in history.

This will look prophetic not too far down the road.

February 23, 2016

Countdown

XS wishes all its readers a productive Bitcoin Halving Day. (It's only the second ever — with the first falling on November 28, 2012, when **Block 210000** was solved.)

Bitcoin likes Countdown numbers (only 21000000 will ever be produced).

(Countdown = 210.)

July 9, 2016

CHAPTER TWO - BTC DEATH?

Bitcoin vs Leviathan

Moldbug's prediction: Freedom loses (as usual).

The question is this: Which dominates? The malignancy of Leviathan, or its incompetence? How radically can the metastatic cancer-phase State shape reality in conformity to its vision?

Bitcoin — which is essentially an experiment in Austrian monetary theory — provides the model test-bed in which this question can be lucidly decided. Its current rising fortunes only accelerates the decision. If Bitcoin can't be stopped, Leviathan is exposed as a paper tiger.

The best way to make the bet, of course, is to buy (or short) BTC. *Outside in* has been too apathetic to put resources behind its hunches yet, but (for the zilch it's worth) our intuitions run *contra* Moldbug on the topic. Compared to Cyberspace, where bitcoin is entrenched, the State is weak, unintelligent, uninformed, parochial, poorly designed, and — in each respect — getting ever more so, in both comparative and absolute terms. The truly stupendous idiocy of Leviathan thoroughly swamps its evil, as is demonstrated every time

it tries to get something done.

The digital Outside, in contrast, is already far beyond recall. The germ of a free economy is under construction.

[UF on Bitcoin (June 2011) here]

March 1, 2013

Bitcoin Horror Stories

Bitcoin Dies, Moldbug ventures, perhaps sometime this year. Following a broad DOJ indictment for money laundering, targeting any and everybody remotely connected with the free currency, the "BTC/USD price falls to 0 and remains there."

"[R]emains there" — how cute is that? *Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Bitcoin R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn*.

Bitcoin simulates gold, and once 'mined' it lasts for ever. If it "falls to 0" it has to remain there, for eternity, because it can never be finished. It can die, but never be destroyed. It's built for undeath.

'Moldbug Monetary Theory' attributes the value of money exclusively to speculation. If the speculators are terrorized sufficiently, BTC drops onto the flatline, and "remains there." The market would be totally extinguished. What Mao failed to achieve, let alone sustain, USG would somehow accomplish, perhaps by exhibiting greater revolutionary ardor and ruthlessness.

Ruthlessness would certainly be necessary, for the obvious reason that flatline-BTC has zero downside risk. It's a one-way bet that someone, somewhere, will re-animate it ("nothing is unstable" (thanks to *fotrkd* for the reminder)). If a genius was designing irresistible speculator-bait, zero-degree bitcoin would be hard to improve upon. It's free, and it's only worth nothing if the cops can secure the crypt flawlessly, and *forever*. Did anyone say 'free money'?

Speculation messes with time, by bringing the future forward. If undead BTC were *ever* to be re-awakened, it already has been. Its economic potential flows back down the timeline, modified by a time-preference discount. The feedback becomes strange, and difficult to confidently calculate, but it works as a vitalizing charge, and the corpse unmistakably twitches. Whatever money at t0 is worth, if it's anything at all, at t0-*n* it almost certainly can't be zero.

The *Necronomicon* describes flatline-BTC with creepy exactitude:

That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons even death may die.

ADDED: An alternative take on Bitcoin and undeath from Yifo Guo, interviewed here (H/T Nick B. Steves, in this comment thread): "… the point is, the idea will never die. Even if bitcoin dies, an alternative will arise, one that addresses the vulnerability that was previously exploited. Then you get bitcoin 2.0."

March 5, 2013

Satoshi Nakamoto Night

On October 31, 2008, this happened.

(The first XS Bitcoin horror story.)

October 31, 2015

The Future of Bitcoin

The latest guidance from US Leviathan's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) is a leaf ripped straight out of Moldbuggian prophecy. The target acquisition revealed in *Administrators and Exchangers of Virtual Currency*, section *c. De-Centralized Virtual Currencies* could not possibly be clearer:

A final type of convertible virtual currency activity involves a de-centralized convertible virtual currency (1) that has no central repository and no single administrator, and (2) that persons may obtain by their own computing or manufacturing effort.

A person that creates units of this convertible virtual currency and uses it to purchase real or virtual goods and services is a user of the convertible virtual currency and not subject to regulation as

a money transmitter. By contrast, a person that creates units of convertible virtual currency and sells those units to another person for real currency or its equivalent is engaged in transmission to another location and is a money transmitter. In addition, a person is an exchanger and a money transmitter if the person accepts such de-centralized convertible virtual currency from one person and transmits it to another person as part of the acceptance and transfer of currency, funds, or other value that substitutes for currency.

[See Fotrkd's link feast in this comment thread]

RIP Bitcoin, I think Moldbug confirms:

I have not of course seen the questionnaire [for money transmitter licenses], but I imagine it asks you how you know the monies you're transmitting are not the product of illegal activity. Of course, Bitcoin provides no such assurance. By design. That's because it's well-designed — for a free country that doesn't exist.

With licenses unobtainable, and unlicensed monetary transactions proscribed, Bitcoin price-discovery has been criminalized. The conclusion: Bitcoin no longer has a practically meaningful US$ exchange rate, which is equivalent, in fact, to having a yet undiscovered (but already implicit) value of US$0. The cliff edge has been crossed, and all that remains is the impact.

Empirically vulnerable predictions are pure gold, and this is an especially precious example. The fate of Bitcoin tests the real power

of the State, the practicability of economic controls, and all political theories — whether reactionary or progressive — which subordinate market dynamics to more fundamental levels of social order. If Bitcoin does soon die, it will have been demonstrated that government can effectively dominate the economic sphere, dictate price, and eradicate commerce, under conditions which are — in at least some important respects — extremely challenging. Freedom might still seem attractive, but it will have been shown to be puny.

Alternatively, if Bitcoin survives, and spreads, the Right's libertarian current will be vitalized. These types will not only find their analytical models reinforced, but the sovereign insubordination of markets will have been dramatically evidenced, the State humiliated and weakened, and an archetypal anarcho-capitalist institution entrenched. Interesting times.

ADDED: Eli Dourado argues that anonymity is the "real target":

Contrary to some popular accounts, Bitcoin is not completely anonymous, but pseudonymous. The entire Bitcoin ledger is publicly shared so that the same coins can't be spent twice. Bitcoin "mixers" take coins from multiple pseudonymous actors, shuffle them around, and return them to their original users under new pseudonyms. In other words, mixers help anonymize a system that is not truly anonymous.

If the government were to succeed in regulating mixers, it would not destroy Bitcoin as a payment mechanism or even hurt Bitcoin's price,

which has now reached an all-time high of $60, but it would ruin one of the chief advantages of using it—the quasi-anonymity that it affords.

ADDED: Meanwhile, in Europe …

March 20, 2013

BTC End Times?

In January, Moldbug spake prophetically:

Bitcoin dies in two very simple steps.

1: A DOJ indictment is unsealed which names everyone on Planet Three who operates, or has ever operated, or perhaps who has ever even breathed on, a BTC/USD exchange, as a criminal defendant. The charge: money laundering.

On May 15, Under the headline **US Government Begins BitCoin Crackdown**, Zero Hedge reported that:

Many people use Dwolla, a PayPal-like payment network, to send dollars to their Mt. Gox accounts. They then use those dollars to buy Bitcoins. On Tuesday, Dwolla announced that it had frozen Mt. Gox's account at the request of federal investigators. It's the first federal action against the currency.

And, by the way:

Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) described Bitcoin as an "online form

of money laundering"

Outside in doesn't share Moldbug's BTC prediction, but the projected narratives don't diverge much for some time. By attempting to stamp out Bitcoin, USG rapidly converts it into an overtly subversive *revolutionary currency**, used only by those in explicit (though covert) antagonism to the regnant global economic regime. The test then begins.

*Typically, reactionaries don't like revolutions, but that's because revolutions are typically democratizing. When the neoreaction gets to watch a spontaneous right-wing revolution unfolding, *against* the democratized or 'political' economy, I suspect that they'll quickly recover their natural sympathy for it.

ADDED: The greatness of Peter Thiel on display (via, and as anticipated)

May 16, 2013

Will Bitcoin Survive?

Eli Dourado, author of the most important Bitcoin-inspired article on the web, remains publicly committed to the cryptocurrency's future. In the wake of the Mt Gox crisis, affecting the world's largest BTC exchange (based in Japan), he has written a brief defense of the bullish case in Nietzschean vein: *what does not kill us makes us*

stronger.

In just four short paragraphs, Dourado manages to make a significant point. Stress-tested survival has a value. The more ferocious Bitcoin's environment is shown to be, the more advantageous its competitive position relative to alternative cryptocurrencies, as its resilience is demonstrated and publicized. Actualization of potential (catastrophe) resolves risk, leaving whatever survives augmented by a security premium. "Now it turns out that getting a cryptocurrency ecosystem to grow up is really, really hard — harder than maybe we thought. It follows directly that Bitcoin faces less competition from other cryptocurrencies than we thought. … since it is hard to succeed, if Bitcoin succeeds, then it may be worth quite a lot."

Dourado's two links do more work still. The first is to a recent Megan McArdle pre-obituary on BTC, which argues that the reputational damage inflicted by the Mt Gox fiasco will weaken it still further in what was always a Quixotic challenge to State power:

I've never been very bullish on Bitcoin, because ultimately, the better it performs at evading government surveillance of currency transactions (and government ability to manage debt loads via inflation), the harder those governments are going to try to shut it down.

Governments like levying an invisible inflation tax, and get angry when people attempt to route around it. (This is all quite explicit,

on both sides.) The balance of opportunities within this conflict is too intricate to detail here, but McArdle's utter submissiveness to government exaction clearly represents an extreme position among commentators. That Bitcoin predictably infuriates state financial authorities is a feature, not a bug.

Dourado's second link refers to an older and subtler argument by Tyler Cowen, which makes a bearish case against Bitcoin on strictly economic grounds. Insofar as Bitcoin is seen to flourish, competitor cryptocurrencies will be attracted into the market, arbitraging value down to the cost of supply:

There is thus a new theorem: the value of [any -it]Coin should, in equilibrium, be equal to the marketing costs of its potential competitors … In short, we are still in a situation where supply-side arbitrage has not worked its way through the value of Bitcoin. And that is one reason — among others — why I expect the value of Bitcoin to fall — a lot. [Cowen's internal link is well worth following up.]

As already noted, Cowen's bearish position is *weakened* by Bitcoin's recent travails. Almost irrespective of what happens next, an established reputation for toughness will feature prominently in the market evaluation of any cryptocurrency from now on.

Since Bitcoin won't have been killed — it is close to impossible to kill — it will have been made much stronger.

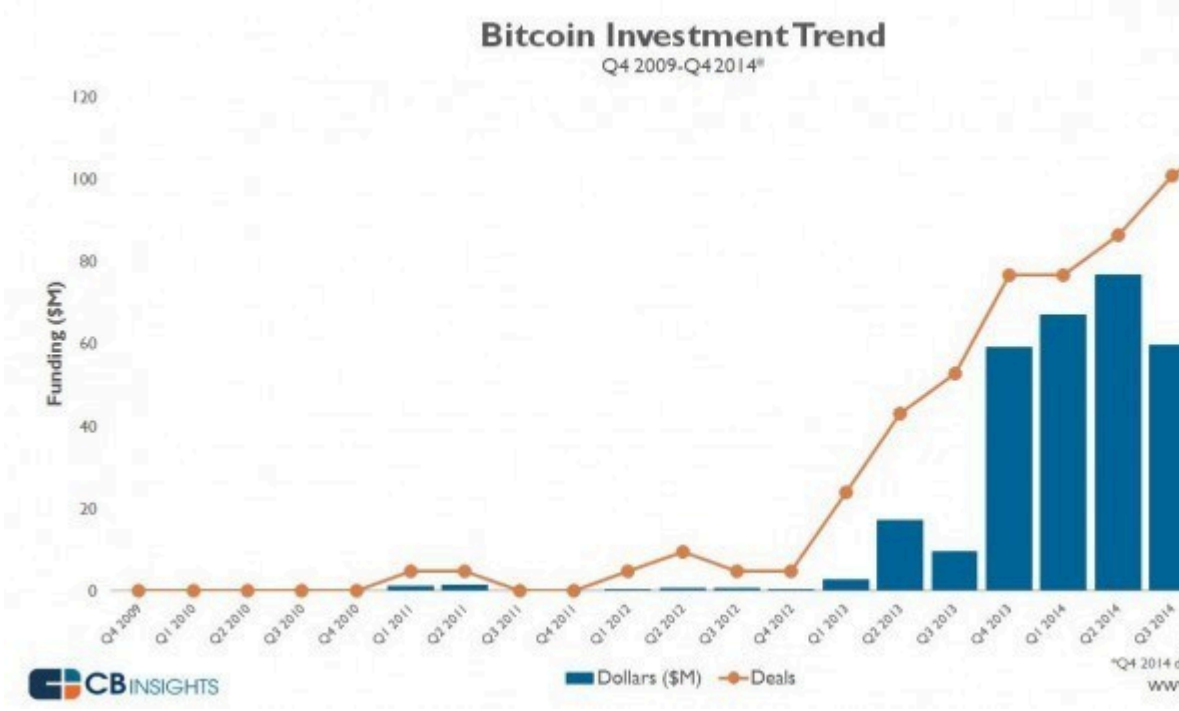
ADDED: Time for YellenCoin? (No.)

ADDED: “So is Mt. Gox the new version of Friendster, the early social networking leader that buckled just before Facebook surged ahead? … Bitcoin’s next generation of founders is cleaner, more pedigreed and suited to Wall Street’s and Capitol Hill’s tastes. They are no less libertarian or wolf-like.”

February 26, 2014

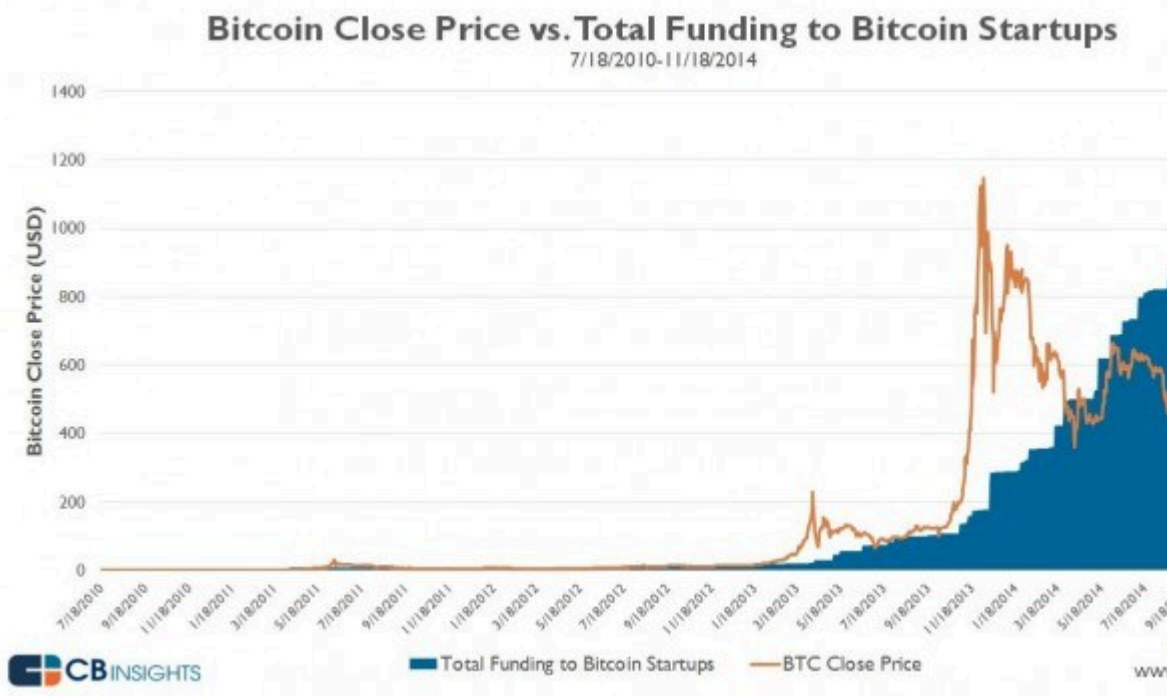
Undead

Does this look like something that’s about to die?



(This is among the few topics that puts my reverence for the Moldgod under serious strain.)

More here:



The apparently inverse relation between BTC value and investment level merits further commentary.

On a trivial personal note, I seem to have carelessly lost my Bitcoin wallet somehow, so my perfect detachment on the subject is even more impeccable than you might think.

Note: There's a exemplary anti-Moldbug prognosis cited over at the other place. "The only extent to which the United States can allow anything at all with respect to Bitcoin is the extent to which

it can reform itself to work inside Bitcoin." OK, it's perhaps an over-stretch in the opposite direction, but it still ends up far closer to the mark.

(Image source.)

ADDED: Found my Bitcoin account again — which I'm confident everyone will be extremely excited about. Better still, my BTC 0.0005 is still sitting there securely. Phew!

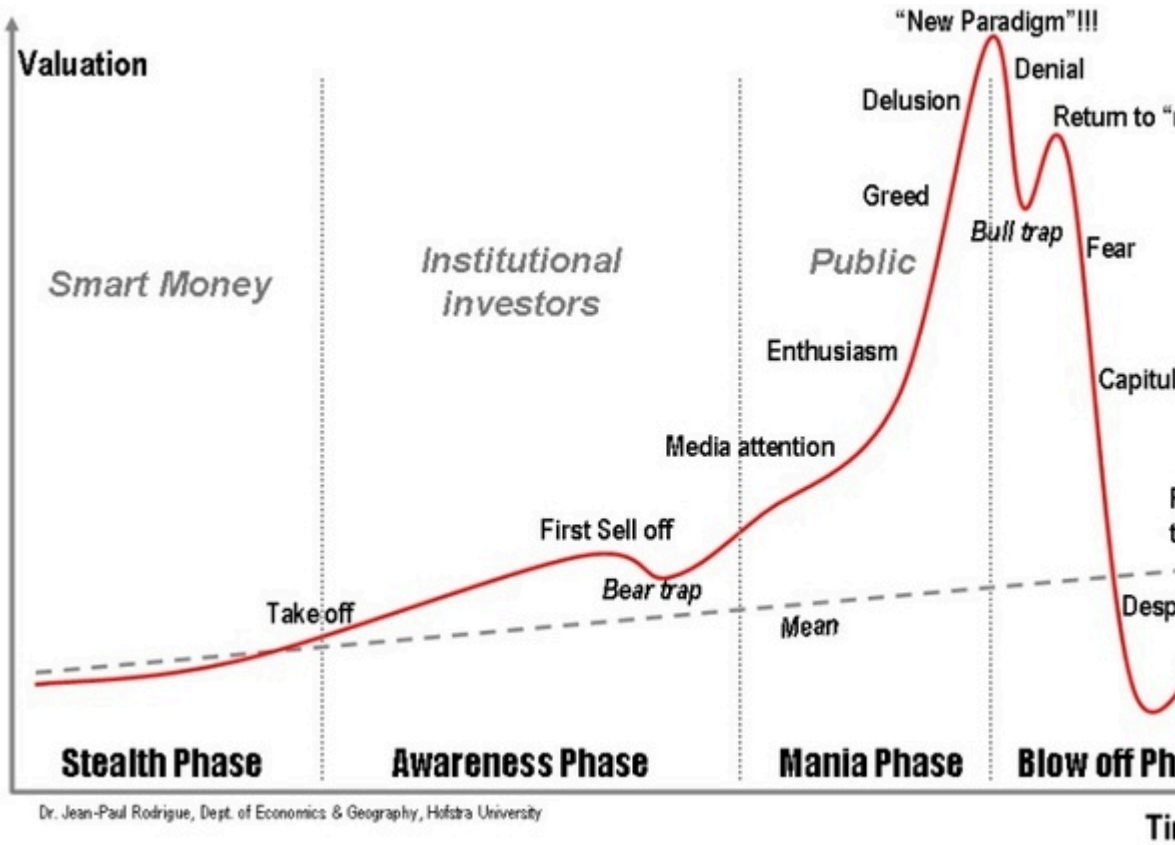
December 1, 2014

Hype Waves

As the Bitcoin price takes a tumble, Heather R Morgan reminds us of her super-bearish article on the currency from February last year (with just a little gloating):

> As #bitcoin plummets, I look back on the article I wrote a year ago about my predictions with a smirk. http://t.co/1lq0PpO4np #economics
>
> — Heather R Morgan (@HeatherReyhan) January 14, 2015

It includes this valuable (abstract) hype-cycle chart:



Look carefully at what is happening in the final stages, though. I don't think this chart is showing what Morgan takes it to. (AI, VR, Bitcoin — they all follow the same roller-coaster course, and they all get installed in the end.)

A Twitter comment worth noting:

> I rarely see skepticism of #Bitcoin that is not more generally just skepticism of money. @Pierre_Rochard @prestonjbyrne @izakaminska

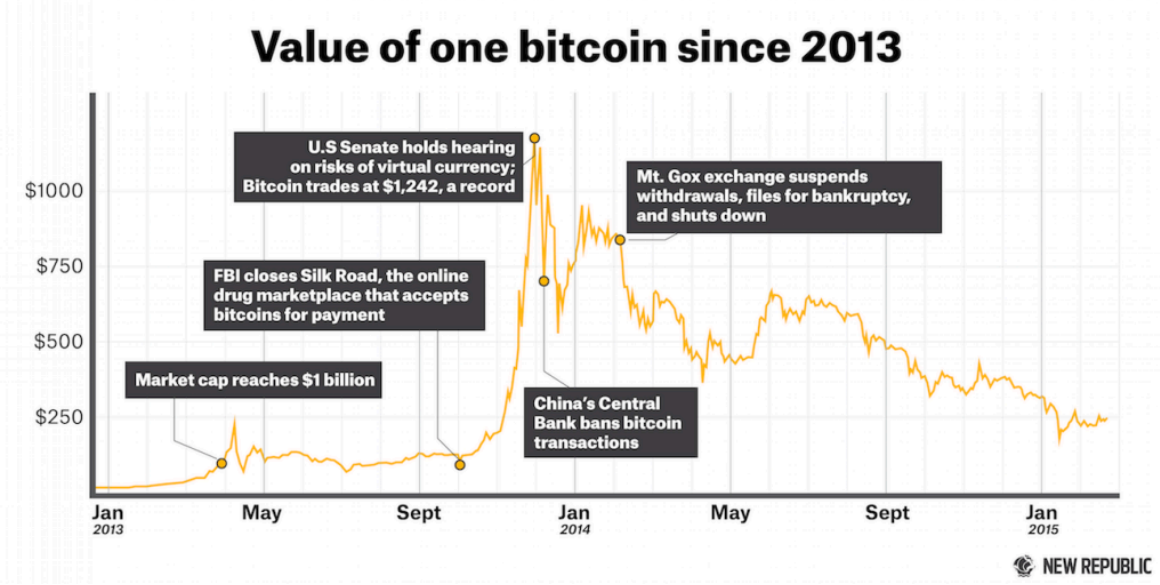
— Michael Goldstein (@Bitstein) January 14, 2015

ADDED: Jerry Brito is sensible on the topic.

January 14, 2015

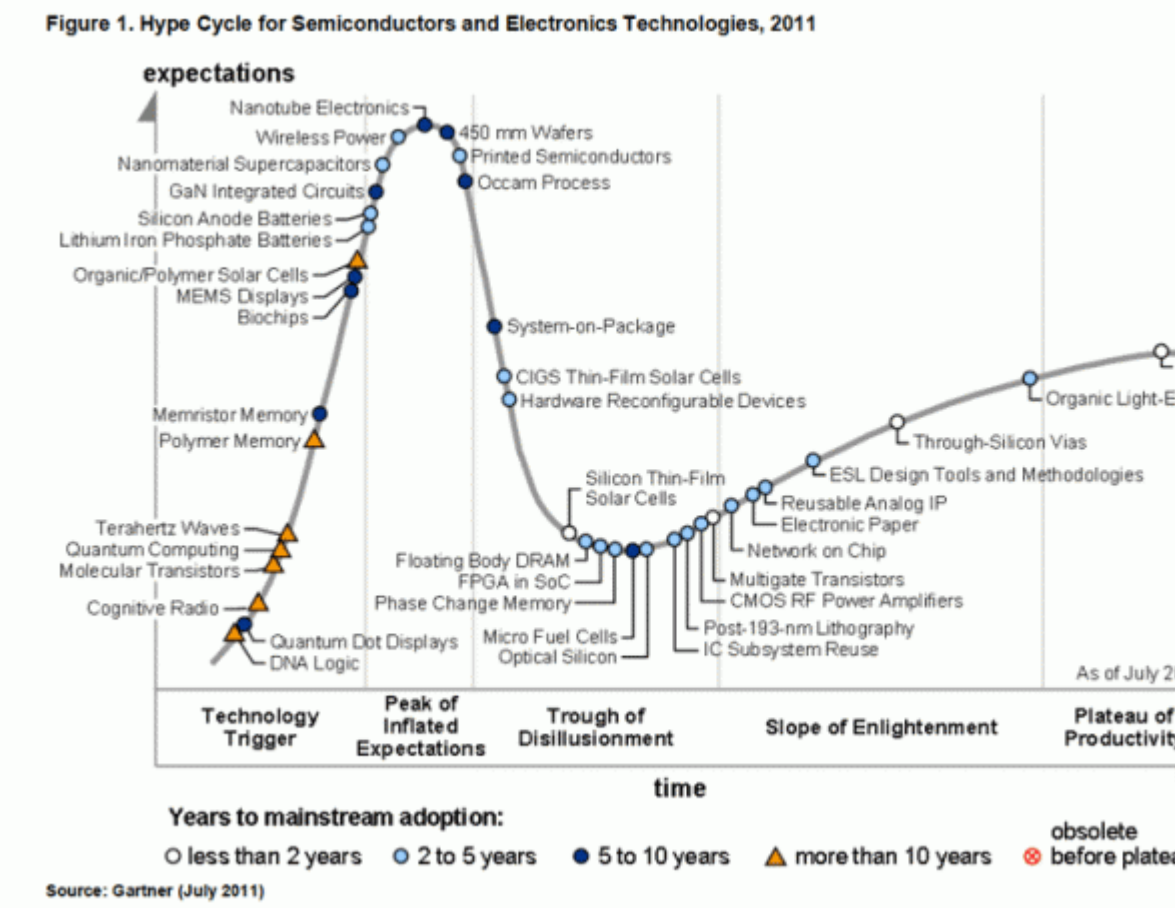
Hype Waves II

The New Republic's somber account of the Bitcoin Gold Rush is well worth a read (despite the troweled-on axiomatic leftism). It includes this chart of the recent undulations in the Bitcoin price (in US Dirty fiat):



It's a small chunk of history that could support any number of

narratives at this point. This one, in particular, offers an alternative to terminal doom scenarios:

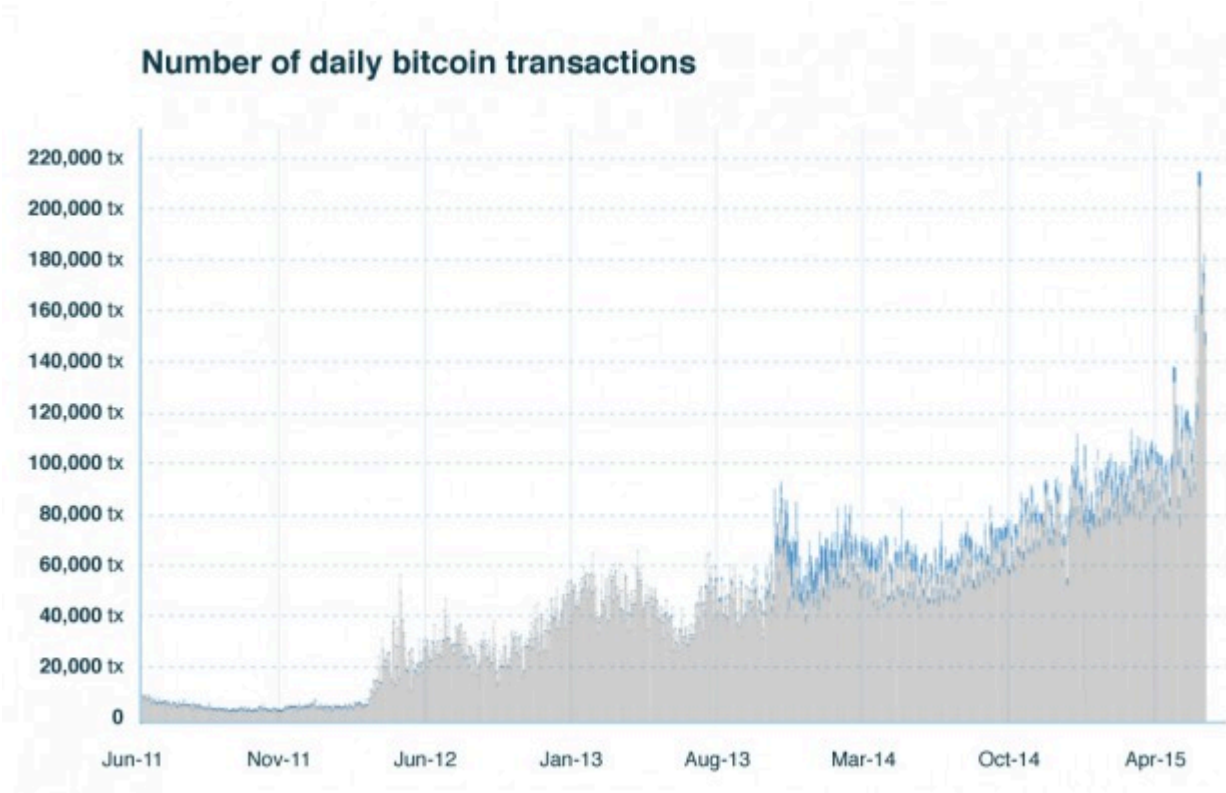


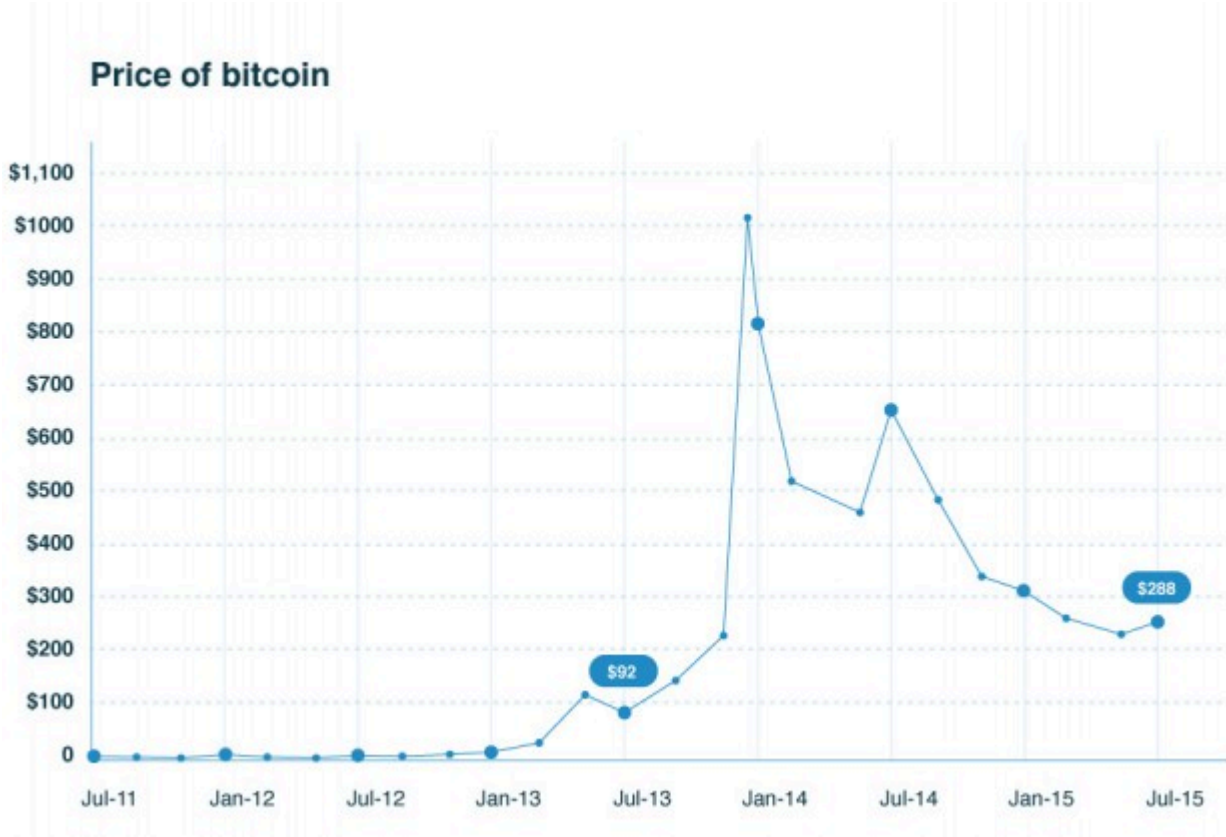
(Plenty of others seem to agree.)

February 26, 2015

Dissociation

Coinbase provides a graphic overview of 2015 Bitcoin trends, strikingly illustrating a structural disengagement of the cryptocurrency's metrics as a medium of exchange and as a store of value:





While the price of bitcoin is down 9% year-to-date, if you look below the surface it is clear that Bitcoin had a strong first half and is making great strides as digital money for people around the world and a payment network for innovation. … […] The number of transactions per day on the Bitcoin network is rapidly accelerating. The network averaged 60,590 transactions per day in June 2014 and 117,474 transactions per day in June 2015. … That's a ***94% increase in monthly transactions over the past year****.*
[Emphasis in original.]

One obvious hypothesis — that Bitcoin hoarders are strategically restraining their holdings in order to facilitate the commercial spread of the currency — seems to assume an implausibly coherent solution to an intractable coordination (or collective action) problem. A more widely accepted Bitcoin has to be worth more, doesn't it? It's hard to see how *everyone* could be leaving that value on the pavement. (This blog is presently stumped.)

July 16, 2015

Quote note (#282)

At least superficially, under-funding is the strict reciprocal of hype:

The blockchain industry is either hugely under-resourced or hugely over-optimistic. Probably both.

Bitcoin rigorously formalizes the common insight that *words are cheap* (it emerged out of spam-filter solutions). So this analysis is intriguingly ironic, as well as obviously thought-provoking.

September 9, 2016

CHAPTER THREE - BTC POLITICS

Bitcoin and Chains

Doug Henwood, writing in *The Nation*, explains the attractions of Bitcoin for the Right:

There have been many other reports of thefts, frauds and hackings, which Bitcoin partisans dismiss as mere growing pains. But with no regulator, no deposit insurance and no central bank, this sort of thing is inevitable — it's just tough luck. Introduce regulators and insurance schemes, though, and Bitcoin will lose all its anarcho-charm.

Keynes once called gold "part of the apparatus of conservatism" for its appeal to rentiers who loved austerity because it preserved the value of their assets. Bitcoin serves a similarly totemic purpose for today's cyber-libertarians, who love not only the statelessness of it as money, but also its power to subject the institutional banking system to "disruption" (one of the favorite words of that set). And like gold, Bitcoin is deflationary. There's a limit on how many bitcoins can be produced, and it gets more difficult to produce them over time until that limit is reached. Of course, new cryptocurrencies could

arise. But the existence of the limit reflects the deflationary sympathies of the libertarian mind — in a Bitcoin economy, creating money to ease an economic depression would be impossible. Which is not to say that only libertarians love Bitcoin.

Despite the careful signals of political distance, there's nothing off-track on the substance. In the subsequent paragraphs Henwood excavates a little deeper, while preserving the same balanced openness to information. He even — momentarily — passes the ultimate Rightist clue-test by collapsing epistemology down into the market: "Bitcoin is not without friends on Wall Street. Gil Luria of Wedbush Securities is following it; he describes the recent volatility as 'extended price discovery,' which is a way of saying that no one knows what it is, what it will be or what it's worth. His firm is selling his Bitcoin research for payment in bitcoins."

His unexpected discovery, however, is a Left Bitcoin constituency, drawn to it by the same priorities that can make 'libertarianism' so ideologically-slippery as a category, most obviously: the potential for "evasion of state surveillance and policing — which, in the post-Snowden era, is nothing to sneeze at." While rummaging for story-snippets at a New York Bitcoin 'party', he is delighted to run into 'Mistress Magpie':

A Marxist-feminist professional dominatrix who practices in Britain … [and] an enthusiastic Bitcoin proponent. She explains her enthusiasm as beginning with her deep techno-geekiness, and adds

that Bitcoin is also practical for someone in her line of work — anonymity is important, whether operating in real life or online. Unlike libertarians, who see cryptocurrencies as a possible gateway to a new society, the socialist in Mistress Magpie sees them as a way to operate furtively under capitalism, in a way that might not be needed in a more open socialist society.

While it's superficially tempting to make fun of such socialism with anarcho-capitalist characteristics, it sparkles in comparison to the dismal defense of state fiat money authority with which Henwood — dutifully — concludes the article.

May 9, 2014

Techno-Leviathan

Writing in *E-International Relations*, Brett Scott raises Left critique of the blockchain revolution to a stimulating level of theoretical sophistication. His central argument is important: Blockchain cryptosystems are the technological realization of the "dystopian, conservative" impulse — first crystallized by Thomas Hobbes — to establish a politically-immunized sovereignty. This social model, previously subverted by the fallible humanity of leaders, is finally becoming attainable as algorithmic government, Scott's *Techno-Leviathan*.

Conservative libertarians hold tight to the belief that, if only hard property rights and clear contracting rules are put in place, optimal systems spontaneously emerge. They are not actually that far from Hobbes in this regard, but their irritation with Hobbes' vision is that it relies on politicians who, being actual people, do not act like a detached contractual Sovereign should, but rather attempt to meddle, make things better, or steal. Don't decentralised blockchains offer the ultimate prospect of protected property rights with clear rules, but without the political interference?

Scott navigates the Ideological Turing Test well enough to become a landmark reference in future discussions. His opponents will no doubt in many cases concede (as this blog does) that the 'dystopia' he describes, while portrayed in ominous and mournful tones, captures the attachments — and dis-attachments — of zealous blockchain promoters remarkably well.

Scott clearly thinks political trust is a social good that can be re-built or recovered (perhaps by restarting democracy). Even if this is so, the time remaining for the salvage operation is running out fast.

June 3, 2014

Interesting Times

Blockchain schizophrenia is reaching criticality:

So we find ourselves in the Bitcoin "missile crisis," and uncomfortable ironies abound. The decentralized currency is beset by centralizing pressures if it changes or if it doesn't. The apolitical currency is being rent by a deeply political rift between camps, each of which purports to be the trusted authority over the trustless, anti-authoritarian currency.

No one ever said anarchistic collective decision-making was going to be easy.

(Via.)

July 24, 2015

Anti-Cap

This tweet storm is pure evil (but fortunately we're fairly tolerant of such things at this blog).

The point it raises is going to fuel an important argument, down the road. Better to explore it via an appropriately constructed altcoin, and in the market, though, than to wreck Bitcoin in the course of the dialectic. Hard money philosophy is baked into the Bitcoin protocol. If that doesn't seem like a good idea, the solution is to try something else.

August 28, 2015

Crypto-Comedy

Bitcoin had a good 2015, at least according to investor estimations. Already, half-way through January, the all-consuming chaos of 2016 has rolled over it.

The Bitcoin block-size spat that rumbled inconclusively throughout the previous year has escalated into a dramatic public row, with core developer Mike Hearn's noisy exit. His text is an instant classic for the historical record, regardless of how persuasive its argument is found. The discussion at *Reddit* provides some sense of the controversy.

Hearn is writing Bitcoin off as a "failed experiment" — which seems histrionic, despite the many points of interest he raises. The deep tension between its security principles and its (near-term) growth prospects is a matter of evident seriousness. Taking the monkey business out of money innovation won't be as easy as some of the crypto-currency's more optimistic proponents had anticipated. Something of extreme historical radicality is occurring, and it's going to be messy.

With much of the world going under in 2016, there's likely to be a scramble for the escape capsule — and that seems to be on fire.

ADDED: Bitcoin obituaries through the ages.

January 15, 2016

Crypto-Power

This is a joke, but it's also onto something serious:

> Satoshi Nakamoto is the NSA.
>
> Hope you all realize that.
>
> — Grim Dark Future Hat (@ClarkHat) February 17, 2016

> A cryptocurrency that maintains a perfect log of every single transaction, and which can be controlled by the party with the most CPUs.
>
> — Grim Dark Future Hat (@ClarkHat) February 17, 2016

> And best of all, the creator has maintained 100% opsec since releasing his paper.
>
> — Grim Dark Future Hat (@ClarkHat) February 17, 2016

In my eternally on-the-way Bitcoin book, the point is raised like this:

While the governmental response to Bitcoin is doubtless guided by a strategy (or in fact multiple strategies) of capture, this does not reduce to an agenda of public regulation, still less suppression, but also includes cooptation in accordance with deep state functions, as well as the private interests of state agents. Insofar as every real

state includes a 'deep' or sub-public aspect, it will inevitably relate ambiguously to the emergence of elusive social capabilities, although this ambiguity will be only minimally reflected in its public relations. The empowering of private agents to evade state scrutiny and regulation represents a manifest erosion of government or 'public' authority, and is liable to be denounced on those grounds (if not transparently in those terms). Yet the crypto-secure transaction systems responsible for such governance complications are also opportunities for covert action, and are therefore to be counted as virtual assets. The novel functions introduced by Bitcoin tend to the exacerbation – or sophistication – of agency problems.

The politics of Bitcoin can be expected, eventually, to catalyze a multitude of obscure metamorphoses in the nature of the state. If the distinct but overlapping occult fields of clandestine security functions and resilient sub-public interests are bundled into a provisional concept of the dark state, it can be quite confidently predicted that the balance of attraction and repulsion between such elements and crypto-currency will be highly asymmetric with respect to public communication. As a corollary, it is realistic to assume that the openly stated position of public authorities in regards to crypto-channels of all kinds, very much including Bitcoin, will be systematically misleading, in a negative direction. Bitcoin tends to empower the invisible, and to disempower the visible.

An event on the cryptic plane is not to be confused with its public

presentation. Even if the NSA did not create Bitcoin (and — like Clark — I seriously doubt that it did), it's unlikely that it would be distraught about the discreet rumor that it had.

February 18, 2016

CHAPTER FOUR - OTHER BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGIES

Speaking Personally …

Under the compulsion of formality, complex legal-administrative codes have no option but to make space for the future.

FinCEN's crucial (and still incompletely digested) guidance note on virtual currencies, issued March 18, 2013, clarifies in a footnote (#2):

FinCEN's regulations define "person" as "an individual, a corporation, a partnership, a trust or estate, a joint stock company, an association, a syndicate, joint venture, or other unincorporated organization or group, an Indian Tribe (as that term is defined in the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act), and all entities cognizable as legal personalities."

There's plenty of room already for almost anything to slither in. (Follow the DAO.)

December 19, 2014

DAO



XS has received a firm (but fair) scolding for not linking to this development in yesterday's Chaos Patch (or elsewhere).

Here's the website and a nested blogpost (containing a deeper link to the whitepaper (which is good)). The (minimalistic) manifesto is an ideological mish-mash which has been worked-over by PR imperatives and demands cold scrutiny to extract its real content.

From the whitepaper:

A word of caution, at the outset: the legal status of DAOs remains the subject of active and vigorous debate and discussion. Not everyone shares the same definition. Some have said that they are autonomous code and can operate independently of legal systems; others have said that they must be owned or operate by humans or

human created entities. There will be many uses cases, and the DAO code will develop over time. Ultimately, how a DAO functions and its legal status will depend on many factors, including how DAO code is used, where it is used, and who uses it. This paper does not speculate about the legal status of DAOs worldwide.

The XS prediction is itself predictable: *This only goes in one direction* (and eventually its going to be vast).

ADDED: When the marketing aesthetics go in this direction, we're done.

ADDED: Andrea Castillo comments.

May 23, 2016

DAO in the dust

I, for one, welcome our new species of robber baron overlords (non-ironically):

I have carefully examined the code of The DAO and decided to participate after finding the feature where splitting is rewarded with additional ether. I have made use of this feature and have rightfully claimed 3,641,694 ether, and would like to thank the DAO for this reward. It is my understanding that the DAO code contains this feature to promote decentralization and encourage the creation of "child DAOs".

I am disappointed by those who are characterizing the use of this intentional feature as "theft". I am making use of this explicitly coded feature as per the smart contract terms and my law firm has advised me that my action is fully compliant with United States criminal and tort law. For reference please review the terms of the DAO …

(Learning is hard.)

Bloomberg commentary.

The *reddit* FAQ.

June 19, 2016

Urbit

There's a lot going on here:

Do you ever feel like you're using the Internet as a modem? […] The Internet is actually an awesome modem. The online services blow AOL away. But are we really that far from 1995? […] Can we re-decentralize the Internet? A lot of great hackers have tried. Maybe we can't? Maybe it's just impossible? […] The Internet isn't from 1995. It's from 1975. In 1995, we learned that a network beats a mainframe. Now, we've learned that a 2015 mainframe beats a 1975 network. […] Does it beat a 2015 network? What is a 2015 network, anyway? […] If the Internet beats a modem, and a modem on top of the Internet beats the Internet — what if we made an Internet on top

of the Internet? […] These questions seemed interesting. So we built Urbit.

The Urbit whitepaper (with links to (arcane) demos).

The *Hacker News* discussion starts off sophomoric, but gets better.

Best promo slogan I've seen yet (from this, last year): "If Bitcoin is money, Urbit is land." It's the algorithmic propertarian matrix for virtual real-estate.

September 26, 2015

Beyond IP Addresses?

The technical competence required to evaluate this (MegaNet) initiative far exceeds my capabilities (that's what you lot are for).

(a) If doable, it's huge.

(b) It seems to follow the grain of The Process (and cross-link not only to Bitcoin, but also to Urbit).

According to Kim Dotcom, the key to a safer, more secure and decentralized Internet will lie within blockchain technology, or a version of Bitcoin's original concept. He has spent two years working on the program, and basically turning the Internet into a encrypted, decentralized smartphone app. In general terms, here's how it works: […] "If you have 100 million smartphones that have the MegaNet

app installed, we'll have more online storage capacity, bandwidth and calculating power than the top 10 largest websites in the world combined," Dotcom claims. "Over the years with these new devices and capacity, especially mobile bandwidth capacity, there will be no limitations. We are going to use very long keys, systems that will not be reverse engineered or cracked by any supercomputer. […] … Dotcom says it will use a faster version of blockchain technology to exchange data globally. There will be no IP addresses within MegaNet, like the current Internet IpV4 protocol uses for enhanced user security. Yet, it will use the current Internet protocol initially as a "dumb pipe" to get the ball rolling. He and his staff are working on a new type of encryption that will work regardless of how MegaNet is accessed. Bandwidth would come from Wi-Fi use and when the phone is idle, so no charges would come through an IP.

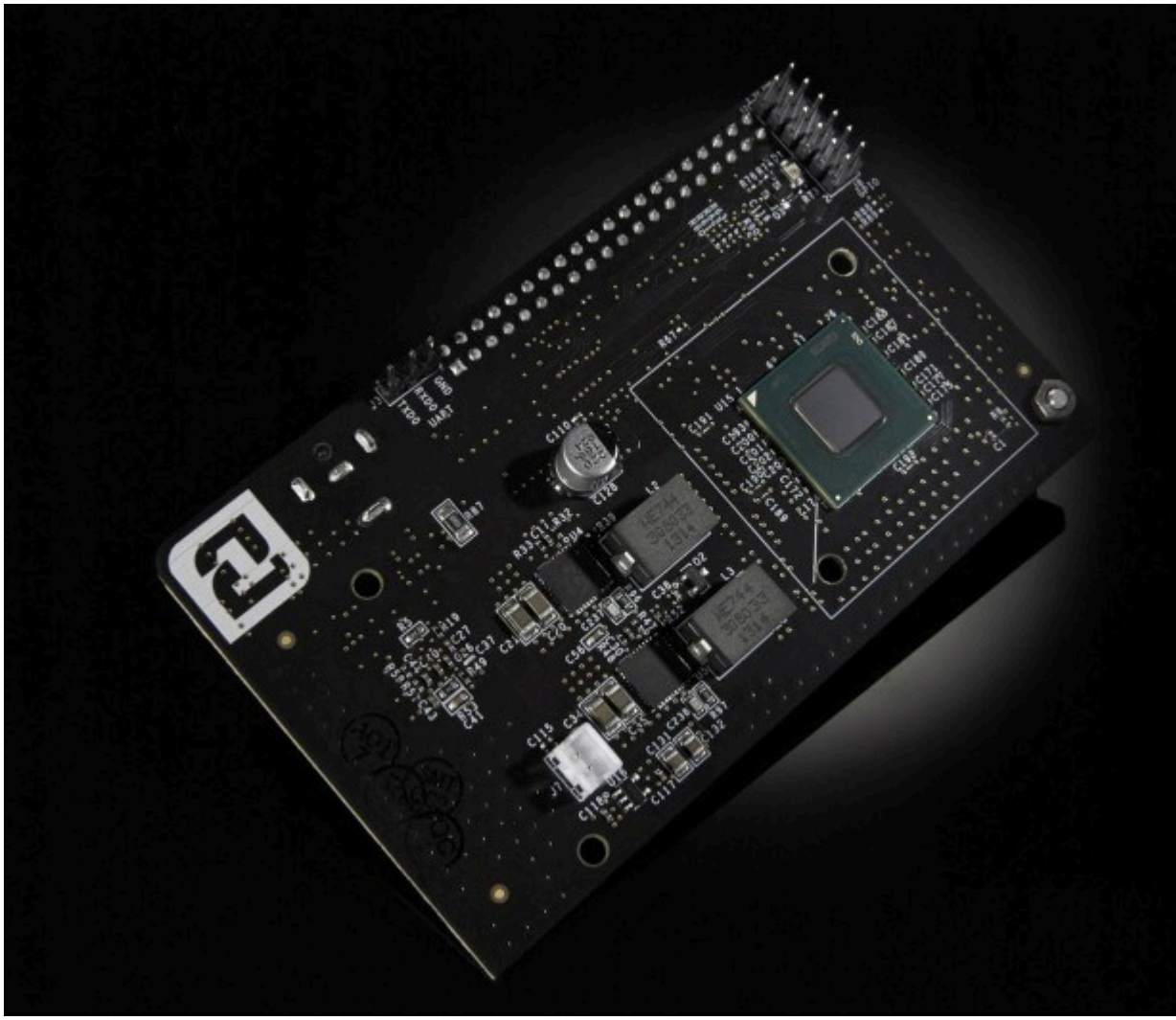
Another source.

Pirate credentials.

November 3, 2015

21 Bitcoin Computer

In case XS hasn't put out an all-in 'It's going to be huge' announcement on this yet, it's past time to do so. (More at *Amazon*.)

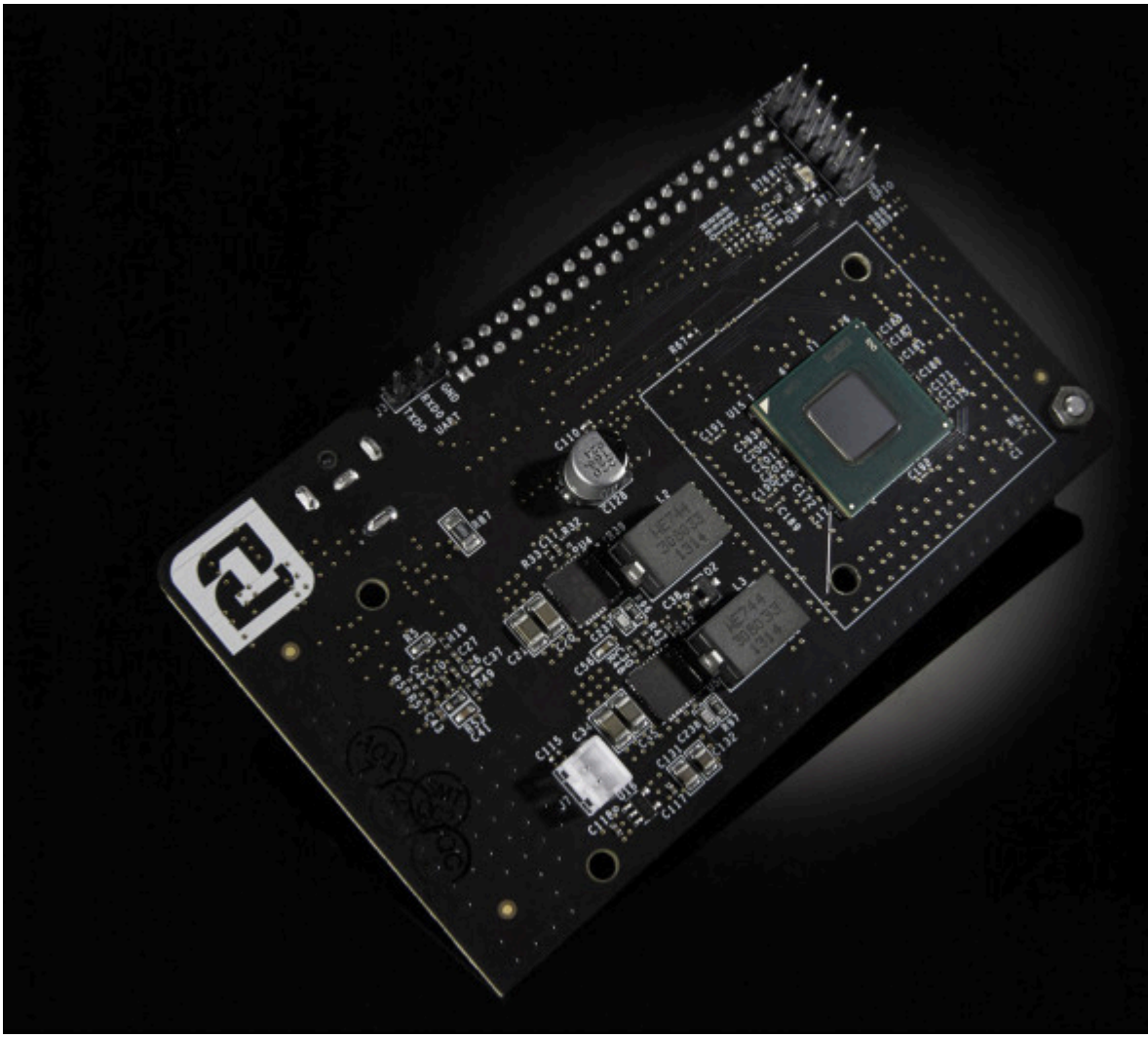


A critical piece of the near-future Internet just crystallized.

November 28, 2015

Micropayments Marketplace

Nelson's vision incremented into actuality by another step thanks to 21.co. It's focused on the core constituency at the moment, situated in the intersection of coders with 21 Bitcoin Computers, but it looks like a significant beta version of something much bigger.



Marketplaces and currencies tend to go well together. Paypal famously got to scale by becoming the currency of choice for eBay buyers and sellers. The US dollar grew to its current international predominance in part on the back of the large, integrated US market. And it thus stands to reason that a digital currency like Bitcoin might

be well suited for a digital marketplace based on Bitcoin. […] But the exact nature of the products being sold in such a marketplace is important. Unlike a traditional physical market localized to a nation state, the digital currency community is dispersed around the world. Moreover, most users hold relatively small balances, especially relative to their reserves of fiat currency. Finally, the community has a disproportionate share of engineers and computer scientists relative to the general world population. […] Taking these constraints into account, we've built what we think of as the first ***micropayments marketplace****: a marketplace that allows buyers and sellers to trade in digital goods using micropayments, initially specifically focused on APIs for developer use.*

(Forward links included at the source.)

Ping21 latches it to the Internet of Things (brief commentary at *CoinDesk*). Plus, more bitcoin market innovation.

March 16, 2016

CHAPTER FIVE - CHINA, BITCOIN AND WORLD ORDER

Bitcoin on the Silk Road

A series of professional writing obligations have taken me to Xinjiang three times this year, and the single strongest impression from these trips has been the centrality of Silk Road heritage. Regardless of borders, ethnicities, and controversies, the Silk Road is the reason everyone is there, and the thing that has always come first. Derivatively, transport infrastructure connects settlements together, but primarily it is the great ancient thoroughfare that has deposited areas of habitation along its vast — and harsh — middle stretches, as if provisioning itself with the archaic equivalent of gas stations and traffic police outposts, distributed in whatever frequency necessary to hold open the road.

China is not very adept at international PR, and Xinjiang coverage in world media tends to be critical. This has resulted in a predictable touchiness, and even though the most cursory historical examination already shows that Han Chinese have a profound ancient presence

in the area, no opportunity is missed to underscore this point still further. These efforts range from the genuinely illuminating to the comically incompetent. One especially interesting species of evidence, falling somewhere between these extremes — and passing between them at an odd angle — is coinage. Repeatedly I was told by museum curators and historical experts, always with the greatest earnestness, that the abundance of Imperial Chinese currency found in the area was an unambiguous indicator of demographic integrity and Han settlement. Certainly, Xinjiang is a numismatist's paradise, even if these tangible commercial signs are dragged into stories they cannot confidently tell.

Coins have little affinity with settlement. 'Portability' is always counted among the essential features demanded of money, because its function is to circulate, or travel. Like droplets swept along by the currents of commerce, the coins of Xinjiang belong to the road before they belong to the place, eloquent about transactions, but mute about territories. They tell of flows, and passages, but when the topic turns to political geography, they fall dumb. What does commercial traffic care for boundaries and homelands? — Only what it is coerced into caring about, whether by toll barriers, or by uncontrolled bandits.

China was drawn into its Far West, well over two millennia ago, as the guardian of the Silk Road. It was legitimated as regional hegemon by its administrative capability and cultural cohesion. Apparently,

in the present age of ethno-nationalist border squabbling and territorial irritability, recognizing this indisputable fact is either too much, or not enough.

Up until recently, Bitcoin was associated with a different Silk Road — although arguably not a *very* different one. As a partially-anonymized cryptocurrency, fundamentally immunized against political interference of any kind, it was naturally affiliated with the anarcho-capitalist markets of the 'dark web'. The closure of this Internet Silk Road in early October propelled Bitcoin into a new phase of existence, as *Tech Crunch* explains:

Bitcoin's recent price surge also comes after a 15% drop last month, following the FBI seizure of the underground 'black market' marketplace Silk Road — where billions worth in Bitcoin had been used to purchase various illegal goods and services since Silk Road was set up. The closure of the service blew a hole in Bitcoin's valuation — but clearly only a temporary one. Bitcoin quickly recovered the lost value, and has since gone on this latest surge.

The removal of one of the most notorious pipelines linking Bitcoin to the buying and selling of narcotics and other illegal goods and services may actually have helped the cryptocurrency — by improving its reputation and thereby boosting its mainstream appeal.

Bitcoin supports near-anonymous transactions, which encouraged its use on Silk Road. But the cryptocurrency has many

other characteristics that potentially make it interesting to a much more mainstream user-base — such as the fact transactions are irreversible, something of potential interest to online retailers wanting to avoid the hassle of chargebacks.

With the artificial Silk Road shuttered, Bitcoin was quickly plugged into the original. Less than two weeks after the FBI operation, China's Internet giant Baidu announced that it would begin to accept Bitcoins. Whilst an obvious threshold event, this decision was also the confirmation of powerful pre-existing trends, which had raised the level of Chinese interest in the currency to the second highest in the world (after only the United States). For Chinese savers, trapped between negative real return RMB bank accounts and irrationally exuberant real estate markets, the prospects of Bitcoin as a speculative store of value can easily seem attractive. (A parallel rise in both private and public gold holdings reinforces this impression.)

The most radical interpretation of these developments, however, would connect them to intimations of a "de-Americanized world". For American Bitcoin users, in particular, the currency is already embraced as a way to short the US dollar, and to practically express disgust at the global fiat money regime. Mere days before the *Baidu* decision, a commentary on Xinhuanet suggested:

What may also be included as a key part of an effective [global financial] reform is the introduction of a new international reserve

currency that is to be created to replace the dominant U.S. dollar, so that the international community could permanently stay away from the spillover of the intensifying domestic political turmoil in the United States.

That sounds like history in the making.

October 24, 2013

Bitcoin's Eastern Future

Simon Black's comparison of US (official) and East Asian attitudes to Bitcoin speaks for itself:

Places like Hong Kong and Singapore understand that they have a role to play as preeminent international financial centers in becoming financial hubs for digital currencies.

If the US wants to shoot itself in the foot (again) and shut itself out of the market, so be it. But Asia is embracing its potential role in the marketplace, complete with all the risks and rewards.

It wasn't but a few weeks ago that a Hong Kong-based bitcoin exchange ran off with a few million dollars of customer money. But that hasn't cooled demand in the region… nor has it sparked a wave of debilitating regulations to clamp down on digital currencies.

What this ultimately means is that all the new businesses and intellectual capital associated with digital currencies will flock to

Asia… just in the same way that all the cutting edge precious metals firms are now basing themselves in Singapore.

ADDED: "The U.S. government believes that some scary people are using bitcoin. But here's another scary prospect: If the government goes overboard with a hard-line approach on bitcoin and other emerging digital currencies, it may merely push them overseas, where they will surely flourish outside of its control."

November 20, 2013

BTC East (again)

Gordon Chang is a writer who finds it hard to maintain his balance on China topics, but his overview discussion of Bitcoin in the Middle Kingdom is not to be missed.

November 26, 2013

BTC East (again) II

The world isn't cooperating with those who want to think about one thing at a time:

*In a report out today from Goldman Sachs about the future of money, the bank points out that **80% of bitcoin volume is now***

***exchanged into and out of Chinese yuan**. The second-highest trading currency is the US dollar, followed by smaller denominations in yen and euros.*

The fate of Bitcoin is inextricable from that of the global monetary order, and coming at it from that direction is increasingly unavoidable.

ADDED: *Cryptocoins News* comments.

March 11, 2015

Hegemonic Headaches

… there are no doubt a number. One that stands out for its conceptual clarity, however, is the Triffin Dilemma. Formulated by Robert Triffin and publicized in testimony to the US Congress in 1960, it builds upon the simple arithmetical necessity that any country whose currency is privileged with world reserve status is compelled to run chronic trade deficits, in order to supply global monetary liquidity. World economic hegemony is therefore inseparable from a loss of control over domestic monetary policy — since measures that might be required to support the value of the currency would commonly be inconsistent with the responsibility to export money (through a negative current account balance).

'Chimerica' is the Triffin Dilemma exemplified in convenient

binary form. On the one hand, economic leadership and the 'exorbitant privilege' of seigniorage (through which mere financial signs are swapped for substantial products and services), on the other economic policy dysfunction and de-industrialization, as American business activity is outsourced to China is exchange for symbolic monetary dominance. In this process, and paradox of power, the current instantiation of world order is captured in its essentials. The way modernity presently and concretely works cannot be made intelligible without reference to Triffin.

The strong implication of the Triffin Dilemma — perhaps even 'Triffin Paradox' — is that global currency hegemony is ultimately ruinous for the financially sovereign nation. It involves something akin to an economic analog or variant of Paul Virilio's 'endo-colonization' which "happens when a political power turns against its own people" progressing smoothly from predation to auto-cannibalization. The 'exorbitant privilege' of accessing real resources in exchange for mere promissory paper is maintained only at the cost of an *absolute* outsourcing — an international division of labor in which the master is compelled to specialize in financial signs, submitting to an accelerating atrophy of productive capability. An international reserve currency is therefore self-hollowing, in a vicious causal loop that substitutes pure political prowess — symbolic prestige — for the industrial advantages which originally promoted it. The culture it imposes accentuates consumerism,

financial politicization, and hysterical sensitivity to the vicissitudes of signs. In the end, only the magic of power remains.

The way out of this deteriorating structure has long been envisaged as a politically-managed international currency, whether the Keynesian 'bancor', or the IMF's SDRs (Special Drawing Rights). The call such a scheme makes upon coherent international governance has reliably exceeded diplomatic and political practicality. It is notable, however, that a certain globalist fantasy is predictably generated by the stresses of currency hegemony, irrespective of all prior or ulterior ideological commitments.

If US Dollar hegemony is unsustainable, and globalist remedies are realistically inaccessible, the world economic order has a catastrophic horizon. Crucially: with currency hegemony now understood as a trap, no sane national regime can be expected to advance itself as the *next America*. Whatever waits beyond the magic show has to be something new. It is under these conditions that — 'coincidentally' — the first post-national and radically depoliticized digital crypto-currencies have begun to appear upon the world stage …

April 16, 2014

Petrodollar Provocations

The mere fact this conversation is even happening has to be disturbing to some extremely powerful global interests. BTC volatility appears to be the only major obstacle to the cryptocurrency's widespread international adoption at this point. If it trends downwards, a switch point will be suggested on the horizon. In the interim, the BTC option sets implicit limits to USD devaluation — the cost of volatility isn't infinite.

The article expects China to oppose any move to price oil in BTC in global markets, based on ambitions for an expanded international use of the RMB. Given what Chinese monetary authorities know about the Triffin dilemma, this is an argument that can very easily be over-stretched.

July 2, 2014

Sinocoin

Outside in is preparing an open letter to the government of the PRC, recommending the creation of a Bitcoin clone. The state-level incentive for such an initiative would be to refashion the global financial order in preparation for the ending of US Dollar status as the world reserve currency. It does not seem difficult to present this

as a matter of clear Chinese national interest, with definite spin-off benefits to the country's political and economic elites, its ordinary savers, and supporters of economic freedom worldwide.

Sinocoin (to use its English name), would be released by the PBoC, and then — like BitCoin — be irretrievably autonomous. The Sinocoin algorithm would be a perfect Bitcoin clone, assuming (realistically) that the PRC government would not be inclined to upgrade it with strengthened user anonymity patches. However, PBoC reserves could be used, in accordance with a publicly announced policy, to sustain a floor valuation for the currency in its initial stages. Limited controls on RMB / Sinocoin exchange might provide a longer range mechanism for the suppression of Sinocoin volatility.

Sinocoin would be a complementary initiative to Bitcoin, designed to avoid the disruptive effects that large-scale Chinese forex interventions would have on the latter currency. Bitcoin / Sinocoin exchange rates would provide a valuable index of Chinese financial integration into the emerging (Modernity 2.0) global economy. Parity is to be considered the ultimate natural equilibrium (with Sinocoin outperforming Bitcoin during its early decades).

If anybody has suggestions to make about the technical, economic, or political implications of such a development, they can be discussed here, and carefully considered prior to drafting the proposal. Unless specifically requested, contributor information will not be willingly passed on to either Chinese or US financial

authorities or intelligence services.

June 7, 2013

Bitcoin Geopolitics

The completed series on 'China, Crypto-Currency, and the World Order' is up at the *WDW Review*:

Part-1: Tribute and Tribulations
Part-2: Digital Denominations
Part-3: Clone Wars

It was written is sequence, so the overall structure could have been tightened (in retrospect). Without external disciples — or at least its interiorized simulcrum — it would probably have been extended to five parts, or more.

The first part already contains the most pronounced conclusion. The emergence of blockchain-based monetary systems intersects with the geopolitics of world currencies, and will inevitably modulate their deep historical rhythms. The RMB is less likely to become the central world reserve currency in the blockchain-epoch, principally because this status is a poisoned chalice, subtracting effective economic control even as it cements nominal dominance.

Despite superficial political reservations, and some characteristic patience (even inscrutability), the China factor is almost certain to

advance the introduction of the decentralized public ledger *commercium*, which will organize the next-stage future of the global economy. None of these claims strike me as seriously controversial.

September 4, 2014

China, Crypto-Currency, and the World Order

> Issuing countries of reserve currencies are constantly confronted with the dilemma between achieving their domestic monetary policy goals and meeting other countries' demand for reserve currencies. […] The Triffin Dilemma, i.e., the issuing countries of reserve currencies cannot maintain the value of the reserve currencies while providing liquidity to the world, still exists. —Zhou Xiaochuan

What the technologies of steam power were to the epoch of British global dominance, and the twin-track developments of electricity and the automobile to the subsequent American Age, digital electronics—and, more specifically, the Internet—are to the "rise of China" and the refashioned world it epitomizes. It is only to be expected, therefore, that the intersection of the post-1979 Open-and-Reformed New China with the post-1990 World Wide Web-enabled Internet should be an object of particular international

fascination, and practical concern.

From the dawn of the modern epoch, geopolitical hegemony has been associated ever more intensely with techno-economic leadership, which has in turn been reflected in the international reserve status of a select national currency. An ever more explicitly formalized world monetary order has converted compelling but obscure intuitions of relative national prestige into an unambiguous system of financial relationships, in which a position of supremacy is clearly established, with a definite and singular role.

The suspicions fostered by leadership are no less inevitable than leadership itself. For easily intelligible historical reasons, the French policy establishment has been an especially vociferous critic of international reserve status and its "exorbitant privilege"[1] of seigniorage—the spontaneous 'right' to issue promissory paper in exchange for real goods and services, without any definite prospect of redemption. There can be little doubt that such criticism articulates concerns widely held beyond the Anglophone world, and its substance deserves serious examination.

Of the indispensable building blocks constructing the near future, China and the Internet have special prominence. There are innumerable places where China meets the Web, beginning with the sprawling, multidimensional, and explosively growing Chinese Internet itself. Bitcoin is a recent and still relatively slender thread in the tapestry of global change, but by tugging at it, some central

features of the emerging world can be pulled into focus.

Among the characteristics that the Chinese yuan and bitcoin share is that neither is the US dollar. Specifically, both are limited yet practical alternatives to the dollar, at least at the level of microeconomic decision-making. When questions are raised about the durability of the dollar's international role, it can be predicted with confidence that one or both of these challengers will be invoked. For the dollar to die of ice or fire is, today, for it to succumb to geopolitical substitution (by the Chinese yuan) or techno-financial obsolescence (by some decentralized, Internet-based crypto-currency).

The international status of the US dollar concentrates two multi-century trends. Firstly, it represents the ethno-geographical peculiarity of modernity, which—up to the late twentieth century at least—tended to slant global power not only toward the West or Occident, but more specifically toward the Atlantic Anglophone nations, ultimately gathered under American leadership. Since the decline of the Spanish dollar, which monetized the treasure of the New World as the first global currency, international finance has been principally denominated in the currency of an English-speaking nation. Non-coincidentally, it has thus been tightly associated with a set of particular cultural themes, including (Philo-Semitic) Protestant Christianity, the invisible hand, free trade, and liberal democracy. The institutionalization of world finance has been

intimately connected with the promotion of a distinct—and for many a distinctly questionable—cultural orientation.

Secondly, the formalization of a global monetary order has been accompanied by an incremental politicization of money, which is to say, by the consolidation of monetary policy as a core function of government. With the establishment of central banking and the demetallization of currency, intrinsic scarcity is replaced by an institutional "promise to pay" that converts money from a tangible asset into a contractual liability. Public confidence in the value of money is turned into a governmental responsibility. It becomes political, and—in the context of a world reserve currency—geopolitical.

In combination, these trends are inevitably provocative, since they concentrate the world's financial destiny in selected, identifiably non-representative hands. Behind the studied neutrality of the Bretton Woods institutions (the IMF and the World Bank) stands the US dollar as the symbol of American exception and the concrete peculiarity of the modern world order.

While it is natural—and even inevitable—for political command of the global reserve currency to be understood as the modern capstone of geopolitical hegemony, it is not a privilege separable from testing responsibilities, or from profound ambiguities. These have been clearly recognized since the 1960s, when Belgian-American economist Robert Triffin formulated the paradox or

dilemma that bears his name: that if foreign governments are to accumulate reserves in one selected nation's currency, that nation must necessarily be a net exporter of money—which can be achieved only by running a negative balance of trade. A nation issuing international reserve currency assumes responsibility for global monetary liquidity. This obliges it to consume more than it produces, in order for the difference to be made available as world money. While this requirement is merely seigniorage, seen from the other side, the constraint it imposes upon domestic economic policy options are so strict they amount almost to a destiny.

These constraints are turned into a destructive dilemma by the fact that the mandatory policy structure required to supply the world with liquidity tends to destroy confidence in the currency at the same time, therefore undermining its value. Chronic balance of payments deficits signal currency weakness, since they would normally be interpreted as a sign that a currency is over-valued (or in need of devaluation). For the issuer of a global reserve currency, however, conventional policy responses to this situation are blocked in both directions, since it can neither take measures to close the deficit, nor attempt to strengthen the currency through elevating interest rates. Because for the reserve currency issuer the trade deficit is a constant, rather than a variable, a devaluation merely incites competitive currency destruction worldwide. Strengthening measures, on the other hand, draw in money from abroad

(denominated in the international currency) and thus further expand the demand for issuance, which can only be satisfied by a widening of the trade deficit.

In other words, the Triffin Dilemma recognizes that international demand for a reserve currency is inherently paradoxical. What is sought is the currency as it would be were it not supplied through chronic trade imbalances, yet these same imbalances are the only channel through which it can in fact be supplied.

"Chimerica" perfectly exemplifies the essentials of the situation. China's two trillion US dollars of reserves correspond to a cumulative balance of payments surplus of precisely the same sum, since this is simply what the reserves are. When perceived appreciatively—which was far easier in the final decades of the twentieth century than in the early decades of the twenty-first century—Chimerica has been a complementary economic arrangement through which America achieved high levels of consumption coupled with restrained price inflation, while China realized export-oriented economic development and the break-out modernization that had eluded it for 150 years. To more jaundiced eyes, the same arrangement is a trap that has married American de-industrialization to Chinese environmental devastation, while fueling unsustainable fiscal incontinence in America and a Chinese investment bubble. Whichever picture has greater realism, it can probably be safely concluded that the dissymmetry imposed by an

international reserve currency has far-reaching and ambiguous consequences.

Cynically, it might be argued that the tributary aspect of reserve currency status is perfectly matched to deep Chinese traditions in international relations, so that an ascent to yuan-based exorbitant privilege would make a natural geopolitical goal for the Middle Kingdom, as it restored its central position in the world. More realistic however—at least in the near term—is a recognition that loss of domestic economic policy control is an inevitable, and well-understood, consequence of global currency hegemony, and it is one the Chinese government is certain to find unacceptable. Whatever the costs (primarily environmental) associated with the role of "workshop to the world" they are immensely outweighed, from the Chinese perspective, by the advantages. It is on the tributary side of the international reserve currency ledger, where China has been for over four decades, that all crucial vectors of development are to be found—technological absorption, infrastructural deepening, industrialization, urbanization, employment, and even military capability.

If Chimerica is breaking down, it has far less to do with any kind of Chinese challenge—even a spontaneous and unintended one—than with a tragic structure inherent to currency hegemony. As hubris leads to nemesis, so does exorbitant monetary privilege lead to crisis, and even ruin. In both the Spanish and British precedents, financial

supremacy became self-defeating, because exporting money (rather than things) differentially advantaged industrial competitors, locking in secular social decline. There is no compelling reason to believe that America has exempted itself from the same ominous pattern.

On 29 March 2009, in the wake of the financial crisis, Zhou Xiaochuan, governor of the People's Bank of China, delivered an important speech entitled "Reform the International Monetary System." He explicitly referred to the Triffin Dilemma as the key to understanding the world's economic instability, while suggesting that a shift beyond US dollar hegemony would ultimately be required to remedy it. In this respect, his words conformed to a tradition dating back over half a century, to the Bretton Woods negotiations, when John Maynard Keynes recommended the introduction of a neutral global monetary medium—to be called the bancor—making the supply of global liquidity independent of national currencies.

Historically, international reserve currencies have not arisen by design. It might be argued, therefore, that the Keynesian bancor was an unrealistic technocratic fix, blind to the spontaneous momentum that had already made a non-negotiable fact of the dollarized world, even before the Bretton Woods proceedings began. This did not prevent the same basic idea re-emerging in different guises, the most prominent of which has been the IMF's SDRs (Special Drawing Rights), regularly proposed as a neutral international currency in

embryo. It was still to SDRs that Zhou turned when searching out a candidate for a neutral world currency.

Perhaps some technocratic solution to the problem of monetary hegemony will ultimately be found, but if so it would mark an unprecedented departure from world financial history. If, as has always been the case to date, economic tides beyond policy control are to determine such outcomes, it is understandable that attention should drift toward the Chinese yuan as an eventual substitute for the US dollar. Yet the lessons of history are available to policymakers, even when the most insistent lesson concerns limitations upon their own influence, and in this case the foremost of these is that the prospect of an international reserve status yuan presents China with a poisoned chalice. It is very unlikely to be accepted willingly.

Might some alternative spontaneous evolution in the nature of money take this critical geopolitical dilemma in a new direction? Such an evolution appears to be occurring, symbolized by bitcoin, history's first example of a decentralized digital crypto-currency. For China, bitcoin—or something comparable to it—could be the only way to evade an assumption of global economic privilege whose essence is ruinous hubris.

Like James Frazer's sacred king, who is crowned in order to be sacrificed, the inner meaning of monetary hegemony is economic and social destruction. China quite clearly understands this, and as the dollar era comes to a close, it is looking for a way out. That is how

the China-bitcoin story really begins.

[1]Coined by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, during his service as French minister of finance in the 1960s. See: http://www.j-bradford-delong.net/movable_type/2005-3_archives/000397.html (accessed 29 April 2014).

May 2014

China, Crypto-Currency, and the World Order, Part 2

> I have a lot of friends who are programmers. The programmers have always gone like, "Those [Bitcoin] guys are crazy."
>
> And then, almost 100 percent of the time, they sit down, read the paper, read the code—it takes them a couple weeks—and they come out the other side. And they're like: "Oh my god, this is it. This is the big breakthrough. This is the thing we've been waiting for. He solved all the problems. Whoever he is should get the Nobel Prize—he's a genius. This is the thing! This is the distributed trust network that the Internet always needed and never had."
>
> So, one of the challenges is you take people who aren't professional programmers or mathematicians and then you

> expect them to understand it from a standing start. And it's daunting. And so then it gets a word attached to it, like 'currency' or whatever you want to call it, and then people think that it is something it isn't. And you have a sense of this, but it's a much deeper concept than currency. It's the idea of distributed trust.
>
> —Marc Andreessen (in conversation with Brian Fung)

It was noted in the first part of this essay series that the economic order of the world is being radically reshaped by two roughly coincidental transformations of stupendous consequence: a secular shift of industrial capability from the West toward the East, and an Internet-based revolution in the nature of money. Of these events, the former is already deeply established, and generally recognized, while the latter is still at an initial stage of emergence, and thus far less obvious in its implications. Their intersection remains deeply obscure.

One topic that seems, tantalizingly, to connect these historical threads is the prospective death—or at least radical demotion—of the US dollar. The Triffin Dilemma argues that any currency attaining world reserve status tends, perhaps irresistibly, to destroy itself.[1] America's relative economic decline looks set to exacerbate the 'winter' of this great cycle. From the other side, the dollar is threatened by the piecemeal emergence of an entirely

unprecedented non-state currency system, disengaged from all the familiar institutions of monetary management. At the historical horizon of the globalized US dollar, the Chinese yuan and bitcoin are hazily gathered together.

Abstractly anticipated, this twin-threat integrates into a single event of compounded significance, but concrete forecasting can easily become lost in its novel complexities. For roughly half a millennium, transitions in world economic leadership have been smoothed by cultural affinity and intimate strategic collaboration, within a commercial Protestant tradition that has shared a common language, and common enemies, since the late eighteenth century.[2] Nothing comparable is conceivable today, as American global supremacy erodes in a context of intense strategic competition and pronounced civilizational difference.



Inside one of the warehouses on Iceland are mining rigs by Cointerra, KnCMiner and recently arrived spondoolies-tech. These rigs stacked high clearly tell that bitcoin mining is now a professional endeavour and students mining entire bitcoins in their dorm are soon to be a thing of the past. Cloudhashing is set to expand its operations. Source: cryptocoinsnews.com. All rights reserved.

Relative to the passage from the pound sterling to the US dollar, systematic adoption of the Chinese yuan would require "crossing the great ocean"—an expedition so daunting it is unlikely, in any straightforward sense, to take place. Superficially, digital cryptocurrencies are set at an even more distant remove, alien even to those commonalities that span the gulf between civilizations. Yet they are positively advanced by proximity to the world's looming monetary precipice, because they represent a solution to the absence of trust.

The word "bitcoin" stands for two very different things (although one contains the other). In its narrow and exact usage it names a specific currency, abbreviated as BTC, incarnating a radically innovative monetary system whose design was fully specified in Satoshi Nakamoto's 2008 "Bitcoin" paper.[3] The currency became operational in 2009.

The 2008 paper is both a practical invention and a substantial contribution to the philosophy of money. Its central insight is that

money functions as a rationing system, acquiring value or application to tradable goods and services through a scarcity *function*. If digital money is to realize this function, it has two interconnected problems to solve. It has to be intrinsically limited, and it has to be exclusively alienable.

Bitcoin solves the first of these problems by emulating a precious metal. It is earned through a process of mining that requires cryptographic work, in order to access bitcoins from a finite 'reserve', released in stages, amounting in total to 21 million BTC. Preserving the finitude of this bitcoin money stock depends on the solution to the second—or 'double-spending'—problem. Considered the principal obstacle to the creation of digital money, the problem of double-spending arises automatically in a medium which effects transfers by copying. Unless money is deducted from the payer as it is credited to the payee, value-conserving expenditures are impossible, yet this simple operation—going against the grain of digital information exchange—seemed to require the introduction of a guarantor, or trusted external party, which the system itself was unable to integrally provide.



Private mining rig. Source: bitcoinexaminer.org. All rights reserved.
This is Bitcoin's most unmistakable breakthrough. Every transaction taking place within the system is entered into a sequential public ledger, or blockchain, which has to be updated as a whole for any exchange to be registered. The cryptographic work of the system's mining activity now acquires a secondary, automatic function, validating each blockchain iteration, and defending the ledger from usurpation by fraudulent agents. The guarantor of each value-preserving 'cash' transfer is thus the entire blockchain itself, operating as a spontaneous or agent-independent trust mechanism. Through this continuously updated, integrated record of all commercial events, the blockchain supports a consistent account of Internet-communicable synthetic scarcity, or self-regulated digital rationing—in other words, the world's first fully-decentralized electronic money system.Bitcoin scarcity is decentralized due to its independence from the promises of an issuing authority.

In describing this system, one passes very rapidly from the singular to the generic, in a way that is easily understood by analogy, and worth dwelling upon momentarily. Had Netscape been adopted as the name for web browsers in general, certain confusions would almost certainly have arisen. Most significantly, the question "will Netscape survive?" would have been fatally ambiguous. As actual history has demonstrated, Netscape in this counter-factual sense

was able both to die, and to thrive beyond all prior expectation. Many hundreds of millions of people use a 'Netscape' every day, although under other (specific and general) names, while only a vanishingly small fraction are aware that Netscape ever existed. It is not clear whether Bitcoin, in its specific sense, could ever be entirely extinguished, but it could certainly be marginalized to the edge of irrelevance: driven from the market by competitive cryptocurrencies through which Bitcoin, in the general sense, advances towards ubiquity.

In its broadest evocation, Bitcoin symbolizes a gathering Internet revolution, of a scale and profundity that is difficult to exaggerate. The technical capability required to run BTC—installed blockchain-supporting software—has a potential extending far beyond the currency itself, and only a very small fraction of this has been explored thus far. This is most dramatically evidenced in the growth of a sprawling spin-off bitcoin ecology of altcoins, or Bitcoin-like P2P contract systems, tagged by the -coin suffix. Prominent altcoins include Darkcoin, Dogecoin, Litecoin, Namecoin, and Truthcoin, with many others on the way. At the outer edge of blockchain abstraction lie applications such as Ethereum, whose Turing-complete scripting language can support smart contracts, and even autonomous intelligent agents. At this point of sophistication, the ultimate potentialities of the system are not merely undetermined, but undeterminable in principle, and the gateway to a previously

unvisited techno-commercial cosmos is opened.

It is this extreme generality that Eli Dourado celebrates in his article "Bitcoin isn't Money—It's the Internet of Money," arguing:
Bitcoin is not just a substitute for money; it can be a form of generalized, programmable, decentralized contracting. […] Most of Bitcoin's critics are making a category error. They are taking aim at Bitcoin the currency, when in fact Bitcoin is much more than a currency, in the same way that the Internet is much more than the telecommunication services that preceded it. […] Bitcoin is a new transport layer for finance that allows decentralized, disruptive, permissionless [4] development of applications on a separate layer. It has the capability to do for finance what the Internet did for communication.

Among the blockchain-based facilities Dourado envisages are assurance contracts, prediction markets, and continuous micropayments, as well as notary, bonded identity, and reputation rating services. It is easy to see why 'getting' Bitcoin triggers something akin to metaphysical shock. As a self-sufficient digital depository for legal identity, it exhibits—virtually—a potential to absorb the cultural infrastructure of formal transactions without obvious limit. There is perhaps no conceivable 'deal' without blockchain compatibility, and therefore no definite horizon to its commercial, legal, or even political utility.

Of particular relevance here is the blockchain innovation of

artificial trust often referred to as trustlessness since it *substitutes for trust*, and is thus pre-adapted to a world in which trust is unavailable.[ref]Google the combination “trustless + bitcoin” for abundant confirmation.[/ref] Under the conditions currently impending, a global hegemonic transition occurring beyond international consensus or civilizational continuity, this deep feature of Bitcoin seems certain to be foregrounded. By apparent remarkable coincidence, a collapsing order of promises, or credible global authorities, is accompanied by the emergence of an alternative system of credibility. As the traditional supports of the world’s institutional architecture are subjected to accelerating erosion,[5] the premium upon trustless functionality can only increase. Bitcoin suggests itself as a replacement for authoritative guarantors, while opening entirely novel vistas of decentralized institutional creation. The contextual friction, dysfunction, and disagreement of a world in hegemonic disarray only reinforce its attraction.

In comparison to the *smooth* transitions in economic supremacy, from the United Provinces, to the United Kingdom, to the United States, the passage beyond the American world order can only be considered *rough*. It is this roughness that shapes the socket, for which Bitcoin—in its most expansive sense—is the plug. The installation of trustless systems fits into a hole in the world.

How does the rise of trustless Internet technology modify the

strategic landscape of the great powers, and the world's other principal actors? To what extent can their responses be anticipated? Only by addressing these questions can some concreteness be introduced to our understanding of the path ahead. They therefore provide the topic for the third (and final) part of this series.

[1] The mechanism, roughly described, is that the chronic trade deficits required for the international distribution of a reserve currency undermine the domestic economic fundamentals upon which that same currency's credibility initially, and ultimately, depends. This endogenous mechanism is sharpened by geostrategic rivalry, and further destabilized by complicating, partially independent factors such as the vicissitudes of the petrodollar convention. In combination, their effect has exhibited a clear directionality in recent times, with the proportion of international foreign reserves held in US dollars declining from 55 percent to 33 percent since 2000.

[2] Transition of world economic leadership from the United Provinces to the United Kingdom was institutionally facilitated by transnational elite integration, crowned by the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The later succession of the United States to global economic preeminence involved a less clearly formalized, but nevertheless unmistakable degree of regime coordination, built in large part upon the military, administrative, and intelligence cooperation forged in the crucible of World War II. Innumerable indicators might be mentioned, including even the dynastic factor of Winston Churchill's hybrid Anglo-American ancestry.

[3] The identity of Satoshi Nakamoto remains a topic of intense speculation, exceeding the

bounds of the present discussion.

[4] Dourado cites Vinton Cerf's 2012 article "Keep the Internet Open," where the notion of "permissionless innovation" plays a crucial conceptual role.

[5] Monetary authorities are the most relevant example here, but every institution dependent upon some measure of public trust is, in principle, susceptible to implicit competition from blockchain-based (trustless) alternatives.

June 2014

China, Crypto-Currency, and the World Order, Part 3

> The German school argued that emphasizing consumption would eventually be self-defeating. It would bias the system away from wealth creation—and ultimately make it impossible to consume as much. To use a homely analogy: One effect of getting regular exercise is being able to eat more food, just as an effect of steadily rising production is being able to consume more. But if people believe that the reason to get exercise is to permit themselves to eat more, rather than for longer term benefits they will behave in a different way. List's argument was that developing

productive power was in itself a reward.

[…] The German view is more paternalistic [than that of the Anglo-Americans]. People might not automatically choose the best society or the best use of their money. The state, therefore, must be concerned with both the process and the result. Expressing an Asian variant of the German view, the sociologist Ronald Dore has written that the Japanese—"like all good Confucianists"—believe that "you cannot get a decent, moral society, not even an efficient society, simply out of the mechanisms of the market powered by the motivational fuel of self-interest." So, in different words, said Friedrich List.

—James Fallows, "How the World Works," The Atlantic (December 1993).

The perception of the Chinese Internet among international observers and commentators is dominated by an impression of *control*.[1] At the center of China's—deliberately conspicuous—system of digital communications oversight stands the Golden Shield project, far more popularly known as "the Great Firewall of China."

No less than the original Great Wall, or even the Imperial Palace, the Great Firewall is a monument. It is first of all a statement, and only secondarily a functional apparatus, with capabilities sufficient

to give said statement public credibility. What it overtly means is more important than what it covertly does. The message is long familiar, and recognizably Confucian rather than distinctly communist: signaling social defiance is not a tolerable cultural decision.

This seems to be an improbable environment in which to insert blockchain cryptosystems. Bitcoin unmistakably retains an aura of extreme social defiance.[2] The legacy of the libertarian-oriented hacker counterculture remains clearly legible in its founding documentation and among its first-wave supporters. Among its most ardent proponents, the vitriolic presupposition of government illegitimacy is combined with an approximately unconditional endorsement of anarchistic—or at least agoristic—practices.[3] In this sense, Bitcoin appears as the impending fulfillment of the "Californian Ideology"—a hyper-capitalist assertion of spontaneous order, or radical decentralization, essentially antagonistic to all concentrated authority.

Any balanced estimation of Bitcoin's prospects in China has to begin with a realistic correction of this impression. While insight into Chinese security analysis is never easily attained, it can be confidently assumed that revolutionary agorism does not figure prominently on any official list of Internet threats. Even in America, in comparatively close cultural proximity to the 'cipherpunks' of the West Coast, Bitcoin is undergoing rapid, and far-reaching

domestication.[4] In China, where ideological libertarianism is effectively nonexistent, the possibility of technologically catalyzed anarchist politics has to seem vanishingly remote.

The concerns of Chinese officials with regards to the Internet are quite different. They are overwhelmingly oriented to the perceived threat of mass activism, triggered by social media networks, and exemplified by the dynamics of the so-called Color Revolutions in the ex-Soviet republics and subsequently by the Arab Spring.[5] It is the capacity of the Internet to amplify a dissident public 'voice', rather than to facilitate a private 'exit', that determines the security priorities of the Great Firewall. From this perspective, the Bitcoin menace is relatively minor, even trivial, in comparison to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and similar channels of vocal dissent.

The administrative challenges Bitcoin does pose to the Chinese authorities are of a technical, rather than existential-ideological, nature, and only tangentially related to the country's monumental apparatus of Internet control. The most politically-charged concern is capital flight or money laundering, but this is a topic of mind-boggling complexity, involving everything from high-level corruption on a titanic scale, through organized crime, to informally tolerated business activities and the attempts of small private actors to secure savings or diversify regime risk. Corruption is clearly perceived by the Chinese Communist Party as an indirect source of political insecurity, and few doubt that the potential of Bitcoin to facilitate

the concealment and expatriation of illicit funds was a leading motive for the restrictions imposed so far.[6]

In "How the World Works," James Fallows excavates the neo-mercantilist political-economic theory of Friedrich List from its oblivion within the Anglophone world. He argues that the *laissez-faire* commercial ideal, considered by English-speaking nations as an undisputed norm of rational economic order, has a remarkably limited application beyond these nations. Elsewhere it is treated as a set of impractical, culturally and situationally specific principles, to which only the most nominal deference can safely be paid. The passage of two decades has done nothing to erode the pertinence of this observation.

List's "German System," which was also Alexander Hamilton's "American System"—and indeed the 'system' of every challenger power seeking accelerated industrialization under conditions of strategic disadvantage—was characterized by a series of anomalous features relative to the free-market hegemonic norm that has been identified with Anglophone cultures for over two centuries, and maritime Protestant Atlantic powers for longer still.[7] Yet even these core economic powers, prior to their ascent to industrial dominion, subordinated commercial liberties to nationalistic development imperatives. Both geographically and historically, the 'normality' of the open market is exposed as rare and precarious. As Fallows remarks in "How the World Works":

> Every country that has caught up with others has had to do so by rigging its rules: extracting extra money from its people and steering the money into industrialists' hands. […] Today's Americans and Britons may not like this new system, which makes their economic life more challenging and confusing than it would otherwise be. They are not obliged to try to imitate its structure, which in many ways fits the social circumstances of East Asia better than those of the modern United States or Britain. But the English-speaking world should stop ignoring the existence of this system—and stop pretending that it doesn't work.

Where Chinese Internet policy is concerned, "ignoring the existence of this system" amounts to an interpretative orientation fixated upon domestic security politics and human rights issues, while overlooking its neo-mercantilist features. When this bias is corrected, the "Chinese System" of digital mercantilism can be seen as a classic example of strategically accelerated industrialization, based upon selective protections directed at those business sectors perceived as most essential to the nation's economic future. Quite evidently, the Internet occupies center stage in this strategy, which identifies it as the basic techno-economic platform of the twenty-first-century world. Arguably, the peculiarities of the Chinese Internet make far more sense in the context of geo-strategic industrial competition,

than in that of domestic regime insecurity.

The most pronounced features of the "Chinese System" are not restrictions on free political expression—although these can of course be found—but rather the emergence of domestic Chinese business analogs for the major players of the international (i.e., American) Internet economy. The most obvious digital Sino-clones include Baidu (Google), Taobao (eBay, Amazon), Youku (YouTube), Weibo (Twitter), WeChat (Facebook), and Alipay (Paypal). From this perspective, it begins to seem that much less is being *prevented* than *replicated*.

As previously noted in this series, Bitcoin designates both a specific digital cryptocurrency (BTC), and a technical innovation in electronic communications of extreme generality (the blockchain), potentially enveloping all Internet-based activity. Besides its intrinsic significance, the currency can be understood as a test implementation of the blockchain system. Increasingly, as the anticipated techno-economic consequences of the blockchain breakthrough have loomed ever larger, it is the second, expansive sense of Bitcoin that has begun to prevail—even as the currency has entrenched itself among the world's resilient monetary realities.

As the extraordinary implications of blockchain technology have come into focus,[8] historical analogies have escalated. While it may once have made sense to compare Bitcoin to a particular Internet application of great generality, such as the web browser, or perhaps

to the World Wide Web, a general-purpose platform built upon the Internet, it is increasingly common to find blockchain technology compared to the Internet as such. On this ever more plausible account the blockchain is of equivalent socioeconomic import to the basic Internet-enabling innovation of packet switching communications—a once-in-a-Kondratieff-wave-level infrastructural revolution. If this is the case, it is a candidate to be the commanding technology of the first half of the twenty-first century.

How might the "Chinese System" be expected to respond to this emerging reality? Everything we have seen so far points in one direction: *Clone war*. For China to reject the blockchain revolution would be an abdication from all industrial leadership ambitions in the coming digital economy. The only Chinese strategic option compatible with the digital industrialization path so far taken is a Sinification of the technology—a blockchain with Chinese characteristics, in which distributed ledger systems are accommodated to the country's social and cultural realities. There is no reason to think this will be an easy thing to achieve, but nothing else could possibly work.

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[1] The theatrical tradition of Chinese power is an indispensable reference here. China has been exceptional among the great civilizations for the emphasis it has placed upon public perception as the key to administrative authority, with an understanding of rule as essentially *dramatic*. In the narrow context that concerns us here, it is important to note that in the eyes of the

Chinese authorities *being seen to control Internet communications* takes precedence over the subordinate and instrumental social and technical capabilities involved. This can be contrasted with Internet security politics in the United States, where invisible data-traffic monitoring receives clear priority.

[2] In order to arrive at a remotely concrete sense of "defiance" it is no doubt important to distinguish between those actors (associated more with the Left) seeking to break into the public sphere in the name of protest, and those (associated more with the Right) seeking to break out of the public sphere, to protect private interests from social or government accountancy. It can scarcely be controversial to propose that, while concern for the latter is by no means negligible in today's China, it is the former that elicits genuine alarm.

[3] This aspect of Bitcoin has been dramatized by the online black-market Silk Road run by Dread Pirate Roberts (Ross Ulbricht), recently described by Daniel Krawisz as "the greatest agorist of our times."

[4] This trend is personified by Marc Andreessen, whose promotion of Bitcoin "mainstreaming" includes an explicit attempt to reframe the blockchain (distributed public ledger) as a *defense* against excessive anonymity, fully compatible with government regulatory interests. Insofar as arguments of this kind are found persuasive in Washington DC and New York, they are likely to find an appreciative reception in Beijing.

[5] Irrespective of the actual contribution of social media to these events, the seriousness with which it was taken by the Chinese authorities is beyond serious question. During the spring of

2011, the word “Jasmine” was targeted for suppression by the Chinese Great Firewall filter, despite its rich cultural resonances in the country.

[6] BTC China was founded in June 2011 with Bobby Lee as CEO. It had risen to become the world’s largest bitcoin exchange (by volume) by 18 December 2013, when it temporarily suspended acceptance of RMB deposits, following a People’s Bank of China statement on the crypto-currency, released on the 5th of that month. Chinese Internet giant Baidu, which had been accepting BTC payments since October 2013, ceased accepting the currency following the PBOC statement. Although RMB depository services were partially resumed at BTC China in January 2014, Baidu has not returned to the currency, stalling the development of bitcoin within China as a means of payment. Price movements of bitcoin on international exchanges have reflected the enormous significance of Chinese events to its perceived value.

[7] Fallows usefully lists the distinctive emphases of the “German System”: planning over spontaneity; producers over consumers; outcome over process; national over individual interest; zero-sum over positive-sum economic relations; and Realpolitik over moralism.

[8] Although the ultimate scope of Bitcoin escapes ready apprehension, it is already clear that it is roughly coextensive with the form of the contract in general, within which monetary systems are comprehended. Any actually or potentially formal human agreement is blockchain compatible, and it is through the blockchain that many previously tacit social arrangements can be expected to attain formalization. The horizon of the blockchain, therefore, is that of deal-making in general. Once this is understood, the predictions of those such as Marc Andreessen—who sees the potential blockchain economy scaling into the multi-trillion-dollar range within a matter

of decades—seem entirely reasonable. Global commerce, as a whole, is in principle a subset of blockchain-supported relationships. As this becomes ever more obvious, the prospect of an economically ambitious society attempting to opt out of this future will become increasingly implausible. It is already unimaginable that China could want to do so.

September 2014

BLOCK 4 - SINGLOSPHERE

CHAPTER ONE - PRIMERS

Singlosphere

East-plus-West at the frontier of freedom

In accordance with the widely-held belief that digital communication technologies 'destroy distance', James C. Bennett coined the term 'Anglosphere' to describe the arena of comparatively frictionless cultural proximity binding spatially-dispersed Anglophone populations. His contention was that the gathering trends exemplified by the development of the Internet would continue to promote cultural ties, whilst eroding the importance of spatial neighborhoods. In the age of the World Wide Web, cultural solidarity trumps geographical solidarity.

Whilst alternative culture-spheres – expressly including the Sinosphere – were mentioned in passing, they were not the focus of Bennett's account. His attention was directed to English-speaking peoples, scattered geographically, yet bound together by threads of common understanding that derived from a shared language, English common law and limited-government traditions, highly-developed

civil societies, individualism, and an unusual tolerance for disruptive social change. He predicted both that these commonalities would become increasingly consequential in the years to come, and that their general tenor would prove highly adaptive as the rate of social change accelerated worldwide.

Bennett's concern with large-scale cultural systems can be seen as part of an intellectual trend, comparable in significant respects to Samuel Huntington's influential 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis. In a world that is undergoing tectonic shifts in the distribution of wealth, power, and hegemony, such preoccupations are understandable. In these circumstances, it would be surprising if the partisans of Anglospheric and Sinospheric cultural traditions were not aroused to ardent advocacy of their relative merits and demerits, and — if Bennett is taken seriously — such discussions will take place in zones of cultural communion that are, at least relatively, increasingly introverted. The rapid emergence of a highly-autonomous 'Chinese Internet' in recent years adds weight to such expectations.

In March, the Z/Yen Group released the ninth in its series of Global Financial Centres Index rankings, in which Shanghai leapt to shared fifth place with Tokyo (on GFCI ratings of 694). London (775), New York (769), Hong Kong (759), and Singapore (722) led the pack. (The top 75 can be seen here).

Both Anglosphereans and Sinosphereans can find ready satisfaction in these ratings. The persistent supremacy of London

and New York attests to a 250-year history of world economic dominance, whilst the ascent of Chinese-ethnicity commercial cities to the remaining top-slots clearly indicates the shift of economic gravity to the western Pacific region. Yet the most interesting pattern lies in-between. Neither Hong Kong nor Singapore belong unambiguously to a Sinosphere (still less to a broad Anglosphere). Instead, they are characterized by distinctive forms of Chinese-Anglophone hybridity – an immensely successful cultural synthesis. It would be difficult to maintain that Shanghai was entirely untouched by a comparable phenomenon, inherited in that case from the synthetic mentality of its concession-era International Settlement, and reflected in its singular Haipai or 'ocean culture'.

The existence of an identifiable Sino-Anglosphere – or Singlosphere – is further suggested by the Heritage Foundation's 2011 Index of Economic Freedom (rated on a scale of 0-100). On that list, the top two places are taken by Hong Kong (89.7) and Singapore (87.2), followed by Australia (82.5) and New Zealand (82.3). The Anglospherean and Sinospherean territorial cores fare less impressively, with none meeting the Heritage criteria for free economies — the United States comes ninth (77.8), the United Kingdom 16th (74.5), and mainland China 135th (52.0). It seems that the Singlosphere has learnt something about economic freedom that exceeds the presently-manifested wisdom of both cultural root-stocks – setting a model for the Sinosphere, and leaving the

Anglosphere trailing in its wake.

As the deep secular trend of Chinese ascent and (relative if not absolute) American decline leads to ever more ominous rumblings and threats of geostrategic tension, it is especially important to note a quite different, non-confrontational pattern – based upon cultural merging and reciprocal liberation. Within the Singlosphere, an emergent, synthetic ethnicity exhibits a dynamically adaptive, cosmopolitan competence without peer, as distinct traditions of spontaneous order fuse and reinforce each other. Adam Smith meets Laozi, and the profound amalgamation of the two results in an unfolding innovated culture that increasingly dominates world rankings of economic capability.

A remarkable study by Christian Gerlach excavates the Daoist roots of European laissez-faire (or wu wei) ideas, and anarcho-capitalist maverick Murray Rothbard was attracted to the same 'Ancient Chinese Libertarian Tradition'. Ken McCormick calls it The Tao of Laissez-Faire. (Those disturbed by this identification might be more comfortable with Silja Graupe's leftist critique of 'Market Daoism'.)

McCormick concludes his essay:

> *The recent ascendance of free-market ideas around the world probably owes more to the practical historical success of those ideas than to the persuasiveness of any theory or*

> *philosophy. Yet one might speculate that the startling success of economic liberalization in the People's Republic of China might in part be explained by the fact that the idea of free markets is embedded in the culture. In fact, the Confucianism that long dominated China was actually a synthesis of competing schools of thought, including Taoism … Hence, while laissez-faire has frequently been absent from Chinese practice, it is not at all alien to Chinese culture. The recent free-market reforms in China might therefore be interpreted not so much as an importation of a foreign ideology but as a reawakening of a home-grown concept.*

The Singlosphere sets both East and West on the right track. The more that Shanghai recalls and learns from it — and the deeper its participation — the faster its ascent will be.

May 26, 2011

Pacific Rim

Well-engineered, formidable, yet also lumbering constructions are directed into battle against horrific monsters, with the fate of the world at stake. Guillermo del Toro's movie *Pacific Rim* is one of these entities, and the ethno-political review by 'white advocacy'

writer Gregory Hood is another.

Within this cascade of monstrous signs, a convulsive re-ordering of the world from out of the Pacific is a constant reference. With the shocking scale of a tsunami, and the insidiousness of an obscure intelligence, it inundates the Old Order, starting from the ocean's coastal ramparts. "When alien life entered the earth it was from deep within the Pacific Ocean. … the Breach." City after city falls prey to the *Kaiju*. "This was not going to stop."

The response is formulaic, and statically defensive. Perhaps some kind of massive sea-wall will work? Hood is at his best in laying out the weary Cathedralist pieties of the Hollywood plot line:

If poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind, filmmakers are the educators, grooming the mass public to accept certain ideas in preparation for them to be implemented as policy. The acceptance of global security forces instead of national armies, the worship of blacks as natural leaders, and the promotion of an international political creed of egalitarianism, secular humanism, and intrusive (but benevolent) government …

Yet the plot-line of his review is no less predictable than that of the movie, appealing to a irrecoverable (and already mythical) confidence in a white lineage of ethno-nationalist self-government, functionally-adequate native traditions, and tested bonds of kin, as if all of these things remained untried resources to fall back upon, rather than efficient historical antecedents to the developments now

being deplored. It was under the conditions of white global dominion that socialism was entrenched, and evangelical moral universalism elevated to its climactic pitch of ethno-masochistic implosion. Defenselessness before the *Kaiju* was not something the *Kaiju* brought about.

The most telling blindness of Hood's review lies close to its heart, in the denunciation of multiculturalism. Rather than striking at Del Toro's movie at its point of maximum Cathedralist vulneraility — which is to say, in its entirely generic, universalist presentation of the multicultural ideal — Hood repeats this same indiscriminate category without significant modification, seeking only to criticize what Del Toro promotes. This would be seriously unserious anywhere. On the Pacific Rim, it is a truly disastrous disqualification of perception.

The only reality-sensitive response to the problem of multiculturalism is to ask: *Which cultures?* Neither Del Toro (the Cathedral), nor Hood (ethno-traditionalism), seem to have the slightest interest in this question. Indiscriminate demographic entropy is either to be promoted, or lamented, but in both cases accepted as the only relevant alternative to a fantastically-imagined, dying world of distinct peoples. If the paint is let out of the tubes, it has to be stirred together with maximum conceptual rapidity into homogeneous brown.

Discussing the film's central micro-alliance, between its

occidental hero and oriental heroine, Hood writes:

None of this makes any sense of course. The "drift compatible" connection seems to require a kind of deep bond that almost always requires family ties. However, in this film, the conflict is driven by the struggle of the rebellious hero and the non-white female to prove that two people who have no shared history or kinship can work together, and in fact be better than everyone else. Where traditional national and family bonds have failed us, multiculturalism will save the day.

As an ethno-racial descriptor, 'non-white' is simply sad. It isn't even trying. Concretely, in this case, it ensures that the true nonsense of the movie eludes attention, which is the displacement of real Pacific Rim ethno-synthesis by a merely cosmetic substitute.

As Hood emphatically notes, the relationship between (white American) Raleigh and (Japanese) Mako is not explicitly romantic, but it occupies the formula-position of a film romance, even when — admirably — it restricts itself to an intense practical partnership. I just love Japanese-American ethno-synthesis to bits, but it has almost no relevance to the real cultural process on the Pacific Rim, which is overwhelmingly dominated by Anglo-Chinese hybridism.

Japan is one of the world's few modern ethno-nationalist states, with a strongly-preserved native culture, tightly-restricted immigration and citizenship criteria, and low English-language competence. In other words, it makes a *far* more tempting target for

'multiculturalist' (or demographic entropy) criticism than America does. But it's 'non-white' so Hood doesn't notice.

Even more peculiarly — and despite its Hong Kong setting — *Pacific Rim* represents China's contribution to the multicultural alliance through three weirdo brothers who get rubbed out at the first plausible opportunity. Without wanting to be unnecessarily crude, I have to repeat — *Hong fricking Kong*. This is the post-1949 capital of the Singlosphere, and therefore the natural location for a centrally accentuated *US-Japanese* working relationship? If this isn't quite "who cares? They're all wogs anyway" it's something remarkably close.

The Pacific Rim, insofar as it matters, is the a Singlosphere cultural catastrophe, a distinctively non-generic ethno-synthesis that has created the most advanced and competitive societies on the planet — Hong Kong, Singapore, and Old Shanghai among them. Del Toro and Hood conspire to efface this fact, even as both, indirectly, address it.

Insofar as we are told anything, it is that in our most desperate moments, we have to jettison Tradition. Instead, we must rely on feelings, on multicultural partnership, on wishes and fantasies and hopes about what the world might be, rather than what it is.

–– that's Hood, not remotely understanding what he's saying.

September 15, 2013

Quote note (#119)

This seems right:

Razeen Sally, a visiting associate professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, wrote this year in Singapore's Straits Times that: "A global city is where truly global services cluster. Business — in finance, the professions, transport and communications — is done in several languages and currencies, and across several time zones and jurisdictions. Such creations face a unique set of challenges in the early 21st century. Today, there appear to be only five global cities. London and New York are at the top, followed by Hong Kong and Singapore, Asia's two service hubs. Dubai, the Middle East hub, is the newest and smallest kid on the block. Shanghai has global-city aspirations, but it is held back by China's economic restrictions — the vestiges of an ex-command economy — and its Leninist political system. Tokyo remains too Japan-centric, a far cry from a global city."

It's a striking indication of the extent to which the world order remains structured by the Anglo-Colonial legacy. However one would *like* to see the world run, this hub-net is an essential clue to the way it is run now.

October 17, 2014

Mackinder in Beijing

A long, but insightful look at the planetary strategic environment puts recent developments in theoretical context:

After decades of quiet preparation, Beijing has recently begun revealing its grand strategy for global power, move by careful move. Its two-step plan is designed to build a transcontinental infrastructure for the economic integration of the world island from within, while mobilizing military forces to surgically slice through Washington's encircling containment.

The initial step has involved a breathtaking project to put in place an infrastructure for the continent's economic integration. By laying down an elaborate and enormously expensive network of high-speed, high-volume railroads as well as oil and natural gas pipelines across the vast breadth of Eurasia, China may realize Mackinder's vision in a new way. For the first time in history, the rapid transcontinental movement of critical cargo — oil, minerals, and manufactured goods — will be possible on a massive scale, thereby potentially unifying that vast landmass into a single economic zone stretching 6,500 miles from Shanghai to Madrid. In this way, the leadership in Beijing hopes to shift the locus of geopolitical power away from the maritime periphery and deep into the continent's heartland.

As a trivial point of perspective, it might be worth noting that this

blog's ferocious Atlanteanism completely overwhelms its Sinophilia in regard to this question. If the emergence of a diasporic-maritime China, attuned to its Pacific Rim ethnic offshoots, is to be forestalled by a revival of dreams of dominion on the world island, the 21st century is about to take a peculiarly unfortunate turn.

June 10, 2015

CHAPTER TWO - SYNTHETIC CULTURE

Reign of the Tripod

China's rise and the future of threedom

According to Arvind Subramanian, even conservative projections of comparative growth trends place China in a global position, by 2030, that is strikingly similar to that of Britain and of America at their respective moments of economic predominance, accounting for a share of the world economy roughly 150% the size of its closest rival. If this were to come to pass, such leadership would invoke 'hegemony' as a matter of sheer quantitative fact – quite irrespective of explicit intentions. The 'Chinese model' would promote itself, even in the complete absence of political and diplomatic reinforcement, and the magnetic power of Chinese culture would continue to strengthen in approximate proportion to its commercial influence. China would become the object of irresistible attraction – counterbalanced, no doubt, by resentments – and its example would burn incandescent, even in the offended eyes of its detractors. So what is this 'example'?

In exploring this question, one place to begin is the history of economic hegemony, and in particular that instantiated by the Anglo-American powers over their two 'long centuries' of global supremacy. This is a topic pursued with exceptional insight by Walter Russell Mead, most remarkably in his work *God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World*.

Mead locates the key to 'Anglosphere' hegemony in the 'Golden Meme' of the invisible hand, originating in the religious idea of providence, and modernized in Newtonian celestial mechanics, Smithian political economy, and Darwinian evolutionary biology. At its most abstract, this idea is both an affirmation and a renunciation, with its potency and suppleness stemming from both. To acknowledge the invisible hand is to foster a special kind of positive fatalism, trusting in the spontaneous trend of history, which is embraced as a covenant, and an overt or implicit election (in the theological sense). Such themes are undisguisedly religious, and Mead does nothing to obscure their roots in the Abrahamic tradition, or meta-tradition, which lays out a providential vision of history as finite, progressive, and inevitable, tending inexorably to eschatological completion, structured by superhuman law, and (through its divine predestination) facilitating the function of prophecy.

The deep culture of the Anglosphere is not only generically Abrahamic, however, it is also specifically pluralistic. The invisible

hand takes center stage because the center is otherwise vacated, or distributed. Esoteric providence supplants exoteric sovereignty because an inability to reach agreement is eventually institutionalized – or at least informally stabilized — in a triangular balance of power.

> *What the British ultimately did was to rely on what Burke called "convention." Scripture, tradition, and reason – each had its place and each had its devotees. But all of them went wrong if you pressed them too far. You should respect the scriptures and defer to them but not interpret the scriptures in a way that led you into some weird millenarian sect or into absurd social behavior. You honored tradition but did not press it so far that it led you into the arms of royal absolutism or papal power. You can and should employ the critique of reason against the excesses of both scripture and tradition, but not press reason to the point where you ranted against all existing institutions., ate roots and bark for your health, or, worse, undermined the rights of property and the established church. One can picture John Bull scratching his head and slowly concluding that one must accept that in society there will be bible nuts, tradition nuts, and reason nuts – fundamentalists, papists, and radicals. This is not necessarily the end of the world. To some degree they cancel*

> *each other out – the fundamentalist zealots will keep the papists down and vice versa, and the religious will keep the radicals in their place – but the competition among sects will also prevent the established church from pressing its advantage too far and from forming too exalted an idea about the proper stature, prestige, and emoluments of the clergy.* [p223]

Cultural hegemony follows from a semi-deliberate *fatalization*, as the sovereign center is displaced by a substantially automated social process, which no social agent is able to master or entirely impede. Each major faction steps back into its position in the triangle, from which it can strategically engage the others, but never fully dominate or eradicate them. The triangle as a whole constitutes a social and historical motor, without adequate representation at any identifiable point.

> *Pluralism, even at the cost of rational consistency, is necessary in a world of change. Countervailing forces and values must contend. Reason, scripture, tradition: they all have their uses, but any one of them, unchecked, will go too far. Moreover, without constant disputes, constant controversy, constant competition between rival ideas about how society should look and what is should do, the pace of*

> *innovation and change is likely to slow as forces of conservative inertia grow smug and unchallenged.* [p231-2]

This blog has previously touched upon the Singlosphere, where aspects of Anglophone and Chinese culture converge in Manchester Liberal / Daoist acceptance of spontaneous order, or laissez-faire. Does this convergence extend to triadic pluralism, and apply to the Sinosphere core of the Chinese mainland? Mead's analysis is highly suggestive in both respects.

In the first place, it encourages considerable equanimity in regards to the prospective global transition, even when attention is focused upon the political and ideological heartland of contemporary China. It might seem, superficially, that the passage from a leading world culture dominated by tacit Christian attitudes to one in which unfamiliar Sino-Marxist ideas rise to unprecedented international prominence must be characterized by an immense – even near-absolute – discontinuity. Can such a leap take place without succumbing to catastrophic culture-shock and unmanageable friction? When examined from a broader perspective, however, such alarmism is far less than fully warranted.

For better or for worse, the over-arching cultural continuity of the coming shift is ensured by the profound kinship tying Marxism into the broad family of Abrahamic belief systems. Theologically rooted in the dialectical engagement with Judeo-Christian spirituality,

initiated by Hegel and Feuerbach, the basic framework of Marxist thinking only trivially perturbs the structure of prophetic, eschatological, redemptive, and providential history. Its millenarian expectations are no more terrifying than those of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism before it, its prophetic certainties no more irrational, its submission to the iron laws of history no more constraining, and its moral enthusiasm no more zealous or impractical.

The specter of a totalitarian Marxist resurgence in China is as realistic as the fear of a theocratic putsch in the United States of America, which is to say, it has no reality at all. In both cases, maturity, pluralism, and established traditions protect against the domination of society by any particular intolerant faction. It is unnecessary to be either Christian or Marxist to recognize the continuing world-historical momentum of a broad Abrahamic meta-narrative, or to accept the consistency of such large-scale social storytelling with the perpetual regeneration of practical impetus, or to see a settled, spontaneously improvised social solution – and incarnation of dynamic conservatism – in the enduring triangular stand-off between Marxist scriptures, Communist Party institutional traditions, and market radicalism in today's China. As with Mead's Anglospherean pluralism, the reciprocal limitations that each of these factions imposes on the others will inevitably disappoint many, but there is no reason for them to horrify anybody.

Insofar as Mead is correct in identifying Anglosphere hegemony with the reign of the tripod, or the socio-cultural realization of pluralism (as triangular dynamic stability), the disruptive potential of emerging Chinese leadership should be considered as massively discounted, because the tripod is a Chinese native. Every temple in the country is equipped with a three-footed incense burner, every museum bronze collection is dominated by three-legged cauldrons, and each of these tripods has definite, explicitly conceptual cultural meaning. This is not only based upon the obvious practical and intuitive truth that the simplest model of stability comes from the tripod, but also from a recognition that triangular stand-off exemplifies sustainable dynamism in its elementary form, disintegrating the universe into strategic possibility.

For literary elaboration of this theme, one need only turn to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, perhaps the most widely read of China's four great classical novels. Its most conspicuous instantiation as popular entertainment is seen in the game of paper, scissors, stone, which dates back (at least) to the Chinese Han Dynasty (206 BC – AD 220), when it was known as *shoushiling*.

The ultimate expression of triangular dynamic stability, not only in China, but worldwide, is undoubtedly presented by the *Classic of Change*, the *Yi Jing*, or *Zhouyi*. It is upon this work of singular, inhuman genius, in which sheer arithmetic speaks more purely than it has ever done before or since, that all of China's ceremonial

bronzes, literary flights, and childhood games converge.

In the numerical system of the *Yi Jing*, the tripod finds a source more basic than the Abrahamic meta-tradition can provide, regardless of how Trinitarian this latter has become. That is because, in this Chinese cultural ur-stratum, unity does not figure as an original unity, subsequently disintegrated into a theological, dialectical, or sociopolitical triangle but is, on the contrary, derived. As the Confucian commentary explains: "The number 3 was assigned to heaven, 2 to earth, and from these came the (other) numbers." *In the beginning were numbers* – primordial dispersion.

The 'language' of the tripod finds its most convenient expression in the trigram, whose three lines constitute an elementary unit. To grasp the *Yi Jing* as a complete arithmetical model of the *dynamic* triad, however, it is necessary to proceed immediately to the structure of the hexagram.

Grasped *in operation*, the *Yi Jing* is not only a binary arithmetical system (as Leibniz interpreted it), but a bino-decimal conjunction. This is demonstrated by the fact that it systematically rewards the application of decimal digital reduction, and reveals its dynamic pattern only under these conditions. (This might, quite reasonably, be considered a highly surprising suggestion, since digital reduction – as it arose within the history of Western Qabbalism – seems to have been generated, automatically, from the interference of the decimal Hindu numerals with older alphabetical number systems, or

'gematrias', that attached cardinal values to specific letters, without use of place value. It is immediately obvious that this historical account cannot be translated into a Chinese context, where alphabets have no traditional root.)

Digital reduction is an extremely simple numerical technique, involving nothing besides single-digit additions and neglect of decimal magnitude. A multi-digit number is treated as a string of single digit additions, and the process is reiterated in the case of a multi-digit result.

Expressing the series of binary powers in decimal notation yields the familiar sequence 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024, 2048, 4096, 8192 … When this series is compressed to a string of single digits by reduction, it proceeds: 1, 2, 4, 8, (1 + 6 =) 7, (3 + 2 =) 5, (6 + 4 =) 1, (1 + 2 + 8 = 11 = 1 + 1 =) 2, (2 + 5 + 6 = 13 = 1 + 3 =) 4, (5 + 1 + 2 =) 8, (1 + 0 + 2 + 4 =) 7, (2 + 0 + 4 + 8 = 14 = 1 + 4 =) 5, and repeatedly, through the 6-step cycle 1, 2, 4, 8, 7, 5. This process exposes the arithmetical necessity of the *Yi Jing* hexagram, as an archetypal exhaustion of the phases of time.

To excavate the triadic or tripodic, it is helpful to turn to the classical (and now integral) Confucian commentary, the 'Ten Wings' (*Shi Yi*), which explore the structure of the trigrams and hexagrams in various ways. These include an explicit formula for folding the six lines of the hexagram back into a triad, by coupling the lines: first and fourth; second and fifth; third and sixth. These dyads have a

consistent arithmetical order, when calculated in accordance with the reduced bino-decimal values generated above: 1 + 8 = 9; 2 + 7 = 9; 4 + 5 = 9. “What these six lines show is simply this, the way of the three Powers.”

Summation to nine regularly serves as a confirmation within the *Shi Yi*. For instance, in the section translated by Legge as ‘The Great Appendix’:

> *52. The numbers (required) for Khien (or the undivided line) amount to 216; those for Khwan (or the divided line), to 144. Together they are 360, corresponding to the days of the year.*
> *53. The number produced by the lines in the two parts (of the Yî) amount to 11,520, corresponding to the number of all things.*
> *54. Therefore by means of the four operations is the Yî completed. It takes 18 changes to form a hexagram.*

144 = 1 + 4 + 4 = 9
216 = 2 + 1 + 6 = 9
360 = 3 + 6 + 0 = 9
11,520 = 1 + 1 + 5 + 2 + 0 = 9
18 = 1 + 8 = 9

There is much more to say on the importance of the number nine in traditional Chinese culture, and beyond, but this is not the time.

For now, it suffices to note that nine, or 'Old Yang', represents the extreme point of maturity or positive accumulation in the *Yi Jing*, and thus incipient transition. It thus echoes the function of the same numeral within a zero-based decimal place-value system, strongly reinforcing the impression that the *Yi Jing* assumes cultural familiarity with such numeracy, and thus indicating its extreme antiquity within China.

The six-phase cycle collapses into a triadic dynamic, whose stages are the dyads 1&8, 2&7, 4&5. It is thus exactly isomorphic with the paper, scissors, stone circuit, or rather, this latter can be seen as a simplification of the *Yi Jing* dynamic tripod, treating each stage as simple, rather than twinned. Where the *bagua*, or set of trigrams, merely enumerates the set of 3-bit variants in static fashion, the system of hexagrams rigorously constructs a triangular dynamic, which is presented as a model of time.

If this is the 'Chinese example' at its most quintessential, then it is exactly the Anglosphere example, as determined by Mead, except carried to a far more exalted level of abstraction, or proto-conceptual purity. Dynamic pluralism is under no threat from a Chinese future, insofar as deep-cultural evidence counts for anything. The reign of the tripod has scarcely begun.

September 23, 2011

Numbo Zhongo

What's the Chinese obsession with numbers all about?

August 22, 2013

Tianming

The Mandate of Heaven (天命) belongs indisputably amongst the most ancient and conceptually richest political ideas. Dating back to the transition from the Shang to Zhou dynasties, over three millennia ago, it refounds the legitimacy of government in a *conditional natural right* (in contrast to the unconditional natural right asserted by the supplanted rulers of the Shang, and by divine right theorists in the occidental world). *Tianming* invests regimes whose *performance* expresses virtuous capability. Legitimacy is not, therefore, a formal endowment, but a substantial discovery, demonstrated through the art of government.

The claim that *Tianming* amounts to a realistic theory of political legitimacy requires far more support than this tentative short post will offer. In particular, it has to be defended against the objection that *Tianming* reverts to a tautology, either empirically or logically (or both). The Mandate of Heaven might be formulated: *For so long as a regime succeeds it will endure*. Is this not, from the perspective

of empirical history, an empty retrospective judgment, or sheer redundancy, and under logical consideration, a thinly disguised pleonasm?

Tianming could be dismissed on these grounds if its negation were inconceivable. Then, indeed, it would communicate no information. Yet this is not at all the case.

Perhaps the most relevant evidence for this is the provocative thesis found in Alexis de Tocqueville's *L'ancien régime et la Révolution* that the successful promotion of social development is more threatening to regime stability than the complete absence of such achievement. This is an argument widely discussed in China today, for obvious reasons. If it holds true, the idea of *Tianming* — in anything other than its shallowest and most sophistical sense — is directly contradicted, in theory and fact. Reciprocally, it has to be acknowledged that the idea of *Tianming* poses an implicit challenge to the Tocqueville thesis, subject to confirmation or disconfirmation by historical events. The stakes of this (yet inarticulate?) controversy could scarcely be higher.

An intriguing reflexivity enters into the topic at this point, because the conditions for the confirmation of *Tianming* are related, through intricate nonlinearities, to the prospects of the PRC regime. Is development success rewarded or punished by 'heaven' (the nature of things)? If the latter, dialectical ruin ensues, as the high are brought low. If the former, economic ascent and political stability

will have demonstrated their compatibility, revolutionary chaos will be precluded, and the rebalancing of the world order towards the western Pacific will continue. Under such conditions, there is every reason to expect that global trends will be incrementally 'Confucianized' with international political thinking increasingly inflected by Chinese characteristics. Simultaneously vindicated and promoted, the idea of *Tianming* will then find a wider receptive audience than it has ever known before.

August 22, 2013

Scary Chinese

Jeffrey Wasserstrom conducts a tour of Western dreams and nightmares of China. Whilst the span of the oscillation is remarkable, he finds the bipolar syndrome itself to be notably stable across time. The upswing — Wasserstrom suggests — is associated with hopes that 'they' are becoming more like 'us', but on the downswing:

… when the Western China Nightmare is dominant, the risk is that observers and the general public lose sight of how varied the Chinese populace is and instead grow accustomed to demonised images of China … filled not with flesh-and-blood Chinese individuals but a horde of soulless mannequins. […] Stories that dehumanise China's population tout court are also periodically published, though only

rarely do they do so as overtly as a 1999 Weekly Standard article which described the Chinese people as prone to 'Borg-like' group-think conformity.

When calmly dissected and investigated, durable stereotypes usually have something significant to say, about both their subjects and their objects. Western sinophobia is an especially rich hunting ground for cultural explorers, and the importance of understanding it is only going to grow. *Urban Future* will be bringing sustained attention to this same topic in the months ahead.

September 30, 2013

Sino-Robotics

Somewhere deep in the task-queue here (at UF) is a post, or article, exploring the resonances between phobic Occidental responses to Orientals and robots (as promised, unreliably, in this post). Some grist for the mill:

Last week, the giant Chinese internet and gaming company Tencent published an article on its news portal about the rising price of consumer goods in China – not exactly earth-shattering news, except that the article was written by a robot called Dreamwriter. […] Dreamwriter wrote the 1000-word article, using algorithms that search online sources and data, in just 60 seconds. The article quoted

economists and highlighted trends in a style indistinguishable from a human financial reporter. […] According to the South China Morning Post, Dreamwriter's article was the first robot-written news article in the Chinese language.
The Morning Post quoted a Chinese journalist who said China's state-run media doesn't give reporters much creative license, which makes them easily replaceable by robot writers: "You know, many reporters working for government-run newspapers across the country usually copy and paste the statements and news press. They are not allowed to express doubt or really investigate reports against the authorities. So robot reporters could easily replace a lot of Chinese reporters like this nationwide."

September 18, 2015

Oppressionless

Zachary Keck is bemused by the findings of a recent Global Scan poll that finds broad Chinese satisfaction with the country's media and surveillance environment. Among the findings, 76% of Chinese feel "free of surveillance" compared with only 54% of Americans. To the extent that oppression can be subjectively evaluated, Chinese 'totalitarian communism' isn't doing it very well.

There might be some way to mine into this information rigorously,

but that's beyond the scope of the discussion so far. Keck muses about the possibility that the Edward Snowden leaks have soured Western opinion, while "it's hard to know how much of the views can be attributed to different expectations Chinese have about freedom when compared to their counterparts in democratic countries, and how much of their answers are attributable to general ignorance about the Chinese government's surveillance and censorship. I suspect both factors probably play a role but that the former is likely more important."

An alternative explanation is that Western cultures have developed in a way that sanctifies dissent, and finds the exemplification of freedom in the act or expression of defiance. The alternative, Chinese assumption, that freedom is mostly about being left alone, is classically captured by the proverb "The mountains are high, and the Emperor is far away" (山高皇帝远). Unsurprisingly, this saying is thought to have originated in entrepreneurial Zhejiang Province (perhaps the most civilized place in the world).

Why would anybody but an idiot go looking for the emperor simply to poke a finger in his eye? Don't do anything like that, and there's not much chance of encountering oppression. Some flaky Internet connectivity doesn't feel like a "a boot stamping on a human face — forever." It feels like a minor inconvenience. At least, that's what the poll evidence suggests.

April 4, 2014

Twitter cuts (#10)

Arthur Chu on an old saw:

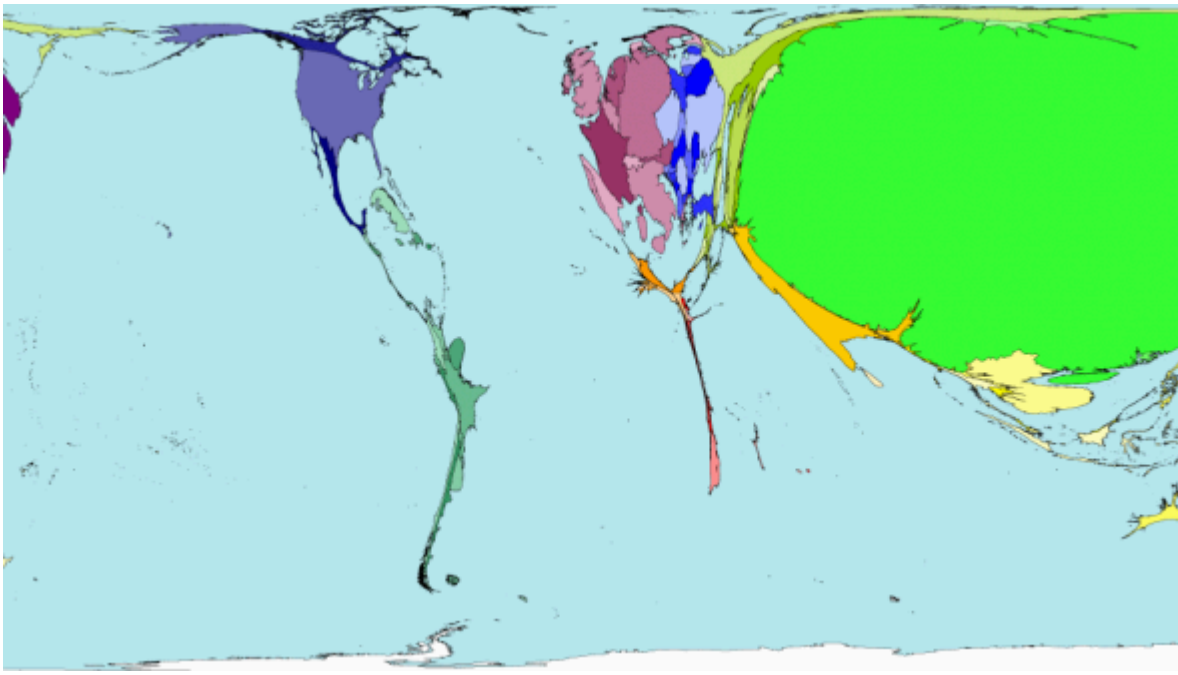
> There's a lot of news happening, never a good thing. It's not actually a Chinese curse but the sentiment is accurate #InterestingTimes
>
> — Arthur Chu (@arthur_affect) August 12, 2014

(Wikipedia agrees with Chu.) Given the authenticity of the wisdom, the inauthenticity of the attribution is especially interesting. Is this a sign of Orientalism as a creative cultural influence?

August 12, 2014

'Not Religious'

This map has been doing the rounds:



(*UF* source here (via this))

Explanation at the original site:

Not religious, in this sense, is everyone who is left over when you have counted adherents. The World Christian Database, on which the data is based, use the term 'nonreligionists' and defines it as ' … encompassing the 2 varieties of unbeliever: (a) agnostics or secularists or materialists, who are nonreligious but not hostile to religion, and (b) atheists or anti-religious/anti-religionists opposed or hostile to religion.'

Territory size shows the proportion of people who are not religious living there. [Absolute numbers seem not to be a factor.]

Even after this gloss, 'not religious' is a dubious category, which

tends to be defined in terms of Western (Abrahamic-Theistic) norms. (Is Chinese medicine, for example, in any serious way 'non-religious'?) Nevertheless, the distribution is striking. Any conception of China's rise (and it's probable world cultural impact) is going to be missing something important if it neglects what is really jutting through here.

October 7, 2014

Heavenly Signs

The American Interest discusses the Chinese crackdown on Church of the Almighty God (also known as Eastern Lightning) after a recruiting operation turned murderous. The general background is most probably familiar, but it's important enough to run through again:

The strong Chinese reaction against splinter groups — in this case, five death sentences—sometimes surprises Western observers, but we only need to look to China's history to see why such groups give Beijing officials the willies. In the 19th-century, the catastrophic Taiping Rebellion involved a group not wholly unlike the Church of the Almighty God. In that rebellion a millenarian sect lead by Hong Xiuquan claiming to be the younger brother of Jesus, rose up against the Qing dynasty. At least twenty million people died in the ensuing

conflict.
Eastern Lightning, like its Taiping predecessor, grounds itself in Christian texts and ideas. The "god" now born as a woman to bring the apocalypse is seen by the sect as the third in a series: Yahweh, who gave the Old Testament; Jesus who came to save humanity and now the third has come to judge the human race and bring the end of the world. The rapid growth of this movement shows the degree to which many Chinese feel alienated from the official ideology, the appeal of Christian messages in China, and the sense of popular unease as China changes rapidly. There is nothing here to make Beijing feel good.
There's another reason that the rise of an apocalyptic cult would be of such concern. China's long history of rising and falling dynasties has given rise to a school of historical analysis that looks for patterns in Chinese history. This approach, shared by many ordinary people and many distinguished Chinese intellectuals down through the ages, seeks to identify recurring features of the decline and fall phase of a dynasty's cycle. The rise of apocalyptic religious cults is one of the classic signs of dynastic decadence, as is the rise of a pervasive culture of corruption among officials and the spread of local unrest.

Since the 18th century, the divorce of theological innovation from social revolution in Occidental public consciousness has pushed the religious question — originally identical with *tolerance* — into ever deeper eclipse. Until very recently, within the West, any attribution

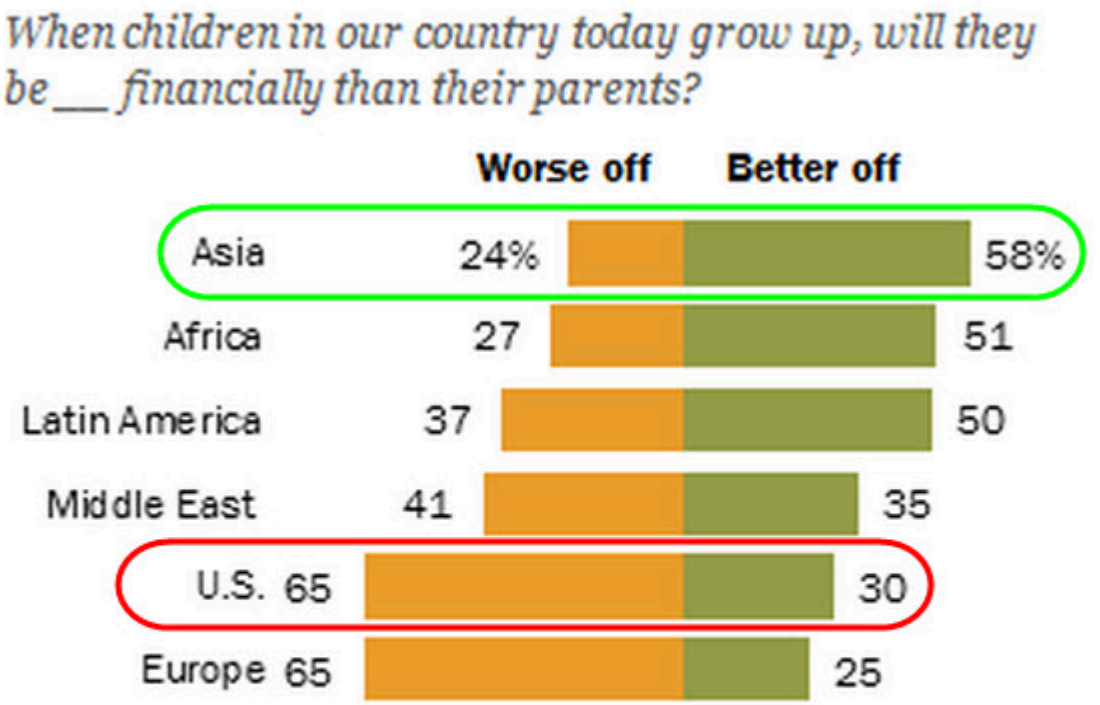
of genuine political consequence to such matters had seemed no more than eccentric anachronism, although this situation is quite rapidly changing. Elsewhere in the world, religious issues retained far greater socio-political pertinence, largely because the common millenarian root of enthusiasm and rebellion had not been effaced.

It is possible that the Chinese approach to dissident religion remains 'strange' to many in the West. There can surely be little doubt, however, that whatever convergence takes place will tend to a traditional Chinese understanding far more than a contemporary Western one. The gravity of the stakes ensures it.

October 14, 2014

Gloom-Core

It isn't necessary to assume more than a sliver of positive feedback for confidence to make a significant difference. Once the future looks dim enough, it's irresistibly rational to cannibalize what's left of it, and then the term 'death spiral' begins to acquire real force. Of course, there are a great many other dynamic tangles at work, and popular sentiment is likely far more of an indicator than a driver. Still:



Ideas arising in a social environment quagmired in radical pessimism (or the opposite) probably require some careful discounting to correct for skew.

(Via *Zero Hedge*)

October 28, 2014

白左

"Baizuo" — the greatest thing in 2017 so far.

Makes me think the world might pull through okay.

It's all (amazingly) good, but this is probably the kernel:

The question has received more than 400 answers from Zhihu users, which include some of the most representative perceptions of the 'white left'. Although the emphasis varies, **baizuo** *is used generally to describe those who "only care about topics such as immigration, minorities, LGBT and the environment" and "have no sense of real problems in the real world"; they are hypocritical humanitarians who advocate for peace and equality only to "satisfy their own feeling of moral superiority"; they are "obsessed with political correctness" to the extent that they "tolerate backwards Islamic values for the sake of multiculturalism"; they believe in the welfare state that "benefits only the idle and the free riders"; they are the "ignorant and arrogant westerners" who "pity the rest of the world and think they are saviours".*

ADDED: *Baizuo* at Weimerica, and Spandrell's place.

May 14, 2017

CHAPTER THREE - ECONOMY AND POLICY

Chimerica

A new world order hits the buffers

"For nearly 30 years we have had two Global Strategies working in a symbiotic fashion that has created a virtuous economic growth spiral. Unfortunately, the economic underpinnings were flawed and as a consequence, the virtuous cycle has ended. It is now in the process of reversing and becoming a vicious downward economic spiral," writes Gordon T. Long, in a guest post at Zero Hedge. "One of the strategies is the Asian Mercantile Strategy. The other is the US Dollar Reserve Currency Strategy."

The system that Long sees unraveling has been dubbed 'Chimerica' by Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, in reference to the mythical hybrid beast of antiquity. Chimerica emerged through the dynamic coupling of the US and Chinese economies, dominating the wave of globalization in the post-command economy world. It

has served as a powerful engine of development, spreading prosperity beyond the narrow enclave of the (Euro-American) 'First World' and facilitating the global roll-out of digital network technologies, from personal computing and mobile telephony to the Internet. In recent years, however, its unsustainable features have become prominently visible.

Stripped to its fundamentals, Chimerica amounted to something akin to an informal geopolitical 'deal' that simultaneously promoted the international status of the US Dollar and domestic Chinese industrialization. The principal financial mechanism was the recycling of Chinese trade surpluses into US Treasury Bonds, in a process that accentuated Chinese competitiveness (by restraining the rise of the Yuan) and suppressed US inflation (preserving the credibility of the USD). This enabled Chinese industrial expansion to proceed at a far greater speed than its domestic market could have supported, whilst providing US governments with the latitude to run a chronically loose monetary policy immunized against the prospect of currency collapse. The Chinese manufacturing and US banking sectors were the most obvious beneficiaries. Both prospered conspicuously.

As Niall Ferguson wrote in November 2008, in the early days of the world financial crisis:

"At the heart of this crisis is the huge imbalance between the

> United States, with its current account deficit in excess of 1 percent of world gross domestic product, and the surplus countries that finance it: the oil exporters, Japan and emerging Asia. Of these, the relationship between China and America has become the crucial one. More than anything else, it has been China's strategy of dollar reserve accumulation that has financed America's debt habit. Chinese savings were a key reason U.S. long-term interest rates stayed low and the borrowing binge kept going. Now that the age of leverage is over, 'Chimerica' — the partnership between the big saver and the big spender — is key."

Having reached a state of crisis, Chimerica seems certain to unwind. This might occur either through a measured rebalancing that increases Chinese domestic consumption whilst reducing US deficit spending, or as a messy disintegration — involving sudden demand contraction, currency wars, and escalating mutual recrimination. Whatever the eventual outcome, a refashioned world order is an inevitable – which is to say, definitional – result.

Whilst Ferguson hedges his bets, Gordon Long spells out a specific and ominous forecast, in which the virtuous cycle of Chimerican globalization reverses into a vicious 'death spiral'. As 'debt saturation' closes down the option of policy continuity, the actions of the US Federal Reserve become manifestly ineffective,

self-contradictory, and ultimately paralyzed. The long-postponed process of currency destruction then begins in earnest. Long offers a useful checklist of milestones on the road to ruin (proceeding from financial, through economic, to political calamity):

1. A deteriorating US dollar

2. Rising US interest rates

3. Sustained and chronic US unemployment

4. Asian inflation, especially in food where 60% of Asian disposable income is spent

5. Pressures on Asian currency pegs

6. Collapsing values of US Reserve holdings

By the end of this process, the world will have been violently catapulted out of a financial architecture dating back 70 years, and a dominant monetary philosophy that has prevailed over the course of centuries.

"The eventuality of a fiat currency crisis is ordained and has been since the early warnings in 2007 of the Financial Crisis," Long insists. "The roadmap has been clear to all that actually wanted to look."

June 1, 2011

Handling China

Handle's epic walk-through of Edward Luttwak on the rise of China

is simply magnificent. If the Chinese foreign policy establishment doesn't put it on a study list, the world is a more dangerous place than it needs to be. It says impressive things about Luttwak that his work is able to prompt commentary of such astounding quality. (Yes, it's long, but you have to read it.)

As a Sinophile, and even (far more reservedly) a sympathizer with the post-Mao PRC regime, it's disturbing to me how convincing I find this analysis. China really could blow itself up, along with a big chunk of the world's sole truly dynamic region, by mis-playing its excellent foreign policy hand (in pretty much exactly the way Handle lays out). In particular, its ability to avoid the disastrous course of Germany's rise is the most pressing question of the age, and the signs so far are not remotely encouraging. Having dug itself quite unnecessarily into a trap of increasingly embittered anti-China balancing, 2013 looks very clearly to have been the worst year since the beginning of Reform and Opening for Chinese geo-strategic decision making.

Reversing course is hard. The important thing for the Chinese leadership to understand is that challenges to global hegemony are almost inevitably catastrophic. There has not been a single case in modern history where such a transition has succeeded, except through close strategic alignment with the preceding hegemon. Holland passed the torch to the UK, which passed it on in turn to the USA. If China envisages an alternative path for itself — rooted in basic antagonism — it is shelving the lessons of modernity, and

turning to something else, where ancient cycles lose themselves in the fog-banks of myth. Such deep historical precedent is far too poorly understood to offer anything like helpful advice. The atavistic popular feeling it rouses, however, is certainly strong enough to drive developments over a cliff.

US global hegemony has lost the Mandate of Heaven. The only way it could trawl it back is through the unforced errors of its enemies — which is to say, those who have blundered into being positioned as its enemies. On present trends, these foul-ups are all-too-likely to be made. That would mean world war, naturally tending to thermonuclear ruin, and the end of civilization. China would be finished as anything beyond a broken warning about what non-submission to the democratic *zeitgeist* leads to (having done to political sanity what Germany did to bio-realism). Through this climax of idiocy, the human species would have melodramatically disqualified itself from any significant historical agency going forward. Military robotics (aka 'Skynet', emerging from the war) would be the only intelligent prospect left.

December 20, 2013

Emergent Properties

Economics is complicated, but at least in certain respects it's not

that complicated. Chart almost any market-sensitive variable and what emerges is a wave pattern, varying in amplitude, frequency, and trend, but clearly conforming to a general pattern, mixing an irregular rhythm with a random walk.

The irregularity and randomness are predicated by elementary economic theory, since determinism and regularity are strictly equivalent to bank notes lying on the street, no sooner glimpsed than seized. Zero-risk speculative opportunities – of the kind any intelligible pattern presents – are quickly arbitraged back to noise, the equilibrium state, in which all significant information is absorbed into price.

The residual rhythm is more unexpected, and attests to an irrational factor, stimulating intellectual and practical controversy. Regardless of such disputes, it is possible to be confident about two indefinite points. Firstly, market rhythms are (almost) never easy to accurately predict, and thus exploit. Secondly, off-trend deviations will eventually be corrected, unless – very rarely – the trend itself changes shape. The qualification of the second point deserves special examination, because unrealistic expectations concerning trend-line transformations lie at the root of the most notorious error in practical economic reasoning – the belief (typically hardening in direct proportion to the inflation of a bubble) that "this time is different." This slogan, which encapsulates the stubborn and disastrously expensive syndrome of *downwards correction denial*,

should be written on the shirts of those who will soon be losing them.

Any market wave of sufficient amplitude crests in a bubble, which 'pops' in a crash. Unless *this time is different* – and it won't be – China will inevitably experience such an event. Speculative commentary on the nature and timing of this event has increased markedly in volume as the global economic environment has deteriorated. Yet prediction is especially difficult in this case. China's market economy is just a little over three decades old, with only occasional rough patches interrupting near-continuous, rapid growth. Disentangling the unsustainable component or rhythmic upswing from the underlying development path involves unusually hazy estimation, given the incompleteness of the pattern perceived.

In an article published in Caixin and Marketwatch (via), Andy Xie makes a substantial contribution to this discussion. He identifies China's financial vulnerability with a massive asset bubble in the property market, but remains sanguine about its ultimate consequences. He argues persuasively that a very substantial write-down of real estate values, although inevitably disruptive, would have a tonic effect on the Chinese economy almost immediately, with fast recovery to follow.

Because China's market economy does not yet have an identifiable long-term trend, Xie estimates the scale of the country's property bubble by comparing the appreciation of real estate prices to wage growth:

China has experienced rapid increase in land prices in the past decade. Some of it can be justified by income and productivity growth due to the country joining the World Trade Organization. Most of the increase is a bubble phenomenon.

While household income may have tripled in a decade, the average land price has risen by over thirty times. Whatever income growth is to come cannot justify the current price of land. Nor can a supply shortage.

China has no shortage of land. High-rise urbanization makes demand for land quite low relative to the population. The sustainable land value is probably 70% to 80% below current levels.

The role of the property market in contemporary Chinese social life is a topic of widespread interest, both inside and outside the country. Because marriage prospects (for men) are tightly bound to their ability to provide a home, some very deeply-rooted Darwinian forces are harnessed to the appreciation of property values, making them an overwhelmingly dominant factor in economic life. For this reason, among others, a real estate crash that brought prices down to somewhere between a third and a fifth of their current level promises to be traumatizing and liberating in equal measure.

Xie recommends that China push through the pain, as quickly as realistically possible:

Some argue that the property bubble is essential to China's economic prosperity. This is utter nonsense. While the property

industry has become bigger relative to the economy over the past decade, it mostly consumes resources and doesn't enhance overall productivity.

It is the main driver for China's inflation. If it shrinks, the economy may suffer temporarily. However, overall productivity will rise. The resulting income growth will bring back more sustainable economic prosperity.

Also, a bubble bursts sooner or later. Government help merely prolongs it, as the Chinese government did in 2008. And the longer a bubble lasts, the more damage it inflicts upon bursting. The economy is suffering because of what happened in 2008.

The country has sufficient capacity to absorb whatever non-performing loans may come out of this bubble bursting. It could be 20 trillion to 30 trillion yuan ($3.26 trillion-$4.89 trillion). But the waste in the bubble economy could have been 5 trillion yuan.

China could overcome the legacy of the bubble in four to five years. Further, better productivity from post-bubble reforms could add another 2 trillion to 3 trillion yuan per annum. The post-bubble recovery could happen in three years.

Japan couldn't get its economy growing after its property bubble burst. The main reason is that its per capita income was already among the highest in the world.

China is still a middle-income economy. Improving productivity is not that difficult. Reaching per capita income of $20,000 by 2030,

excluding inflation, is quite possible, which would make China the largest economy in the world.

August 2, 2013

383

At *Project Syndicate*, Andrew Sheng and Xiao Geng provide a brief commentary on China's economic policy outlook:

At the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, currently under way in Beijing, President Xi Jinping is unveiling China's reform blueprint for the next decade. In advance of its release, the Development Research Center of the State Council, China's official think tank, presented its own reform proposal – the so-called "383 plan" – which offers a glimpse of the direction that the reforms will take.

Despite a keen sense of the obstacles ahead, the writers are clearly impressed:

But the kind of deep and comprehensive reforms that China needs are always difficult to implement, given that they necessarily affect vested interests. In order to win public support for reforms, thereby maximizing the chances of success, the government must offer clear, accessible explanations of its goals. … The Research Center takes a holistic approach to the reform process, viewing it

as both a systemic change and a change of mindset. Translating its proposals – which are as profound as Deng Xiaoping's 1978 reforms – into simple, straightforward terms is no easy feat, but one that the 383 plan handles with relative deftness.

It's almost impossible not to read the comparison to the 1978 reforms as hyperbole, especially when it is quickly conceded that "rapid, sweeping transformation is not realistic in a country of 1.3 billion people." Nevertheless, the proposed direction of change is clearly encouraging, most obviously because it seeks so unambiguously to deepen the market-oriented policy approach of the Reform Era, by expanding the sphere of decentralized price-sensitive decision making (while contracting the scope of political discretion).

"The '383'" — they explain:

… is shorthand for the plan's content. First, the proposal describes the relationships between the Chinese economy's three main actors: government, business, and the market. Second, it identifies eight key areas of reform: governance, competition policy, land, finance, public finance, state assets, innovation, and liberalization of international trade and finance. Third, it highlights three correlated goals: easing external pressure for domestic policy changes, building social inclusiveness through a basic social-security scheme, and reducing inefficiency, inequality, and corruption through major rural land reform.

Shanghai's new Free-Trade Zone also gets a quick but glowing mention.

Given the near-inevitability of serious disruption in the world economy over the next few years, as well as some overdue bubble-popping in China (mostly in real estate), even a cautious crawl in the right direction looks attractive. Among the reasons not to rush anywhere is the degenerate state of monetary theory worldwide, which has lead to the adoption of disastrously misconceived policies in almost every major economy. Hedging makes a lot of sense right now.

Once the macroeconomic house of cards collapses, there will be space for sounder ideas to re-emerge. Judging by China's accumulation of (both public and private) precious metal holdings, along with its flexible approach to new (and 'hard') digital currency, the intellectual germs of a near-future post-fiat monetary regime could already be in place. That would really be something solid to build upon.

ADDED: "China will deepen its economic reform to ensure that the market will play a 'decisive' role in allocating resources, according to a communique issued after the third plenary session of the 18th CPC Central Committee …" (*Xinhua*)

November 12, 2013

Market-Leninism

Confused Westerners, wondering how the Xi-Li leadership's quasi-Maoist political initiatives square with its commitment to economic reform, will find their quandaries resolved by Zachary Keck's excellent analysis in *The Diplomat*. Regardless of liberal assumptions to the contrary, enforcing Central Party discipline on China's regional fiefdoms is tightly aligned with the reform agenda. (Realism in this regard is advanced by the acknowledgement that authoritarian liberalization is the only kind there has ever been, anywhere.)

Xi and the central Party's authority over local leaders will go a long way toward determining the scope and extent of the economic reforms China undertakes in the years ahead. Xi and Li have both made it clear that they understand the nature of reforms China needs to sustain growth. Their ability to act on this understanding is a different matter entirely. Although they will face stiff resistance from many segments of society, local leaders are notable in that they are involved in nearly every major area of reform. […] Thus, overcoming local government resistance will be a crucial part of Xi's ability to undertake the necessary economic reforms. Xi and the central leadership seem to understand this given their year-long effort to consolidate their control over provincial and other local leaders.

(The entire article is excellent — read it all.)

November 13, 2013

Quote notes (#91)

Panda-hugger Martin Jacques on the global tide:

A month ago, China overtook the US to become the largest economy in the world by one measure. By 2030 it is projected that the Chinese economy will be twice as large as America's and larger than the European Union and America combined, accounting for one third of global GDP. This is the world that is coming into being, that we must learn to adapt to and thrive in. It is a far cry from the comfort zone we are used to, a globe dominated by the West and Japan: in the Seventies, between them they were responsible for two thirds of global GDP; by 2030 it will be a mere one third

During the preponderant part of the modern period, China's civilizational competences were oriented to keeping the Pandora's box of runaway modernization firmly sealed. Western intervention put an end to that, and the escape is now almost certainly irreversible. That is why, in broad outline, Jacques' prognosis is correct. An accommodation to fate is in order.

('Doom' — as tagged — means no more than fate, as we have begun to explain, or at least to explore.)

June 23, 2014

Phase Change

China is reaching the end of its current (post-1979) growth process, argues Michael Pettis, and the direction it takes next will be decided in large part by its approach to the country's debt over-hang. Dismissing glib talk about a magical 'socialization' of the debt-burden, Pettis insists that the problem of assigning losses is irreducible, and the only serious question is where these costs will be concentrated. Irrespective of the specific policy mechanisms selected, there is essentially a three-way-option: someone has to pay, and it will either be the country's households, its small-and-medium enterprises (SMEs), or its large state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

Of course if the losses are assigned to the household sector, China cannot rebalance and it will be more than ever dependent on investment to drive growth. This is why I reject absolutely the argument that because China resolved the last banking crisis "painlessly", it can do so again.

[…] Beijing can also assign the losses to SMEs. In effect this is what it started to do in 2010-11 when wages rose sharply (SMEs tend to be labor intensive). It is widely recognized that SMEs are

the most efficient part of the Chinese economy, however, and that assigning the losses to them will undermine the engine of China's future productivity growth.

[…] Finally Beijing can assign the losses to the state sector, by reforming the houkou [sic] system, land reform, interest rate and currency reform, financial sector governance reform, privatization, etc. Most of the Third Plenum reforms are simply ways of assigning the cost of rebalancing, which includes the recognition of earlier losses, to the state sector. This is likely however to be politically difficult. China's elite generally benefits tremendously from control of state sector assets, and they are likely to resist strongly any attempt to assign to them the losses.

According to Pettis' (non-predictive) analysis, re-igniting Chinese growth in a new phase will be inseparable from an intra-establishment struggle over the responsibility of the SOEs to cover the legacy costs of the country's economic reformation to date. *Status quo* resistance to this compelling developmental logic is sure to provide critical context for the actions of China's new Xi-Li administration, as it consolidated power among unusually challenging circumstances.

July 15, 2014

Twitter cuts (#16)

If street protest in Hong Kong continues on its present course, a lot of people are going to get hurt, for nothing.

> If Beijing doesn't give in, looks bad in front of world. If does, whole China knows protesting works, ricks rule. How`d you choose to act?
>
> — Offbeat China (@OffbeatChina) September 29, 2014

> Fear people on the Hong Kong streets don't understand what they are dealing with
>
> — Bill Bishop (@niubi) September 28, 2014

Asking excited students to take a step back, and think, doesn't have a great track record of success. The alternative, however, is catastrophic. The window of opportunity for sanity to prevail is closing fast.

ADDED: No doubt politically incorrect, but admirably pithy:

> Dear Hong Kong, Democracy sucks. Go back to work.
>
> — Henry Dampier (@henrydampier) September 29, 2014

September 29, 2014

China and the Net

At *ChinaFile*, following the World Internet Conference, in Wuzhen, a fascinating discussion — by English-speaking foreigners — on what is arguably *the* crucial issue of the 21st century: *How will China 'manage' its relationship with the Internet?* It is hard to imagine a problem which throws economic and political agendas into more turbulent conflict with each other, or one that more clearly reveals the ultimate nonlinear dependencies between the two. The entire ideological history of the world seems to be lensed through it, just as the future of the world 'will be'* decided by how it works out.

Some useful background, conveying the sheer scale and dynamism of the Chinese Internet, can be found here. As the *ChinaFile* commentators make clear, this is a topic howling with paradox-torsion — and thus one peculiarly liable to unleash creative surprises.

* Scare quotes included to fend off *Templexity* pedants (this blog's cute alternative to grammar Nazis).

December 4, 2014

Digital Sovereignty

Even skeptics (such as this blog) can note the importance of the

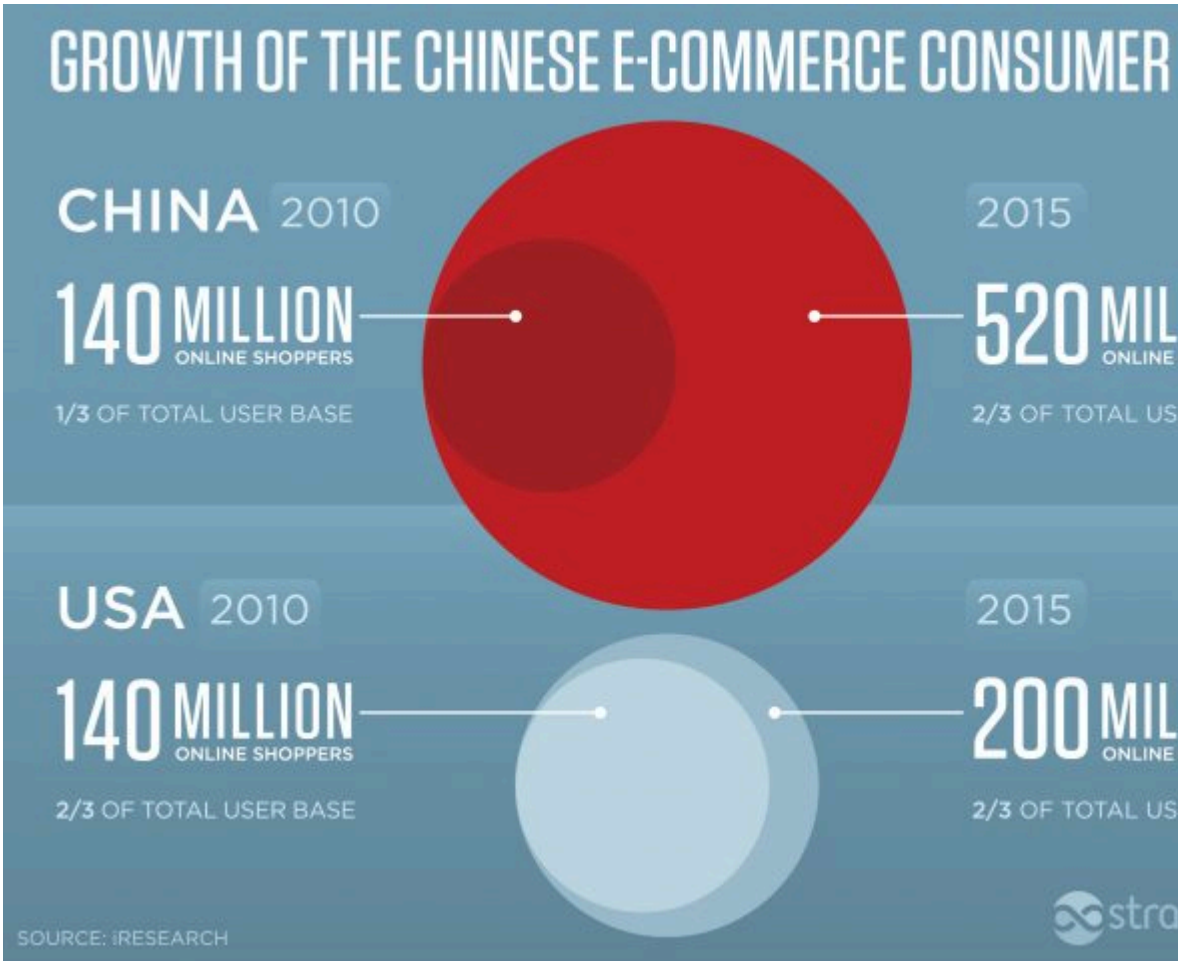
discussion initiated here:

Soviet Union had cinema, the PRC has the Internet.

*I personally think that the international audience still largely underestimate the importance of what China has achieved policy-wise for the global landscape of Internet. Concepts like "**digital sovereignty**" that were proposed by China are now emerging from post-Snowden discussions in proposals at the highest levels in EU countries. Russia has already embraced it. Of course, the US industry still need the myth of a "global village" to push products worldwide. Still, I am curious to see how it evolves as the ad market will continue to shrink, and as foreign relationships with the US are likely to get less friendly in the next years. While EU and other countries (esp in Africa and South America) start realizing that the US-first model of the Internet is too much a disadvantage for them, the only other real-world case they can turn to is China. In many regards, China looks like the future of the Internet. …*

It's tempting for Westerners (and especially Anglos) to see Chinese government Internet policy as simply *backward*. That's almost certainly an inadequate framework for making sense of the most explosive Web-growth in the world.

Among other developments, there's this:



June 30, 2016

Drone Business

Whatever the administrative obstacles on the path of the Chinese

Internet, the basic infrastructure of the coming robot-facilitated e-commerce system seems to be coming together remarkably smoothly. For instance, this.

(This might be UF's favorite advertisement of all time.)

More here, and here.

Telecommercial drone-logistics (and the idiots wanted flying cars).

February 5, 2015

Quote note (#327)

Urbit perspective on the Chinese century:

The closest thing to a general-purpose personal server today is probably the Chinese service WeChat. If you don't know much about WeChat, you should really watch this NYT video.

Catch-up would be sensible. (Abandoning the bizarre Western prejudice that the Internet is primarily for political expression would be a start.)

Pointed criticism follows. If Urbit delivers, we could actually see some geographically-distributed competition, which is otherwise looking increasingly unlikely. 2017 should tell, apparently.

February 3, 2017

Switch

Long-anticipated, and now officially recognized:

The Chinese economy just overtook the United States economy to become the largest in the world. For the first time since Ulysses S. Grant was president, America is not the leading economic power on the planet.

It just happened — and almost nobody noticed.

The International Monetary Fund recently released the latest numbers for the world economy. And when you measure national economic output in "real" terms of goods and services, China will this year produce $17.6 trillion — compared with $17.4 trillion for the U.S.A. […] As recently as 2000, [the US] produced nearly three times as much as the Chinese.

To put the numbers slightly differently, China now accounts for 16.5% of the global economy when measured in real purchasing-power terms, compared with 16.3% for the U.S. […] This latest economic earthquake follows the development last year when China surpassed the U.S. for the first time in terms of global trade. […]

… the moment came sooner than … predicted. China's recent decision to bring gross domestic product calculations in line with international standards has revealed activity that had previously gone uncounted.

I'm expecting more discomfort than triumphalism from a China

that is being pushed into the lime-light faster than it is ready for. The political advantages of catch-up might not match the economic ones, but they are by no means inconsiderable.

Some gentle snark from Glenn Reynolds: “Well, in recent years both China and the United States have been fundamentally transformed.”

December 5, 2014

Death Valley

Strictly gossip-level, but the bold predictions gets it a mention. It’s *Breitbart*, so understatement isn’t going to feature:

San Francisco, heartland of wacky progressive politics but also home to some of America’s most innovative technology companies, is in trouble. Not just trouble, actually, but serious shit. […] And the main reason is China. The Wall Street Journal has a good explainer on what’s going on over there, but the basic thing you need to understand is that a lot of glossy American stocks are about to take a tumble, especially tech stocks.

The core of the analyis:

Fear and greed run the stock market, which is, of course, exactly as it should be: they’re the instincts upon which capitalism is built. But that’s a problem for companies who suffer dramatically when

global events conspire to shunt investors into safer bets. […] Businesses like Twitter and Facebook have always been grotesquely overvalued, according to conventional analyses. Technology companies get away with hilarious valuations mainly thanks to upward pressure; the inflation happens right at the start when companies raise hundreds of millions of dollars on multimillion dollar valuations, despite not earning a penny in revenue and having no immediate plans to do so. […] That's in outrageous contradiction to their price-to-earnings ratio, one traditional and very reliable way of valuing companies. […] Tech stocks have absurdly high price-to-earnings ratios, and any blip in the market has a much bigger effect on high PE stocks than low PE stocks. So investors are counting on massive future growth that will likely never come ***and*** *betting against global events that shave billions off the value of frothy investments.*

It could get a little rough.

August 25, 2015

Huge News (if true)

China is bailing out of US Treasury paper (ZH reports).

August 27, 2015

CHAPTER FOUR - URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Re-Animator (Part 1)

Can Expo live again?

Different truths are 'harsh' to different people. For Chinese, one truth so harsh that it escaped public recognition at the moment where it most mattered is that almost nobody, outside the country, cared very much about the 2010 World Expo. By the time China eagerly but belatedly seized its chance to take up the torch for this global festival of modern civilization, Expo's epoch of radiant significance had passed. Harsher still: this was the basic fact, and principal conditioning reality of the event, rippling with ominous implications for the future of modernity and the international response to China's re-awakening. Ameliorating it are more shadowy, contrary truths – first among them that Shanghai had already discounted a tired world's Expo indifference, and worked around it, in order to make the event into an opportunity for

something else, and for itself.

The history of World Expo, from London's Great Exhibition of 1851, is too abundantly documented to rehearse here. The basic pattern, however, is not difficult to outline, since it conforms to a relatively smooth curve from meteoric rise (1851-1940) into gradual decay (1958 onwards), almost perfectly tracking the trajectory of modernist optimism, from its ignition in the promethean forge of industrial revolution through to its expiry in postmodern / postcolonial cynicism, elite masochism, and apologia.

Importantly, this has remained an essentially Western story, despite the consistent globalism of its cultural ambitions. The ascent of Western, globalizing, industrial capitalism, in its European and American waves, was reflected in World Exhibitions of heart-stopping glory. The crisis and decline of the West – both relative and absolute — has thrown the event into marginality, neglect, and self-doubt, clasped in the death-grip of an embittered and self-mortifying anti-modernism. Most crucially — and astoundingly — the long-evident dawning of the historical revitalizing and frenetically modernizing 'Asian Century' seems to have had a negligible impact upon the declinist 'Grand Narrative' incarnated in World Expo, which has plunged ever deeper into twitchily gesticulating, hypersensitive panic at the supposed social and environmental calamity of modernistic growth.

The irony of this situation merits explicit emphasis. Precisely

when globalization shifted from questionable aspiration and ideology to definite historical fact, with the emergence of robust, non-Western economic development cores, first in Pacific East Asia, then South Asia, and beyond, the project of cosmopolitan modernization underwent a seemingly irremediable delegitimation in the court of approved 'world' opinion. Apparently, if the West cannot any longer strut across the world stage with invincible and unchallenged confidence, the only acceptable alternative option is hair-shirts for all. If this epitome of triumphant dog-in-the-manger resentment does not exemplify 'cultural hegemony' at its most potent and most toxic, it is hard to imagine what might.

An overwhelming abundance of public evidence attests to the implacable momentum of Expo degeneration, although most of this data resists tidy quantification. Since the end of World War II, the original purpose of the event, which was to promote industrial modernization worldwide through a comprehensive public exhibition of advanced productive technologies, structural engineering, manufactures, and commodities, has been progressively phased-out, to be replaced by an agenda that reflects the concerns of inter-governmental bureaucracies, national diplomatic services, and tourism boards. Public relations displays have been systematically substituted for technological exhibitions, and the number of significant mechanical and product innovations achieving popular exposure through Expo – once substantial — has

fallen to near-zero. Expo themes have been steadily stripped of their associations with accumulative materialism and refashioned into earnest exhortations for moral and social transformation, as an event that was initially designed to celebrate modernity has increasingly come to apologize for it. Predictably enough, this bureaucratically-alchemized transmutation of a festival into lament has been accompanied by a precipitous collapse of popular interest and engagement. Audiences that once flooded in to catch a vision of the future, now avoid an event that musters all the allure of a United Nations teach-in.

In the West, this is all tediously familiar. Scarcely anyone pays attention to Expo anymore, or cares much about it. Perhaps most, if jolted into an opinion on the matter, would vaguely approve of the politically correct course the event has taken, although not sufficiently, of course, to ever entertain the prospect of attending one. After all, few Westerners believe in modernity anymore, world trends distress them, and Expo seems roughly as relevant to their anxieties as the prospect of Mars colonization.

In the East, things are more puzzling. Societies undergoing rapid modernistic development make natural Expo hosts, as demonstrated consistently throughout the history of the event. There has never been a great World Expo that has not broadly corresponded to a moment of exceptional national and urban flourishing. Why, then, has Expo not undergone a profound Asiatic revitalization, restoring

it to former glories? Why has the western Pacific Rim not captured Expo, re-tooling it into a promotional vehicle for its own developmental prospects, as America did in the early 20th century?

Weighed by sheer visitor numbers, the two largest World Expos in history have been East Asian. Yet the moribund, guilt-wracked pathos of Occidental decline continues to dominate the event. Japan spent its Expo 1970 attempting to prove that it could out-do even the West in growth-sapping sanctimoniousness (as its economy would later demonstrate), whilst the mood in post-Expo 2010 Shanghai seems remarkably devoid of any euphoric sense of accomplishment, and more akin to that which might be expected from a group of schoolchildren freshly escaped from an abnormally-uninspired six-month lecture on ethically-guided behavioral rectification, delivered by an international Mandarinate. Having just executed the largest discrete event in human history, the predominant feelings are dutiful relief and anticlimax, numbed by something like deliberate amnesia. In any case, there's Shanghai to get on with, so why waste time remembering Expo? Doesn't that just stink up the joint with the odor of Western death?

(Some suggestions, tentative answers, still more downside, and a lot more upside, to come.)

August 4, 2011

Re-Animator (Part 2)

Expo transformers – the uninvited guests

What was inside the UK national pavilion at Expo 2010? Did anyone get in there? Maybe they could pass on the inside dope? Because one thing is for sure, if 'Anglosphere' cultural resonances mean anything, expectations can be pitched down to sub-basement levels. Like the UK, Australia did a good — even excellent job – with the outside of its pavilion, but its exhibition was, to be brutally frank, a disgrace. Vacuous, patronizing, revoltingly sentimental, and despicably cowardly – details would be nice, of course, but actually there weren't any — it served to perfectly illustrate the collapse of Expo, from a festival of dynamic modernization to a whining indulgence in modernity's most destructive cultural pathologies. Where once an exhibition, whether corporate or national, boldly declared: "This is what we're doing (isn't it magnificent?)," now they exhaust their attenuated energies exploring new, although consistently unimaginative, ways of saying "sorry." Narcissistic guilt flaps pointlessly about the exhibition space like a shoal of stranded fish, dying on a beach.

Incredibly, the USA pavilion was even worse. Not only was the pavilion itself a prefabricated strip-mall insult, unworthy of comparison with a second-tier Wallmart, but the exhibition inside

took the obsequious pandering of the Australians to a whole new level. We wanted a space shuttle or a predator drone and they gave us Hillary Clinton saying "*ni hao*" plus some nonsense about planting flower-beds in the ghetto. Anyone who left this pavilion without deep and abiding detestation for everything America represented itself as being probably thinks Barney is a pretty cool guy. This was the society once capable of staging the Chicago Expo of 1893, the New York Expos of 1939-40 and 1964-5, of making incredible things and exhibiting them, of depicting a compelling vision of the future, and now … morbid Spenglerian reflections were inescapable.

Wandering amongst these monuments to misdirection, bland meaninglessness, sugary PR, and piteous 'please-don't-hate-me' concessions to the strident anti-modernist moralism of the age – which is to say, to sheer, ruinous decadence — consciousness pixilated out into semi-random dot-pattern, swirled kaleidoscopically by a storm of frustration that could only be relieved by barking out at the local Expo authorities, and beyond them at the city, country, and region that was hosting this event "Could you *please* stop being so danged polite!"

The West is obviously spiraling down the drain, and what it needs, above anything, is some inspiring competition. In particular, and in 2010, it needed a western Pacific Rim, full-throttle development, blazing-a-path-to-the-future Expo that – purely by inevitable implication – maximized the humiliation of the senescent 'developed'

world and jolted it with the roughest imaginable type of *tough love* from its path of decline. (Of course, the societies most in need of this shock therapy are too lost in the enthralling minutiae of their own degeneration to have noticed it, but still …) Instead, Expo 2010 remained scrupulously courteous, deferential to deeply decayed Expo traditions, and respectful of the multicultural piety that even the most wretched examples of systematic social failure have a dignity of their own. What it lacked was a massive injection of pure, unselfconscious, ethno-historical arrogance, based on unmoderated confidence in what was being achieved.

Perhaps this can be stated even more offensively: modernization should make people feel bad. Its most altruistic or epidemic function is to so thoroughly deride and humiliate all of those who are failing to modernize that eventually, after every excuse and projection has been attempted and exhausted, *behavior is changed*. Backwardness is made shameful, and thus corrected. That's how history works. It began that way among the jig-saw principalities of Renaissance Europe, it worked that way in Japan (bringing modernization with the Meiji restoration), in China, long denigrated for its 'stagnant Confucianism', now big mummy of the Dragon economies, in India, finally lashed psychologically out of its absurd 'Hindu rate of growth' by the China model, and everywhere else that has ever climbed out of complacent sloth onto the developmental fast track. It's long overdue to start happening in the West, because what has been

happening there — for the best part of a century now — simply isn't working, and this chronic social failure is nowhere near clear, painful, or embarrassing enough to the populations concerned.

Nothing would be better for the West than to have its nose rubbed in its own decay, the more abusively and insensitively the better. In order to accelerate the process, the entire treasure chest of colonial condescension should be re-opened and rummaged through, searching for whatever will best aggravate, provoke, and catalyze transformation, perhaps with strong insinuations of racial and cultural inferiority thrown in for spice. The lesson of history is that the human species is comfortable with inertia, and generally more than happy to gradually degenerate. One of the few things that ever stops people, and turns them around, is the transparent contempt trickling down from other, more dynamic societies. If Expo needs a 'social dimension', that's it.

No doubt 2010 is still too recent for alternative or counter-factual history, for an Expo-punk (or X-punk) genre, searching out everything that might have been re-animated through the event — but the venture is irresistible. Call it *Asia Unleashed 2010*, an utterly impolite assertion of new socio-geographical realities that expresses, in raw and overwhelming style, the central truth of the age: the simultaneous de-westernization and radical re-invigoration of modernity.

Asia Unleashed could have borrowed heavily from the actual

Expo 2010, adopting almost everything that was created by the host, in fact, and much else beside. The China Pavilion, Theme Pavilions, Urban Best Practices Area, Expo Cultural Center, Expo Center, Expo Boulevard, Expo Museum, and site landscaping, as well as the Shipping Pavilion, GM/SAIC Pavilion and exhibition, Telecoms Pavilion, Oil Pavilion, Shanghai Corporate Pavilion with all its stuff, Coca Cola Pavilion, plenty of the international pavilion designs, and even a few of the internal exhibitions … all keepers. What gets laughed out are the schmaltzy public relations videos, the *sorry, sorry, really truly sorry* song and dance act, the *weren't we awful* performance, the Kumbaya Pavilion, the Environmental Hypersensitivity Pavilion, the Victimological Grievance Pavilion, the Beyond Growth Pavilion, the There Must Be A Gentler Way Pavilion, any national or corporate pavilion without exhibition objects (roughly half), almost everything bearing the imprint of tourist boards, media studies graduates, or diplomatic services, and every usage of solar panels that isn't strictly tailored to commercial exploitation on a massive scale. In addition, any national pavilion based entirely on ethnic kitsch gets grouped together with others of its kind in an exotic tourism area, because it's admitting to a complete absence of creative capability and needs to be mocked. *No robots, no platform*: that's the rule.

Asia Unleashed also needs a lot of things brought in, most of all machines. Expo is all about machines, even though every Expo over

the last half-century has been pitifully deficient in this regard. It scarcely needs mentioning that the entire Expo site should be pulsing, crawling, and twitching with robots of every type and scale, from industrial goliaths, automated submarines and space vehicles, through charismatic androids, to intelligent household appliances, Go players, robopets, and insectiform mechanisms. To push the process along, those countries and corporations with the laziest robot exhibits can be publicly ridiculed over the PA system.

Expo is an exhibition, and its historical sickness is perfectly tracked by the degeneration of this elementary conception into PR. Organizers at all levels, from the pinnacle of the international Expo bureaucracy (BIE) downwards, clearly need to be forcefully reminded of the difference. For instance, video technology is an entirely suitable object for Expo display, and videos themselves can quite appropriately play a supportive, informative role. To center an 'exhibition' upon videos, however, especially when they have been put together, using state-of-the-art advertising techniques, with the entire purpose of selling a national or corporate brand through image associations and spin, is a complete abnegation of responsibility and should straightforwardly be banned, or at least boycotted, derided, and rendered ineffective through inundating contempt. The only acceptable center of an Expo display is an object, preferably astonishing, fetched from the outer edge of industrial capability in order to concretely represent the trajectory of material

progress. Displaying such objects – and thereby respecting audiences sufficiently to evaluate them for themselves – is the non-negotiable, basic function of Expo as an institution. If it can no longer accept this task, it should be terminated (by a giant robot, if possible).

Asia Unleashed is dedicated to the latest and impending phases of global industrial civilization, which should be more-or-less implicit in the fact that it is a World Expo, although sadly, it isn't. There's plenty of room for artworks and other singular cultural creations, but the emphasis is edgily modernistic. Green technology gets in because it's technology, and the tourism industry gets in because it's an industry, but in both cases the spin-meisters have been reined back hard, and the preliminary question insistently raised: "What, really, are you exhibiting here?" The only organizers who get to avoid such suspicious interrogations are the ones overseeing the erection of some fabulous structure that looks as if it comes from the set of a science fiction movie, or unloading partially-animated assemblages of glistening metal from mountainous stacks of shipping containers, because – clearly – they understand what an Expo is all about. The cyclopean space elevator anchor station, taking shape in the Extraterrestrial Resources Exploitation Zone, serves as a model for the guiding spirit of the festival. The machinery in the 3D printing pavilion printed the pavilion.

The mining industry employs monster trucks weighing 203 tonnes, with a capacity to carry 360 tonnes, they cost US$3 million

each, their tires are four-meters in diameter, and driving one is like "driving a house" – why on earth didn't Expo 2010 have one? *Asia Unleashed* most certainly would. For developed countries with the resources to put on an impressive show at Expo there needs to be something like a price for admission, and an awe-inspiring piece of industrial machinery fits the bill exactly. The Canadian tar sands are being criss-crossed by these monster trucks, and the Canada national pavilion should have been strongly *advised* to bring one over. Instead they brought … (hands up if anyone remembers).

All the imagination that has been squandered over decades in utopian speculations of the "another world is possible" type has been far more productively employed at *Asia Unleashed*, counter-balancing the tendency of advanced industrial capabilities to flee from the arena of spectacle. The monumental achievements and consequences of intensely miniaturized and softened technologies demand exhibition, from silicon chip fabrication, gene sequencing, and rudimentary nanotechnology, to cryptosystems, social networks, digital microfinance, and virtual architecture, even as they slip through their inner inexorable logic into invisibility. To present these frontiers of industrial capability rapidly, dramatically, and memorably to a highly-diverse, transient Expo audience requires the application of creative intelligence on a massive scale. The growing challenges of this task are worthy of the rising computer-augmented talents brought to bear upon it.

Asia Unleashed never happened, of course, partly because the international Expo institutional apparatus is locked into the Occidental death-slide, but mostly because it would have been impolite. Ultimately, postmodernist multicultural political correctness – today's hegemonic globalist ideology — is an elaborate etiquette, designed to prevent the 'insensitive' identification and diagnosis of failure, and to elude, indefinitely, the blunt statement: "What you're doing doesn't work." No Expo that remained true to its deep institutional traditions could avoid such a statement arising, implicitly, through contrast. Hence, Expo has been condemned to die, by inertial forces too profound for Expo 2010 to fully arrest, let alone reverse: *Better decayed than rude*.

From the wreckage of the Expo institution, however, Expo 2010 was able to extract, polish, and resuscitate a crucial modernist topic: the city as engine of progress. More on that in Part 3.

August 11, 2011

Re-Animator (Part 3)

What makes a great city?

By far the most interesting element of *World Expo 2010: Shanghai*, was Shanghai. Whilst deeply-rooted regional traditions of courtesy

sustained the fiction that this World Fair was about the world, it really wasn't. Whatever the diplomatic benefits of the almost universally convenient internationalist pretense, to China and Expo's foreign participants alike, Expo 2010 was about Shanghai, and for Shanghai. The Expo was global because Shanghai is, it was about China because Shanghai is China's gateway to the world, it was about cities in order to be even more about Shanghai, nobody uninterested in Shanghai paid it the slightest attention, and Shanghai used it to restructure, intensify, and promote itself.

Expo as an institution was in decline before 2010, and continues to decline. Shanghai was rising before 2010, and continues to rise, but now infrastructurally upgraded, thoroughly renovated, and decorated with the historical merit-badge of Expo hospitality. *Better City, Better Life*, a typically airy and aspirational Expo theme, is a cold-sober description of the Expo-effect in Shanghai.

Cities are, in certain important respects, generic. There is such a thing as 'the city in general' as the work of Geoffrey West, in particular, has demonstrated. We know, thanks to West, that cities are negative organisms, with consistent scaling characteristics that structurally differentiate them from animals and corporations. As they grow they accelerate and intensify at a quantifiable and predictable rate, exhibiting increasing returns to scale (in sharp contrast to animals and businesses, which slow down in proportion to their size). Organisms and firms die normally and by necessity,

cities only rarely and by accident.

Cities belong to a real genre, but they are also singularities, undergoing spontaneous individuation. In fact, they are generically singular – singular without exception – like black holes. It is not only that no city is like another, no city *can* be like another, and this is a feature that all cities share, arguably more than any other.

Beyond such generic singularity, there is an additional level of enhanced differentiation that emerges from the position cities occupy within larger systems. These systems are not only internally specialized, but also hierarchical, dividing core from periphery, and distributing influence unevenly between them. Ultimately, within the fully global incarnation of the 'world system', cities acquire secondary metropolitan characteristics, to very different degrees, in accordance with their geographical and functional proximity to the center of the world. They transcend their local histories, to become hubs or nodes in a global network that re-characterizes them as parts of a whole rather than wholes made of parts, as metropolis-versus-periphery rather than (or on top of) metropolis-versus-town.

The geographical structure and historical instability of modernity's core-periphery architecture has been the focus of the 'world system theory' developed from the Annales School of Fernand Braudel (1902-85) by Immanuel Wallerstein (1930-) and – most impressively — Giovanni Arrighi (1937-2009). According to the world system theorists, the revolutions that matter most are not

national regime changes, such as those in France (1789) and Russia (1917), but rather global re-organizations that mark out the basic phases of modern history, jolting the world into new core-periphery structures. Modernity has undergone four of these shifts up to the present, with each phase lasting for a 'long century', introducing a new core state, or hegemon, with enhanced capabilities, and a new urban center – successively, Venice, Amsterdam, London, and New York – that operate as an effective capital of the world.

As the example of New York attests, this status is not primarily political. Nor does prominence in manufacturing seem to be a relevant factor (the 'world capital' has never been the dominant industrial center of its respective region or state). Over the course of modern history to date, the crucial features of the world capital seem to be that it is the largest urban agglomeration in the leading ('hegemonic') region or state; that it is an established financial center that quite rapidly attains a position of global pre-eminence in this respect; that it is an open port city with clear maritime orientation; and that it has an exceptionally internationalized demographic profile, with a large segment of internationally-mobile, opportunistic residents. A significant period of leadership in the creative arts might plausibly be added to this list. Functionally, the world capital serves as the supreme nerve-center of the global economy, specialized nationally, and then super-specialized internationally, as the financial, logistics, and business services hub of a system whose

global integrity is reflected in the city's privileged singularity.

The exceptional drama of our age lies in its nature as a time of transition between phases of modernity, somewhere in the winter of a long century, when an epoch of hegemony is exhausted. More specifically, the walls are closing in on the American Age, as commentators of almost every intellectual and ideological stripe are increasingly aware. Overstretched, essentially bankrupted, politically paralyzed and disillusioned, America sinks into self-conscious crisis, its mood dark and clouded. It would be a mistake to limit attention to America, however, because the crisis is world-systemic, heralding the end of an international order that arose among the chaos of the world wars and achieved definition in the post-WWII United Nations and Bretton Woods institutions (IMF, World Bank, and the descendent of GATT, now the WTO). It affects not only the role of the US dollar as international reserve currency, an Atlantic-centered NATO and an Occidentally-skewed UN apparatus, but also the European Union, the post-colonial Middle Eastern state-system and (very) much else besides.

Over the next two decades, under the impact of economic forces of extreme profundity (far exceeding the responsive capacity of existing institutions), a revolutionary re-ordering of the world can be expected to unfold. If America succeeds in maintaining its position of leadership within the global system for a period that significantly exceeds the long 20th century (which began no earlier than 1914,

and thus might be expected to persist for some additional years), it will have broken a pattern that has remained consistent throughout a half-millennium of history. Whilst not strictly impossible, perpetuation of the present hegemonic order would be, quite literally, a stretch.

Another vision of a break from historical precedent, this time transparently utopian, envisages – rather than the continuation of US pre-eminence — the obsolescence of the core-periphery global structure in its entirety, ending hierarchical geography and hegemony in general. Even If such a vision truly rises to the level of a definite expectation (rather than a nebulous exercise in wishful thinking), it remains ungrounded in reliable historical and theoretical foundations. Altruistic political intentions – were such ever credible – would still be quite insufficient to overcome the spontaneous, dynamic trend to approximate world systemic equilibrium, in which a core zone, and its metropolitan capital, are automatically nominated, by diffuse economic currents searching for a central clearing house.

Whilst no doubt deeply disappointing to utopian eschatology, and to all dreams of historical conclusion (or passage to the promised land), phase-shifts in the world-system are less ominous than they are often depicted as being. Among Arrighi's most important insights is the reminder that whenever an attempted reconstruction of the world order has been based upon a frontal military and geo-strategic challenge to the hegemon, it has failed. This is exemplified, above all,

by the German and Russian histories of the 19th and 20th centuries, in which repeated direct confrontations with the established Anglophone-dominated international system led only to frustration, regime collapse, and subaltern re-integration.

Perhaps ironically, a marked subjective aversion to hard power assertion and the assumption of hegemony can be quite reliably taken as a positive indicator for the objective emergence of hegemonic status. Holland, Great Britain, and the United States of America were all, in certain crucial respects, accidental imperialists, whose successive ascents to world dominance shared a prioritization of commercial motives, retarded state involvement, strong 'isolationist' and 'anti-imperialist' cultural currents, and a determined avoidance of 'Clauswitzean' decisive collision (especially with the prior hegemon). The British and American ways of war, in particular, are notable for their common emphasis upon hedging and triangulation, such as the exploitation of offshore position and maritime supremacy to avoid premature entanglement in high intensity 'continental' conflicts, the usage of financial and logistic capability to manipulate conflicts at a distance, and the diplomatic inclusion of defeated adversaries in reconstructed, poly-centric, 'balanced' systems of power. Hegemony was, in each case, peacefully inherited, even when it was cemented by war (in *partnership* with the previous hegemon) and later gave rise to opportunities for increasingly aggressive imperialistic adventurism.

Given this broadly uncontroversial historical pattern, it is all the more surprising that the German example is so widely invoked in discussions of China's 'peaceful rise'. In fact, China's ascent has stuck far closer to the model of hegemonic hand-overs than to that of confrontational challenges, as indicated by the prioritization of commercial development, the highly cooperative (even synergistic or 'Chimerican') relationship with the prevailing hegemon, the gradual accumulation of financial power by way of spontaneous, systemic re-distribution, and the equally gradual consolidation of maritime interests, emerging out of the global trading system, which draw the focus of government strategic policy – perhaps reluctantly – from domestic concerns out into the high-seas.

Historically, China has been far more a continental than a maritime power, and this fact provides the single most persuasive objection to the assumption of an impending Chinese (Long) Century. The emergence of a continental world system core would be as decisive a departure from precedent as any yet discussed, and if such a possibility is entertained, disciplined prediction falters. If inverted, however, this problem becomes a forecast in itself: the trajectory of China's rise necessarily implies its transformation into a maritime power (an insight already tacit in the controversial 1988 Chinese TV series *River Elegy*).

A vague intuition, partially but elusively crystallized by Expo 2010, is now precipitated by sheer historical pattern-recognition

into the form of an explicit question:

Is Shanghai destined to become the capital of the world?

(Part 4 to come)

August 16, 2011

Re-Animator (Part 4)

What does the world make of Shanghai?

If the deepest traditions of the World Expo are those cemented into its origin, it would be incautious to over-hastily dismiss one prominent feature of its inaugural instance. The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, held in London, in 1851, was staged in the effective capital of the world. In this case, at least, the defining internationalism of the Expo is difficult to disentangle from the indisputable historical fact that the entire world was rapidly becoming London's business. In a gesture of reciprocity so perfect that it approached simple identity, London invited the world to itself exactly as – and because – it was inviting itself to the world.

The Great Exhibition made irresistible sense because it put the future of the world on display in the only place that could. To see the concentrated, realistically sifted, programmatically arranged destiny of the earth, it was necessary to visit London, since it was in London

that everything came together.

Over its first two decades (and four episodes), World Expo alternated between London (1851, 1862) and Paris (1855, 1867), as if oscillating between the relative historical potencies of maritime and continental power. Yet this apparent hesitation actually compresses and conceals two distinct, complementary, and unambiguous trends. Britain was ascending inexorably to global hegemony, whilst disengaging from World Expo, whilst France was managing equally inexorable comparative decline, as it made World Expo – to a remarkable extent – its special preserve.

It is tempting to propose a theory of institutional consolation to account for this pattern. Long after Britain had abandoned all claim to Expo leadership, France continued to invest heavily in the event, chalking-up a record of Expo hospitality unmatched by any other country and setting the course to Expo institutionalization through the Bureau of International Exhibitions (BIE). The BIE, established in 1928, has always been based in Paris, and remains a bastion of Anglo-French bilingualism.

French Expo-enthusiasm expresses a more general relationship to the world system of great importance. Having relinquished its (Napoleonic) role as a challenger to the world order in the early 19th century, France has maneuvered, with unique capability and determination, to remain an indispensable secondary power, or – more precisely – a balancer. Its relationship to the successive phases

of Anglophone global hegemony has been guided by an extremely consistent deep policy of accommodation without acquiescence, characterized by imaginative and unrelenting, yet restrained rivalry. Close to the core, yet never quite part of it, France has been able to draw sustenance from the world order whilst contesting its cultural meaning (as English-speaking, protestant, and *laissez-faire* individualist).

World system challengers, it should be clearly noted, never host World Expos. The Expos held in Japan (Osaka 1970, Tsukuba 1985, Aichi 2005) and Germany (Hanover 2000) took place long after their armed resistance to the Anglo-American world order had been broken and both countries had been beaten into docility. Russia has never hosted one. Moscow of the USSR was offered the 1967 World Expo, but declined it (presumably judging it dangerously destabilizing to a closed society).

World Expo has thus acquired a secondary tradition, as a deliberately eccentric platform from which to contest the *core future* of the world system, and to propose a pluralized (or embryonically multicultural) alternative. Already in 1855 and 1867, and then in 1878, 1889, 1900, and 1937, World Expo staged *the view from Paris*, one that accepted the global reality of consolidated, revolutionary modernization, whilst systematically de-emphasizing its techno-commercial determinism and its convergence upon Anglophone cultural traits. Industrial globalization was reconfigured

as a condition to be critically interrogated, rather than an opportunity to be vigorously promoted.

Between the primary and secondary impulses of the Expo, collision was inevitable. Predictably enough, the occasion was provided by the reconnection of Expo to the global core.

Even given this truncated and radically simplified schema of Expo history, which had been largely settled in its essentials by 1870, the significance of the two New York World Expos, staged in 1939-40 and 1964-5, comes clearly into focus. Mid-20th century New York, like every world systemic capital, represented the leading edge of modernization as a revolutionary global process — emergence and consolidation of a new world order and new age (*novus ordo seclorum*) – compared to which the authority of established international institutions counted for nothing.

Both New York Expos flagrantly violated BIE regulations in numerous respects, but even after the withdrawal of official sanction, they ahead anyway. These were, non-coincidentally, the first rogue Expos. They were also among the most memorable and influential in World Expo history.

For the first time since the mid-19th century, Expo had found its way back to the capital of the world, in order to provide an uncompromised and unambiguous foretaste of the *World of Tomorrow* in the place that was orchestrating it. BIE opinion mattered little, because Expo was not being hosted in New York so

much as re-invented, echoing the originality of 1851. This was where the future would come from, and everyone knew it. All that was necessary was to tease the city into anticipating itself, and what resulted was a *Futurama*.

There was an additional message, easily overlooked due to the scarcity of data-points: hosting World Expo is one of the things the world capital has to do — as a kind of ritual responsibility, or a coming-out party. Shanghai has done that now. Precedent suggests that one additional Expo would be appropriate (perhaps in 2025, or 2030), although it might have to be unsanctioned next time.

Of course, Shanghai is not yet the capital of the world, but it is heading there. From the late-1970s, after centuries of exile and denigration, the offshore, diasporic-maritime, capitalistic China of the *tianchao qimin* — those 'abandoned by the Celestial Empire' – has been steadily, and rapidly, re-integrated with the continental mainland and its 'market socialist' structures. Floodgates of talent and investment have been opened, and as this scattered, sea-salt scented population has reconnected with the motherland, the 'Chinese miracle' of recent decades has taken place. Shanghai is the main-circuit socket that links this other China — oriented to oceanic trade, entrepreneurial opportunity, capital accumulation, international mobility, and a society of flexible networks — to the vast potentialities of the country (and flexible Sino-Marxist state) lying up the Yangzi, and beyond. If the process of reconnection is not

interrupted, the next phase of modernity will be centered in this city, where China meets the sea.

Despite its self-identification as the 'central country' (or 'middle kingdom' – *Zhongguo*), China has not been at the core of the world process for centuries. Instead it has been a complacently declining legacy power and a badly-treated outsider, then successively a second-tier affiliate, a truculent challenger, and a cautious balancer, until its prospective status as core inheritor (or virtual hegemon) began to percolate into global popular awareness over the final decades of the 20th century. Very little of this is a matter of motivation, or strategic assertion. Quasi-Marxist assumptions of economic inevitability and directional base-superstructure causation come into their own in this respect. Global leadership is nominated by industrial reality, not political will, and hegemony can neither be perpetuated beyond the endurance of its economic foundations, nor long disdained once such foundations have been laid. Eventually a reality check becomes unavoidable, and policy is hammered into compliance with the demands of world system equilibrium. Core-periphery relations are decided by trade and capital flows, not by political declarations. Since comparative success and failure show no sign at all of disappearing, it can confidently be expected that hierarchical geography – however re-arranged – will not be withering away any time soon. Realists will follow the money.

There will be a new world capital (you can count on it), but will it

be Shanghai? It would be reckless to presume so. The world system tradition, in its eagerness to anoint Tokyo as the successor to New York (during the 1980s), provides a cautionary lesson. There was no Tokyo World Expo, and it turns out that there was not an urgent or essential need for one.

So, *is Shanghai next?* That should have been the animating question of Expo 2010, and perhaps it will have been in the future. The whole world has a stake in it, because it tells us what is coming, and that is what World Expo was designed to do. For an emerging world capital to mask itself as a generic city passes beyond modesty into a species of accidental deception, but tact can easily be confused with pretence – especially by those on unfamiliar cultural terrain. It might be that Shanghai said everything that was necessary in 2010, and that what it said will eventually be heard, and understood.

Expo begins again in each new world capital, in 1851, in 1939, and – far more problematically – in 2010 (?). In Shanghai's case, we are still too close to the event, and too entangled in the current revolution of modernity, to know for sure. What Expo 2010 will have been depends upon what the world becomes, how its center of economic gravity shifts, how its new center condenses, and what it makes of Shanghai.

(final lurch into this fog-bank coming next (yippee!))

August 26, 2011

Re-Animator (Part 5)

The Call of Haibao

Dispatched from the British Consulate, Doctor Helen Goodwhite arrives at the Jiangnan Special Hospital for Inexplicable Foreign Devilry to interview a problematic inmate.

Dr Goodwhite: How are you feeling today Mister Vaughn? They tell me you're quite a bit calmer.

Vaughn: OK, I guess. A little disoriented. How long …?

Dr Goodwhite: Do you remember why you're here?

Vaughn: Not exactly.

Dr Goodwhite: Those scars on your arms, any ideas?

Vaughn: [Hesitating] Some kind of accident …?

Dr Goodwhite: I've got some witness reports here, all very consistent, maybe they'll jog something. It seems that you were walking down Nanjing East Road when you suddenly started shrieking "a-ya, a-ya, a-ya" with a highly unconvincing Chinese accent before switching to English and shouting "Get out. Get out. We have to get out of the city." After that, when nobody took any notice, you continued to 'yell aggressively' …Umm, let's see [riffling through her notes], ah yes, "Haibao spawn, you're all effing Haibao spawn, effing plague-blood zombie Haibao spawn," and so on, considerable obscenity it appears, and then … ah, here we are "filthy future-toxed

effing robot Haibao spawn, die, die, we're all going to die" et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Then you rushed across the street and smashed the plate-glass window of an Expo gift shop with your bare hands. [Looking up] Do you remember any of that, mister Vaughn?

Vaughn: Some of it, yes. Now you mention it. It's coming back. But it wasn't really like that.

Dr Goodwhite: It wasn't?

Vaughn: Not really, no. At least, those things happened, yes …

Dr Goodwhite: They did?

Vaughn: Yes, but it's just, what they meant … [hesitating]

Dr Goodwhite: Go on.

Vaughn: Well, they didn't mean anything of course, what I meant to say was, well, it was sort of a mistake.

Dr Goodwhite: A 'mistake'?

Vaughn: Yes, or, I guess, more of a misunderstanding.

Dr Goodwhite: I'm afraid you're going to have to be a great deal more specific if we're going to make any progress.

Vaughn: It's rather complicated.

Dr Goodwhite: Please. Just start at the beginning.

Vaughn: I suppose it began at the pavilion.

Dr Goodwhite: The UK Expo pavilion?

Vaughn: I was working there you know.

Dr Goodwhite: It's in the file.

Vaughn: So you know what it looked like?

Dr Goodwhite: Yes, of course.

Vaughn: The tendrils, the shimmering, the name like a taunt from … them.

Dr Goodwhite: It was called the 'Seed Cathedral', according to this.

Vaughn: Seed Cathedral, Sea Cthudral, whatever, it had been sent back, sent up, to show us their true 'face'. … At least, that's what I thought at the time, but that's just ridiculous, isn't it? I realize that now.

Dr Goodwhite: But at 'the time' you thought 'they' had 'sent it back'?

Vaughn: I'd been working too hard. It was quite stressful, you know. I wasn't sleeping well, worrying, and that's when they began chatting.

Dr Goodwhite: Who were 'they' Mister Vaughn?

Vaughn: The Haibao, of course.

Dr Goodwhite: Ah yes, the Expo mascot …

Vaughn: Mask, not mascot.

Dr Goodwhite: Did you know that the Shanghai Corporate Pavilion was defaced with luminous blue paint, on the night of September the ninth? [She passes a photograph.]

Vaughn: [Shudders silently]

Dr Goodwhite: The message is rather cryptic, but your words reminded me of it, for some reason. It's a bit difficult to read from the

photo, but I've got a transcript. "We are many and yet singular. Our name equals 90, the seething void, enfolding artificial intelligence and the terminal alpha-omega. We come from the depths, from the blue screen at the end of the world. Cthublue."

Vaughn: I don't know anything about that.

Dr Goodwhite: Really?

Vaughn: It's Haibao cultist, hardcore. I'd never touch that stuff – not ever.

Dr Goodwhite: Yet you seem to recognize it.

Vaughn: From dreams — bad, really bad, dreams. I told you, I wasn't sleeping well. They wouldn't stop talking, telling me things I didn't want to hear, I couldn't stop them. I tried, but they kept calling me.

Dr Goodwhite: Calling you to *bow* before the most *high*?

Vaughn: [Outraged] I never said that. I'd never say that. It's absurd, obscene. It's not even code.

Dr Goodwhite: [Checking her notes] So, you understand now that 'hairy crab' isn't a secret anagram for 'Haibao'?

Vaughn: Yes, I can see that, of course.

Dr Goodwhite: It isn't even close, really — too many letters, for one thing.

Vaughn: Well, six and nine are rotational twins, and 'o' is a 'cry'. [Sobs slightly] … It's all nonsense. I see that now. I was confused.

Dr Goodwhite: The trouble, Mister Vaughn, is that this subject

still seems to excite you rather disproportionately. I think we need to conduct a little test. Let's see what happens when we compare this [she reaches into her bag and lifts out the statuette of a tentacle-faced abomination, sculpted long ago by some Pacific island tribe, presumed extinct] with this [a soft, cartoonish, vaguely anthropomorphic blue doll, suggestive of a toothpaste advert for children]. The similarity isn't especially striking, is it?

Vaughn: No, no, no, no, NOOOOOOOOOO.

Dr Goodwhite: I'm sorry, what?

Vaughn: [In an almost indiscernible whisper] Deep ones.

Dr Goodwhite: I didn't catch that.

Vaughn: From the depths, the ocean – deep ones. They're from the sea – 'treasure from the sea' [laughs morbidly]. Even you have to understand that, doctor. Globalization, technocapitalism, Shanghai, alien invasion, the Thing — it could hardly be clearer. It's escaped from the abyss, and now it's exposed. The time has come. Sea Change, Modernity, call it whatever you want, it doesn't matter. The Haibao will tell us how to think soon enough, and we'll comply, because they're behind us, beneath us, and we'll peel away from what they always were like dead skin from a snake. They've shown us the ultimate city god already, so it won't be long. Their words are arriving, whispers, mutterings …

Dr Goodwhite: [Disquieted] Oabiah nasce zhee ute ewoit.

Vaughn: Excuse me?

Dr Goodwhite: That means nothing to you?

Vaughn: Nothing.

Dr Goodwhite: Strange, then, that it's tattooed on your arm.

Vaughn: I've no idea how it got there.

Dr Goodwhite: Alright, let's move on, shall we?

Vaughn: Move where doctor? We're already here, in the city at the end of the world, the thing that came out of the sea. We aren't going anywhere. It's coming for us, right now, and it can't be stopped. What did you expect? A New Jerusalem? [laughing unpleasantly]

Dr Goodwhite: Alright Mister Vaughn, I think we're done here. We need to get you some proper, professional attention. Then, after some rest, back to your family …

Vaughn: [Prolonged laughter, even more ghastly] Too late, doctor! Way too late. The Haibao have already taken them. It came for the children first, don't you realize that? Do you know how many Haibao dolls my sweet little kiddies have accumulated? [Voice cracking] Seventeen! They might as well have tentacles growing out of their eye-sockets — it would all amount to the same thing. Haibao melted their souls into the blue screen months ago. That generation's gone. Long gone. It was over even before the Haibao clones slithered out of the television set.

Dr Goodwhite: [Backing away nervously] This has been a very interesting chat, but I've really got to be going now. I'll tell the consulate that … that …

Vaughn: [Zoned-out into the blue] They want to transmute us — replace us – with something unspeakable, with a bionic monstrosity from beyond the blue screen. Our metropolises are turning into, into … Actually they were never ours. The deep ones, the Haibao, were always using them to modify us, using us to make them – that's the circuit: alien animation. It was a cosmic gamble, a bet, and now they're raking it in …

Dr Goodwhite: [Turns pale, a hideous comprehension dawning] Better city, better life …

September 2, 2011

Arts of Re-Animation

There's always something huge happening in Shanghai — and usually several things. Out at the leading edge over the last two years has been the tsunami of urban development along the Huangpu waterfront to the south of the Puxi metropolitan core, in an area that has been named 'Xuhui Riverside' or 'West Bund'. The scale of what is underway there is (of course) utterly stunning.

A mixture of new residential complexes and prestige towers is under construction, and the immediate waterfront has already been redeveloped into a strip of interconnected parks and boardwalks (constituting the 8.4km 'Shanghai Corniche'). Along the river, a neo-

modern aesthetic prevails, characterized by elegantly re-purposed heavy industrial structures: slabs of concrete, disused rail tracks, and massive cargo cranes. As elsewhere in the city, the heavy-duty Shanghai 1.0 has been playfully folded over itself, in a stylish celebration of modernist heritage. The future is presented as a re-launch of the past. For anybody mesmerized by time-spirals, it's irresistible.

The role allotted to the arts in this process of urban re-animation is especially notable. Even in a city blitzed into delirium by an explosive growth of arts space, the proliferation of galleries, theaters, museums, and other cultural centers in the West Bund comes as a scarcely-comprehensible shock. The subsonic sucking roar of this new cultural capacity, emitted in overlapping ripples as it extends its devouring appetite throughout the city and far beyond, reaches a magnitude that seems to bend space and time. There are entire national cultures in the world that would be hard-pressed to fill it.

The coming out party for this arts infrastructure was held on a suitably stupendous scale. *Westbund 2013: A Biennial of Architecture and Contemporary Art* included an interlocking set of exhibitions, each of which would have been dazzlingly impressive on its own. *Sound Art China* introduced the country's sonic bleeding edge in its *Revolutions Per Minute* event, set up within four renovated oil storage tanks. The adjacent West Bund Exhibition

Center — a redeveloped industrial structure of truly cyclopean proportions — hosted a multi-threaded sound / video / architecture / cinematic history show in and around a central 'Inter-Media Megastructure' that fully lived up to its grandiose name. A more modest urban development exhibition in a nearby warehouse space did its best to explain the epic convulsions that the area was undergoing. (I think the appropriate word is 'awesome', cubed.)

There's only one reasonable conclusion: Shanghai is sheer cosmic splendor compacted for terrestrial application, and expressed through aesthetic overload. Cynicism can wait for another occasion.

December 16, 2013

Dotting the 'I'

Whatever else is to be learned from 'A Dream I Dreamed' — the Kusama Yayoi exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai (Dec 15 to March 30, 2014) — the most superficially striking lesson is sociological. Shanghainese — and especially young Shanghainese — can't get enough of this stuff. After almost two months, queues no longer regularly stretch all the way through People's Park and out onto Nanjing Xi Lu, but they still over-spill the gallery. Both thematically and socially, this is a show about multitudes.

Kusama, born in 1929, has an artistic career stretching back to the 1950s. Throughout seven decades, as her celebrity has waxed and waned in waves, her artistic focus — or, more exactly, her strategic 'obliteration' of focus — has remained remarkably constant. Sensuous disintegration of self and world into dot pattern has been a continuous preoccupation.

The MoCA show concentrates upon Kusama's very recent work, mostly from the last two years. To a general audience, the best known pieces are probably her large, brightly bi-colored, speckled pumpkins, enjoyed for their pop-art accessibility and unpretentious aestheticism. When encountered within the context of the show, however, the disciplined dot shading on these works takes on an unsuspected seriousness, as it is sucked into swirls, drifts, and flurries of dots in different colors, across picture planes and sculptured surfaces, and even into illusory volumes. Through a power of pure multiplicity, Kusama's vivid, relentlessly cheerful pop-art chromatics become the tails of neonized guiding streaks, hurtling into cosmic vistas and shattered states of being.

Dotted tulips, dotted dogs, huge mushroom-styled dotted spheres, 'Infinity Dots' (2012), 'Infinity Double Dots' (2013), and the 'Infinity Nets' (numerous, 2013) created by the diffuse dot-puncturing of space … it becomes all-too easy to understand why Kusama chooses to live in a Japanese mental hospital as an OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) patient, and why her own accounts

of her work wander so uninterruptedly between aesthetics and psychopathology. Her installation 'I'm Here, but Nothing' (2013), consisting of a living room suffused with violet light and blitzed with countless hallucinatory dots, provides something close to an insanity portal. Visitors entering the 'Obliteration Room' are handed a sheet of colorful dot stickers and invited to go crazy. It's at once humorously and seriously dotty.

The works are typically without center, diffusing perception smoothly across sheer distribution, sometimes through spaces expanded to infinity through installed mirrors. The sense of religious suggestion is occasionally made explicit, as in 'Transmigration' (2011) — an 'infinity-net' style acrylic painting whose numinous title is only reinforced by its thematic continuity with the rest of the show. In 'Narcissus Garden' (2013), a packed array of stainless steel spheres, mirroring and the assembly of featureless particles are finally fused (although this work is more notable for its neat infolding of Kusama's artistic vocabulary than for its aesthetic power). To immerse 'oneself' in this exhibition is to be strewn across the void, lost in clouds, and in crowds.

Kusama's appeal manifests an East Asian 'pop' sensibility that clearly works in Shanghai, attesting once again to the influence of contemporary Japanese culture throughout the region, and to the continued relevance of common religious traditions. Beyond — or simply through — the deliberate frivolity of this work, something

profound, and shattering, is being shared. It's well worth adding yourself to the crowds.

February 11, 2014

Urbanization in Focus

Might urbanization be the leading theme of China's 5th generation CCP administration? The background to this question is the process of Chinese urbanization itself. Over the three decades of Reform and Opening, China's urban population rose from 20% to 53% of the (rising) total, resulting in over half a billion new urbanites. The economic and geostrategic consequences of this transformation have profoundly re-structured the world. (It is the central fact of the Pacific-centered Modernity 2.0.)

In the *Atlantic*, Matt Schiavenza communicates the basics:

In China, economic growth and urbanization have gone hand in hand. When Deng Xiaoping initiated Reform and Opening in 1978, the vast majority of the population lived and worked in the countryside — just as Chinese people had for centuries. But over the past three and a half decades, as special economic zones churned out exports and China modernized its cities, hundreds of millions of people migrated to urban areas seeking work in the manufacturing and service sectors. This … has made China — and the Chinese —

much wealthier.

The guideline themes of China's 4th generation CCP leadership – 'harmonious society' and 'scientific development' – were no doubt sculpted by the stresses and policy challenges of massive urbanization, but they addressed the phenomenon indirectly. There are numerous indications that a more specifically-focused emphasis upon urbanization is now emerging. In particular, China's new Premier Li Keqiang envisages the topic as a nexus, where many of the country's development and governance issues meet.

The Chinese journal *Qiushi* published an article on urbanization by Li Keqiang in its Winter 2012 issue (translated into English by He Shan and Chen Xia here). Framed by the expectation (attributed to "Foreign economists") "that China's urbanization and U.S. high technology would emerge as twin engines of the global economy in the 21st century," it rewards close scrutiny.

The analysis of Michael Pettis, who identifies insufficient domestic consumption (by households) as China's pre-eminent economic obstacle, is a valuable preparation for this discussion, which begins: "Urbanization has the greatest potential for boosting domestic demand." Li argues that China remains relatively under-urbanized, so the propulsion to "exponential urban growth" continues, with at least partially predictable implications. Since "urban residents spent 3.6 times more than rural dwellers in 2010" it can be confidently anticipated that consumer spending will rise as a

function of urbanization, contributing automatically to economic re-balancing.

… it is estimated that every rural resident who becomes an urban dweller will increase consumption by more than 10,000 yuan (US$1,587). And each one percent increase in the urbanization rate in only one year will see more than 10 million rural residents absorbed into the cities. This will, in turn, translate into consumption totaling more than 100 billion yuan (US$15.9 billion) and correspondingly create more investment opportunities.

Full realization of these opportunities, Li argues, will require reform or abolition of the country's *hukou* system of residence registry, with its "urban-rural dual structure." In other respects, too, vigorous government action is recommended, as long as it achieves "conformity with the objective law of urban development." (Investigating "the objective law of urban development" is the primary mission of this blog, so it is a concept we shall obsessively return to.)

Core government responsibilities are taken to include the mitigation of social conflicts and problems, infrastructure investment, and administrative intervention to constrain housing-market instability. Urbanization management is thus recognized as a governmental priority. Given the complexity and the global significance of this task, which amounts to the integration of another quarter-billion Chinese into the economic mainstream in a little over

a decade, there is really no decent alternative to remarking – with an absolute minimum of smugness or sarcasm – *good luck with that*.

***

Even when direct construction expenditures are ignored, by systematically raising the level of household consumption, Chinese urbanization dominates the country's macroeconomic landscape. It is no great exaggeration to see the emergence of the world's most dynamic consumer economy as a side-effect of a three decade-long urbanization process, although – as in any such complex development – the causality is turbular, and self-stimulating.The Chinese consumer is a creature of the new urban epoch, and an incitement to its further elaboration.

As noted in the first part of this post, the centrality of urbanization to China's macroeconomic predicament has been explicitly addressed in a significant article by China's new premier, Li Keqiang. The conversion of rural folk into urbanites (or 'citizens' according to strict etymology) is accompanied by a 3.6-fold rise in *per capita* consumption. In addition to the purely quantitative impact upon the level of domestic economic demand, the rise of urban consumers also drives a qualitative transition, characterized above all by the expansion of the service sector (in both absolute and relative terms). Li seeks to align administrative action with this trend:

Escalating the growth of the service industry is critical to adjusting the industrial structure. Effective measures should be

taken to build a favorable environment for the growth of the service industry, both in terms of its size and quality. The government should promote the development of production-related service industries such as modern logistics, e-commerce and scientific research and design. It should also ensure that consumption-related services such as tourism, recreation, care of the elderly and domestic services receive a boost, and the development of small and mid-sized service companies gets support.

Urbanization promotes a more service oriented economic structure, which in turn promises to lower the energy-intensity of economic output; raise total factor productivity (TFP); proliferate entrepreneurial small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs); accelerate the emergence of knowledge-based and creative industries; and increase employment opportunities. In other words, a predictable series of dependencies – from urbanization, through consumerism, to service-orientation – subordinates economic policy to "the objective law of urban development" which alone makes its goals realizable. The expansion and improvement of cities will decide whether China works.

The orchestration of central policy questions under an urban theme is also strikingly seen in the area of regional development. Here, too, the country's most intractable problems are to be unlocked by an urban key:

Regional development is closely related to urbanization. Less-

developed regions lag behind in terms of growth, especially in urbanization. In areas which boast mature development conditions and large environmental capacity, the government should actively and steadily facilitate urbanization by reasonable allocation of resources, centralized layout of businesses and encouragement of intensive land usage to fire up new engines of growth and enhance the local capacity for self-sustained development. The government should tailor its regional, industrial and land policies to different regions and sectors, rather than adopting general and all-inclusive policies.

The infrastructural investment and social policy tools that have been employed to 'Open up the West' since the turn of the millennium are now specifically envisaged as ways to catalyze, accelerate, and guide urban development in backward regions. Cities are to be the solution.

Some extra links:

Mi Shih's excellent introduction to chengzhenhua (城镇化) — and why 'urbanization' isn't the right word

For a more hostile take on the Chinese urbanization agenda, see Gordon Chang here.

Nin-Hai Tseng at *Fortune*: "[Stephen] Roach offers an interesting statistic: China's services sector requires about 35% more jobs per unit of GDP than do manufacturing and construction."

***

Capital Absorption: On the topic of Michael Pettis, this superb recent article is sure to become an indispensable reference point for China economy watchers. Pettis has long argued that Chinese investment levels exceed the country's absorption capacity, and the new article places this argument in a broader theoretical framework, which he explains with extraordinary lucidity. If he is correct in his basic assessment, some widely-held assumptions of development economics will require drastic revision, with cultural and institutional factors ("social capital") acquiring far greater prominence.

Pettis has a deserved reputation for bearishness on Chinese growth prospects, but this article makes a guarded case for optimism in regards to the country's development strategy, which he sees shifting from an investment-driven growth model to something more institutionally-sensitive. This political sub-forecast predicts significant movement in the direction of market-oriented reform during the Xi-Li period.

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Opening Moves: At the *South China Morning Post* (via): *Premier Li Keqiang fought open opposition from financial regulators in his bid to push through a landmark plan for a free-trade zone in Shanghai. It is the clearest sign yet that the nation's new leadership is determined to deliver long-delayed economic reforms. […] The new Shanghai free-trade zone plan, officially announced at the beginning of July, is*

expected to be the testing ground for major policy reforms. It would promote cross-border commodity and capital flows, with key experiments in freeing foreign exchange markets and liberalising domestic interest rates.[…] Within two months, Li made an initial proposal covering 21 initiatives, whose details were not officially announced. These included shortcuts for foreign banks to set up subsidiary or joint venture operations and special permission for foreign commodities exchanges to own warehouses in the free-trade zone in Shanghai … […] … other mainland cities, facing unemployment and slower growth, are also keen to follow Shanghai's move to lure foreign capital. But Li is not understood to be interested in rushing to copy the Shanghai model for other mainland cities.

***

Handle_MZ commented: "it can be confidently anticipated that consumer spending will rise as a function of urbanization, contributing automatically to economic re-balancing."

I read "The Great Rebalancing" and I think this prediction strangely contradicts Pettis' main narrative. Pettis says that the consumption share of Chinese GDP is a necessary function of both the populations propensities to save and consume and the whole of Government economic policy to include the PBoC's interest rates, capital
controls and stabilization of the dollar exchange rate.

The objective is sustainable high GDP growth through high levels

of investment, stable wages, and productive factor capital accumulation — especially in the export and tradables sector. A corollary objective is improved global competitiveness in markets farther up the value chain.

If household consumption is a product of means which seek the above end, then any increase in consumption (i.e. from urbanization) that disrupts this end will only be met with compensatory government moves that push
it back down. Policy is the unmoved mover of consumption levels. Well, slightly moved, but by that aforementioned sustainability criterion. But rebalancing cannot occur under the current system unless the
government is wise enough to support it.

And at any rate, urbanization creates a surplus of labor which suppresses the growth rate of average urban wages. The more urban consumption rises (from rising wages, for example), the more attractive it is the move from the
countryside, which also pushes urban wages back down. This helps China's global competitiveness, but may actually reduce domestic consumption relative to the less-urbanization counterfactual.

Admin response: As you know from previous discussions, there are numerous assumptions that need straightening out before pushing far with this. At this point, I'm satisfied with the conclusion that urbanization is being conceived as a solution to the country's

most pronounced economic quandary (at the highest level of the new leadership). I think this is quite solid, irrespective of the issues that Pettis and you raise. On the latter, though, it seems hard to believe that urbanization is incidental to "social capital" formation, of the kind that — Pettis argues — raises capital absorption capacity, and thus directly contributes to the amelioration of the consumption deficiency problem. That's in addition to the direct consumption effects emphasized by Li Keqiang.

This isn't intended as an adequate response to your argument, just a provisional rejoinder.

July 29, 2013

City Limits

There's undoubtedly a Quixotic character to the 'China should do X' mode of outside commentary, but Yukon Huang's short *Bloomberg* article advising revision of the country's urbanization policies represents the genre at its best. Noting the agglomeration effects that yield disproportionate returns to urban scale, Huang recommends a turn away from the proliferation of new minor cities, and towards megacity growth.

China is already in a class by itself in accounting for 30 of the 50 largest cities in east Asia. It boasts half a dozen megacities with

populations of more than 10 million and 25 "large" cities exceeding 4 million. In fact, though, the only way China will achieve its desired productivity gains is if its leaders allow cities to evolve more organically in response to market forces. They need to let cities like Beijing get bigger.

Urban concentration creates real problems, but these are indistinguishable from the challenges any genuine process of socio-economic advance has to confront. The solutions to these problems will be the same steps that carry the country forward into unexplored territory — beyond 'catch up' and into the open horizons of the future. Everything learned from concrete economic history suggests that technological and business opportunity will be ratcheted upwards by exactly those forces which promote megacity agglomeration — and better still urban concentration or intensity — to historically unprecedented levels. That is how — and where — deep social innovation takes place.

Instead of actively trying to spread out growth to small new cities, China's planners should embrace the agglomeration economies, which militate for larger metropolises. As land and wage costs escalate, some industries will eventually gravitate to medium-size cities, but services will continue to drive expansion in the larger ones. Smart people like to mix with other smart people, and globalization has amplified their financial returns. Beijing and Shanghai have continued to grow because of buoyant higher-value services, even

as their manufacturing bases have shrunk. All this explains why in China, productivity in urban areas is more than three times that in rural areas.
But aren't China's megacities already too big to be sustainable? As a matter of fact, some urban specialists have concluded that even China's biggest cities may be too small. They cite "Zipf's law," one of the great curiosities of urban research. The law, which is surprisingly accurate for many countries, claims that the biggest city in a country should be about twice the size of the second-biggest, three times the size of the third-biggest, and so forth. On this basis, China's largest cities appear too small.

Thinking through power laws (such as Zipf's) dispels the idea of 'normal' city sizes. Optimum urban scale is decided by network effects, and is dependent upon the entire social ecology — regionally, nationally, and even globally. The 'ideal' size of Shanghai, for instance, cannot be derived from some model of a generic city, but has to be understood, instead, with reference to the singular role this city plays as a hub in multiple networks — especially commercial webs — within which it amasses specialized functions. As these webs expand and thicken, their critical nodes tend to grow and intensify spontaneously. It is natural, therefore, throughout the process of global modernization, for the limits of urban scale to be pushed out ever further, in accordance with the functional sophistication of the system's crucial hubs, and the associated refinements of

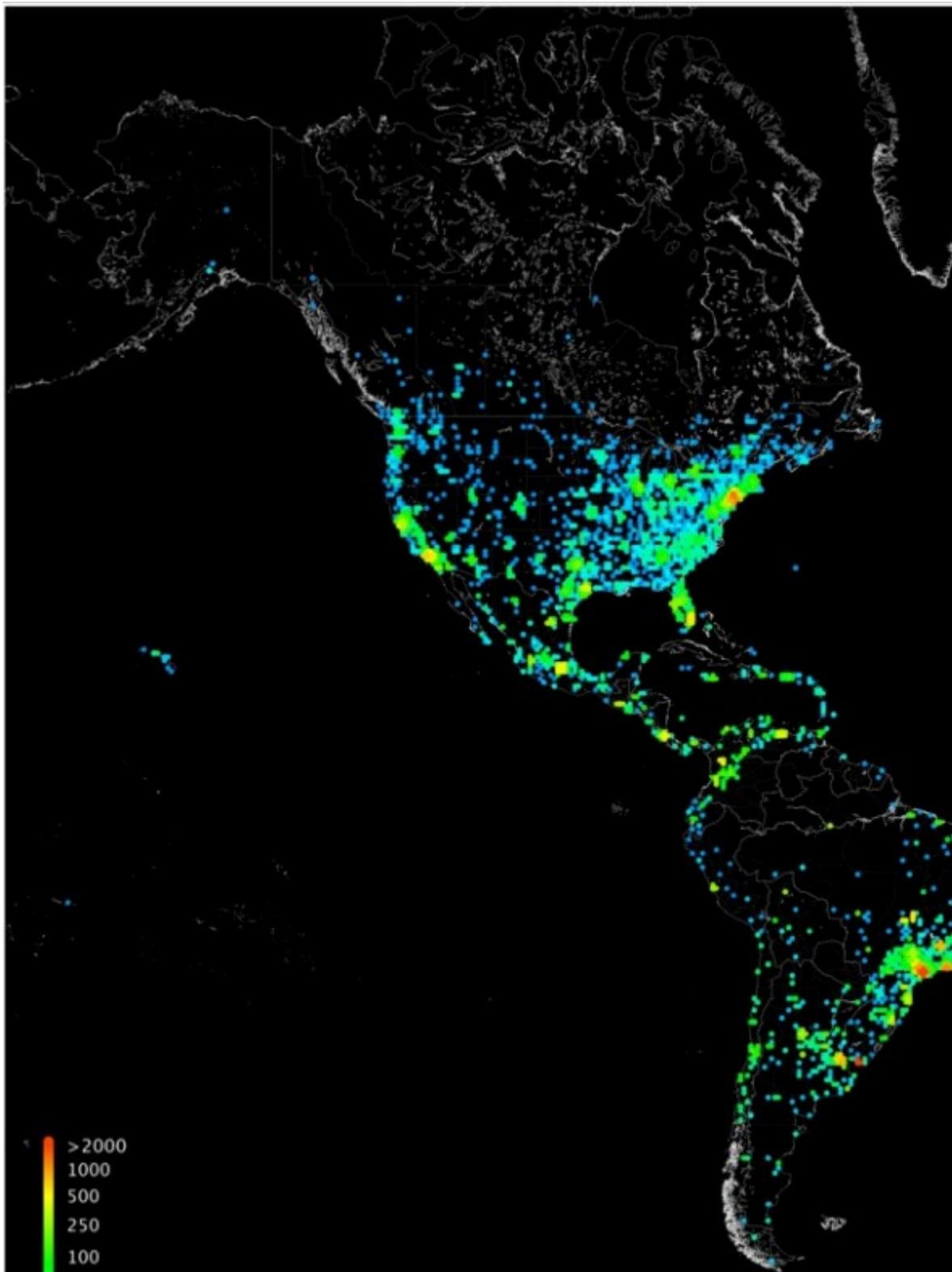
specialization these key cities foster.

Beijing is subject to stubborn environmental constraints, with limited water resources prominent among these. Its distance from the coast is also a growth-inhibiting factor. Shanghai, in contrast, is destined to vastness by such implacable historical forces that it is hard to imagine even the most determined policy resistance standing in the way for long. As the country's commercial capital, any realistic power law distribution of urban scale begins with Shanghai at the summit. It would be best to bend to the inevitable, and let it become the world's laboratory for urban intensity, tracking the advance of modernity into the Pacific Century. The rewards for this acceptance would easily overwhelm the costs.

September 11, 2013

Modern Legacy

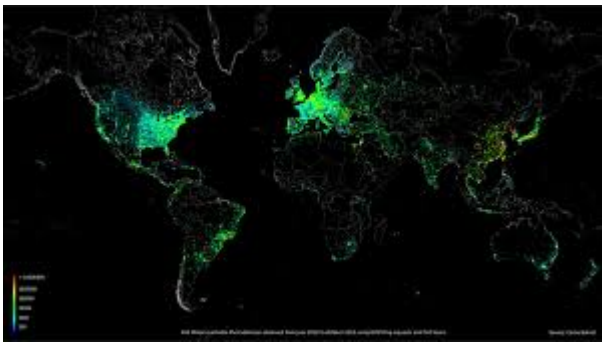
In 2012 the global distribution of Internet connectivity still looked strikingly Atlantean:


>2000
1000
500
250
100

Two years later, Alissa Walker at *Gizmodo* asks (rhetorically):

Where is the internet? This map might explain it better than any statistics could ever hope to: The red hot spots show where the most devices that can access the internet are located.

On the new map, too, the Pacific Century has yet to dazzle. It seems that infrastructure — even the most advanced digital infrastructure — incarnates a legacy, rather than virtuality (or potential). By accentuating the Internet-of-Things, the new map has actually dulled the digitization of emerging markets, drawing vision back on a retro-futural path to the historical roots of the modern world order. (The color scheme also tends to under-emphasize the spiky urban-concentrations of the Asian Internet, relative to the more diffuse Euro-American distribution.)

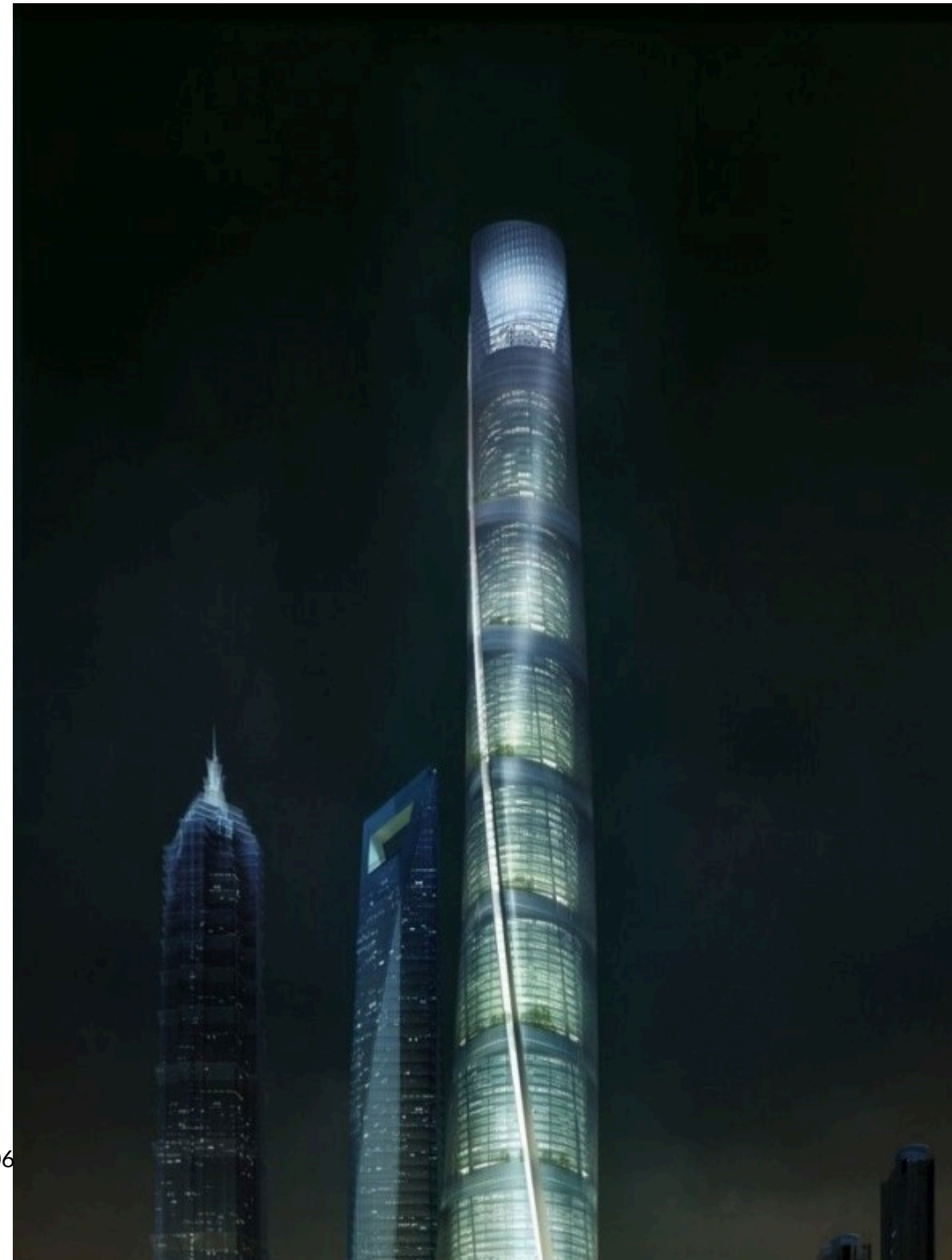


Follow the Gizmodo link for various image options, including alternative Internet visualizations (such as these, and — from the comments — this).

September 1, 2014

Shanghai Tower

It’s Aesthetics Week @ Social Matter. Here’s the XS twist:

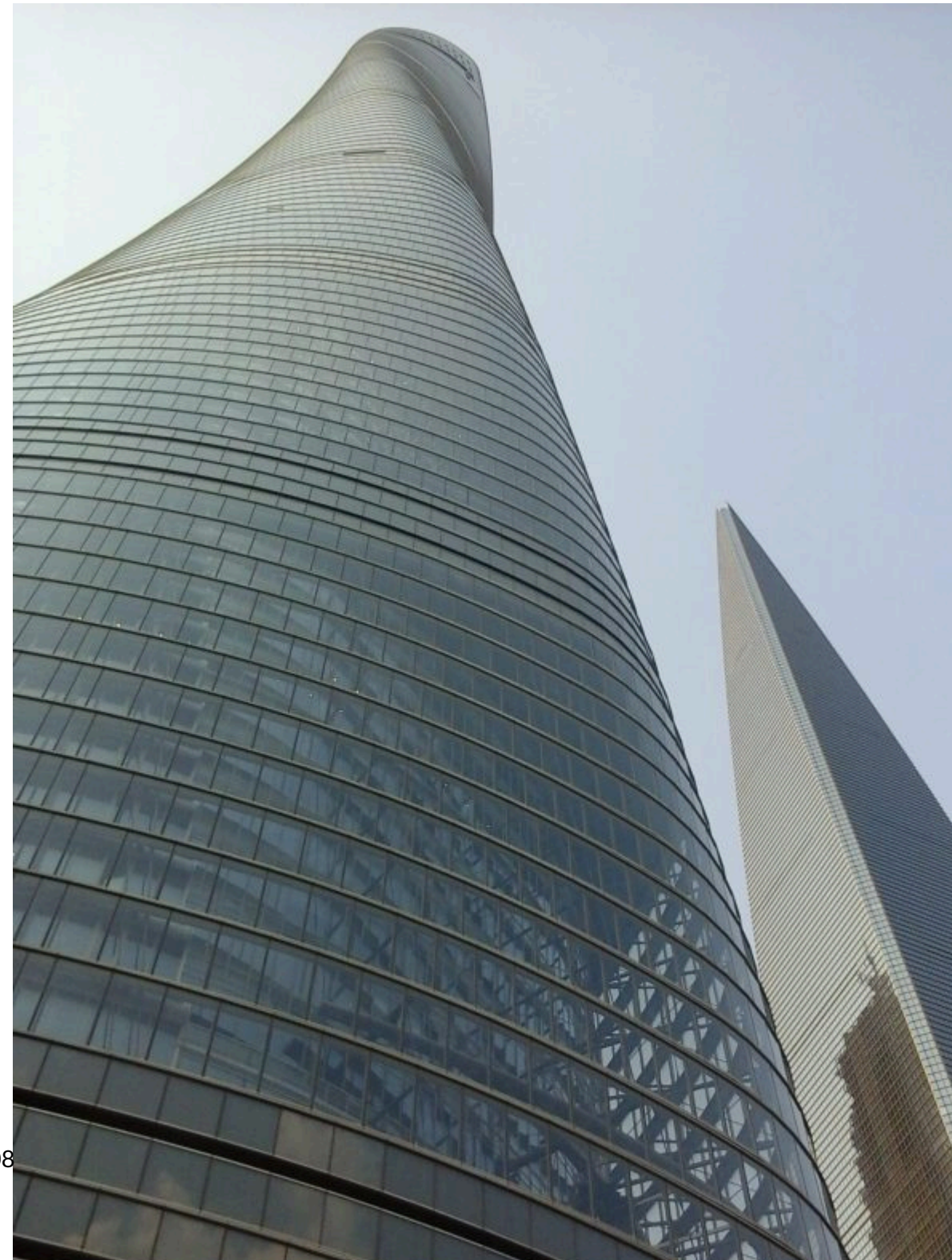


It's the new Shanghai Tower, in Lujiazui. Latest glistening jewel in a fabulously beautiful city.

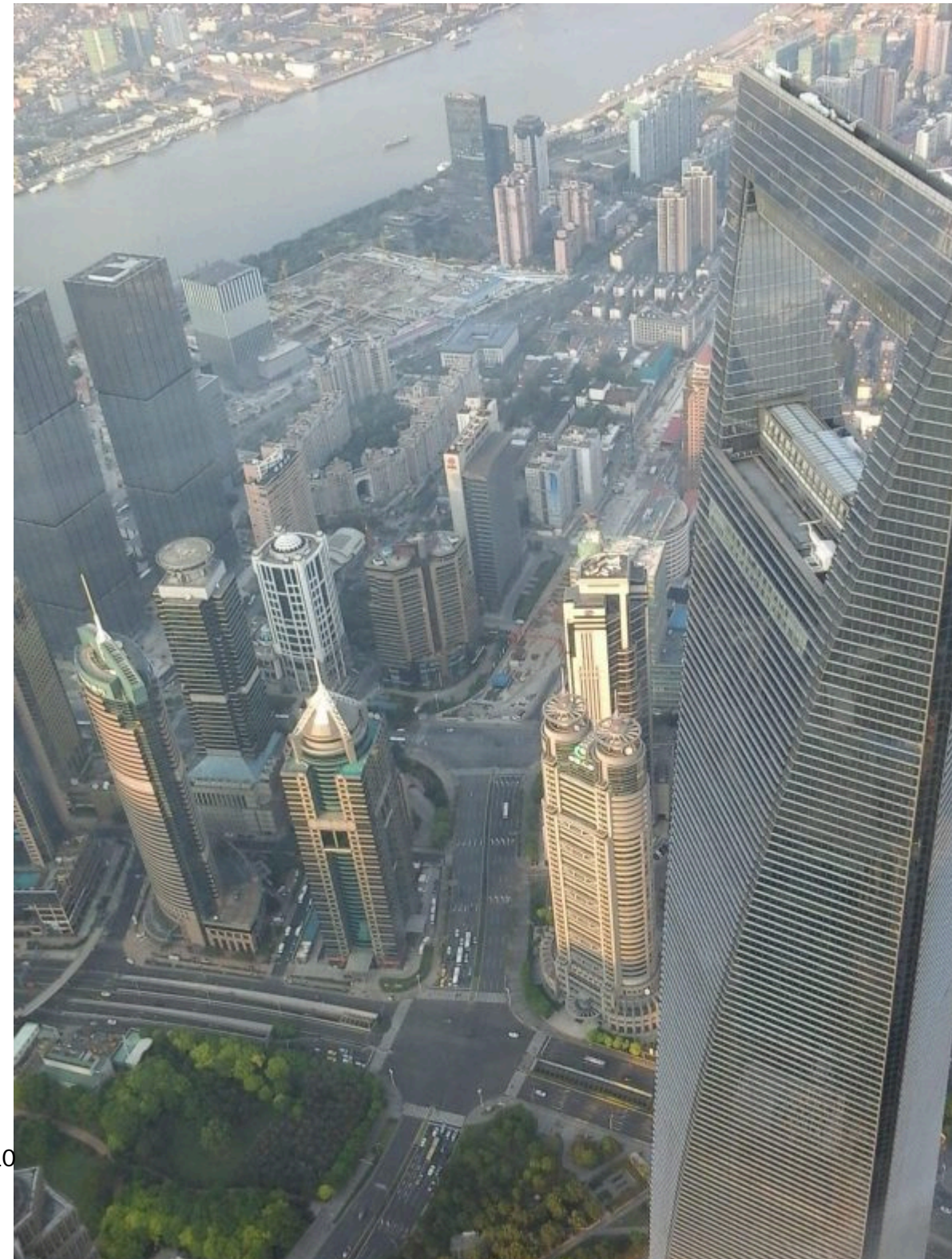
May 6, 2015

Shanghai Tower

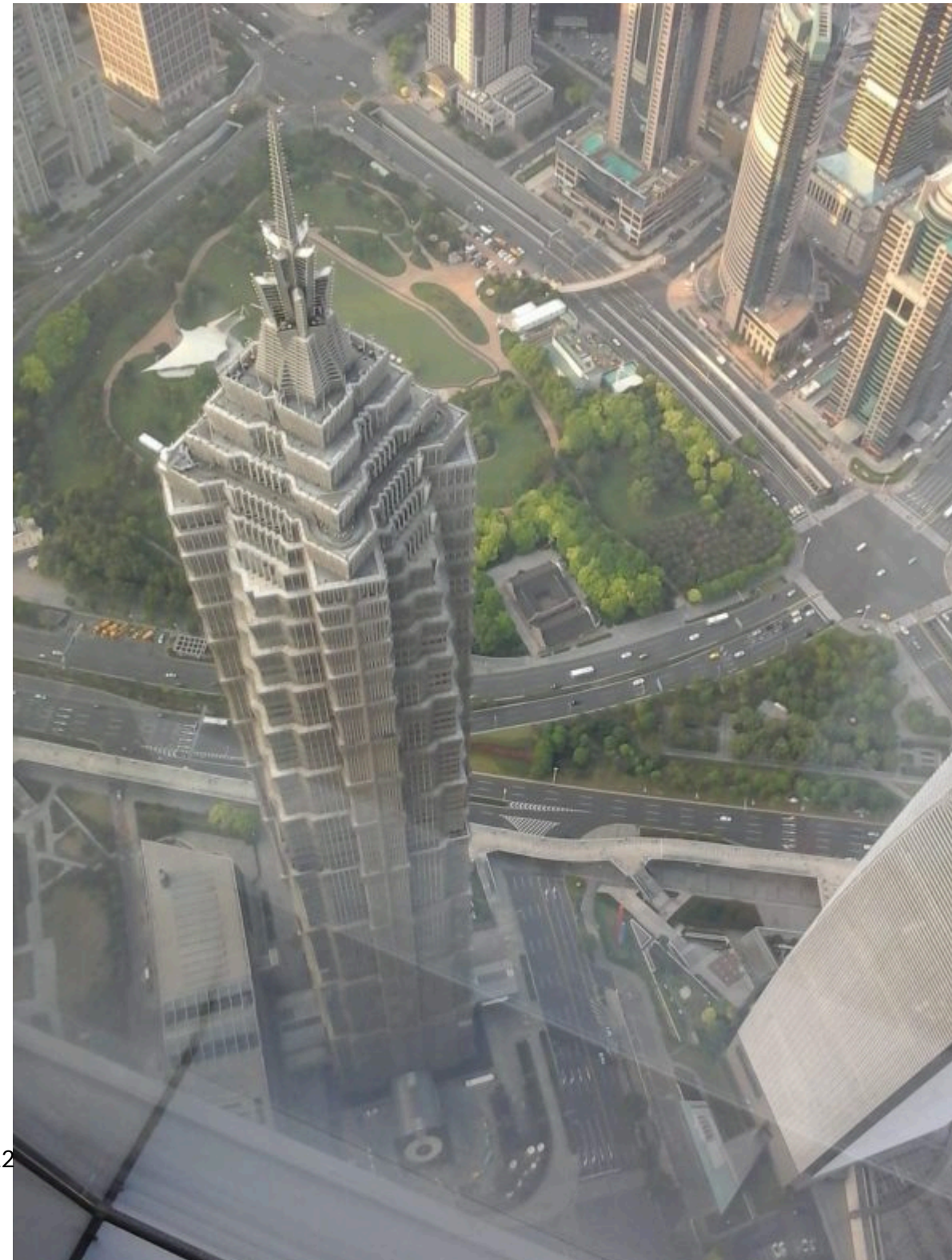
It's a "Green Smart Cultural Vertical City" apparently. (Still a fantastic building, although not much seems to be happening inside yet.)



Here's the view from the Observation Deck, looking down on it's closest Shanghai competitor (the Shanghai World Financial Center):



And on number three, the Neo-Deco Jin Mao Tower:



August 29, 2016

35 Today

Shenzhen's birthday is this Wednesday. I'd have put up a 1980 photo, but there wasn't anything there.

Shenzhen today:



The Wikipedia profile.

Reignition

August 26, 2015

CHAPTER FIVE - NICK LAND'S TRIPS

Out West

The real (paying) job calls. For the last few days of March (and 1st April), I'm going to be 'away' on a research trip to Kashgar (Xinjiang). If connectivity isn't a problem, 'away' might not mean much from the perspective of Cyberspace, but I'm expecting at least moderate disruption (most probably exacerbated by colorful ethnic distractions and horrible torrents of *baijiu*).

If anyone has any Kashgar questions, or information to offer, I'll do my best to bend my investigations responsively. (I'm not thinking of using this blog as a platform for Xinjiang material, but that's not a dogmatic commitment, if there's any interest in the topic.)

[This short Kashgar profile by Ron Gluckman is over a decade old — it will be interesting to see how it has dated.]

ADDED: If the main things you are searching for in life are alcoholic intoxication, coffee, and smooth Internet connectivity, Kashgar cannot — in all honesty — be recommended. On the positive side of the ledger, there's far more of the Old Kashgar left than first appearance suggests (Otangboyi Road is the place to go, following

it past the Idkar Mosque to the night market). The Silk Road commercial culture still thrives, reaching a truly delirious pitch in the Grand Bazaar, which oveflows with sensation-drenching commodities from thousands of kilometers around. The tea is delicious — a spiced up black tea, drunk without milk, but with a distinct hint of Indian *chai*. Ditto the yoghurt (as thick as cream cheese, with a razor sharp edge), and — of course — everything delectable that can be done with a dead sheep whilst remaining *haram*.

It's hard to work out the ethnic balance, but it's at least predominantly Uyghur (I've seen figures between 70-85%). There's no obvious indications of social tension, with everyone seeming to get on with their lives quite frictionlessly, and no signs that I could pick up of street-level Han paranoia. Han Chinese women navigate the streets alone except for small children, seemingly perfectly relaxed about the social environment, and untroubled by any prospect of violence. Our group (two Han, one Bulgarian, one Brit, and one Uyghur government guide — who is excellent btw) have encountered nothing but friendliness, often combined with impressive efforts to sell us stuff. It has to be said, though, that the government propaganda is shockingly crude.

For example, a note at the Idkah Mosque, after explaining the history of CPC renovation efforts, helpfully explains:

All of it shows fully that Chinese government always pays special

attentions to the another and historical cultures of the ethnic groups, and that all ethnic groups warmly welcome Part's [sic] *religious policy. It also shows that different ethnic groups have set up a close relationship of equality, unity and helps to each other, and freedom of beliefs is protected. All ethnic groups live friendly together here. They cooperate to build a beautiful homeland, support heartily the unity of different ethnic groups and the unity of our country, and oppose the ethnic separatism and illegal religious activities.*

Perhaps it sounds better in the Uyghur.

Of course, at the end of the day I'm a regime apologist. Afghanistan and Pakistan are right next door, each demonstrating in their own way the wonders of ethno-democratic self-assertion.

March 27, 2013

Out West (again)

Urumqi this time. I'll fill things out a little when I get a chance (more for my own sake than under any pretence of communication).
That *Baijiu* holocaust problem I worried needlessly about in Kashgar? Urumqi is a very different city …

ADDED: After arriving yesterday we took in the International Bazaar, a more mall-sructured, and thus rather less atmospheric

version of the Kashgar Grand Bazaar, trading similar goods. The most distinctive items were chunks of fossilized wood, so precisely metamorphosed that the minutiae of organic structure were clearly discernible. It's hard not to be impressed when examining the fine-grained organization of a thing that died 150,000,000 years ago.
Next stop was Hong Shan Park, situated at the north-east edge of the city in 1947, but now enveloped. It's high, and gives a vantage point from which to get oriented. Better still, the viewing pavilion there also serves as an urban development museum, including scale models (1947 and today), lots of photographs, and basically everything needed for a firm space-time fix. Finally, there was dinner with the local officials — our hosts — which was great fun (even though I'd been horribly sick the day before and still felt shaky). The *Baijiu* onslaught then unfolded (my travel companion from work turned out to be crazily *lihai*, and probably saved me by deflecting some of the white death torrent onto herself). Maybe I wrote some scraps fished from the gulfs of shadow? Then oblivion.

Next day: Tarim Mummies, the Urumqi version of Shanghai's M50 (art hub), and the city's massive new industrial park called the UETD. The mummies — dessicated accidentally by the arid environment — are very well known, for good reason. Their state of preservation is incredible — you could still wear their clothes (after almost 4,000 years). The whole anthropo-ethnographic backstory is enthralling too, and I need to try and get my head wrapped around it. The oldest

mummies are 'Europoid' and really look as if they could have been Cornish. (Scientific consensus, as I understand it tenuously, identifies them as 'Tokharian'.) This throws the Uyghur-Han ethnic elbowing into disconcerting perspective, but it's just too *out there* to be truly politically sensitive (I'm hoping). If the Welsh start claiming chunks of Xinjiang based on ancestral rights I guess that could change. The old mummies come in two pairs, two 3,800-y.o. females, both 'Europoid', then a pair from a thousand years later, a Europoid male and a mixed Euro-Mongoloid female. Both of these later mummies are tattooed, and for reasons not yet understood were buried with non-matching boots. Then the exhibition throws in a mummified Han official from AD500, but if you folllow the exhibition around in a disciplined counter-clockwise circuit, there's no reason to be thrown off by this bizarre and crudely-motivated *non sequitur*.

The art space had some OK stuff, and reflected the guiding Urumqi attitude: well-meaning, relentlessly multi-cultural, driven by Han, and extremely tame. If you like art that drags you into extra-cosmic abysses of shock and dread, there wasn't much there to set the pulse racing. Lots of pleasant, (unthreateningly) intelligent, traditional, craft-based stuff though.

The industrial park was really something. Pure China, in the sense that it was mostly a (truly immense) construction site, from which some slender threads of raw potential had tumbled backwards into the present. It already has a population of 270,000, and looked

roughly 10% complete. This 'Park' — an entire urban district until a few years ago, when it was re-purposed — is programmed to become a glstening science-fiction entity that would over-awe 70%+ of the world's cities (with most of the remaining 30% being Chinese). We saw a truck plant and the local Coca-Cola operation — full of clattering robotic bottling machinery — and got to ask some questions about the bases of Xinjiang growth. The impression we got is that serving the wider Central Asian market is the cornerstone of everybody's plans.

ADDED: Six hours on the road and — just to keep things moving forwards smoothly — a two hour visit to a *baijiu* factory in the middle (plus a lot of other stuff). Two bottles of sample (non-retail maximum strength) rocket fuel in my bag, and four hours sleep to cling onto. Beyond the lesson that Shariah isn't exactly calling the shots in northern Xinjiang, analysis and reflection is going to be delayed.

May 8, 2013

Out West (yet again)

Whatever the prejudices you might harbor against Urumqi Internet connections in second rate hotels, they're probably over-generous. I've been effectively de-twitterized by sheer technological crappitude rather than anything more sinister, but this channel

seems to be (barely) OK. (Annoyingly, they provide a computer in the room, which locks everything into chronic dysfunction.) So apologies for the deteriorated state of communications over the next few days.

The main objective of this trip is to explore Xinjiang's Buddhist heritage, which is so vast and rich that even some superficial scratching should turn up some interesting stuff. The main current of Buddhist influence into China passed this way, hybridizing wildly with other cultures in one of the world's great mixing zones. After arriving off the steps, the Uyghurs were Buddhist for centuries, before Islam got a grip around the turning point of the first millennium (I'll try to fill in some dates with greater precision later on).

Updates as events, energy, and time permit.

ADDED: Scheduled to arrive at the site of interest tomorrow. Up to now, it's been a mix of some interesting stuff (but probably not *Outside in* material — weird Uyghur dances with cups of water balanced on heads? I didn't think so), Internet nightmare (Twitter inaccessible again), and grand finale: the mandatory *baijiu*-crazed 'austere-enough-for government-work' welcoming banquet. The inebriated babble effect is no doubt obvious. We saw some astounding Tianshan vistas too ('Tianshan Grand Canyon' — don't be put off by the ridiculous name), but I'm hopeless at natural wonder, so I won't even try to communicate it.

We're in Baicheng now. I'll be impressed if anyone's heard of it, bt

it seems shockingly well-governed, and probably the most attractive modern city in Xinjiang. For us, it's just the gateway out to the Buddha caves, but it's been an interesting surprise. It's prosperous — due to petrochemicals — well-designed, seems highly livable, and it's partnered with Wenzhou (which you should have heard of), a relationship that has been very effectively milked.

Our hotel is a beautiful Jiangnan-style place, which also came as a serious shock. We'd expected we were on the way down from the Urumuqi quarters to something seriously dire, but instead find ourselves in one of the nicest hotels in Xinjiang — and that does actually mean really nice. Still no reliable Internet connectivity though (by which I mean the opportunity to run my VPN), so the twitter shakes are getting bad. [If Spandrell's out there — I'm not hiding from your ruthless tweet-fu logic, my tongue's been cut out.]

September 22, 2013

Guizhou

Over the next few days I'll be in Guizhou, known for its karst landscapes, insanely spicy food, and comparative poverty. The computer is coming — but so are the kids, so blogging is likely to be erratic at best. It's going to be a test of my *Outside in* addiction, and one that I'm already failing … digit tremors and threads of mild

delirium are creeping in, and I haven't left the house (or keyboard) yet.

ADDED: As Spandrell points out in the comments, ethnic complexity should have been added to the list of main Guizhou promotion points. There are a whole bunch of 'minorities' here, of whom the Miao are probably the best known, and exotic 'tribal' clothing (especially impractically-ornate head-dresses) are easy to spot even in the metropolis — more as attractions in shops and restaurants than on the street. The tribals are obviously little folk, giving the province a land-of-the-pixies feel. We've yet to see any foreigners here.

We're still in Guiyang, the provincial capital, which might be the smallest Chinese city we've ever seen — just 1.2 million according to our (highly untrustworthy) guidebook. I pretty much always like Chinese cities, and this one — whilst definitely odd — is no exception. The architecture is only tenuously sane, consisting in large part of highly eclectic experiments in variants of hybrid Chinese modernism, or an oneiric re-visitation of global architectural history spliced with Chinese characteristics. Unconvincingly restored Ming complexes co-exist with space-ship roofed towers and grandiose domed edifices from an imagined 1920s. They're doing something ambitious with the river, but it's hard to quite tell what.

We spent the morning at Qianling Park, right at the edge of the city, and an amazing place to visit. Forested misty hills, covered in

obscure Buddhist carvings, with the province's largest temple at the top. Thousands of monkeys populate the park, and even though some of these now form a welfare-dependent semi-criminal underclass, they were still the best-behaved wild simians we've yet encountered — fearless, dignified, entertaining, and pacific. (There was no sign of the 'heavy begging' we've encountered among macaques elsewhere in China — let alone among the terrifying monkey gangs in India — and I'm putting that down to the Buddhist influence.)

ADDED: Anshun, the gateway into central Guizhou, is a scruffy town of roughly 400,000. Our hotel — The Triumphal (seriously) — was supposedly a 4-star, everything about it was vaguely dysfunctional, and the Chintz aesthetics were like needles in the eyeballs. (The room included its own Internet-connected computer, which meant that both the machine and the connection were scarcely endurable.)

Once out into the scenic areas (no easy task), the squalor and hassle was thoroughly redeemed. We were 'doing' geology rather than ethnography, so the main cultural stimulus was provided by Miao grannies selling cucumbers and boiled eggs to the tourists (all Chinese, as far as we could tell). The area around Huangguoshu — where a new city has been built on (tourist industry) spec. — is dominated by vast, rugged, karst tracts: canyons, caverns, sculpted mountain-pillars, and brutally-sliced cliffs, cross-cut by innumerable waterways and small lakes. It's truly stunning.

A high point for us was passing behind the Huangguoshu Great Waterfall (Dapubu), climbing through a series of winding limestone caves that broke out intermittently into open ledges, in front of which the largest waterfall in Asia deluged downwards thunderously. We'd already explored the mind-melting Tianxing area earlier in the day [insert karst landscape superlatives here] and were bouncing against the outer limits of stimulation absorption.

Philosophical stimulation? One curiosity of special note (at Tianxing) had the English label 'The Root of the Human Race' — it was indeed a root, of some old, tough rock-clinging creeper, but it only really made sense in Chinese, because "Human Race" translated the character 'ren' (very roughly an inverted 'V'), and what was being described was a rising cascade of converging connections. The 'ren' ideogram is sometimes explained as an image of convergence, so the Tianxing root was radicalizing [sic] a pre-existing conception, but one that blatantly contradicts the dominant image of human ancestry — whether Darwinian or Biblical — as a 'tree' diverging from a single root. It has the potential to be upsetting in all kinds of ways, so I've reserved this creeper a stretch of undistracted attention sometime soon …

May 1, 2013

Hong Kong

Latest travel distraction is the world capital of the technocommercialists. Of course, it's a city that I adore to the edge of brain-stem seizure. Just seeing the Kowloon container port is almost enough to persuade one that the process on this planet is actually going OK.

Naively, I had expected that Mandarin would have made some obvious inroads since the last time I was here (roughly six years ago). No sign of that, though. It's quite stunning how much English there is here, and the extent to which English remains the default alternative to Cantonese. That has to have important implications in respect to the cultural foundations of Hong Kong autonomy.

Expeditionary inertialization due to exhausted children prevented exploration getting off the ground today. Nothing too adventurous is likely to happen, but I'll try to record a few sporadic notes here. Hong Kong is an iconic city, with an exceptional intensity of sociopolitical meaning, so it should be possible to discuss — and even argue about — it.

I'm only here (with family) for a few days, then returning to Shanghai for six weeks of solitary, extremely high-intensity production. After Thursday, if anybody has extravagant demands to make, it's the time to make them. Whatever is ever going to be possible should be possible soon. Most likely, I'll learn some crushing

lessons about project feasibility, because all my excuses will be gone.

ADDED: Hong Kong has to be a critically important example for the development of the sovereignty discussion. It's almost certainly the freest society in the world, whilst quite clearly under the sovereignty of a nation that, even to its its most ardent defenders, equally certainly isn't. Perhaps this doesn't rise to the level of a paradox. After all, up until 1997, when it served (retrospectively) as a crucial case of the neoreactionary thesis — distinguishing liberty and democracy with extreme clarity — the structure was not altogether different. Even then, the colonial metropolis was evidently pitched at a far lower level of liberty than its comparatively small, powerless, and insultingly disposable possession. Given the international image of the PRC, however, it would surely be hard to argue that the peculiarity had not been exacerbated.

In Hong Kong, the PRC 'oversees' an outpost that operates as a zone of uninhibited reflection upon its ideologically hyper-sensitive motherland. There are many ways to explore this. It connects with the larger issue of Cantonese ethnic self-consciousness — a topic of truly immense significance for China's medium-term future. It has important academic and media dimensions. It also shapes the concrete reality of China's engagement with the world, especially in its most 'deterritorialized' or cosmo-capitalist dimension.

On this trip, the area which brought it most into focus was the visual arts. Most particularly, a fascinating exhibition at the Asia

Society Hong Kong Center called *Light before Dawn: Unofficial Chinese Art 1974-1985*. This show covered material that might have been found in Shanghai today, except what would have been explored approximately, cautiously, and with nervous cunning in Shanghai, was brought together brazenly and (for anyone habituated to mainland cultural norms) provocatively in Kong Kong. The message of the exhibition was stark: Socialist Realism was benighted, and the cultural escape from the command economy era was a liberation from totalitarian night. The three decades from 1949-79 were a horror story, from which China has been released. It scarcely needs to be said that this is not a narrative in conformity with the 'official' PRC storyline of Reform and Opening, and its historical meaning.

Setting aside the details of the show, for the moment, the questions it raises concern Hong Kong, China, sovereignty, and cultural autonomy. Does China surreptitiously appreciate this offshore zone of critical leverage? Does it merely tolerate Hong Kong's role as gadfly, due to the preeminence of other factors, and interests? (Chinese mainland capitalism clearly makes massive use of the 'One Country Two Systems' arrangement, in many different ways.) How functional is a peripheral zone of exorbitant freedom, considered abstractly, as an appendage to large-scale authoritarian social structures in general? Could this be the way that a rational apparatus of power realistically discriminates, eagerly seizing upon

an invaluable exemption from impractical universalism? That is what *Outside in* suspects.

June 29, 2013

Vietnam (scraps)

My Vietnam is like my China: accessed from the South, from the mega-urban, commercial culture, and from pre-communist traditions. It's very much the view from Saigon (and that isn't something I regret). Saigon would be a great place to live (in small part because the idea of calling it Ho Chi Minh City is a transparent joke).

Doi Moi looks like it should work a lot like Gaige Kaifeng (as a local version of generic 'Reform and Opening' in a 'Market Leninist' regime) — but it doesn't seem to be quite working out. If rationalized corruptocracy is close to ideal limit of effective government among large states, Vietnam seems to have managed the corruptocracy far better than the rationalization. Infrastructure development — the magic sauce of recent Chinese hyper-growth — has not reached ignition. The country is too small to fund its own ambitions, and too chaotically kleptocratic to bring in foreign investment on the scale required. Despite many excellent things going for it, the country is floundering with a morose economic spirit that is almost Western.

Vietnamese coffee is among the most sublime offerings this tortured planet supplies. Thick, dark, and massively caffeinated, it makes a Starbucks brew seem like dishwater. One cup and the flight has paid for itself, as far as the utilitarian calculus is concerned.

A visit to Saigon's fine arts museum is a grave disappointment. The building is a beautiful colonial structure, but the contents — once despicable trash had been ceremoniously burned — would fill a small room. There's no way Vietnam will be setting the world art market on fire in the immediate future.

Cao Dai is very strange. Created as a new religion in 1926, with the obvious brief to make spiritual sense of Vietnam's peculiar position with cultural history and geography, it canonized Victor Hugo and Sun Yat-sen as signatories of "the third alliance between God and man" (after Moses and Jesus). Cao Dai's Masonic founder, Nguyen Gia Tri, rounded out the new sacred triumvirate.

"I saw an eye" was the way my seven-year-old daughter recorded her experience of the main Cao Dai temple. That would be the Sauronic Cosmic Eye, repeated obsessively as a motif, overlooking the white-robed devotees during their observances. The quantity of lurid symbolism is quite overwhelming. For anybody with the slightest attachment to a restrained religious tradition, the effect would be one of unbridled spiritual chaos. Apparently good natured, and seriously interesting, though.

Vietnamese water puppet theater — more engaging than I had

expected.

[Typing on this device is killing me — I'm heading out into the fragrant tropical night for a cigarette.]

January 17, 2014

Angkor (scraps)

Siem Reap (Cambodia) is a scruffily exotic town that never threatens to over-stretch the adjective bank. For anyone who has been out of the tropics for a while, it's charming enough, and the locals are pleasant, dignified folk. Our hotel, with its hints of French colonial heritage and lush foliage is more than OK (as long as you don't make the mistake of testing their catering capabilities). Siem Reap, however, is just a jump-off point.

The Angkor sites, in contrast, incinerate all available positive adjectives within seconds, threatening speechlessness. It's absolutely necessary to assume a front-rank wonders-of-the-world baseline in what follows, with awe-struck mind-melt accepted as the default perceptual mode (in the absence of, and in addition to, any explicit qualification). There might be more stunning spectacles to be found on this earth, but that would require a serious argument.

The Angkor temples were constructed over a period of 630 years, reaching a climactic golden age of architectural production in the

14th and early 15th centuries. Go read a history book (I still need to).

Angkor Thom is an entire temple city, with large tracts of rain forest within its walls, and a moat of lake-like scale without. One architectural feature well worth noting at an early stage follows from the fact that the Khmers never mastered the arch, so their internal spaces have a massy, geological character, often rising to impressive heights, but without culminating vaults. Technically, therefore, it is a kind of anti-gothic, ascending through sheer mountainous upsurge of stacked stone, rather than gravity-defying structure. It is if the earth were imperiously commanded to soar, without the slightest hint of sublimation into anything other than itself. These are fabulously sculpted artificial mountains — sacred mesas. According to my guidebook, there are 11,000 carved figures and 1.2km of bas reliefs on the Bayon — the core of Angkor Thom. These carvings were detailed to the level of fine textile design on the skirts of miniature dancers, while including giant enigmatic faces several meters across (and in great number).

Angkor Wat is not only a monumental aesthetic composition, but also an enthralling philosophical puzzle. As befits the final days of the snake year, it is a symbolic complex strung together by nagas. These seven-headed serpent monsters are arrayed around the site as guardians, rearing up from the end of every balustrade. They also figure prominently on the series of huge, continuous bas reliefs that wrap the main structure, and — truly provocatively — provide hoods

for numerous Buddha statues throughout the site. (Angkor Wat is thought to be devoted primarily to Vishnu, with Buddhism present as a later arrival.) This hissing religious insidiousness needs futher attention at a future point.


Click image to enlarge.

(Five-headed nagas are atypical — this one was found at Ta Prohm.)

The third prominent naga moment occurs on the most revered of the bas reliefs, which depicts the ‘stirring of the ocean of milk’. A quick step back first …

Viewed panoramically, Angkor Wat epitomizes timeless serenity. Close examination of its narrative carvings, however, reveals an obsession with war. Armies clash, and parade, on earth and in the heavens. Even the torments of the underworld have the character of

military atrocity — stabbings, slashings, and impalings. The cosmos depicted tends to a slaughterhouse.

It is here that the naga key can be inserted. The stirring of the ocean of milk (the Milky Way?) is a tug-of-war between gods and demons — a cosmic war, therefore, whose thread is the vast naga Vasuki, whose body is stretched across a hundred meters (?) of delicately-carved display space. Crucially, a central pivot, consisting of Mount Mandala resting upon the body of Vishnu in turtle-form, converts this conflictual back-and-forth into rotary dynamism — appropriating war to a celestial function …


Click image to enlarge.

ADDED: The third temple in the core of the Angkor complex is Ta Prohm. For sheeraesthetic rapture, it might be the most stunning. (I'm going to add some snaps as soon as bandwidth considerations

allow that.)

Ta Prohm has been shattered and devoured by the jungle, with broken masonry fused (at once beautifully and hideously) with monstrous trees. It thus vividly presents a hard collision between culture and nature in the starkest possible terms. The trees conducting the slow-motion assault are known locally as ‘spung’ (botanically: tetramelesnudiflora). No director could have chosen better assailants than these behemoths, with massive, twisting roots. It was obvious from this spectacle that trees do tentacle horror even more impressively than cephalopods, if allowance is made for the inhuman time factor.

An almost equally superb example of semi-digested cyclopean civilization is found at Beng Mealea, a two-hour tuk tuk ride away, through jungle-fringe countryside. The heritage preservation problems of intervening in this titanic clash are fascinating to contemplate. How does one appropriately restore — or merely save — an intricately-carved shrine half-eaten by a colossal tree? Is a formula even imaginable?

January 21, 2014

Cambodia (scraps)

The Angkor remains tend to overwhelm the experience of the

country — probably as the pharonic remains of ancient Egypt do there. The better half raised some thought-provoking points about the situation. A regime based on god-king sovereignty, caste, and war — hardcore even by the wildest imaginings of contemporary reactionaries, therefore (and with no hint of 'neo-' in sight) — created a legacy that continues to support the country six centuries after the collapse of the Khmer kingdom. How does this affect calculations of social order, economics, and time? It certainly inclines the mind toward illiberal musings.

***

Cambodian money is a study in the contemporary world order. In Siem Reap, especially, the economy is fully dollarized. The local currency, the Riel, is worth USD0.00025, and we never came across a note worth more than 25 cents until leaving SR. Riels were used as change (compensating for the absence of US specie). Seignorage bitchez. Everyone says it doesn't amount to much in aggregate, but the symbolism is certainly something.

In Kampot, we threw a chunk of the local economy into chaos trying to break a 10 dollar bill. The first group of street traders we approached had no idea whar it was (might as well have been some kind of arcane futures contract). It was only when we got into the center of town that 'money' and 'small change' became differentiable concepts?

***

The whole ‘Khmer Rouge accelerated dysgenics’ idea makes a lot of sense, conceptually, but the locals seem competent enough on the evidence provided by casual exposure. Given where the country has been, it seems to be doing OK.

The second HBDish (or as we say ‘Spandrellish’) point raised in respect to the Vietnamese was ‘tropical work habits’ — I’ll plead agnosticism, while reluctantly noting that Siem Reap contained the first “6-11s” I’ve ever seen …

***

Cambodian politics? Not much new information really, except (1) the state of media openness seems quite high (for better and for worse, given the chronic Cathedralism of the contemporary journalistic mind), and (2) the pervasive promotion of the Cambodian People’s Party is recognizably ‘communist’ in its indifference to the pseudo-binary balance recognized by friend and foe alike as the hegemonic global norm. Going out on a limb, I’d hazard that the country is doing well by effectively suppressing anything beyond nominal democracy, but the pressure to deteriorate will only get worse.

***

Being disconnected in stages is a new experience. All connectivity disappeared at 9pm last night (or so) — it wasn’t something I appreciated. Satellite-linked neuro-embedded chip? Yes please.

***

Conversations with a Tuk Tuk Driver #1 (Democracy):

Us: "So who did you support in the last election?'

TTD: "I voted for Sam Rainsy."

US: "What did you like about him?"

TTD: "He promised to spend more money on things. Hun Sen is spending a lot of money, but Sam Rainsy said he would spend even more money."

Conversations with a Tuk Tuk Driver #2 (Colonialism):

Us: "This place [a pepper farm] is great. [Joking, to kids] Would you like to become Cambodian pepper farmers?"

TTD [jumping in]: "Easy. There's a lot right next door available for US$6,000. Enough space to grow pepper, mangoes, papaya, bananas, keep some chickens, some cows — that's really good money, cows."

Us: "It sounds like a lot of work."

TTD: "No problem! Cambodian people would do all the work. You could just lie in hammocks, telling them what to do. They'd do all the farming, ask if you want something to eat, bring you drinks …"

[more later]

January 26, 2014

Scrap snaps (#1)

The Mogao Caves are located in a harsh place. (Click on images to

enlarge.)







The caves shown are in the northern cluster, whose exterior features have not been defaced by reinforced concrete. The southern group has been externally ruined by Zhou Enlai (although he seems to have meant well), but its interiors are the great treasures of the site, and some are open to the public, by guided tour. Some images of southern cave interiors (reconstructions) to follow.

April 12, 2014

Scrap snaps (#2)

Photography is forbidden in the Dunhuang grottoes, and under the close supervision of the mandatory tour, this prohibition is strictly

enforced. Photography is also forbidden in the adjacent Mogaoku Museum …

The spine of the museum consists of a row of (extremely impressive) cave reconstructions, sampled from among the 492 decorated caves at the site. (A two-hour tour of the site takes in perhaps 10.)

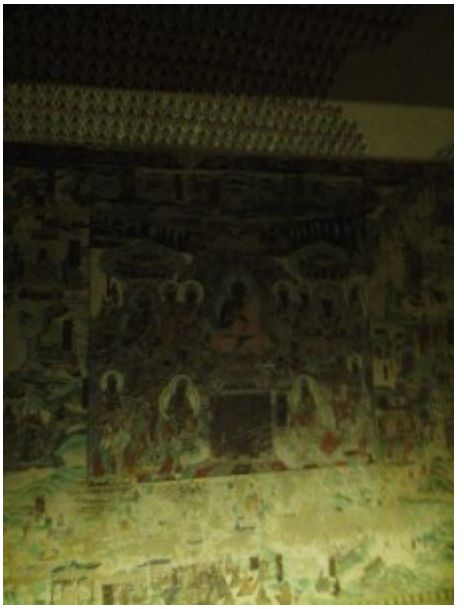
The following images are of reconstructions, not originals. The photographic quality is especially dire, given the unusual lighting conditions and cramped space. What I'm posting here is what I've got. (Click on images to expand.)

Cave 003:



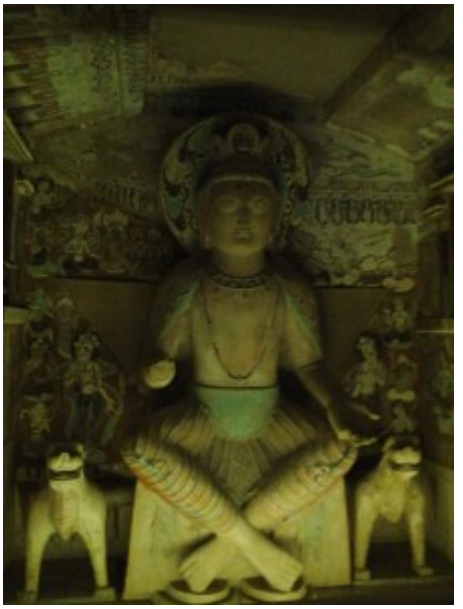


Cave 217 (one of the most renowned caves, whose images — disputedly — convey scenes and stories from the *Lotus Sutra*):



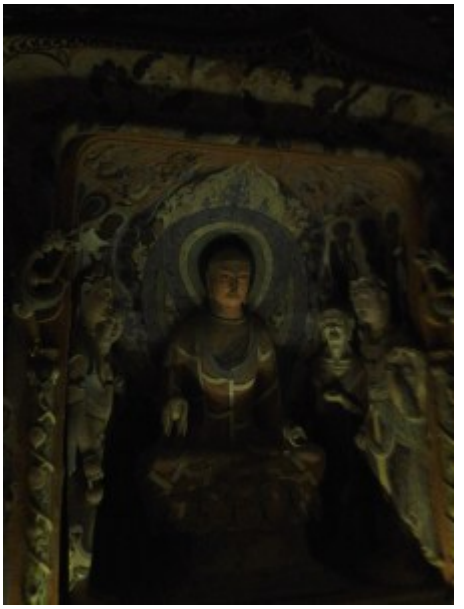


Cave 275:



Cave 419:

Reignition





April 13, 2014

Disconnection

Unplugged in Gulang Yu (involuntarily). Normal service to be resumed ASAP. Here‘s some soft jungle to be going on with.

… Damn, POS pseudo-connection can‘t even manage that.

(Have they hung Bryce yet?)

ADDED: Looks like it’s possible (finally) to put up a few tropical retreat snaps (and seems like they’re clickable):









(I can't get enough of this arborohorror.) One more:



ADDED: The two posts that have made all this ('Trannygate')

craziness worthwhile —

(1) Nyan Sandwich at More Right "… is Neoreaction a heretical political-insight-seeking movement, or a right-wing activist movement?"

(2) Nick B Steves on the Official Neoreactionary Position (endorsed by the most right-wing person on the Internet).

May 30, 2014

Shenzhen

The new airport doesn't by any means say it all, but it says a lot:



If it were not that ‘modernity’ (also) connoted friction and nostalgia, would there be any hesitation in describing Shenzhen as the most modern city in the world? It is nothing beyond what the opportunities of the present era have enabled it to be — a uniquely unambiguous urban seizure of the global now. (*Urban Future* adores this place to the edge of neurological catastrophe.)

[Disjointed commentary to be added as the opportunity arises]

Huaqiang Bei — Chips with everything:


内存卡
批发U盘

Shenzhen, and Huaqiang Bei in particular, places absolutely unapologetic euphoric commoditization on display. This is the world's Gizmoverse.

No one can have even the faintest idea how massively electronic production differentiates into lineages, species, sub-species, and minutely subtle varieties, until they wander through these markets. Combining innovative variation, replication at mind-melting scales, and fierce commercial selection (expressed through adaptive minutiae of product specification and price), the ecological analogy — based on fabulously complex networks of competition and cooperation — is irresistible. The electronic jungle is open to exploration.

Each product line opens niches for others. Not only are there dazzling multitudes of mobile phone types — an entire phylum now, honing classical forms, and branching off chaotically down lines of mutation — but also symbiotc industries for phone cases ("protective shells"), stands, re-chargers, input and output accessories, cables and connectors, each assertively seizing its patches of commercial display space.






艾蒂
Adila

The Huaqiang Bei outlets are described as ‘factory shops’ — sheer industrial exuberance jutting into exchange space. As an indicator, bulk discounts are the norm. Buy a single gizmo of any kind and the deal is met with the friendly but puzzled question: “Only one piece?” Racks of Cyberspace candy tilt towards rapid circulatory flow.

More (always massively more) on a descent into the commoditronic core of intensive modernity:






收库存
百榮電子

(There are other aspects to Shenzhen than turbular emergent machine-mind markets, and they deserve a chilled Shenzhen post. Then, some deeper engagement with the seething interior of Darwinized social logistics, competitive supply, or the Commoditronic Thing.)

September 12, 2014

Scrap note (#14)

… Shenzhen fragments (from the world's tech-comm paradise).

Sucking up to the specter of Sino-Capitalism:



Ironically, my connectivity here is so bad it's driving me out of my mind, so this is arriving in pieces …

Our hotel is in Huaqiang Bei, the center of the Shenzhen electronic market zone. The area is packed with emporia, which are in turn packed with products — and more specifically *commodities*. Rather than masking the traits of commercial mass-production under a veneer of 'boutique' rarity, the Shenzhen spirit is most gloriously manifested in the naked exhibition of hyper-alienated, techno-proliferated, trade-format *volumes*. Chips (of all kinds) come in sheets, which are then stacked into piles, and tessalated into display places designed to minutely explore minimal differences (product micro-specifications and volume-linked price slices). This is capitalism. It's easy — in a decline-phase Westernized world — to forget what it looks like.




内存卡
批发

Cables:


利兴达电子
USB CABLE
USB CABLE
USB CABLE
LXD

Skynet embryo chips in the Huitong Professional Security Market:


人脸识别摄像机
百万高清DVR
高清红外

The drone market is only just getting started (at least, we didn't see any stacks):


Camcorder
Camcorder
Camcorder

September 13, 2014

NZ Scraps

Fragments from the West Coast, plus some bits and pieces.

Currently in a gothic inspiration — the Otira Hotel — just beyond Arthur's Pass. Bought for one million dollars, along with the whole village of forty houses. It's on the rail-line, but remained on the market for years because:
1) It's a Gold Rush ghost town with no economic base
2) It's deep in a valley that plunges it into permanent shadow for half the year
3) There's a massive quake due (on the fault-line it straddles) which is expected to destroy everything
The new owners have stuffed the hotel bar with Gold Rush antiques, taxidermy specimens, the first telegraph cable, freaky life-size marionettes … it should be getting dark for the full effect (but it isn't yet) …

On an Internet ration tonight (Dec. 27.), but I'm going to try to keep this alive — meaning updates undramatized by an 'ADDED'. Also pics (but some slight time lag likely there).

The NZ west coast is dominated by a near-continuous strip of temperate rain forest, blurring into sub-tropical rain forest in the

north. The peculiar local vegetation, including numerous species of giant ferns, give the landscape a prehistoric flavor. It's also extremely rugged, with the western slopes of the NZ alps cascading right down to the coast. The sea is brutal, and the coastline deeply mauled. The early exploration of this area was tough. It's conspicuously Gnon-tinged geography. (Patience needed on the pix front, apologies.)

Only 30,000 people live on the west coast of the South Island — and most of them are trying with greater or lesser urgency to leave. The landscape is glorious (the British Columbia comparison is inescapable). Once drone logistics make it viable to survive in web-linked isolation in this area, it's going to make a spectacular refuge. For the moment, it's populated by hippies, hill-billies, and extraction-industry social detritus (a great horror fiction mix, however — drugs, guns, and expendables).

Finally — NZ West Coast pics (via the better half).

December 25, 2014

Singapore

No one really denies that Singapore is the most functional society on earth, which is interesting in itself. Everything works here (even multiculturalism (of which they have the superior Confucian hegemony version, rather than the ethno-masochistic late-Christian

fiasco)). Practical civilization reaches its zenith in the orchid zone of the Singapore botanic gardens, or somewhere close to it. This drives a lot of people — even those who profoundly admire the place — into a sulfurous rage.

No one likes an apple-polisher of Gnon (or scarcely anyone, I'm exempting myself, along with a few others). By demonstrating social functionality, Singapore makes everyone look bad, which doesn't go down well. *The Sings make us all look like useless scum*. Yes, there is that.

Conversation snippets:

"How much crime is there in Singapore?"

"Not much. I saw a sign saying 'Warning! Five bicycles have been stolen from this area in the last three years.' People were leaving them there unlocked."

"I've known a lot of Singaporeans, but I've never really had a Singaporean friend. … If you're used to going out on a Friday night, getting hammered, and waking up in the morning feeling like crap, it's hard. No one does that here. The Singaporeans are sensible all the freaking time …"

The stairwell door to the apartment where we're staying has a biometric identification system (plus two redundant human security guards).

The demographic problem — I'm increasingly convinced — is hugely about education costs (in money and time). It's k-selection

catastrophe. That's a can to be kicked down the road for the time being, though, because no one has a solid solution to offer right now. Mentioned here because it's deep, highly general, and the *only criticism of Singapore that deserves to be taken remotely seriously*.

3.5 million citizens, and 1.5 million permanent residents. ('PRs' are obligated to do national military service.)

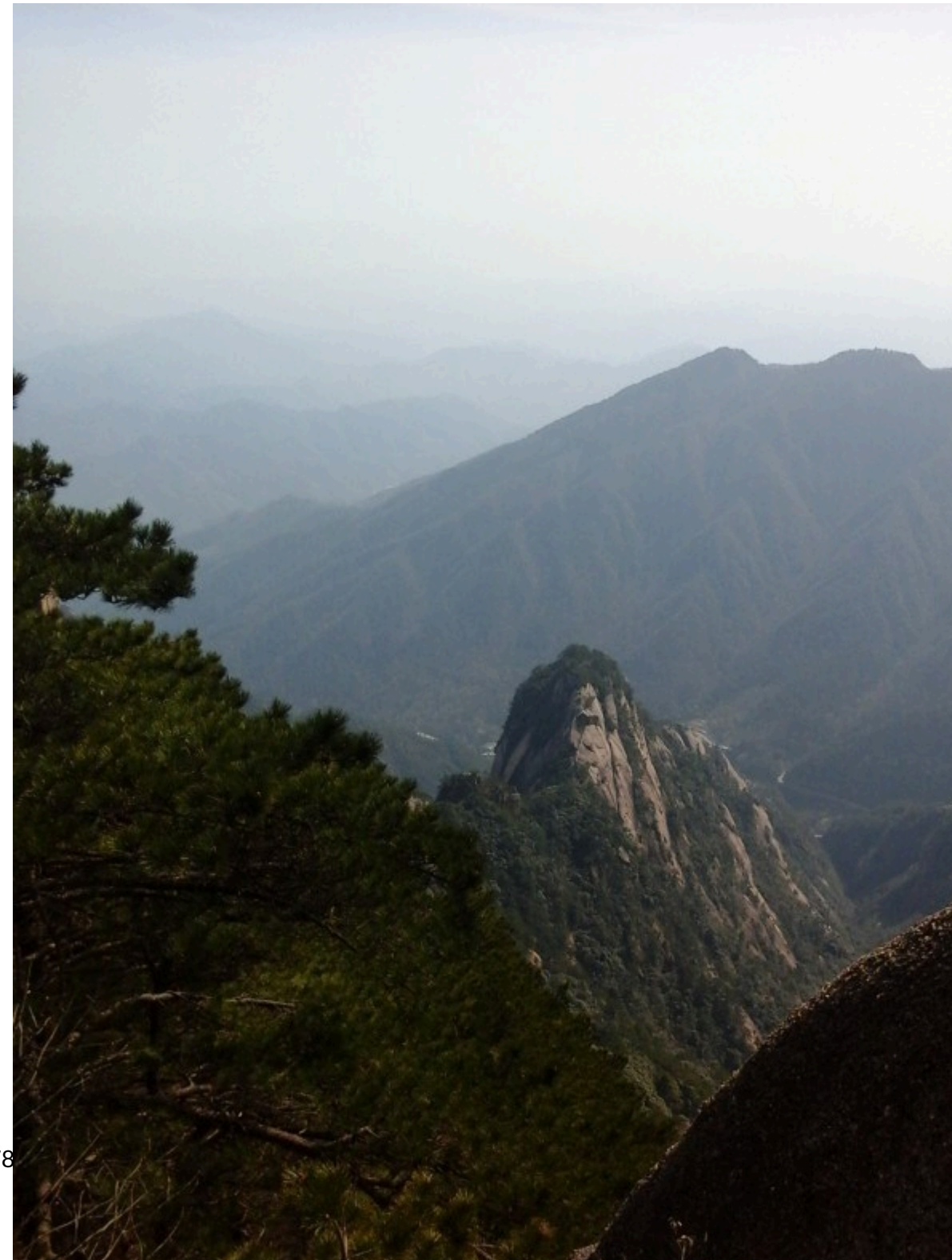
I'll try to update this further (and if I was Singaporean I'd almost certainly deliver).

January 7, 2015

Scrap snaps (#3)



Huangshan — It isn't K2 (but then I'd never be idiotic enough to try scaling K2.)





April 2, 2016

Vietnam (scraps) II

Arrived in Hanoi a few hours ago (first time in the northern part of Vietnam). Will be here a couple of days, then down south to Hoi An, and Hue. I'll try to ad some notes pics, in stages.

One less than massively-inspired snap so far, of the Hanoi Old Quarter, (near our hotel):


Trà Đá

Anyone with a particular desire to know that I'm nodding along in glum agreement can feel free to tell me its one of the most execrable pieces of photographic garbage to yet soil the terrestrial infosphere. Hoping, in inadequate excuse, that it gives some vague hint of the local atmosphere. Will try to up my game to a more ordinary level of sub-mediocrity in the days ahead.

(Organization this time should be up to a reasonably competent Chaos Patch tomorrow.) A

ADDED: At the shrine of the Long Do God, heaps of 'Choco-Pops' packets and a pyramid of canned beers offered solemnly in sacrifice.

May 14, 2016

NZ Stuff

Barry Crump is seen as capturing the edge of the place. There's a recent movie based on one of his books (recommended for the Outer-Anglosphere cultural flavour).

There's also a route to Samuel Butler, through the back country.

The outlaw myth is far more integral to the Anglo culture than much of NRx can easily be happy about. Everyone is going to sympathise with the runaways, not with the search party.

Some (real) advice from the bush: "Keep moving or you'll be eaten." (Deeper than it was meant to be at the time.)

December 22, 2016

Disconnection VI

Posted from Tokyo, first time in Japan, which is awesome so far. *An open society without being stupid about it* would be the NRx fast-summary (sound, but limited). It was *vastly* easier to get into Japan than the United States.

Staying in the AirB&B equivalent of a coffin-hotel, but the situation is good (in Ueno).

Civilization level meets high expectations, and friendliness level exceeds them.

Much more English signage than expected, and the inherited Chinese characters have preserved their meanings, if not their phonological values, so the urban landscape is surprisingly intelligible.

Micro-artisan businesses of extreme excellence, typically run by elderly people, are everywhere.

Automation dialed up to eleven.

Yet to see a single over-weight person (which out-performs the stereotype).

Ginza:


LUMINE

January 27, 2017

SECTION A - NEO-TRADITIONALISM

Neo-Traditionalism

YI XIANG

Paradox prompts thought. Arriving at the unthinkable after proceeding, step-by-step, along the path of reason, unsettles comfortable mental routines and points – obscurely – towards something new. Nothing twists this prompt more intensely than time-paradox, which grates thought open upon the basic tangles of reality.

The main creative current of Shanghai visual arts grasps this instinctively. Whilst predictably multidimensional (and in other respects unpredictable), the work revealed by Shanghai artists and

art spaces gravitates distinctively towards themes and techniques that can be plausibly described as *neo-traditionalist*. This inherently paradoxical inclination is itself a deep tradition, with relevance far beyond the visual arts and knotted roots that can be traced back to the Song Dynasty.

At the Shanghai Himalayas Museum Inaugural Exhibition (scheduled to last until the end of September), this neo-traditionalist tendency is represented with unprecedented scope and penetration. Entitled *Yi Xiang* (意象) in Chinese, it has been translated (lamentably) into 'Insightful Charisma' in English, but this is only a minor tripping point. ('Meaning Manifested' would have been far superior.) *Yi Xiang*, or the tension between essentials and their expression, echoes China's historic neo-traditionalist response to the challenge of modernization, as formulated during the Qing and Republican period: 'Chinese learning as essence, Western learning as application' (*Zhongxue wei ti, Xixue wei yong*, 中学为体，西学为用). Further scattered echoes of this deep impulse – to guarded assimilation – can be heard, preserved even through superficial inversion, in such recent expressions as 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

Yi Xiang is a complex exhibition, divided into five sections, each labeled by a single Chinese character. Threaded through each is a neo-traditionalist current, modulated in different ways. This is most economically grasped as a refusal to decide between past and future,

tradition and modernity, but to aesthetically stress both together, in a single cryptic direction. The inevitable consequence is a time-scrambling artistic (and curatorial) jolt, which simultaneously progresses into the past and regresses into the future.

The show is self-consciously refracted through China's landscape tradition of *shanshui* (山水) – literally: 'mountain, water' – the aesthetic fusion of the rigid and the fluid, permanence and change, stability and flux. *Shanshui* is extended beyond scenic representation into a method of historical reflection, exploring an intricate time-scape of modifications, appropriations, blockages, deluges, accommodations, and adaptations. The sweep of this insight more than suffices, on its own, to justify the entire exhibition. (I should note, however, that one brilliant but determinedly contrarian commentator has interpreted this focus upon *shanshui* as an evasion of *fengshui*, arguably bypassed due to its politically awkward associations with 'feudal superstition'.)

Shen (神) or 'spirit' is housed in a single softly illuminated gallery, filled with classic *Shanshui* works from the Qing, Ming, and even Song dynasties, along with a smaller number of early modern pieces directly inspired by them. This exquisite, compact sub-exhibition elegantly illustrates the way in which the modernization of tradition is itself a tradition.

Li (理) or 'reason' (a term with rich Neo-Confucian reverberations) is devoted to 'Chinese Cube': an explicitly philosophical uptake of

the classic *Yijing* into a variety of modern codes, translating tradition into a recursive, cryptographic puzzle box.

Qi (气) or 'internal force' ('familiar' through the *Dao* and Traditional Chinese Medicine), is the largest part of the show, consisting of cutting-edge works presented within a coherent, neo-traditionalist curatorial context. The quality of the work displayed is outstanding, including pieces by Li Hongto, Shao Yan, Wang Jieyin, Wang Tiande, Yang Yongliang (and Ma Haiping), and many others. (I hope to return to these artists in future posts.)

Jing (境) or 'imagery' is devoted to architecture, with the neo-traditionalist theme partially displaced into a negotiation between nature and urban construction. The visionary work of Ma Yansong dominates this part of the show.

Yun (韵) or 'rhythm', with its musical sub-theme, pursues the involvements of mountains and water more determinedly than any other part of the show. A complex work by Ding Yi is perhaps the center-piece of this section.

Neo-traditionalism is the main driver of China's cultural renaissance, and the manifested meaning of its greatest aesthetic delights. *Urban Future* will be returning to it as frequently as practically possible.

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NEO-TRADITIONALISM IN HONG KONG

The momentum of modernization is directly proportional to the restoration of tradition (discuss).

Abundant evidence relevant to this thesis is on show in Hong Kong, at two art exhibitions of exceptional interest.

At the Hong Kong Museum of Art, *The Origin of Dao: New Dimensions in Chinese Contemporary Art* (curated by Pi Daojian, open until August 18) exemplifies the infolding of audacious experimentation into profoundly conservative aesthetic commitments. The show is divided into two parts. One includes works in a variety of media, and is moderately stimulating. The other, devoted entirely to recent ink works (with supporting video) is truly outstanding.

Works by Yang Jiechang, Gu Wenda, Zhang Quan, Shao Yan, Kan Tai-Keung, Qiu Zhijie, and others, excavate the creative potentialities of traditional Chinese media and forms, propelling them into a dazzling variety of new horizons. One especially conspicuous theme is the fluid boundary between text and image inherited from the Chinese script, evoking meandering lines of exploration, elaborated in the cryptic gulf between pictorial representation and intelligible

sign. The modernization of native aesthetic tradition progressively liberates these lines — whether broken or unbroken — from both resemblance and significance, on a path of escape into pure form.

Shao Yan demonstrates this trend with particular vividness, through the creation of ink abstracts poised between calligraphy and landscape. An accompanying video shows Shao at work, like a *gongfu* Pollock, realizing a type of Chinese action painting that draws upon the occult root of cultivation (anticipated by the equation of calligraphy and sword-fighting depicted in Zhang Yimou's *Hero*).

At the Hong Kong Asia Society, *Light before Dawn: Unofficial Chinese Art 1974-1985* (through to September 1) concerns the liberation of Chinese art from the constraints of Socialist Realism, as shown through the work of the Caocao, Wuming, and Xingxing artists. From both a Neo-Traditionalist and Shanghai perspective, the Caocao Society works are especially significant, consisting of ink paintings that explicitly (and provocatively) revive artistic impulses which had been ideologically proscribed due to their associations with the Confucian literati. Qiu Deshu's masterpiece *3-5 Times Shouting* (1980) steals the show.

July 29, 2013

CHAPTER ONE - ARTWORKS

Ink-cantations

When art history invokes the 'contemporary', it refers to *now*, the current moment, and thus points into an unresolved perplexity. *Now* remains undefined, whether by science, philosophy, or mystical religion. Our contemporary 'now' is not merely an instant — not even a stretched or dilated instant. It is a time that is still with us, or which we continue to participate in, at once proximate and elusive, still awaiting its sense, obliquely intersecting the narrower present of chronological location and practical schedules.

The visual arts, at their most reflective, enter into this perplexity as into an animating spiral. Whilst succumbing to categorization — or time definition — within a still obscure and incomplete contemporaneity, the art work can also make the act of definition its own, reaching out into the *now*, and telling us what it has found. In doing so it tests itself against an ultimate abstraction.

In some such now, current but chronologically indeterminable, Chinese visual art encountered a critical threshold. The difference between heading forward or backward, advancing or retreating,

ceased – at some 'point' — to be an option, or a choice. Instead, for that complex cultural trend *and* inheritance at once defined as — and defining — *neotraditionalism*, true modernity was discovered in the acceptance of tradition *as a path*. This wave of creative – even explosive – experimentation was also an excavation, and a recovery. It demonstrated that innovative variation was inextricable from the *maintenance of a course*, directed into a future already cryptically indicated by the past.

Beyond Black and White: Chinese Contemporary Abstract Ink, on show at Pearl Lam Galleries (until September 7, 2013), focuses with glorious intensity upon the neotraditionalist current. In keeping with this focus, it both fulfills and deranges expectations, through the audacious explorations of a heritage made new.

The exhibition poises itself between a number of dynamically balanced dualities. Most graphically, it is integrated by its primary material, the contrastive complements of black and white, ink and paper, *yin* and *yang*, perturbed only at the margins by subtle deviations of media, and occasional encroachments of color. Architectural balance is sustained by the great double-helix of Chinese ink wash tradition, the distinct but inter-twined lineages of pictorial and calligraphic expression, image and sign, with each strand inciting the other into heightened flights of formal abstraction. Past and future – as already emphasized — are mutually suspended in a multiplied contemporaneity. Through all of this,

Chinese art is re-balanced in the world, communicating with alternative cultural traditions at the abstract limit of each, where the escape from formal constraint fuses with the reality of time.

"Abstract Ink" – as a culmination of tradition — is already distinctively Chinese, but the true cultural singularity that is pursued here exceeds the medium, to involve, minimally, a reciprocal creative irritation of painting and writing – twin twisted tracks that, between them, describe an aesthetic trajectory into abstraction. The Chinese tradition, propelled by this double training, cultivates resemblance and significance simultaneously, and thus, through relentless sublimation, flees both, into a horizon of purity where strokes and (gray-scale) tones become sheer flight, or indices of escape — cosmic gestures without substance or meaning.

Arrayed along the northern end of the gallery, several series of small pieces by **Qiu Zhenzhong** undertake systematic experiments with stroke and tone. Calligraphic scripts are disentangled by cursive lines into unintelligible forms, or melted through tonal dissolves into the indefinite, whilst images are simplified to the brink of an archaic ideography.

Wang Tiande – an artist of obvious centrality to the neotraditional renaissance – contributes two small pieces worked in his characteristic subtractive method — which combines stroke and tone in a piercing scorch – one tilted into his experimental practice from calligraphy, the other from painting. These pieces represent

him (and testify to his importance), rather than demonstrating his work at its most fully or ambitiously achieved. Also included is a technically-complex textile work, in which the scorch method creates a calligraphically-annotated shirt.

Wei Ligang is represented by a single, large, calligraphy-based work (*Unicorn-Crane*, 2010), whose golden, flowing background relaxes the show's chromatic discipline. Color also creeps in through **Feng Mengbo**'s video work (*Not Too Late*, 2010), which makes the modernization of tradition both theme and medium.

Qiu Deshu, a bold pioneer of neotraditional revival from the early 1980s, has two pieces on display (*Fissuring*, and *Fissuring Life*, 2012), more remarkable for their intelligence than their dazzling aesthetic presence. Abstract explorations of paper tearing and folding, they employ an intermediate ink tone to collapse shape onto the picture plane, bearing witness to a vanished spatial dimension. (As with Wang Tiande, the casual encounter with Qiu Deshu in this show is best taken as an invitation to further engagement with a neotraditionalist artist of supreme importance.)

For sheer visual drama, the calligraphic dimension of the exhibition is dominated by **Wang Dongling**. The three works on show (*Tiger Wind*, 2010; *Benevolence and Integrity*, 2013; and *Chuang-Tzu's "Free and Easy Wandering"*, 2013) are not only striking (even stunning) in themselves, but also remarkable for their extraordinary variety. *Tiger Wind* is a large three-character cursive work whose

bold sweeping lines – unmoderated by intermediate tones – compose a frozen leap of tensed energy. *Benevolence and Integrity* is a more architectural work, structured by soul-sucking slabs of abysmal blackness, whilst *Chuang-Tzu's "Free and Easy Wandering"* is a more traditionally composed work, using serried Chinese script to playfully explore the combinatorial space of shape and shade. These outstanding pieces amply reward a visit to the exhibition on their own.

Three superb works by **Lan Zhenghui** and **Zheng Chongbin** complete the more painterly dimension of the show, displaying the potential of Ink Abstraction at a thrilling level of aesthetic achievement. Lan Zhenghui's huge 'mop' work (*Leap Series No.4*, 2010) exuberantly jumbles ink-tones and stroke-angles to construct a monumental celebration of the medium as a vehicle for artistic liberty. Zheng Chongbin's exquisite abstracts (*Untitled No.16*, 2007; and *Formless*, 2010), sharpening the tonal scale with vivid acrylics, conduct an utterly absorbing visual expedition into the limitless involvements of light and darkness.

"These artists are part of a growing circle in China that draws inspiration from traditional Chinese ink painting and its philosophy as well as Chinese calligraphy," the gallery explains. As the story of Chinese neotraditionalism takes shape, *Beyond Black and White* will surely find a place among the tellers, as well as in the tale. It is also a feast for sense and thought alike. Catch it if you can.

Address: Pearl Lam Galleries, 181 Jiangxi Zhong Lu, (G/F), Huangpu District, Shanghai (021 6323 1989), online.

August 1, 2013

Ningbo

Some time fragmentation is wholly predictable until Wednesday, in Ningbo (Zhejiang), due to an end of summer family break with berserk offspring. That was to have been compounded by computer crisis until the excellent IT guy at the hotel here sorted out what had seemed an insoluble connectivity problem. We're at a beautiful Park Hyatt out at the edge of the town, done out in an aesthetic that mixes Jiangnan elements with the company's cosmopolitan minimalism (rough textures, earth tones, and intricate landscaping seem to be consistent themes.) Our explorations of the city isn't likely to amount to much, but there are a couple of cool things to report on over the next couple of days. My expectation is something like the Hong Kong activity slump, but on heavy tranquillizers, so I'm throwing in a Chaos Patch to keep the wolves at the door.

ADDED (August 27): Besides the hotel itself, the main object of our neo-traditionalist excursion is the Ningbo Museum, which won a Pritzker prize for architect Wang Shu last year. Wang was the architect behind Ningbo's pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo

(2010), a building I raved about at the time (in obscure places). His most distinctive design characteristic is monumental facades of brick and tile, recycled from demolished villages, and tessellated into endlessly absorbing surfaces, minimally punctuated by irregularly oriented and distributed windows. These walls look truly fantastic, each being an intricate composition, subtly incorporating drifts of texture and color from the non-uniform component elements. Exactly how the construction process works remains a mystery to me at this point, since it relies upon an astonishing degree of craft attention at the smallest scale of assembly — and therefore seems to make economies of standardization and scale impossible. In any case, somehow it's done.

The second aspect of the Ningbo Museum is a hybrid structure, marrying the intricate recycled facades with colossal brutalist structures, consisting of comparatively homogeneous roughened concrete. The geometric language of massive angled planes comes straight off the Atlantic Wall 1944, and has an undeniable military-totalitarian edge. (Whatever one thinks about the alternative neo-traditionalist aesthetic expressed in our hotel, it doesn't seem adamant about engaging in a conversation about death camps.)

Conclusion? Not yet.

August 26, 2013

Ningbo Museum

The Ningbo Museum, which won a Pritzker prize for architect Wang Shu last year, is a challenging edifice. Combining traditional elements and materials with monumental modernism — in its most uncompromisingly brutalist manifestation — it realizes a peculiar complex of delicacy and terror.



Wang's signature facades already display the same ambiguity in embryo. His vast sheer planes, shown in the Ningbo Tengtou pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai World Expo (2010), memorialize a demolished past. The bricks and tiles from obliterated villages are recycled into exquisitely tessellated, endlessly absorbing surfaces, sparsely punctuated by irregularly oriented and distributed windows. The tension between crushing scale and intricate composition is immense (and intimate). Subtle drifts of texture and color from the non-uniform materials make the walls into sensual displays of abstract pattern, whilst their massive geometric rigor approaches a state of absolute menace (with an

unmistakable military-totalitarian edge).

In the structure of the Ningbo Museum, this tension is compounded to an almost hysterical pitch by a hybrid structure, fusing the flattened village mosaics with colossal blocks of comparatively homogeneous textured concrete. The building looks like a modern fortress, assembled in an architectural language of hard defensive pragmatism. Every aperture is pressurized in the direction of a *slit*, as if even minimal openings were a reluctant concession to weakness and vulnerability. For the landmark cultural institution of an open, commercial city, nestled deep within China's traditionally pacific Jiangnan region, this structural vocabulary is jarring, and indubitably provocative. If it has a message, it is not easy to decrypt.



August 29, 2013

Blow Ups

Shanghai's the Power Station of Art is hosting *The Ninth Wave*, a solo exhibition of work by Cai Guo-Qiang (1957-), through to October 26. It's … explosive.

The name of the show, and its central exhibit, is taken from a painting (1850) by Russian artist Ivan Aivazavosky (1817-1900). This image of inundating disaster is of clear relevance to the show, but it also serves as a pretext and screen for an adoption of signs that Cai Guo-Qiang invests with singular (and cryptic) evocations. Deep rhythms of time, power, and number are a consistent theme flowing through the exhibition.

The Ninth Wave (2014) is a re-purposed boat, crowded with (99) stuffed animals. It was floated down the Huangpu to be installed in the show, making it the memorial of an event — a signature of Cai's work. Superficially, it's a Noah's Ark, and an icon of ecological calamity, but this barnacled hulk, with its crew of traumatized inhuman survivors, also satirizes the dramatic narratives — whether comic or tragic — that are employed to frame the profound, ruinous tides of cosmic transition.

Cai Guo-Qiang has seared his name on the cultural imagination in fireworks, pursuing an incendiary path to neotraditonalist aesthetic restoration. Working with gunpowder is the revival of a traditional Chinese artistic medium. Cai modernizes its potential for public

spectacle, in ‘Explosive Events’ or ‘Pyrotechnic Explosion Projects’ which are stunningly documented in the show. Yet, among the things Cai explodes is media compartmentalization. The fallout from his work includes char-marked images, production diagrams, and video recordings. His detonations spread across the entire multidimensional domain of visual aesthetics. Time itself is envisaged as a system of explosions, burns, and debris.

The Bund Without Us (2014) epitomizes his usage of gunpowder as method for the production of static images. The process of creation is staged as an event, in which a complex, controlled explosion ‘draws’ the picture in gunpowder burns. The image is left as an aftermath. An enactment of devastation feeds naturally into a narrative of apocalyptic disappearance. (The title references an ecological catastrophe fable.)



Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter (2014) was created through an innovative re-combination of traditional media, depicting the cycle of the seasons in gunpowder-scorched porcelain. Rhythmic regularity emerges from a violent process of combustion, excavating a sublime order of recurrence from both nature and history.

Silent Ink (2014) has ripped up a large gallery space to create an ink-filled pool, choked with multiple allusions, from the trite to the abysmal. Once again, a traditional medium is unpredictably

modernized, pouring continuously into a colossal installation that evokes urban redevelopment, chemical pollution, and quotidian ravaging in general, while opening onto deeper cosmic themes of harsh time-cycles and spontaneous restorations. (The title, of course, echoes an environmentalist classic.)

Head On (2006) is a huge lupine loop, constructing a frozen dynamic in three dimensions. Ninety-nine wolves model social history as a cycle of collective leaps, crises, and dazed re-beginnings. (As in *The Ninth Wave*, with its 99 mammalian survivors, Cai escalates traditional Chinese numerology to figure a point of catastrophe and reversal.)



Catch the wave, if you can.

Power Station of Art, 200 Huayuangang Lu, Huangpu Qu, Shanghai (86 21 3110 8550), Web.

September 8, 2014

The Qin Model Army

Qin Shihuang's terracotta funerary army hasn't ever been high on

the *UF* China attractions list. In Xi'an, there's no choice but to see it though.



The site is an extraordinary place. For a start, it is only very incompletely excavated — deliberately so — making the great halls a monument to the archaeological enterprise, almost as much as to the partially-exhumed exhibit itself. Qin Shihuang's tomb is still undisturbed. It's is beyond the capabilities of contemporary archaeology to deal with it, according to Chinese experts. Mercury saturation from moats of the alchemically-precious substance add a toxicity problem to the other technical difficulties.

The worked-site (and exhibition area) is divided into three pits, of which the first is the hanger-scale structure shown here, in which the vast majority of the excavated warriors are displayed. Pit-2 presents the opportunity for a closer look at individual warriors. Pit-3 dramatizes the archaeological effort with special intensity.


8
7

The slogan “Dreams from the Qin Dynasty come true” might strike those of a more Confucian inclination with some misgivings, but it seems to have been selected as the condensation of the site’s official meaning. The non-uniformity of the model army, which is the main aesthetic point foregrounded, might perhaps be a hook for some ideological ambiguity. It’s not being presented as a fantasy of clone troopers, at least.





May 8, 2015

Art Machined

Mohammad Salemy produces a manifesto for the deepening machine age. “What makes this experiment necessary is the severity of the cultural crisis in which art stubbornly refuses to find itself.”

‘Manifesto’ is a *UF* categorization, that responds to the text’s dominant imperative tone, as exemplified by: “Art needs to be removed from its contemporary ivory tower to deal with the implications of its appearance, but unlike twentieth-century modernisms, today art cannot afford to be solely about the limitations of its supporting material, or only conceived in relation to its own history and ontology.”

Much, too, though for awkward contemplative nihilists:

Art, whether artists agree or not, is the void of meaning folded in cognitive wrapping paper, visible only as the surface of cognition and as the materialization of both the historical and semantic emptiness which it carries. It is a series of verifiable claims inserted into the real world and reified to take up the empty space of meaning, a void occupying another void.

September 10, 2015

CHAPTER TWO - CONFUCIAN RESTORATION

Confucian Restoration

One of the many reasons to be suspicious about political activism on the Occidental off-spectrum right is the parochialism that feeds it. There is a global process that will settle what occurs in its broad structure, making local pretensions to decisive ideological agency simply ridiculous.

The fundamental economic outcome — and thus the fate of the world — is not ultimately controllable even by the central financial administrations of the major world powers (unless certain intriguing axioms of radical contemporary fascism are defensible), so the idea that extremely marginalized Western cabals are positioned to seize the political driving seat is so saturated in self-deception that it wastes everybody's time. In addition, technological developments complicate all economic forecasts essentially, and obscurely. We cannot even approximately delimit what unforeseen technical breakthroughs could entail.

The geopolitical context is even clearer. The collapse of Islam, and rise of China, are re-organizations of the world so evident in their unfolding, so vast in their implication, and so inadequately thought, that they make a mockery of all political programs yet conceived. It is first necessary to know, if only in roughest outline, what is taking place in profundity — tidally, and inexorably — before determining an ideologically relevant act. The process comes first.

Already in Moldbug, and increasingly elsewhere, there are signs within some of the most thoughtful regions of the Occidental 'reactosphere' that could be interpreted as a pre-adaptation to an impending Chinese global hegemony (complementary to the decline of the West). The most recent is here. When we entertain speculations about the nature of 'our' envisaged reaction, it cannot be realistically disentangled from what the world will have become. (I've been dismissive of Moldbug's "Call me Mencius" line in the past, not — I hope — vindictively, but out of the anticipation that we will increasingly be talking about the original Mencius, and the potential for confusion is already visible.)

From the (cultivated) Chinese perspective, the structure of world history is not defined through modes of Abrahamic eschatology, but with respect to deep rhythms of Confucian Restoration, describing a spiral, in which advance and return are synthesized. If the hypothesis of a continuing trend to a more Chinese world is — at least momentarily — granted credibility, then the present (second) epoch

of Confucian Restoration is the key to historical intelligibility on a global scale.

Mou Zongsan could prove more important to us than any Western political theorist writing today. The restoration he conceives has the remarkable advantage of *already taking place*. He does not have to imagine what 'would be nice', and because he doesn't, neither do we. Instead, we can explore what is in fact happening, even if from an angle that remains unfamiliar. An alternative order need not be extracted from the rot and ruin of the old.

The new *Urban Future* site should be going up in the next few days, re-focused by a division of labor with this blog. The dark thrills of collapse will still dominate here, but UF2 will devote itself to the lineaments of a restored civilization and a renewed modernity which are — from the perspective of Shanghai — much closer to 'home'. When the threshold is passed, of course, I'll invite you all over. It won't be so rough over there, so please take your shoes off at the door.

June 10, 2013

Mou Zongsan

Jason Clower has edited an indispensable volume of Mou Zongsan's

writings (*Late Works of Mou Zongsan: Selected Essays in Chinese Philosophy*, forthcoming). In the first words of his introduction, he says: "If twentieth-century China produced a philosopher of the first rank, it was Mou Zongsan." This judgment strikes me as near-irresistible. A taste (from two of the first three essays):

From **Objective Understanding and the Remaking of Chinese Culture**

*...to adapt to the times you have to understand the times. For that you need right knowledge of the present age (**xiandai** 現代) ... Compared to political and social activities, the influence of scholarly culture is an influence on a virtual level (**xuceng** 虛層), but "the virtual governs the solid" (**xu yi kong shi** 虛以控實) and its influence is wide and far-reaching, which is why I call it a "decisive influence." We should not take it lightly and think that it is not an urgent matter.*

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*... to have objective understanding. The first step is to understand ourselves; the second step is to understand the West. Then we can look for the way out for Chinese culture, and we hope that our young friends will take on this responsibility. In its simple essentials, this responsibility is to revive the ancient meaning of Greek philosophy. Its original meaning was what Kant defined as a "doctrine of practical wisdom" (**shijian de zhihuixue** 實践的智慧學). And what is wisdom? Only "yearning after the highest good" is wisdom. As most people know, philosophy is the "love of wisdom," and the "love" in question*

*is the kind of love that is "heartfelt yearning for that highest good in human life and constantly wanting to put it into practice." That is why Kant called "philosophy" in its ancient Greek sense a "doctrine of practical wisdom." The term is very apt. But this ancient meaning of philosophy has already been lost in the West. Nowadays all that is left is linguistic analysis under the conditions of advanced civilization, with logic having been reduced to applied computing. This does not actually count as philosophy, only the degeneration of philosophy into a technology. To enter into the depths of philosophy, it has to be that "love of wisdom," the "yearning after the highest good." But though the West has forgotten it, this sense of philosophy has been preserved in the Chinese tradition, as what the Chinese ancients called "teachings" (**jiao** 教). Buddhism exemplifies the meaning of "teachings" most clearly, but Confucianism has it too, as the "teaching" referred to in the Doctrine of the Mean when it says, "The understanding that arises from authenticity is called our nature, and the authenticity that arises from understanding is called teaching," and when it says, "What heaven decrees is called our nature; following our nature is called the Way; cultivating the Way is called teaching." The meaning of "teaching" here is not institutional education as currently practiced, which takes knowledge as its standard. Rather, it is "philosophy," the "yearning after the highest good" of a doctrine of practical wisdom.*

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*Nowadays in the West, Anglo-American analytic philosophy is in command, and the most famous on the European continent are Heidegger's existential philosophy and Husserl's phenomenology, the "dainty philosophies" (**xianqiao zhexue** 纖巧哲學) of the twentieth century, uninformed by the great Way of the ~~gentleman~~ superior man. Only that which connects upwardly (**shangtong** 上通) with noumenon or being-in-itself (**benti** 本體) counts as informed by the great Way of the ~~gentleman~~ superior man, whereas those two men do not have an idea of noumenon. So as far as I am concerned, Husserl's phenomenology, though written so tortuously and with such show, is at bottom impoverished to the point of having no content at all. For it has lost the wisdom of method and given up philosophy's stock-in-trade, so that all that is left for it is to say empty words. All those questions of theirs can just be consigned to science; what need is there for philosophy to be its cheerleader? So nowadays, we cannot rely on the West for real philosophy; we have to come back to ourselves and understand Chinese philosophy. My life's work has been very simple, it has been preliminary objective understanding, but it has already surpassed previous ages. Thus I once wrote a letter to a student of mine on the mainland saying that my life has been very ordinary, and the only exceptional thing is that very few people nowadays can surpass me in objective understanding. I have no prejudices. I have even read some of Marx's **Capital**, and have done so with an open mind. I am not even a*

complete stranger to economics; it is simply not my specialty. So my disgust for Marx is not a bias but a true inability to appreciate him even after I had understood him.

[On the one occasion where I found Clower's translation decision intolerable, I have graphically amended it (twice)]

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… I believe that for the work of absorbing Western culture, the best medium is Kant. … I am not a Kant expert but I do believe that I have a relatively good understanding of Kant. To understand Kant one must first understand his original meaning. There are more people who teach about his first Critique and people know a bit more about this one. There are fewer who teach about his second Critique and people know a bit less about it. As for the third, no one teaches about it and no one understands it. I have been translating it and at the same time working hard to understand it and understand Kant's original meaning, in order to be able then to digest it. In my view, Kant really is talking about problems and wants to solve some problems, but to see his limits in solving those problems, the only way is with traditional Chinese philosophical wisdom. Chinese wisdom can take Kant even farther. If Kant experts only read Kant and Westerners only read Western philosophy, they will not necessarily understand Kant's original meaning. Among British and American translators of Kant, each of the Critiques has three people who have translated it but no one person has translated all three.

They are expert in just one aspect of Kant and so do not necessarily understand Kant. I am not an expert, for my foundation is Chinese philosophy, and therefore I can discern Kant's original meaning and take him a step further.

[Mou translated all three of Kant's Critiques into Chinese.]

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Why do I say that Kant is the best medium for reminting Chinese philosophy? I often say that "one mind with two gates" is a shared philosophical model. From ancient times the West has recognized the two gates, as Kant did, but nowadays Western philosophy is only left with one gate, and this amounts to a shrinkage in philosophy. In the West, the noumenal aspect of the one mind with two gates has not been developed well. It did receive a little of the attention due it from Kant, but it was negative, and Wittgenstein's ***Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*** *continued Kant's negative approach, so that all was left were a few ripples. … Wittgenstein's point was that anything belonging to the world of value, of the good and the beautiful, is mysterious and unsayable, and that whereof one cannot speak, one must remain silent. This sort of attitude is as negative as it is possible to be, and in keeping with this, on the European Continent, Heidegger and Husserl did not touch noumenon at all. The two gates are the original meaning of philosophy, but now all that is left is the one gate of phenomena. Chinese philosophy happens to be just the opposite. It is best at noumenon but not good at phenomena. That is*

also the real reason that China wants modernization.

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If you can deeply understand the significance of "one mind with two gates," then you will understand that the more advanced civilization is, the greater the need for a "doctrine of practical wisdom" and for what in China has been called "teaching" to firm up the course of our life and right the problems that come with advanced civilization. Therefore Westerners should also look to China for instruction and not just expect Chinese people to come seek instruction from them. But Westerners are able not to respect Chinese because Chinese do not read their own books and hence have no instruction to offer.

From **Meeting at Goose Lake – The Great Synthesis in the Development of Chinese Culture and the Merging of Chinese and Western Tradition**

We commonly say that Song-Ming Confucianism was skewed in the direction of inner sagehood. By the end of the Ming, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Wang Fuzhi, Huang Zongxi, and Gu Yanwu appeared, they already knew that Chinese history was about to turn in a new direction, that they could not continue in the direction that Song-Ming Confucians had been going for six hundred years, because it placed too much weight on inner sagehood. Thus people like Huang, Wang, and Gu began advocating openness to external things, expanding from inner sagehood to outer

*kingship as well, and thus it was that they began to emphasize the pragmatic study of statecraft (**jingshi zhiyong zhi xue** 經世致用之學). But the reason that this development from inner sagehood to outer kingship was interrupted and did not bear fruit was the Manchu Qing dynasty. The arrival of the Manchus meant that China was ruled by an alien race …*

The three hundred years of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries comprised the Manchus' Qing empire, and the Qing empire brought not even a scintilla of benefit to Chinese culture. That is China's recent history. How could China's original history and culture produce the Communist Party? It was the shallow intellectualism of the May Fourth movement. Why was the movement so shallow? Because of the baleful influence of mid-Qing textual studies. As its influence spread gradually, Chinese intellectuals lost the ability to think and to carry on with the development of thought. And because of those three hundred years of Qing rule and the intellectuals' loss of the capacity to think, the historical opportunity was lost and the movement toward and demand for a development from inner sagehood to outer kingship was repressed. If there had been no three hundred years of Manchu rule, the natural course of the Chinese nation's development would have been little different than the West's. It was exactly during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries of the Qing that the West progressed quickly toward modernization. … Of itself, the

cultural life-force of the Chinese nation was poised to open outward. It was only that it was repressed by the Manchus.

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Nobody believes in Marx anymore.

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… the rise of New Confucianism is a necessity of the trends of history and we must take up that responsibility. The Chinese nation is to take up the responsibility of that necessity.

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I am the sort of person who just quietly ploughs away. I have never been a government official, never belonged to the KMT, and naturally I have certainly never belonged to the Communist Party.

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… This stuff takes time! It does not matter how smart you are unless you have time.

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It is not the life of traditional Chinese culture which is lacking; it is the Communists and their Marxism-Leninism which are evil and irrational. So in this great synthesis, it is the mainline of our very own culture which will be the basis and which will merge with the Western tradition of the Greeks. Western science and philosophy comes from the Greeks. Modern liberal democracy has many components, with contributions from Greek tradition, from Roman tradition, and from the modern Industrial Revolution and the English

Magna Carta. Western liberal democracy is also a modern product, coming in the last three hundred years, rather than something that existed from the beginning. And in the Western tradition, apart from Greece and Rome, there is also the Hebrew tradition, which is religious (Christian). These are the contours of Western culture.

What we want is a great synthesis based on the mainline of the life of our own culture, a great merger with the science and philosophy developed out of the Greek tradition and with the liberal politics developed by the West out of various causal conditions, but we do not want a great synthesis with Christianity. The relationship with Christianity is not a matter of synthesis but of "classifying the teachings." We do not oppose Christianity. Western people's faith and prayer is fine; that is their way, though it is not ours. But we can critically examine teachings, as Buddhists of the past did. We can distinguish what is the same and different in them, what is high or low, and what is perfect or imperfect.

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What is a "true mind-only theory?" There is nothing wrong with using the phrase "mind-only theory," but within Western philosophy there is no mind-only theory, only idealism. This has to be clarified. Neither Plato's idealism nor Kant's idealism nor Berkeley's idealism can be regarded as a mind-only theory. Idealism is not mind, so Western philosophy only has idealism, not a mind-only theory. What the Communists call "mind-only" or "idealism" is for them just an

*indiscriminate term of opprobrium. They use "idealist" and "materialist" as value labels, but they are clueless about Western idealism. Idealism is about ideas, but an idea itself is not mind. Plato's idealism is a theory of Forms. Kant's is a transcendental idealism (**chaoyue de linianlun** 超越的理念論). What are these ideas? For Kant, they are concepts of reason, which are different from concepts of the understanding. Concepts of the understanding are categories, which are the conditions for accomplishing knowledge, whereas concepts of reason cannot represent knowledge. Therefore, Kant's thought can only be called a transcendental idealism. For Berkeley, an idea is a perceived phenomenon, not a mind but an object of mind, a particular, real object. Berkeley's saying, that "to be is to be perceived" [**esse est percipi**] [means that his so-called subjective idealism] is a subjective percept theory (**zhuguan de juexianglun** 主觀的覺象論). It is completely wrong to translate it as a "subjective idealism" (**zhuguan de guannian lun** 主觀的觀念論) or "subjective mind-only theory" (**zhuguan de weixin lun** 主觀的唯心論). In the West, ideas are always regarded as objects, and though objects are related to the mind, in particular to the cognitive mind, nonetheless they are not themselves the mind. Therefore only China has true mind-only philosophy.*

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Where philosophical systems are concerned, we would do best to use Kant's philosophy as our bridge. Kant is the best go-between

*for absorbing Western culture to remint Chinese philosophy and support Chinese doctrines. Kant's framework opens up two realms, the realm of phenomena and the realm of noumena (**benti** 本體) or, if we superimpose Buddhist terminology on it, it is "one mind opening through two doors." In the West, the noumenal dimension has not been developed well. In Kant's system, noumena has only a negative meaning.* […] *Applied to Kant's philosophy, "one mind with two gates" refers to phenomena and noumena. But it must be understood in Chinese terms, through the mainline cultural spirit of the three Eastern teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Trying to understand the "one mind with two gates" by means of Kant's system does not work; it must be through the Chinese tradition. This is why I say that if you want to get a handle on what China has been doing for thousands of years, you must delve deeply into the mainline of its cultural life. Thoroughly immersing yourself is the only way to understand its strengths; otherwise "cultural life" is just an empty phrase.*

*First we thoroughly understand China's mind-only system, and then based on the wisdom of that system, we digest Kant. For Kant's cannot be called a true mind-only theory, only a transcendental idealism, which implies that it is negative. What is positive in Kant is his empirical realism, which is limited to the phenomenal world, the empirical world. Concerning this, please see my book **Phenomenon and Thing-in-Itself**. The thing for us to do, then, is to take Kant's*

*transcendental idealism and his empirical realism and, building on Chinese wisdom, turn it into a two-tiered ontology, of "attached ontology" and "non-attached ontology." "Attached ontology" is that of the cognitive mind (**shixin** 識心). A "non-attached ontology" is that of the wisdom mind (**zhixin** 智心), and it is this which is a true mind-only theory. Mind-only theory emerges from "non-attached ontology," and it is something that cannot come out of Western philosophy. The mind-only theory that emerges from non-attached ontology can also be called thorough-going realism (**shizai lun** 實在論).*

[If you can see why this line of thinking makes Mou Zongsan — despite his very different topical concerns — a Chinese Mises (at the level of abstract metaphysics), you've earned a patronizing *Outside in* pat on the head.]

ADDED: This discussion of intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*), despite going completely off the rails at the end, supplies some valuable historical context.

ADDED: More Mou.

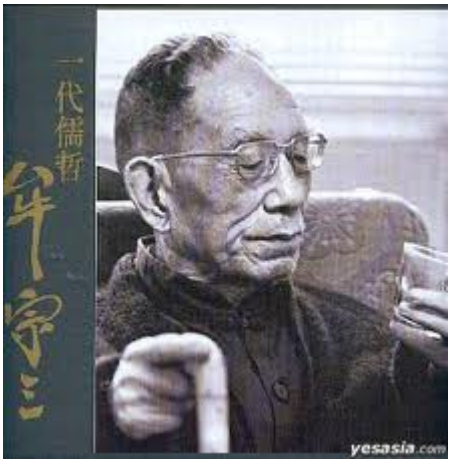
ADDED: Jason Clower's book on Mou and Buddhism, discussed Buddhistically. Clower's introduction to Mou at the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Mou at UF.

September 17, 2013

Cultural Restoration and Mou Zongsan

After a difficult half millennium, China's place in the world is adjusting back towards its longer term norm, at a speed that continues to disconcert even the most diligent observers. With this positive correction comes an inevitable 'spirit' of revival, extending from the level of unreflective mood, through partially articulate attitudes, to the loftiest peaks of systematic cultural restoration. As this wave of revitalization intensifies, and refines itself, it becomes increasingly involved in a re-thinking of Confucianism and its historical meaning.

The philosopher most indispensable to this process is Mou Zongsan (1909-1995), the most brilliant of China's New Confucians, setting the standards of intellectual rigor and audacity for the country's third-wave of Confucian inspiration, following those of the Pre-Qin and Song-Ming periods. Describing the Confucian tradition as the "main artery" of Chinese culture, responsible not only for its own perpetuation and renewal, but also for the safe-keeping of the country's Daoist and Buddhist traditions, Mou considered its renaissance a "necessity". It not only should, but would return, assuming only that Chinese culture has a future. It is due to this indestructible confidence that Mou's own name is inextricably bound to the wider prospects of Chinese national recovery.



Mou recognizes that the Confucian tradition is more than an arbitrary ethnic peculiarity, to be retained out of some extrinsic commitment to cultural preservation. Rather, the task of cultural restoration is inherent to it, as a core feature, from the time of Confucius:

How did Confucius view the Zhou culture? His attitude was positive, ritual being always necessary. Whatever the period, a society will always need ritual. Confucius believed that the rituals instituted by the Duke of Zhou were in his time still useful. Of course they could be contracted or expanded with prudence but you ought not to radically overturn them. So his attitude was positive. However, it was through his re-vitalization of the Zhou rites that he came to develop what is called Confucian thought. For it was not that the Zhou rituals were without objective validity because of intrinsic flaws, but rather that they had lost effectiveness because the nobles were corrupt and degenerate and unable to carry the weight of the

ritual and music. Corruption undermined their ability to uphold these rituals, and if they could not practice them, would not the Zhou rituals then become empty? Because they became empty, they became mere form, became so-called formalism. The Mohists and Daoists looked upon them as mere form and thus wanted to negate them. Confucius knew that the corruption of the nobility made the Zhou ritual empty, but he wanted to re-vitalize it. The Confucian attitude was that to make the Zhou ritual valid, it had to be first revivified.

Confucianism has undoubtedly undergone periods of victimization, but it cannot afford to retreat into victimage, because it has inalienable responsibility not only for its own restoration, but for Chinese cultural restoration in general. This argument can be extended still further, since Mou contends that even Western philosophy depends (unknowingly) upon the revitalization of China's Confucian tradition for the re-awakening of its ultimate possibilities — as epitomized by the undeveloped potential of the Kantian system, to supply a practical path into the cryptic realms of the *noumenon* (following the thread of 'intellectual intuition'). The world-historical destiny of philosophy, and the self-restoration of Confucianism, were conceived by Mou as a single cultural necessity.

Urban Future has no doubt that over the course of proceeding decades Mou Zongsan's international reputation will be immensely enhanced, as he is recognized — in Jason Clower's words — as "a

philosopher of the first rank" with the intellectual stature of a Heidegger or Wittgenstein. It is thrilling to witness such a figure at the stage of early ascent, extracted from relative obscurity and projected into global consciousness as a cultural treasure of inestimable value.

For English readers, Clower's contribution to the discovery of Mou Zongsan deserves special mention. He has already released a book on Mou and Buddhism, with an edited collection of Mou's writings forthcoming (*Late Works of Mou Zongsan: Selected Essays in Chinese Philosophy*). As China's cultural restoration unfolds, and Mou's star rises, these volumes will eventually find their way onto a million bookshelves, as invaluable guides to a new world, and an old one.

(See also Clower's introduction to Mou at the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.)

September 18, 2013

Exploration of the Outside

Mou Zongsan opens a gate into the Chinese cultural interior by unswervingly directing his work at its most radically indigenous characteristics, uncompromised by ulterior elements, and therefore undistracted by any seductions of otherness or exoticism that fall

short of its inherent destination — connection with the absolute Outside. That alone is authentically Chinese, Mou insists, which originates and culminates in the Way (道), cultivating an unsegregated mutual involvement of thought and being which corresponds closely to the Occidental philosophical concept of *intellectual intuition*. Whether approached through the Daoist, Buddhist, or Confucian strains of the Chinese cultural complex, the consistent ethnic characteristic is an interior path to exterior reality, continuous with the way of 'heaven' (天), or cosmic necessity. The inner voyage is the way out, but more importantly — for the Confucian current at least — it is the way to let the Outside in, making culture a conduit for the cultivation of the world.

From Mou Zongsan's summit of philosophical intensity, therefore, no true boundary can be drawn between a project marked by extreme cultural 'nationalism' and an ontologically-grounded cosmopolitanism, or between a diligent restoration of tradition and a venture beyond the horizon of time. The inward path reaches out (as it fuses with the tendrils of Outsideness, which reach in).

In his essay on the Meeting at Goose Lake, Mou seeks to explain the singularity of the Chinese tradition in terms intelligible to Western philosophy:

… Kant attached only a negative meaning to noumena. Applied to Kant's philosophy, "one mind with two gates" refers to phenomena and noumena. But it must be understood in Chinese terms, through

the mainline cultural spirit of the three Eastern teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Trying to understand the "one mind with two gates" by means of Kant's system does not work; it must be through the Chinese tradition. This is why I say that if you want to get a handle on what China has been doing for thousands of years, you must delve deeply into the mainline of its cultural life. Thoroughly immersing yourself is the only way to understand its strengths; otherwise "cultural life" is just an empty phrase.

Metaphysical traditionalism attains extroversion through introversion, so that its "perfect teaching" is announced as a culmination of paradox. It is only at the limit of psychological and cultural inwardness that the gate of deep connection is opened, enabling cultural encounters in profundity, rather than a confusion of comparisons, facile commonalities and contrasts. Chinese and Western philosophy meet at the summit, and through the Outside, whose brink each discovers on its own distinctive path.

The paradoxical signs of the 'perfect teaching' guide Mou's restoration of Chinese intellectual tradition, as it homes — or strays — to the root of acceptance *and* correction. In order *to turn Confucianism into itself*, he cultivates (discovers / invents) a third strand of orthodoxy upon which to train the luxuriant but disordered growth of Cheng-Zhu *lixue* and Lu-Wang *xinxue*: a lineage passing through the comparatively obscure figures of Hu Wufeng (or Hu Hong) and Liu Jishan (or Liu Zongzhou). It is this third thread of the

tradition, he contends, that most fully develops the essential intellectual content of Confucianism, making it the true inheritor of the Northern Song *ruxue* legacy (Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, and Cheng Mingda), which is itself the uncontested conveyor of the ancient canon. It alone consistently refuses the delusive separation of intelligence from the Way, and thus preserves the understanding of human conduct as cosmic self-realization. Within the (correctable) Lu-Wang line, this insight tends to slide into eclipse, but on the mainstream Cheng-Zhu line the slippage has become an assertive deviation — hardened into "fundamental error".

Mou's metaphysical traditionalism coaxes Chinese intellectual history into an *immanent correction*, through which its proper inwardness is reinforced as a resilient — or fusional — connection to the Outside. What is most its own is spiral immersion within the Way, where the second gate opens.

October 30, 2013

The Great Convergence

Every great philosopher has a single thought, Martin Heidegger asserted. However questionable this claim might be, it applies without qualification to Mou Zongsan, China's greatest modern philosopher (and perhaps also the world's).

While the breadth of Mou's scholarship is intimidating, it was made possible only by conformity to a methodical life-long study schedule, organized by a single idea. His *one thought*, which he translated into the language of Western Philosophy as 'intellectual intuition' (*νοῦς*, *intellektuelle Anschauung*), integrates not only his own thinking, but also — he consistently maintains — the entire Chinese philosophical tradition, of which it is the cap-stone, or guiding thread. Each of China's three teachings (三教), Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist, tends to a principle of intellectual intuition in which it finds consummation as a "perfect teaching" and through which it adheres by inner necessity (rather than extrinsic cultural and historical accident) to the integral Chinese canon.

If any single concept has a density of significance sufficient to define the essence of a vast and highly-ramified world culture, it can be expected to resist casual comprehension. To understand it, as Mou painstakingly demonstrates, is not a preparatory step to thinking within the tradition, but the ultimate cultural task posed by the tradition, in each of its main constitutive strands. If Chinese culture shares an initiatory insight, it is not a readily concluded *realization*, but an integrative *aspiration*, which orients its various parts towards the same destination, or final achievement. Cognitive resolution is subordinated to practical development, through self-cultivation.

In the West, intellectual intuition is notoriously a *difficult*

concept, to such an extent that it is widely dismissed as an example of philosophical extravagance, beyond all possibility of rigorous formulation, or theoretical use. Designating the direct self-apprehension of intelligence, it was associated from the earliest times with the process of divine mind. Aristotle's God, whose self-contemplative thought is the turning of the highest action upon the highest object, epitomized the notion.

Kant determined intellectual intuition to lie beyond any possible human understanding, strictly exiling it to the outer sphere of divine intelligences. Henceforth, appeals to the concept would be the mark of romantic or 'mystical' philosophical undertakings (represented primarily by the thinkers of German 'Objective Idealism' and those influenced by them). As techno-scientific rationality incrementally supplanted speculative metaphysics, and divinities shriveled to implausible hypotheses, the significance of intellectual intuition contracted towards a vanishing point — whether discreditable eccentricity, or historical curiosity. In Mou Zongsan's terms, Western philosophy, in keeping with its own cultural fatality, had become almost perfectly non-Chinese.

The 'Great Divergence' familiar from discussions of world economic history, therefore, had a rigorously-determinable high-cultural counterpart, which explains why, when East and West experienced their hard encounter within modernity, they would be bound together through profound mutual estrangement. The idea

identified by Mou Zongsan as the basic principle of Oriental Intelligence, through which — alone — Chinese culture makes sense, had been shelved by the Occident centuries before, as an oddity of speculative theology, and now lay buried in dust, barely recollected, let alone even tentatively understood.

If the idea of directly self-apprehending intelligence were to remain the preserve of 19th century German metaphysics, it is scarcely imaginable that the gulf between East and West — as Mou Zongsan understands it — could ever be more than tenuously bridged. Either the East would remain entirely inscrutable to all West, excepting only a cultural fringe of Orientalists, devoted to the pursuit of radical exoticism, or the East would depart fundamentally from its own cultural path, Westernizing itself until commensurable thinking was reached. Both of these prospects were explicitly deplored in the influential text "A Manifesto for a Re-appraisal of Sinology and Reconstruction of Chinese Culture" (为中国文化敬告世界人士宣言), signed by Mou Zongsan and three other 'New Confucian' students of Xiong Shili (Zhang Junmai, Tang Junyi, and Xu Fuguan), originally published in 1958.

That the tide of the economic and geostrategic Great Divergence turned in the final decades of the last century is a matter of indisputable fact, confirmed by a deluge of quantitative performance indicators. The cultural aspect of this reversal is necessarily more complicated, and contentious. In the West, there are no doubt very

many who would account for the transition in terms of Chinese Westernization, beginning with the adoption of European 'scientific socialism' in the late 1940s, and maturing through liberalization — or economic-technological globalization — until reaching the moon.

A very different narrative, and one in which the emerging status of Mou Zongsan could be far more positively limned — would adhere tightly to the problem of intellectual intuition, or self-apprehending intelligence. The most significant reference would be I J Good, and his path-breaking essay 'Speculations Concerning the First Ultraintelligent Machine', composed in the early 1960s and first published in 1965. In this paper, Good writes:

Let an ultraintelligent machine be defined as a machine that can far surpass all the intellectual activities of any man however clever. Since the design of machines is one of these intellectual activities, an ultra-intelligent machine could design even better machines; there would then unquestionably be an "intelligence explosion," and the intelligence of man would be left far behind … Thus the first ultraintelligent machine is the last invention that man need ever make, provided that the machine is docile enough to tell us how to keep it under control. It is curious that this point is made so seldom outside of science fiction. It is sometimes worthwhile to take science fiction seriously.

The techno-scientific horizon is described by a reflexive intelligence, practically apprehending itself, and in doing so marking

the final human purpose. This is quite evidently 'intellectual intuition' as it emerges at the outer-edge of modernity, rather than among the jumbled curiosities of its philosophical ancestry. If it corresponds to the Chinese cultural core — as Mou Zongsan doggedly maintains — it is as an anticipated destination, rather than an abandoned legacy. Advanced modernization heads *towards it*.

While, superficially, the tale of Chinese modernity might be construed as the replacement of Confucius by robotics, careful attention to the problem of intellectual intuition suggests something very different. Self-cultivation *or* self-improving intelligence — what sort of choice is that?

December 3, 2013

Legalism

The real core of the Chinese tradition?

***Chinese Friend**: Nobody in this country believes in anything anymore.*
***Foreign Devil**: So what do you think they should believe in?*
***Chinese Friend**: Unless people are punished more severely, they won't behave themselves.*

February 15, 2015