

‘The only constant in life is change’

Of course, but is it always for the better?



SAYEED AHMED

The nations that once took pride in leading the human civilisation have all shrunk to become Lilliputs of the Gulliver's Travels. Their bodies remain big but the hearts and minds have given in to narrow and abrasive nationalism.

ON November 29, 2019, *The Daily Star* announced the demise of its Star Weekend magazine and the birth of Toggle, quoting Heraclitus as a justification, but without giving him due credit.

It was Heraclitus of Ephesus (c.535-475 BCE), a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, who said “Panta rhei”, or “everything flows”, meaning everything or all things change. This is regularly explained in everyday English, for the benefit of the common people like us, as “the only constant in life is change”.

So, change is inevitable. But are all changes for the better?

The last few decades have witnessed massive changes in the world we live in. Science and technology have taken giant leaps that have surpassed all developments made since the start of civilisation, by a large margin. The world has transformed from being bipolar to unipolar, then quickly to multipolar. War has been privatised by the presence of so many terrorist outfits that we have lost track of who is affiliated to whom and who is real and who is perceived. News has become divided into two types: real and fake. As it appears, even photographs and videos can be faked to an extent that only experts can tell them apart. A group of people as far as in the Middle East or Afghanistan can be killed with a mere video game-like software in Pentagon! With no accountability.

The United States of America has abandoned its role as the “leader of the free world”. Instead, it has made “America only” its official policy in every sector: trade, foreign policy, science and technology, military, environment, etc. They have been doing this all along but, before, there was a veneer of modern liberal values to hide it. But this is no longer the case.

The United Kingdom, despite being a nation that led the world in the industrial revolution and



produced a long line of great thinkers, scientists, leaders, philosophers, writers and economists, has decided to abandon the rest of Europe and tow along the isolationist line of the USA. They were for a long time considered a junior partner of their richer cousin, but now they have decided to throw away the façade of Europeaness as an official policy. Seeing this, William Shakespeare would have written an excellent piece of comedy, or Adam Smith a new edition of his “Wealth of Nations”, had they been alive today.

The nations that once took pride in leading the human civilisation have all shrunk to become Lilliputs of the “Gulliver's Travels”. Their bodies remain big but the hearts and minds have given in to narrow and abrasive nationalism, so much so that they can't even tolerate a little difference of opinion or another faith, culture or ethnicity, let alone dissidence. Where are we heading, really!?

India is a lucky nation. Its sages gave them a

strong guiding principle many centuries ago, a privilege enjoyed by only a few nations of the world. But that was an India of diversity and tolerance. Rigveda, an ancient Indian sacred canonical text of Hinduism, written somewhere between 1500 and 1200 BC, states, “Let there be oneness in your resolutions, hearts and minds; let the determination to live with mutual cooperation be firm in you all.” While the Indian sub-continent is still reeling from the shock and horror of its partition and paying the price, the supposed safekeepers of Hinduism have decided to abandon the core of its ancient values and constitutional obligation, and reopened the wounds of 1947. This is another change, with potentially disastrous consequences.

China is almost as old as the history of civilisation itself. Emperor Qin Shi Huang unified all of China and founded a modern state with legal systems, scientific standards and a centralised

bureaucracy. The 2008 Summer Olympics opening ceremony comprised two parts titled “Brilliant Civilisation” highlighting the Chinese civilisation and “Glorious Era” showcasing modern China and its dream of harmony between the people of the world. The Chinese dream of harmony, however, is now mired in controversy, with many observers pointing out the heavy-handedness of its dealing with smaller nations and its own minorities.

We never learn from history, and that is also a lesson of history. Throughout the history of mankind, great nations usually followed some sort of openness and inclusiveness in their policy, and their downfall almost always coincided with the abandonment of those policies. A notable example of this is the fall of the Arabs in the Iberian Peninsula, when they were wiped out by the conquistadors of Spain during the 15th century.

The world seems to have forgotten that violent nationalism and religious intolerance in one country are likely to stoke up a similar environment of hatred and intolerance in other countries as well, with no apparent connection with the source country. Neil Thompson wrote in a column for *The Diplomat* about how extremists in Asia are feeding off each other's unrelated conflicts (“Terrorism in Asia: The Global Village Effect”, August 1, 2018). While nations are drifting apart with their own narrow agenda, terrorist outfits are taking advantage of that, uniting in their efforts to undermine people's freedom and the right to live.

But there is hope. In a wider interpretation, “Panta rhei” means “the way up and the way down are one and the same. Living and dead, waking and sleeping, young and old, are the same.” These things are the “same” in that they are all subject to change, arise from one change to vanish into another and all things, constantly, are in flux and are, in that regard, the same. Will Toggle again change into something better? Let's hope so.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

Dystopia is Arriving in Stages



ALEXANDER FRIEDMAN

IT is commonly believed that the future of humanity will one day be threatened by the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), perhaps embodied in malevolent robots. Yet as we enter the third decade of the millennium, it is not the singularity we should fear, but rather a much older enemy: ourselves.

Think less *The Terminator*, more *Minority Report*.

We are rapidly developing literal mind-reading technology without any framework for how to control it. Imagine, for a moment, if human beings had evolved to be able to read each other's minds. How would that have gone for us?

To answer this question, consider your own internal dialogues. It is safe to assume that every one of us has had thoughts that would be shocking even (or especially) to those closest to us. How would those who might not wish us well have reacted to being able to hear what emotional rants go through our heads from time to time? Would they have had the judgment to let them pass, recognising them as just flashes of emotion? Or would some have responded opportunistically, taking advantage of thoughts we would otherwise not wish to betray?

Evolution did not enable us to read minds because that power might have ended our existence as a species. Instead, as our ancient ancestors organised into groups for protection, most of us learned what could be said and what was best left unspoken. Over

time, this became a highly evolved human trait that enabled societies to form, cities to rise, and even hundreds of stressed out people to be jammed into a flying tube, usually without attacking their seat-mates. It forms a core part of what we now call EQ, or emotional intelligence.

And yet technology is now beginning to threaten this necessary evolutionary adaptation in a fundamental way.

The first stage has taken place in social media. Facebook underscored this trajectory, when Russian manipulation of the platform affected the United States' presidential election in 2016. And Twitter, which empowers a user to dash off a passing thought or emotion that might then be shared with millions, amplifies this trend. Imagine how North Korean leaders struggled to interpret President Donald Trump's tweet of nuclear “fire and fury.” Was it a real threat from a new and erratic US leader, or just a spur-of-the-moment exhalation, a mental flash without a filter that would best be ignored? Back in the days of the bipolar superpower world, the iconic US-Soviet hotline phone was installed as a way to clarify each side's intentions, lest through some misunderstanding the world might otherwise disappear beneath a nuclear mushroom cloud.

Today, in our much more complicated multipolar and asymmetric-threat-driven world, social media offers all who are willing a giant, unedited megaphone. Social media has become a tool that can undermine democracy; and yet it is mere child's play compared to what is now barreling our way.

Companies ranging from start-ups to multinational conglomerates have recently announced startling



Consider the myriad of thorny ethical, legal, and social-order implications of a policeman stopping a crime before it takes place because he or she could “assess” an individual's likely intent by reading their brainwaves.

PHOTO: REUTERS

innovations that enable mind reading. Elon Musk's company Neuralink is seeking approval for human trials of a device implanted in users' brains to read their minds. Nissan has developed “Brain-to-Vehicle” technology that enables a car to read instructions from a driver's mind. Facebook has funded scientists that use brainwaves to decode speech. A recent paper in the science journal *Nature* explains how AI can create speech by analysing brain signals. Researchers at Columbia University have developed technology that can analyse brain activity to determine what a user wants and vocalise those desires via a synthesiser.

Clearly, these kinds of advances can offer real benefits, including helping

those suffering from paralysis or neurological disorders. Early examples of neuroprosthetics, such as cochlear implants, which enable a deaf person to hear, or promising devices that could allow the blind to see, are already in use.

But there are also darker potential applications, like enabling advertisers to micro-hone their offerings to individuals' unspoken desires, or employers to spy on their workers, or police to monitor citizens' possible criminal intent on a vast scale, akin to the way London residents today are tracked on CCTV. An early warning is ToTok, one of the most downloaded social-media apps, which, it was recently revealed, the United Arab Emirates government had been using to spy on users. And what happens if mind-

reading devices are hacked? It is difficult to imagine a more relevant area of data privacy than that which exists in the human brain.

Musk believes that brain interfaces will be necessary for humans to keep up with AI. This brings us back to Philip K Dick's science-fiction horror story “The Minority Report” (the basis of the 2002 film). Consider the myriad of thorny ethical, legal, and social-order implications of a policeman stopping a crime before it takes place because he or she could “assess” an individual's likely intent by reading their brainwaves. When is a crime committed? When the thought takes place? When actions begin that manifest the thought in reality? When the gun is pointed? When the trigger finger tightens?

A principal challenge of technological innovation is that it usually takes society a long time to catch up, understand the broader implications of how the new technology can be used and abused, and provide appropriate legal and regulatory frameworks to regulate its conduct.

In the second decade of this millennium, social media moved from a tool to connect to a platform with immense power to spread lies and manipulate elections. Society is now grappling with how to harness the best of this innovation, while mitigating its potential for abuse. Perhaps, before we have even figured that out, the third decade of the millennium will confront us with far more consequential technological challenges.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Atlantic catches
5 Elizabethan barmaid
10 Similar
12 Honolulu hello
13 Race ends
15 Holiday lead-in
16 Parrot or puppy
17 Manx, for one
18 Belgrade's nation
20 Aspiration
21 Did shoe work
22 "That's my cue!"
23 Small body of land
25 Danson and Nugent
28 Pop stars
31 Regrets

32 Right angle's degrees
34 Play division
35 Pres. day mo.
36 Verb for you
37 Revue groups
40 More loyal
41 Lauder of cosmetics
42 Feudal workers
43 Young ones

DOWN
1 Casual eateries
2 Relish-tray items
3 Moolah
4 Enjoy the slopes
5 Poet Whitman
6 Yale student
7 Sergeant, for one

8 Low-quality, in slang
9 Hurry up
11 Spots
14 Frontpage items
19 Total happiness
20 Think up
24 Like some mushrooms
25 Plots of land
26 Trick-taking card game
27 Redirected route
29 Crude shed
30 Parade site
33 Agreeable answers
35 Trappers' wares
38 Game caller
39 Supporter

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

L	A	T	E	P	I	L	E	D
A	G	R	A	A	D	A	G	E
B	O	A	R	R	E	M	O	V
E	R	I	T	R	E	A	T	I
L	A	T	H	E	R	S	R	A
P	D	A	S	B	I	T	E	
S	E	P	A	L	P	I	P	E
C	L	A	Y	P	A	R	A	T
H	A	T	C	O	N	T	A	C
E	T	E	H	I	G	H	B	A
M	I	L	T	O	N	D	I	R
E	N	L	I	S	T	A	D	O
G	A	P	E	S	Y	E	N	S

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

JANUARY 12, 2010
Haiti severely damaged by earthquake

On this day in 2010, a magnitude-7.0 earthquake devastated Haiti, especially Port-au-Prince, killing more than 200,000 people and leaving more than one million homeless and touching off a massive international relief effort.

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