

Call of the Wild Instinct

Are we doomed to 'live in interesting times' (Chinese curse)?

The panic notes that suppressed the proverbial nonchalant attitude of the Davos forum mainstays troubled the grace year of 2019 already in January. This posh and a bit snobby get-together of heavyweight politicians, financial moguls, captains and colonels of industry, high-tech corporate wizards and articulate pundits once again attempted to pull wool over the eyes of the unsophisticated headlines swallows. This time, however, the odds were against the Davos show of complacency.

There were hardly any visible displays of self-righteousness and beefed up artificial optimism. No blarney or bragging. No pretense of knowing why the global trade and economy are in grips of resurged protectionism. Or why relationships between nations are perfidiously distorted by convulses of national egoism. And, more importantly, how these negative developments correlate with the forceful dismantling of international law pillars, including the Paris agreement on climate change, denigration of transnational institutions like the UN, WTO, EU, NATO, etc. and rejection *cum* humiliation of moral principles in foreign policy.

In contrast, the wrongfully termed “populist” movements on the left and the right side of the spectrum know for certain that the political and economic elites running modern societies, as it was spelled out by John F. Harris from POLITICO in his dispatch from the Swiss reclusive resort, “...know what they are doing. What they are doing is often bad - greedy, exploitative, short-sighted...”

Despite distancing himself from the “populists”, Harris admits: “...in key Western capitals, governance is failing” while “prospects for economic downturn are rumbling.” The verdict passed by this onlooker is telling: “Little wonder that, instead of triumphant optimism about the forces of globalization sometimes associated with Davos, some voices here made it sound like modern life is on a toboggan ride to hell.”

To back up this unnerving observation, Harris quotes Tiger Tyagarajan, CEO of professional services firm Genpact, who described the mood of the high-flown gathering as “more somber.” The CEO with a reference to uncertainty due to political factors made another symbolic admission: “I don’t think that any of them [Davos attendees like himself] are masters of their destinies; I don’t think they control their own situations.”

There was another emblematic hallmark of Davos-2019: the immense popularity of a discussion at Davos spearheaded by Yale University professors who though it expedient, and were correct in their assumption, to advise the assembly of the rulers of earth’s realm on such an intricate subject as managing stress and “the neuroscience of happiness.”

Next month, in February, the highly intellectual German daily Handelsblatt, referring to the results of the traditional three-day 53rd edition of the Munich Security Conference, noted the growing awareness of the new abnormalities turned dire realities. Amid heightened competition for welfare and zone of influence, Europe has no longer allies since the US under Trump views Europe as an opponent, not as a partner, Handelsblatt opined, not without any justification for such a verdict.

The German newspaper quoted an unnamed source close to decision-making bodies in Washington who made no bones about the allegedly hidden agenda behind Trump's harsh rhetoric towards the Europeans: "Trump hates you. He hates you more than he hates the Chinese."

Similar disturbing revelations already created a diplomatic and conceptual havoc in the shaping of trans-Atlantic long-term strategies for the Europeans. Some still prefer to treat recent developments pushing towards gradual disengagement of the two pillars of the "Collective West" as an aberration. Regrettable but temporary retreat. Some assess the unfriendly moves by Trump, the self-proclaimed "nationalist", as a turning point.

"The U.S. will not simply be seen as an uncertain ally, but it would cease to be seen as an ally," Francois Heisbourg, senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Paris, claimed. "That's the risk."

Dramatic overtones crown predictions of some even more skeptical observers. For instance, Jorg Lau, Foreign Editor of another influential German daily, Die Zeit, takes a truly pessimistic view of the recent twists and curves in the US foreign policy. "Who says that Trump is the end?" Lau questions and provides an answer: "He could be the beginning."

Anger with a capital A

Definitely, Herr Lau has a point. The tidal wave that swept Trump to the top was triggered off by deep, basic, fundamental dysfunctionality of the American economic and social model. David Maraniss and Robert Samuels made a remarkable observation in their piece published in The Washington Post on March 17, 2016, having discovered "so much anger out there in America." The two of them frankly detailed what exactly they meant:

"Anger at Wall Street... Anger at Muslims... Anger at trade deals... Anger at Washington... Anger at police shootings of young black men... Anger at President Obama... Anger at Republican obstructionists... Anger about political correctness... Anger about the role of big money in campaigns... Anger about the poisoned water of Flint, Michigan... Anger about deportations... Anger about undocumented immigrants... Anger about a career that didn't go as expected... Anger about a lost way of life... Specific anger and undefined anger, and even anger about anger..."

Probably, this is in no way extraordinary, weird or bizarre. Not only for the United States but also for the overwhelming majority of countries around the globe. Some old-timers might even sagely remark, "It was always thus" and play down the alarmistic fidgeting of ultra-sensitive personalities.

Yet, a study by Lloyds Insurers dated the same year as the publication in Wash Post established a worrying trend gaining momentum since 1960. The publication revealed an increasing frequency in "pandemics" of "political violence contagion" taking form of regional and transnational outbreaks of civil unrest within and among states. Militarization of domestic and foreign policies coupled with "neoliberal austerity at home" could well provoke "contagions" of violence, the report claimed.

Three years down the road, there are hardly any soothing and consoling trends while Anger with a capital A is steadily going one level up in most regions and states. To find prove it is sufficient to

scan through the headlines in national dailies from Detroit to Caracas, from Islamabad to New Delhi, from Lagos to Kabul, from Paris to Warsaw, etc.

A witty person sardonically summed up the simplistic views of the outside world nurtured by the Hollywood-groomed US President Ronald Reagan; it is “us versus them”. Regrettably, the black-and-white schematization and selective stigmatization of ‘foreigners’, ‘aliens’, and ‘others’ have come into the vogue for those who do politics from a position of power. The call of the wild or rather the call of the wild instinct is becoming the unspoken motivation of the decision-makers and influencers.

Disintegration. Name of Doomsday Game?

Things will never be the same. As always. But this time the fast and jerky evolution of the societies we live in and the global politics we play with is highly likely to happen in a most brutal and unsavory manner.

The 2008 subprime mortgage crunch in the United States turned out to be an iceberg. It capsized revealing the plethora of accumulated structural deficiencies that have defused and contaminated the tissue and texture of the neoliberal market. With the fundamentals of the market economy and liberal world order not stirred but shaken, uncertainties multiply.

In the previous decades of relatively sustainable growth, the everlasting disparity between the rich and the poor were overcome “by distributing a bit of the gains of the tremendous increase of the fruits of the global division of labour to the richer working classes in these nations,” opined Professor Gerhard Hanappi.

The new would-be prophet interprets the recent developments inside nations and in international affairs as solid proof of his assumption that Western world is getting engulfed in the whirlwind of “disintegrating capitalism” and precipitating into the twilight zone of multiplied conflicts.

Professor Hanappi is no academic freak with a taste for doomsday sensationalism. He is Jean Monnet Chair for Political Economy of European Integration at the Institute for Mathematical Models in Economics at the Vienna University of Technology. On top of it, professor Hannapi is member of the management committee of the Systemic Risks expert group in the European Cooperation in Science and Technology research network, another think-tank funded by the European Union.

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Professor Hannapi points out to the double risk we all face. Firstly, the overwhelmingly financialized free market system no longer supports an adequate prosperity distribution. This immediately resulted in the thinning out of the middle class, deterioration of the well-being of the working class,

and concentration of wealth in the hands of the selected few. Inevitably, it erodes the silent “social contract” and challenges internal stability.

Secondly, competition and rivalry on the global arena used to be regulated by a multi-layer and multi-functional agreements based on delicately balanced national interests of state actors. No longer the case. As professor Hannapi concludes, “formerly sacrosanct international trade agreements are being torn to shreds. This has fueled a reversion to nationalism in which global and transnational structures have been rejected, and ‘foreigners’ have been demonized.”

All in all, several key factors defined by Hannapi have put the brave old world “on a slippery slope to a global war”, as phrased by Dr. Nafeez Ahmed, founding editor of investigative journalism project INSURGE intelligence. These are the factors leading to Apocalypses: the inexorable growth of military spending; democracies transitioning into increasingly authoritarian police states; heightening geopolitical tensions between great powers; the resurgence of populism across the left and right; the breakdown and weakening of established global institutions that govern transnational capitalism; and the relentless widening of global inequalities.

The dreary and dismal forecast Hanappi makes amounts to three possible scenarios of the looming conflicts. The first scenario deals with the clash between three formidable military powers, the US, China and Russia. Referring to an unidentified estimation, in case of an all-out war China has the highest probability of survival at 52%, followed by the US at 30%, and Russia at 18%. Ergo, China could be regarded as the “most inclined to escalate direct hostile military activities that challenge its rivals”, as Dr. Nafeez Ahmed transcribes Prof. Hanappi’s conclusions.

If you stretch this logic just on inch further, one might get the impression that Chinese leadership could be infected with the illusion of being capable of ‘winning’ a global war, even if it acquires nuclear overtones. The assumption sounds and looks highly improbable but nevertheless scary. At least, China has been careful not to appear taking a belligerent posture and would reiterate each time that the nation with roots in the 5,000 year old civilizational hearth is a nation of *status quo* and not a trouble-shooter.

The second scenario of “small civil wars in many countries” is even scarier since it is less hypothetical being supported by the high and low intensity conflicts within failed states and troubled societies. Libya and Syria could serve as an explicit example but they only top the list.

The other daredevil supposition by professor Hanappi within the framework of “small civil wars” is more intriguing than outwardly frightening. He argues there is a potential for outbreaks of national civil war between emerging paramilitary branches of right-wing and left-wing populist movements. Is it a tacit and covert reference to the “cultural wars” in the United States? After all, there is suspicion that it is a projection of the rise to prominence of both the Alt-right and the Alt-left fundamentalists.

The third scenario is drawn by professor Hanappi around the continuing for the last three decades and surging inadequacies in the distribution of income and wealth. The accumulating wrath of the destitute and depressed masses, and we are talking about three billion people - almost half of the earth’s population, amounts to a transboundary explosive potential.

Dr. Nafeez Ahmed reminds us that the 2016 study by Lloyds Insurers also professed a series of

“super strain pandemics” in the form of “anti-imperialist” and “independence movements”, “mass pro-reform protests against national government”, and “armed insurrection” or “insurgency” associated with two particular ideologies, “Marxism” and “Islamism.”

Are these schematic extrapolations of today’s abnormalities groundless or, on the contrary, quite plausible in mid-term? Are we blindly playing a doomsday game in geopolitics and neglecting the urgency to manage the accelerating decline of the ‘free’ globalized marketplace and disintegration of the pillars of the liberal world order? In any case, the most worrying prophesy made by professor Hanappi is that a combination of his three scenarios is a more likely to occur than just one of them.

Destination “Uninhabitable Earth”

Symptomatically, the concept “disintegrating capitalism”, which is propelled by professor Hanappi, resonates with the interpretation of the “back loop”, a phase of systemic decline of the old and older order, as it is spelled out by American geographer Dr. Stephanie Wakefield.

This scholar is no less captivated by the radical metamorphosis of today’s nonlinear ‘post-truth’ world of fragmentation, while coming up with the notion that exacerbated environmental crises are somewhat correlated, although not necessarily synchronized, with all types of disruptions, fractures and transfiguration in the political and geopolitical dimensions.

Here is the final conclusion Dr. Wakefield arrived at: “The list of anthropogenic-induced tipping points crossed or neared grows: fisheries collapse; biodiversity loss; the melting of the ice caps and rising seas; 350 ppm and now 400 ppm CO₂; anthropogenic nitrogen inputs; ocean acidification and coral reef bleaching; deforestation... But equally and together with these processes, since 2011 we are also in an era of riots, revolutions, local experiments and social movements from left to right that, to the front loop mind, may look insane, but that are very real.”

The aggregated weight of the ecological stress on the planet is no longer underestimated. The dreadful warning penned by David Wallace-Wells in his book “The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming” makes all other predictions pale in comparison of what sad lot awaits us.

“The earth has experienced five mass extinctions before the one we are living through now,  each so complete a wiping of the fossil record that it functioned as an evolutionary reset, the planet’s phylogenetic tree first expanding, then collapsing, at intervals, like a lung: 86 percent of all species dead, 450 million years ago; 70 million years later, 75 percent; 125 million years later, 96 percent; 50 million years later, 80 percent; 135 million years after that, 75 percent again,” seemingly unpassionately remarks Wallace-Wells. The hideous murderer were not the notorious asteroids. The serial killer was the greenhouse gas.

Some 250 million years ago carbon dioxide “warmed the planet by five degrees Celsius, accelerated when that warming triggered the release of methane, another greenhouse gas, and ended with all but a sliver of life on Earth dead”, writes Wallace-Wells before sounding the alarm bell: “We are currently adding carbon to the atmosphere at a considerably faster rate; by most estimates, at least ten times faster.” Could it be worse?

A certain impressed reviewer of the book under the nick Radiantflux commented on the revelations about the “uninhabitable Earth” in a telling manner: “Wallace-Wells shows in stunning detail just how bad the global neo-liberal consumption=happiness after-party is going to be, and just how soon the lights are going to come on.” Sic!

As for the correlation between climatic collapse and man-made violence suggested by Dr. Wakefield, her sticking out epithet “insane” referred to “riots, revolutions, local experiments...” reflects the deep-seated bewilderment of the academic community, predestined to explain to the ordinary folk “what’s going on» and “what the hell”, and provide consoling solutions. Disappointingly, clear-cut, convincing and “consoling” solutions are in short supply unlike pretentious recommendations, which are usually either simple or complicated, appealing and fundamentally... wrong.

Ideological crusade of capitalism-bashers

Doomsday prophecies were always abundant. Yet, today its renaissance heyday for all sorts of oracles who examine the entrails and tealeaves to foretell the dismal immediate future while lambasting the no less murky present. On 7 January 2019, the arrival of the “smartphone age” and the availability of technological gadgets would invariably produce “a whole new set of geopolitical players”, Ian Bremmer, President of Eurasia Group and GZERO Media, declared. He props up his claim with reference to the still untold true story of the 9/11 tragedy, “where a handful of terrorists were able to change the course of world history by hijacking and crashing planes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.”

Bremmer concludes by saying that “as technology continues to progress, the world will have more and more stakeholders capable of driving geopolitical developments, and many won’t be national governments.” This he finds genuinely worrisome. Verdict: “If you think the geopolitics of 2019 will be chaotic, just wait for 2069.” Notably, Bremmer is the author of a NYT bestseller called “Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism.”

Within this picturesque realm of doomsayers, Umair Haque, alias The Vampire as he terms himself, could be considered as the uncrowned sovereign ruler. He seems to be at the forefront of the unabashed and unapologetic critics of the Old Order. It might be sufficient to uphold Haque’s credentials as the prophet of the already unravelling decline of capitalism in its “neoliberal” phase of decadence to list some of his essays appearing with monotonous regularity on the aggregating platforms in the worldwide web. Here they are, to name a few:

- “Why the World is Going Insane” (April 2018)
- “Why Individualism, Materialism, and Competition Won’t Create the Future” (May 2018)
- “The Origins of America’s Unique and Spectacular Cruelty” (June 2018)
- “American Collapse isn’t Just Economic and Political – It’s Moral and Ethical, Too” (June 2018)
- “How American Collapse is Powered by Modern History’s Most Backwards Ideas” (June 2018)
- “Why the Civilized World Breaking Up With America Was Inevitable” (June 2018)
- “Three Hard Truths About American Collapse” (August 2018)
- “The Spectacular Failure of American Morality” (August 2018)
- “The Ethical Collapse at the End of Predatory Capitalism” (August 2018)

- “Why Predatory Capitalism is Exploding into Fascism, in Every Corner of the Globe” (August 2018)
- “How American Collapse is Becoming American Implosion” (October 2018)
- “America’s Collapsing Into Fascism Because Americans Still Don’t Understand Fascism” (October 2018)
- “How Capitalism Addicted Us to Hate” (October 2018)
- “Six Myths About Capitalism Everyone Should Know” (November 2018)

The dominant message of all these selected 14 diatribes aimed at condemning and vilifying “predatory capitalism”, which is essentially equal to the prevailing Liberal World Order, like it or not, boils down to the admittance: We are nearing the bottom line or the expiry date of the previous economic, social and institutional model. Meaning, the model of governance, societal mechanisms, social contracts’ arrangements and rules of international law regulating inter-state relations.

The self-proclaimed “vampire” deserves to be properly quoted to support his credentials of a credible and no-nonsense critic of the dire realities.

“... beginning in the 1980s, through the 2000s, industries like news, healthcare, media, finance, and so on, were massively deregulated. Nobody seemed to care very much about the central question: but the beneficial nature of these things is vital to the functioning of a working society, and capitalists are hardly likely to police themselves towards that end.”

“Bang! Capitalism implodes into fascism just this way: it shatters democratic values, the foundation of modernity, by feeding people a diet of garbage, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, until they are nothing but fear, spite, venom, rage, whimpering fools who see monsters in little children, and are ready to shoot, imprison, or exterminate them.”

“We might preach kindness and gentleness in church - and even desperately believe it - but the daily reality of American economic, social, and cultural life is that an absolutist, totalizing, atomizing self-interest has prevailed, isn’t it? We’re instructed, maybe indoctrinated, to believe that to be aggressively self-interested is what is good - not just for us, but, strangely, for everyone. Economics teaches it, psychology teaches it, business practices it, culture celebrates it, politics institutionalizes it - America is built on it.”

“People crowdfunding healthcare. “Active shooter drills.” Kids buying bulletproof backpacks. Elderly people who’ll never retire. Young people saddled with life-crippling debt just for getting an education. These are just some of the self-evident failures of morality as aggressive, naked self-interest.”

“Hate of others, hate of the self, hate of the world, hate of the future, hate of truth - on and on, into oblivion. What is it that unifies all this stuff - YouTube algorithms, Twitter, Facebook, Kelly, cable news? Capitalism needs to sell more and more distilled, extreme, ultra-pure forms of hate - the equivalent of crack, meth, and fentanyl - to keep on surviving.”

However, the most troubling prediction by this mind-boggler came out in April 2018. Titled “Why The World is Ripping Itself Apart. Five Ways History’s Repeating Itself”, the prophecy revoke some of the most disturbing analogues in contemporary chronicles of human perfidiousness.

After drawing a causal nexus, starting with stagnation that breeds authoritarianism, then instability,

then hostility, which in turn produces chaos and war, Umar Haque claims that history tends to repeat itself. He suggests that the main culprit who generated “a linked chain, a vicious cycle” were those politicians who chose to rupture the “social contract.” In his parlance, “Broken social contracts produce stagnation”, and this has become evident after the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis triggered off an avalanche of insolvencies.

After concluding, “the greatest financial crisis since the great depression is what ultimately sparked this doom loop”, the self-styled prophet took the liberty and the trouble of retelling the innocent and short-minded readers what actually happened.

“Banks failed, saddled with bad debts, as a result of foolish loans and malinvestments. Societies from America to Britain to Germany chose to “bail them out” in a particularly toxic way - society assumed the debts, and the banks essentially got off scot-free, with no real costs to shareholders, executives, or even their own incomes.”

Basically, the ruling elites chose to protect themselves from the financial crunch at the cost of crippling the societies. They proclaimed “austerity” as the silver bullet for laying to rest the enraged beast of economics mismanagement, which was fully and solely their own deed. It was none other’s but their own sinful sin that forced living standards to dwindle and, taking United States as a sample, life expectancy to decline.

The convincing logic pursued by Umar Haque, unintentionally underpinned by a Marxist reasoning, is worth a full quote:

“Austerity following the last financial crisis produced stagnation, that sparked authoritarianism, which led to instability, that is creating aggressive global hostility. And all that is the story of the 1930s, too. In 1929, a great financial crisis wrecked the globe. Governments responded in exactly the wrong way - cutting investment, wrecking social contracts, raising tariffs. All this caused stagnation, which led to authoritarianism, instability, hostility, and ultimately, world war. We are on the fatal trajectory of the 1930s today - exactly and precisely.”

The regularly drawn historical parallels with the Weimar Republic as the predecessor of the Nazi Germany are customarily twisted to serve a purpose. They are usually overblown and overstated. This time, however, Umar Haque’s analogue is ominously relevant. Instinctively we do feel the current evolution cycle is over, do we not? As a Soviet humorist once put it, “The actual tertiary period of the Cenozoic era is over. Now - intermission.”

‘May you live in interesting times’

Enough scaremongering? Probably, it is enough. The overarching message of a plethora of publications bent on clairvoyance comes out loud and clear.

Time to dispense with the old “modes of thinking” and embrace the ugly unpalatable truth. Like  it or not, the world will never be the same. It might remain round and rotating, with no concessions made to the Flat Earth Society. Yet, symptoms of decay are as obsessive and intrusive as they are omnipresent in the news flow and daily routine. And these symptoms are...

The “disintegrating capitalism”. Cultural, or rather moral truths wars in the USA and in the West, as we know it today. The unstoppable upsurge of religious and ethnic extremism in the lagging behind backward societies, not ready for modernity and discriminated by opponents that are more powerful. The crumbling of previous pillars of stability like family values, spiritual ethics, protective rituals, traditional codes of behavior, etc. The pandemic of DDD - Depression, Dementia and Delirium fuming out anger and hate (remember Umar Haque’s vitriol).

It all points out to the conclusion that we have irrevocably entered the phase of cardinal metamorphoses. The oft-quoted Chinese curse ‘May you live in interesting times’ implies the dramatic downside of any meaningful changes we are destined to go through and possibly survive.

Now that the unsavory realities linked to the neo-liberal order are definitely expiring, complacency is in short supply. There would be no posthumous comfort for anyone. There is a worrying suspicion that the brave old world would not be easy to lay down to rest in peace. It would pass away in a savage and brutal manner. It will fight back to the very end, and most probably, it would become totally and finally extinct only after it is slain, ungraved, bones burnt and ashes cast into the ocean...

Or is it just another fake prophecy?

Vladimir MIKHEEV

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