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Punjab Elections Mark a Watershed for Indian Democracy

Subhash Chandra Pandey

April 4, 2022

A new opposition party in power in Delhi has won its first victory in India's border state of Punjab but may find it a much harder place to govern.

India, the world's largest democracy has held elections since 1951 and largely changed both the national and state governments peacefully. Recently, five of India's 28 states went to the polls. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won reelection in four out of the five states. The opposition Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) won in the northwest border state of Punjab, beating the historic Congress Party.

What Is Remarkable About AAP's Victory?

The AAP is a relatively new party. Founded in 2012, it is led by Arvind Kejriwal who is the chief minister of Delhi, India's national capital. Unlike Punjab, Delhi is not a state. It is one of India's eight union territories, some of which are administered directly while others have their own legislatures. A 1991 act of parliament gave the national capital its own legislature and the first election to the Delhi Legislative Assembly was held in 1993.

The Delhi government does not have the same powers as that of states such as Punjab, West Bengal or Tamil Nadu. The union cabinet that operates out of the British-built New Delhi, a part of Delhi, retains control over law, public order and the police. Both the AAP and the BJP operate out of Delhi and are political rivals with a history of troubled relations.

The AAP's victory in Punjab is a historic moment in Indian democracy. It has defeated the Congress Party, the grand old party of the

nation that ruled Punjab for the last five years, as well as the Akali Dal, the regional powerhouse. The AAP has expanded from the national capital to a nearby state. In the eyes of many, the AAP is the new face of the opposition that could replace the sclerotic Congress Party and mount a challenge to the BJP.

The AAP's victory in Punjab is significant. Punjab may be one of India's smaller states but it is a strategic one for the country. With a population estimated to be over 30 million people, it borders Pakistan. Punjab is the home of Sikhs, a five-century old religious and philosophical tradition started by Guru Nanak with followers around the world. During the bloody partition of British India into India and Pakistan, Punjab was partitioned too. Ishtiaq Ahmed has chronicled the tragedy of Punjab in consummate detail and that trauma lives on to this day.

Pakistan worries about Punjab as a springboard for a tank-led offensive to Lahore that lies 24 kilometers from the border. India worries about a threat to Amritsar, home to the Golden Temple — the holiest Sikh shrine. In the 1980s, Pakistan supported a Sikh insurgency against India and the army had to storm the Golden Temple itself in 1984. Some diehard Sikh extremists still want an independent Sikh state of Khalistan. A new untested party in the strategic state of Punjab is a dramatic new development for Indian democracy.

Can the AAP Replicate Its Delhi Model in Punjab?

Many argue that the AAP has done a good job in Delhi. Newspapers like The Hindu and The Print have published editorials about the success of the AAP's education reforms in Delhi. It has also won kudos for its welfare measures such as distributing free electricity and water as well as improving healthcare. While many contest the extent of change, it is

clear that voters in Punjab have bought into the Delhi model. As a strategic state of the union, Punjab presents both new opportunities and challenges for the AAP.

For a start, the AAP will now control law, public order and the police. This is a big responsibility in a border state with a history of insurgency. In recent years, drug abuse has haunted Punjab as have allegations of political and bureaucratic corruption. The AAP will have to provide funding for the police in Punjab, something it has not had to do in Delhi, where the law gives the union government control over the police as well the responsibility for its funding.

To put the matter in perspective, it is instructive to take a look at the numbers. In India's financial year, beginning April 1 and ending March 31, of 2020-21, the budget for the Delhi Police exceeded \$1 billion (over 80 billion rupees). In the 2021-22 financial year, this expenditure is estimated to rise to over \$1.4 billion (over 110 billion rupees). Police funding from the union government has given the AAP leeway to fund welfare measures for its voters.

Besides, Delhi has a much larger economy than Punjab. The 2019-20 gross state domestic product (GSDP) of Delhi was estimated to be over \$110 billion (over 8.5 trillion rupees) while that of Punjab was about \$75 billion (nearly 5.8 trillion rupees). The National Capital Region of Delhi, which comprises areas in the neighboring states of Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, has a population nearing 31 million people. Of these, almost 19 million live in Delhi where the AAP is in power. With a lower population and a larger economy, Delhi has much higher GDP per capita than Punjab. The AAP will find governing a much poorer state a different proposition to running the prosperous national capital.

Punjab once led the nation in prosperity. Till the pre-insurgency years, Punjab had the highest per capita GDP in the country thanks to India's green revolution that high-yielding

seeds, fertilizers and irrigation enabled. This revolution led to other problems that Atul Singh and Manu Sharma chronicled in their 2021 analysis of farm reforms. Yet despite these problems, Punjab ranked third in per capita GDP in the country till 2000-01. Today it has slipped to the 16th position in the country. Furthermore, statistics from the Reserve Bank of India reveal that Punjab's growth rate has been one of the slowest in the country.

Punjab's smaller GSDP and lower growth rates present a big challenge to the state's public finances. While Delhi's goods and sales tax (GST) revenue for December 2021 was a little over \$493 million (37.54 billion rupees), Punjab's GST revenue was nearly \$207 million (15.73 billion rupees). Punjab has lower revenue and higher expenditure than Delhi. Its fiscal liabilities have risen from nearly \$14.8 billion (more than 1.12 trillion rupees) on March 31, 2015 to more than \$27.8 billion (nearly 2.12 trillion rupees) on March 31, 2019. While Delhi is nearly debt-free, Punjab runs large deficits and is highly indebted.

Furthermore, Punjab's budget is burdened by many rigid spending items like interest payments, salaries, pensions and power subsidies. It has benefited from farm subsidies that India's XV Finance Commission has declared unsustainable. Punjab's agriculture has sucked its groundwater, consumed electricity inefficiently, increased pollution dramatically, caused health problems and run out of steam. Neither industry nor services have stepped in to fill the void.

The AAP has won 92 out of 117 seats in Punjab. It has promised "employment, education, health, free electricity, freedom from drug menace and agricultural reforms." Given Punjab's perilous fiscal condition, the AAP will find it much harder to fulfill its promises in this border state than in Delhi, making it very difficult to mount a national challenge to the BJP.

***Subhash Chandra Pandey** is a retired Indian civil servant who heads the Institute of Public Auditors of India.

“The Dawn of Everything,” including a New World Order (Maybe)

Peter Isackson
April 9, 2022

A collaborative book recounts the history of our misunderstanding of history.

Over ten years, the late anthropologist and political activist David Graeber and the archaeologist David Wengrow shared thoughts, explored ideas and conducted research on an impressive scale to produce a ground-breaking book that was finally published at the end of last year, more than a year after Graeber’s death at the age of 59. Such an exceptional collaboration was bound to contain a bevy of interesting insights about how human societies function and evolve over time. But *The Dawn of Everything* offers much more than that. It is nothing less than a compelling invitation to reframe and radically rethink our shared understanding of humanity’s history and prehistory. While ranging across the globe and far back in time to make their case, the authors aim at demolishing the powerful, widely accepted *idées reçues* that our schools, media and writers of popular science have fed to us in the form of what has become a quasi-official account of “the evolution of civilization.”

In their reading, Europe’s vaunted scientific revolution that began in the 17th century marks the moment when a certain sclerosis of thinking about the broad sweep of human history began

to set in. Only three years after the Treaty of Westphalia that confirmed the triumph of the idea of the nation state, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes published *Leviathan*, in which he proposed what appeared to be a “rational” view of human prehistory. According to Hobbes, civilization emerged as a process of political and economic organization that, by building solid institutions, tamed humanity’s initial anarchic state of war of all against all. The secret of a rational civilization’s success was the establishment of hierarchies that forced obedience on the otherwise unruly masses.

More than a century after Hobbes, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau turned the Hobbesian view on its head. He posited the existence of what generations since Rousseau have called “the noble savage,” the innocent hunter-gatherers who cared for little more than thriving in their local settings. Graeber and Wengrow more accurately describe Rousseau’s characterization of innocent humanity as “the stupid savage.” These poor unreflecting, convivial souls were overwhelmed, displaced and their innocent culture corrupted by the principle of property and wealth that followed the discovery of agriculture. They were forced against their will to accept artificial hierarchies and even tyranny.

Paradoxically, the seemingly contrary beliefs attributed to these two philosophers continue to haunt our post-industrial culture. They combine to produce an effect that both restricts our understanding of human history and limits — if not eliminates — our ability to devise political systems designed to respect both the reality of human nature and nature itself. Despite their opposition, the cultural heritage of Hobbes and Rousseau have reinforced the uncritical acceptance of a politicized status quo in which the authors claim we have been “stuck” for some time.

Theorizing the nation state

For Hobbes, the march of history required the emergence of political hierarchy to rein in the selfish and violent instincts of savage, uncultured beings. For Rousseau, the establishment of sophisticated political institutions canceled the original state of human freedom, stifling our naturally cooperative instincts. That binary Hobbes-Rousseau duopoly has defined an artificial line of demarcation between what we now think of as conservative and liberal political ideologies. Hobbesians — cultural conservatives — may complain about some of the features and consequences of the exercise of authority, but they believe human behavior must be severely policed. Rousseauists — the cultural left — predominantly believe that if we just learned to be kind to one another, like our hunter-gatherer ancestors, we wouldn't need the repressive institutions that hinder our pursuit of happiness. Both have regrets, but both conservatives and liberals have accepted the political, economic and military status quo of the modern nation state as inevitable.

To get us unstuck, the authors offer a variegated view of societies stretching over space and time, most of the examples deriving from the prehistoric past. Their descriptions are based on the most up-to-date archaeological research. Graeber and Wengrow paint a compellingly varied picture of the surprising choices human societies were capable of imagining and implementing as they worked out their institutions and elaborated their patterns of behavior.

The examples the authors cite persuasively debunk the now commonly accepted idea that there was only one overriding pattern in the evolution of government and social organization, and that it proceeded through a series of logical and ultimately inevitable phases to lead us into the modern world. They contest the deterministic view that certain events, such as the discovery of the benefits of agriculture or the creation of more efficient

technology, left the societies that profited from them no other choice than to march forward towards an ever more sophisticated, technology-oriented civilization, transforming their institutions, cultures and relationships to accommodate and adapt to the supposed laws of the “brave, new world” thus unveiled.

The authors are keen to discredit the idea that “the birth of agriculture” inexorably implied the reorganization of societies around the principle of property and the accumulation of wealth. Citing examples from the the Fertile Crescent that reveal a variety of social changes after the advent of agriculture, Graeber and Wengrow complain that “it no longer makes sense to ask, ‘what were the social implications of the transition to farming?’ — as if there was necessarily just one transition, and one set of implications.” They point out that, contrary to what “most general works on the course of human history” tell us, any researcher or student “of agrarian societies knows that people inclined to expand agriculture sustainably, without privatizing land or surrendering its management to a class of overseers, have always found ways to do so.”

So why do we continue to entertain the idea that farming cannot be dissociated from the culture of private property and the accumulation of wealth? One explanation might be that our political and economic leaders feel motivated to inculcate the belief that today's capitalist creed of “greed is good” is an immutable principle comparable to Darwinian evolution. This conveniently justifies the underlying logic of the consumer society. Such a belief may be designed to liberate us from grappling with any lingering moral scruples concerning the unbridled pursuit of self-interest. The authors present mountains of evidence that serve to demonstrate the disconnect between the discovery of farming and the neoliberal ideology of private property.

Analyzing the testimony from the New World

The first surprise in the book occurs when the authors turn the tables on the usual image we have of anthropological observation. Instead of beginning, as most anthropology does, with a demonstration of the capacity of evolved, literate, civilized and intellectually disciplined Europeans or North Americans to venture into the heart of darkness with the aim of describing and deciphering the cultures of previously unobserved societies, the authors begin by citing the testimony of indigenous Americans in the 17th and 18th centuries who had the occasion to travel to Europe. This experience cast the observed in the role of observers. Some of them assumed the task of anthropologists ready to comment on the curious rules and customs of European society.

A telling example the authors cite is the discourse of the Huron Chief Kondiaronk as transmitted, with likely literary embellishment, by an impoverished French aristocrat, the Baron de Lahontan. In his book, *Curious Dialogues with a Savage of Good Sense Who Has Traveled (1703)*, based on his interviews with Kondiaronk, gives voice to the Native American who astutely compares life in France with pre-colonial North America.

“Do you seriously imagine that I would be happy to live like one of the inhabitants of Paris? To take two hours every morning just to put on my shirt and make up? To bow and scrape before every obnoxious galoot I meet on the street who happens to have been born with an inheritance? Do you actually imagine I could carry a purse full of coins and not immediately hand them over to people who are hungry? That I would carry a sword but not immediately draw it on the first band of thugs I see rounding up the destitute to press them into Naval service? If, on the other hand, Europeans were to adopt an American way of life, it might take a while to adjust but in the end you will be far happier.”

Kondiaronk’s ideas as expressed in Lahontan’s dialogue are consistent with the testimony of European missionaries who interacted with Native Americans at the time. Lahontan’s work set off a popular literary trend in Europe of fictional commentaries on the follies and foibles of European civilization as judged by imaginary visitors from Persia, China or Tahiti. In the case of Kondiaronk, our authors highlight not only his commentary on Europe, but also what this comparative discourse revealed about social structure and moral principles that regulated life back in the Chief’s “Indian” lands. These were, of course, lands that would in subsequent centuries be transformed into what generations of US politicians like to refer to as the “shining city on a hill.” The city, as most people are aware, whose defensive walls have taken the form of an imposing military-industrial complex, has now spilled down the sides of the hill and well beyond.

Are human societies and civilization the same thing?

A famous scene at the beginning of Stanley Kubrick’s 2001, *A Space Odyssey*, evoked an idea that has been drummed into the heads of every school child in recent centuries: that there was a mysterious moment in human history we call the “dawn of civilization.” Kubrick’s version was pessimistic and passably Hobbesian. We have all been taught to understand that the world we were born into is something we flatter with the title “civilization.” But has there ever been a more ambiguous word? Mahatma Gandhi once highlighted its ambiguity thanks to his undeniably witty response to an inquirer who had the temerity to ask him what he thought about Western civilization. According to legend, Gandhi responded “I think it would be a good idea.”

Graeber and Wengrow maintain that, instead of thinking of civilization as a simple good idea, we should see it as a lot of good

ideas, and of course some bad ones, as well. The authors make the essential point that, contrary to the reigning ideas about how civilization developed almost as a linear process, there is no simple pattern of evolution from primitive to civilized, from a society of dispersed foragers to the megacities of the 21st century. The book contains detailed descriptions of an impressive variety of types of social and economic organization that appear to have emerged not just out of necessity but as conscious, socially coordinated attempts to produce ways of life appropriate to differentiating environments and to the disposition of each specific population.

Rather than appearing as a frozen state of relationships determined by phenomena such as the economy of agriculture and the rise of cities, the various civilizations the authors describe, ranging across every continent, appear far more fluid and open to local creativity than our standard narrative allows for. In contrast, the homogenization of culture that has been taking place and rapidly accelerating at least for the past century could be characterized as the return to a more primitive mindset.

In many ways, our globalized civilization has never been more fragmented. Today's news is dominated by different groups, including governments, media, identity communities and special interests, all desperately trying to impose the validity of their way of thinking about social and political issues. They all tend to reduce or downright reject the possibility of dialogue and debate. Those who, even in a recent past, still celebrated the humanism bequeathed by the Renaissance, judged that kind of parochialism as uncivilized and characteristic of a "primitive" worldview.

When Machiavelli analyzed the mechanics of power, among the tools he recommended for a successful prince was the virtue of cultural adaptivity. That advice is no longer heeded by today's princes. Instead, the trend is that those who identify with a particular worldview and

have the power to back it up will reject out of hand even the consideration of other worldviews. This has notably infected US foreign policy, at least since the George W Bush administration, and has now become the norm. It reflects an attitude asserting that talking to an adversary compromises one's integrity.

We are in a privileged position today to see how this attitude plays out in real events. It was the case during the war in Syria, when Americans refused to consider negotiations with Bashar al-Assad because he was the villain. More recently, days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared that there was no point negotiating with the Russians to avoid a war the State Department itself believed inevitable. The reason given was that Russia had refused to accept the sacrosanct principle that the sovereignty of a nation state included the freedom to join NATO and become the vassal of a superpower. Given the Russians starting position, there was nothing to discuss and so the fireworks could begin. After several weeks of destruction and killing, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy began insisting that neutrality is something he would envisage, which would exclude joining NATO. Even today, as the carnage continues, the US, sure of its principles, appears to be saying, that cannot happen, at least not yet and possibly, not even not on your life (i.e. Ukrainian, not American lives).

The startling example of Teotihuacan

The Dawn of Everything brings home the lesson that nothing is inevitable. Societies are capable of change and may even succeed in inverting the principles they seemed to represent. The authors describe in detail the transformation of Teotihuacan, the site in Mexico whose monumental pyramids testify to the existence of a severely hierarchical, authoritarian tradition. At one critical point in

its history, Teotihuacan's population — through a process of decision no one can explain — became a successful and durable “utopian experiment in urban life,” a truly egalitarian society. It wasn't a regression to some dimly remembered forager culture. It was manifestly the result of a conscious and well reasoned social choice.

However constraining the social rules of many of the societies described in the book may appear, the authors insist that prehistoric societies retained a fundamental awareness of a trio of very real freedoms not written into any society's bureaucratic bill of rights. They list them as the freedom to move, to disobey and to create. This implies the exercise of both critical insight and the freedom to experiment at the level of an entire society, a category of freedom that has disappeared in the era of the nation state. In that sense, history has indeed evolved. We have lost what were once assumed to be manifest freedoms. Once upon a time, migration from a perceived dystopia to another more amenable culture appeared to be a natural choice for ill-adapted individuals. Or an entire population, such as in Teotihuacan, could simply recreate its social rules.

Along with the modern belief in progress, humanity has thus moved away from its earlier phases of societal creativity to a form of social organization that, as the authors insist, has now become “stuck.” Today's social organization systematically stifles experimentation and has increasingly adopted homogeneity as an implicit and legitimated constraining ideal. Resisting that homogeneity or critiquing it, as we are seeing today, can lead to systematic censorship and, in some cases, to highly orchestrated accusations of treason. Every citizen today in almost every corner of the world is now expected to uncritically endorse the abstract hierarchy called the state, an entity that claims in its generosity to offer its citizens a national identity.

The rigidity of a world divided into nation states

In our democracies, we may enjoy (within limits) the privilege of criticizing policies and specific people in power, but we mustn't call into question the authority of the state. Even the Olympic Games serve to consolidate this perception of the state as the central feature of our identity. Willingly or unwillingly, we share a set of political values, a structure of authority and largely emotional connections of belonging to a nation. This is not unnatural. The capacity humans have to identify with the locality and social groupings in which they were raised is universal. But it can turn into a social constraint when a powerful political entity imposes a more abstract, less locally inspired set of principles or beliefs on its citizens. A European concept born in the 17th century and exported through the tentacles of colonialism, has left humanity under the authority of what we now call the nation state. As citizens, we are told from birth that we “belong to” our nation state.

All nation states invent and then disseminate their specific historical narrative. In most cases, they rely on existing mythologies and legends that highlight local features and traditions as well as celebrate their geographical specificity. Others, especially those with potentially global ambitions, tend towards teleological accounts of their own history that they seek to merge with a more general spiritual, moral or scientific idea of historical evolution. This kind of narrative, a trend spawned by the European Enlightenment, appeals to values that are deemed universal, and serves to grant the nation states that elaborate it a superior moral standing that exists in the minds of its leaders and is shared by its citizens.

Once the nation state finds what it is looking for, it enriches the narrative to make it as spiritual, moral or scientific as it can, according to its needs and living traditions. Each of our modern nation states has thus crafted its unique history. By appealing to

various universal political concepts, such as democracy, equality and liberty, some nation states often prefer to create a narrative of progress over time towards an ideal that shares whatever convenient combination of spiritual, moral and scientific assumptions each one is capable of devising. This also includes what in Chapter 10, Graeber and Wengrow call the tendency of nation states to “scour the ancient world for embryonic versions of our modern nation states.” A past that was very different thus can thus be mobilized to justify the current order.

This helps us to understand the source of the standard reading of human social evolution, even in the clever variations of writers such as Yuval Noah Harari, Jared Diamond and Steven Pinker, who present it as a logical process. It is a process the authors critique throughout the book. In its standard version this narrative leads inexorably from hunter-gatherer societies towards our shared idea of modern civilization dominated by nation states and property or possession, proverbially defined as being “9/10s of the law.” This model supposes that, except for possible minor variations, everything happened with a Darwinian logic and could not have developed otherwise.

A full century before Darwin, in his *Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope formulated the tenet that stands at the basis of the modern belief in progress: “One truth is clear, whatever is, is right.” Most people now consider that Leibnizian sentiment too absolute, especially after Voltaire so sardonically picked it apart in *Candide*. Nevertheless, the idea that history followed a logical, possibly pre-ordained path to reach the type of complex social and economic organization we have today is cemented into the foundation of our civilization’s mindset.

When compared with the multiple examples of creativity practiced by the diversity of the civilizations the authors describe, the reigning ideas we have about the nature of civilization

may thus seem simplistic. Our teachers at school taught us to think of the arc of history as a steady progress towards today’s civilization, disturbed only by occasional moments of regression. Through an impressive variety of examples, the authors of *The Dawn of Everything* show that the laws our contemporary theoreticians hold to be self-evident simply did not kick in as automatically as they seem to suppose. The book can be read as a methodological guide to rethinking, not just prehistory, but history itself.

Schismogenesis and social creativity

One compelling concept the authors develop and return to at various points is what they call schismogenesis, a term coined in the 1930s by the ground-breaking sociologist and anthropologist, Geoffrey Bateson. It describes “people’s tendency to define themselves against one another.” Bateson’s purely psychological treatment of the phenomenon meant that he viewed schismogenesis as a destructive element in the relationships between individuals.

But when the authors apply the concept to societies, the term takes on a different character. At the level of coexisting societies, schismogenesis becomes a factor of creativity. It generates behaviors in which groups seek to define an alternative strategy for constructing their social values and institutions. They do it by reacting to and often inverting the values of a neighboring society. One of the outcomes of schismogenesis can be to correct the distortions created by one culture by emphasizing the opposite.

The authors examine at some length a telling example of schismogenesis between two foraging societies on the Pacific coast of North American territory extending from modern California to Canada. They describe a curiously symbiotic relationship between the Kwakiutl, a hierarchical society in the north that practiced slavery but eschewed the notion of private property, and the Yuroks, a largely egalitarian

society that lived to their south. Everything about the pair of cultures differentiated them. The authors contrast “the flamboyant extravagance of one” with “the austere simplicity of the other.”

Citing the historically well documented societies of Athens and Sparta, they explain how such societies “end up joined within a common system of differences, even as they attempt to distinguish themselves from one another.” Each one “becomes an indispensable alter ego, the necessary and ever-present example of what one should never wish to be.”

The contrast between the two societies on the West Coast of America may remind us of a similar contrast in 17th century England between the Puritans (Roundheads) and the Royalists (Cavaliers) that turned into a civil war and led to the beheading of the king. The difference between the North American and English examples is that the schismogenetic conflict in England took the form of a civil war within the framework of a nation state. To preserve the integrity of England, one party had to achieve absolute victory, leaving no possibility of coexistence within the borders of the state. The Kwakiutl and Yuroks were neighbors who interacted, but like Athens and Sparta, they remained geographically separate.

Graeber and Wengrow insist on the importance of cultural diversity as a laboratory of creativity. The point Graeber and Wengrow make is quite different from the current liberal idea that cultural differences should be tolerated, and that we should all agree to live together while seeking ways of sharing the similar if not the same values. History reveals that diversity is a permanent feature of human societies. It can lead to conflict but it also opens up the possibility of social and societal innovation. Highly differentiated neighboring societies are a natural occurrence. Differentiation allows the exercise of the three essential freedoms the authors believe to be at the core of all viable social organization: “the freedom to move, the

freedom to disobey and the freedom to create or transform social relationships.”

The deeper problem of freedom

Throughout his career, David Graeber insisted on the ambiguity of our ideas of freedom that are too easily codified into sclerotic ideologies. He also insisted on the need to embrace the challenge of that ambiguity and to see it as a permanent invitation to modify what exists and especially create and build what is different. Embracing this challenge is the key to any hope we have to become unstuck from a fixed worldview that has spawned institutions seemingly focused on restricting social creativity.

Graeber and Wengrow’s book is not only about the intellectual origins of our current quandary. It also presents a rich panorama of examples demonstrating how the facile theories we have created and cling to are contradicted by reality. They document a wide variety of real responses by societies across the globe over many millennia to numerous environmental and social challenges. The authors seem to be hoping we 21st century humans might take the hint from our own complex past to find a way of being at least as creative as many societies of yore. Perhaps, by relying more on history instead of artificial theories of history, we will be able to better respond to the range of challenges that now confront us.

Among those challenges is a huge one that has become more visible in recent weeks. Prominent politicians, notably in the US and China, have been telling us that we are now in the process of defining a “new world order.” The war in Ukraine has become a powerful accelerator of a movement that was already clearly underway. The positioning of the nations of the world is already revealing a manifest and growing split, not just between the West and the East, that will inevitably lead to a redistribution of power, but also between the

developed, white nations sometimes abusively referred to “the free world” and the rest of humanity.

US President Joe Biden has called this moment of decision-making as an “inflection point,” by which he seems to mean a moment that requires reinforcing the existing order to preserve it. Others appear to see it as a schismogenetic moment in which the equivalent of a tectonic shift may be taking place. The transformations of societies in the past that Graeber and Wengrow describe tell us that such a moment can represent an opportunity for creativity. But in a world dominated by nuclear armed nation states sharing a global financial system that itself has become a weapon of mass destruction, the margin for creativity may turn out to be limited. The Dawn of Everything was written with a definite sense of geopolitical awareness, but it focuses on our knowledge of the past and avoids directly broaching any of the issues that face contemporary society. It can be read as a rich exploration of the struggles human societies have always engaged in as each sought to find its place among its neighbors and within its physical environment. It contains a treasure trove of examples of social organization, cultural construction and economic creativity that invites us to broaden our understanding of our species’ past and perhaps better prepare for its future. The book’s insights may even help us to become unstuck.

Not many people have the time or energy to keep up with everything that happens in the various digs around the world, which are constantly unveiling new knowledge and new hypotheses about societies that disappeared thousands of years ago. The lay reader should welcome Graeber and Wengrow’s book as, if nothing else, a fascinating introduction to the global state of the entire discipline of archaeology as well as a wide-ranging update of its methodological orientations. But The Dawn of Civilization is also a major work of

anthropological reflection that should incite its readers to think of social creativity in a new light, even if our political leaders will most likely fail to notice its significance in this historical moment.

***Peter Isackson** is the chief strategy officer at Fair Observer, an author and media producer

Virtual Reality is Impossible, Like Perpetual Motion

William Softky

April 11, 2022

The coming VR revolution, including much of the so-called metaverse, is mathematically guaranteed to create “simulator sickness.”

Over a hundred years ago, most scientific evidence pointed toward an impending invention which would change the world, encapsulated in the paradoxical expression “perpetual motion.” Ultimately that invention proved to be impossible because of the brand-new scientific discovery that energy cannot be created nor destroyed.

Nowadays, a similarly profitable fantasy builds on a similarly paradoxical expression: “virtual reality” (VR). Turns out Nature says VR won’t succeed either, because VR will inevitably induce “simulator sickness,” as it always has.

The Industrial Revolution started with steam, allowing fuel (coal) to do the work of many men. As the technology improved, more and more power became available. Part of that power came from burning more coal. Another part came from improved mechanical efficiency, that is by recovering and reusing waste heat, force and momentum. Many

tinkerers were convinced that by using clever mechanical trickery, such as lifting weights over here in order to drop them on lever-arms over there, engines could in fact “recover” more energy

than went in. Evidence made this hypothesis reasonable, because the trend of recovered energy had been rising upward steadily for decades. Hopefully it could pass 100%.

The idea behind perpetual motion was that if the trick worked — that if a machine could essentially harvest its own momentum to keep itself running forever — then even a tiny excess of power could be amplified and scaled, and no one would need to burn actual fuel any more.

Back then physics and physicists didn’t really exist, but thoughtful people ever since da Vinci have known perpetual motion was a fantasy. A hundred years ago, they proved it scientifically by finding a deeper principle at work, one which absolutely limited the amount of energy in play. The new science said that energy is not created, not destroyed, and certainly not free. The total energy must be “conserved” (kept fixed). No free lunch from Nature. But optimistic tinkerers kept trying anyway, until the US Patent office stopped allowing applications altogether, killing the “technology” for good.

Virtual Reality or Unreal Virtuality?

That fantasy repeats itself with so-called “virtual reality.” According to the evidence, VR gets better every year. An extrapolation of that trend would let VR replace the boring physical world we’re usually stuck in, literally creating whole new universes (or metaverses) and whole new streams of revenue, almost out of nothing. Free reality.

I know VR cannot work because I happen to know how nervous systems work. New technology won’t fix that mismatch, but at least new research explains it. That research explains both human and machine learning in the same terms; neuroscience and data science

account for both as signal bandwidth. So formerly fuzzy questions about how brains work now have mathematically absolute answers. In the case of VR, as with creating energy, it turns out there are absolute limits on

what brains can and can’t do, limits not provable before.

There are many ways to prove that VR makes people sick; two will do for now. One involves how different senses mix together in the brain. The other involves how much time a brain takes to mix and make sense of them. Vertebrate brains evolved 500 million years ago to do exactly one thing, a task which even now is far more difficult than memory or speech: making 3D pictures out of tiny input pulses (a computational process called “tomography”). Our everyday experience bears this out. The sensory inputs into our bodies (and outputs from nerves into the brain) come from eyeballs, eardrums, taste and smell receptors, and especially from millions of vibration-sensors spread throughout the body. Airborne sound hits ears and skin together, and our brains combine them into a single unified experience so solid and believable that we know for sure the world exists, even behind us, even when we can’t see it. Lived sensory experience is unified by the hardware of our brain: that’s how brains work and what they do. Neuroscientists call the process “sensory fusion.”

Obviously, a brain fabricating a single unified experience is the opposite of fabricating two inconsistent, competing experiences, which is what VR forces on our brains. For example, a gamer’s eyes may be convinced that he is flying high-G rolls inside a fighter plane aloft, because VR is so good at creating visual illusions, making every visible cue consistent with all the rest...looming, moving, twisting, occluding, dropping, all synchronized so the visual world makes 3D sense.

But vision isn’t everything to brains, not even half. In the gamer’s case, all the other

senses agree that the body is not moving or flying, but sitting in a chair. Neural signals from the inner ear, the legs, the gut, the spine all confirm no barrel-rolls, no upside-down, no special forces pulling or pushing. No jet engine

sounds rattling the body, just injected in the ears. In this configuration roughly half the brain is convinced the body is quite still, the other half convinced it's flying hard and fast. A brain can't hold such a deep contradiction for very long, so "simulator sickness" makes the gamer nauseous. That problem hasn't changed in 40 years, and won't, ever, because brains can only feel one reality at a time, and the real reality is always centered in your gut, regardless of what the eyeballs say.

Vision and motion

Another insoluble problem with VR is how fast it responds to self-motion. In the regular real world (no VR yet), every time you move your body, neck, head, or eyeballs, the image into your eyeballs (and onto your retina) changes with that motion. To make its picture of the world, the brain anticipates the physical shift before it moves its muscles, and uses that anticipation to predict what it will see. The brain uses an interactive process of continual exploration and zooming (neuroscience buzzword: "sensory contingencies"). Because the brain makes plans, then sends pulses. And then the head and eyes begin to move. The brain therefore creates internal expectations long before any motion could be visible from outside.

But at best VR can measure your self-motion from the outside, after the fact. It can't measure things which haven't happened yet. (Even access to your brainwaves would not solve this problem, since even brain waves are merely delayed traces of yet smaller and more subtle processes). So even an ideal VR response would be fatally delayed, relative to how your eyes and brain normally work. What VR

shows your eyeballs is not exactly what would come from a real world, but milliseconds slower, and only approximate. The faster you move your head and eyes, the more weirdly a fake world slips under them. The core problem is not with VR, but with brains themselves because their

task is nearly impossible already. It's clear most humans see the world in high-resolution (HDMI or better in space, seamless motion in real time). But synthesizing high-resolution 3-D moving images is hard even for supercomputers and MRI machines. It's even harder for the brain to synthesize so much data (teravoxels) if it gets a million pulses per second of input from two jiggling spheres of jelly (the eyeballs). That's about a million data points synthesized for each single input pulse. It's a miracle that Nature can leverage such internal fakery, then erase the artifacts so perfectly the result seems not merely realistic, but absolutely real.

Unfortunately for VR, that miracle is utterly dependent on the 3-D world actually being there. There is no mathematical way to make a consistent world-image from partial, delayed, corrupted data injected into only part of a brain's input stream, while ignoring all the rest. Our brains need real-live 3D data like our lungs need air, and no amount of hype will change that fact.

***William Softky** is a biophysicist who was among the first neuroscientists to understand microtiming, and among the first technologists to build that understanding into algorithms.

The MADness of the Resurgent US Cold War With Russia

Nicolas J.S. Davies
April 14, 2022

While Russia is responsible for invading Ukraine, the US has played a role in squandering the peace dividend and triggering another Cold War

The war in Ukraine has placed US and NATO policy toward Russia under a spotlight, highlighting how the US and its allies have expanded NATO right up to Russia's borders, backed a coup and now a proxy war in Ukraine, imposed waves of economic sanctions, and launched a debilitating trillion-dollar arms race. The explicit goal is to pressure, weaken and ultimately eliminate Russia, or a Russia-China partnership, as a strategic competitor to US imperial power.

The US and NATO have used similar forms of force and coercion against many countries. In every case they have been catastrophic for the people directly impacted, whether they achieved their political aims or not.

The Bitter Fruits of US Intervention

Wars and violent regime changes in Kosovo, Iraq, Haiti and Libya have left them mired in endless corruption, poverty and chaos. Failed proxy wars in Somalia, Syria and Yemen have spawned endless war and humanitarian disasters. US sanctions against Cuba, Iran, North Korea and Venezuela have impoverished their people but failed to change their governments.

Meanwhile, US-backed coups in Chile, Bolivia and Honduras have sooner or later been reversed by grassroots movements to restore democratic, socialist government. The Taliban are governing Afghanistan again after a 20-year war to expel a US and NATO army of

occupation, for which the sore losers are now starving millions of Afghans.

But the risks and consequences of the US Cold War on Russia are of a different order. The purpose of any war is to defeat your enemy. But how can you defeat an enemy that is explicitly committed to respond to the prospect of existential defeat by destroying the whole world?

Mutually Assured Destruction

This is in fact part of the military doctrine of the US and Russia, who together possess over 90% of the world's nuclear weapons. If either of them faces existential defeat, they are prepared to destroy human civilization in a nuclear holocaust that will kill Americans, Russians and neutrals alike.

In June 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree stating, "The Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies... and also in the case of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons, when the very existence of the state is put under threat."

US nuclear weapons policy is no more reassuring. A decades-long campaign for a US "no first use" nuclear weapons policy still falls on deaf ears in Washington.

The 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) promised that the US would not use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state. But in a war with another nuclear-armed country, it said, "The United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners."

The 2018 NPR broadened the definition of "extreme circumstances" to cover "significant non-nuclear attacks," which it said would "include, but are not limited to, attacks on the US, allies or partner civilian population or infrastructure, and attacks on US or allied

nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment.” The critical phrase, “but are not limited to,” removes any restriction at all on a US nuclear first strike.

So, as the US Cold War against Russia and China heats up, the only signal that the deliberately foggy threshold for the US use of nuclear weapons has been crossed could be the first mushroom clouds exploding over Russia or China.

For our part in the West, Russia has explicitly warned us that it will use nuclear weapons if it believes the US or NATO are threatening the existence of the Russian state. That is a threshold that the US and NATO are already flirting with as they look for ways to increase their pressure on Russia over the war in Ukraine.

To make matters worse, the twelve-to-one imbalance between US and Russian military spending has the effect, whether either side intends it or not, of increasing Russia’s reliance on the role of its nuclear arsenal when the chips are down in a crisis like this.

NATO countries, led by the United States and UK, are already supplying Ukraine with up to 17 plane-loads of weapons per day, training Ukrainian forces to use them and providing valuable and deadly satellite intelligence to Ukrainian military commanders. Hawkish voices in NATO countries are pushing hard for a no-fly zone or some other way to escalate the war and take advantage of Russia’s perceived weaknesses.

Nuclear Risks Escalate

The danger that hawks in the State Department and Congress may convince President Joe Biden to escalate the US role in the war prompted the Pentagon to leak details of the Defense Intelligence Agency’s (DIA) assessments of Russia’s conduct of the war to Newsweek’s William Arkin.

Senior DIA officers told Arkin that Russia has dropped fewer bombs and missiles on

Ukraine in a month than US forces dropped on Iraq in the first day of bombing in 2003, and that they see no evidence of Russia directly targeting civilians. Like US “precision” weapons, Russian weapons are probably only about 80% accurate, so hundreds of stray bombs and missiles are killing and wounding civilians and hitting civilian infrastructure, as they do just as horrifically in every US war.

The DIA analysts believe Russia is holding back from a more devastating war because what it really wants is not to destroy Ukrainian cities but to negotiate a diplomatic agreement to ensure a neutral, non-aligned Ukraine.

But the Pentagon appears to be so worried by the impact of highly effective Western and Ukrainian war propaganda that it has released secret intelligence to Newsweek to try to restore a measure of reality to the media’s portrayal of the war, before political pressure for NATO escalation leads to a nuclear war.

Since the US and the USSR blundered into their nuclear suicide pact in the 1950s, it has come to be known as Mutual Assured Destruction, or MAD. As the Cold War evolved, they cooperated to reduce the risk of mutual assured destruction through arms control treaties, a hotline between Moscow and Washington, and regular contacts between US and Soviet officials.

But the US has now withdrawn from many of those arms control treaties and safeguard mechanisms. The risk of nuclear war is as great today as it has ever been, as the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists warns year after year in its annual Doomsday Clock statement. The Bulletin has also published detailed analyses of how specific technological advances in US nuclear weapons design and strategy are increasing the risk of nuclear war.

Peace Dividend Lost

The world understandably breathed a collective sigh of relief when the Cold War appeared to end in the early 1990s. But within a decade, the

peace dividend the world hoped for was trumped by a power dividend. US officials did not use their unipolar moment to build a more peaceful world, but to capitalize on the lack of a military peer competitor to launch an era of US and NATO military expansion and serial aggression against militarily weaker countries and their people. As Michael Mandelbaum, the director of East-West Studies at the Council on

Foreign Relations, crowed in 1990, “For the first time in 40 years, we can conduct military operations in the Middle East without worrying about triggering World War III.” Thirty years later, people in that part of the world may be forgiven for thinking that the US and its allies have in fact unleashed World War III, against them, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, Pakistan, Gaza, Libya, Syria, Yemen and across West Africa.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin complained bitterly to President Clinton over plans for NATO expansion into Eastern Europe, but Russia was powerless to prevent it. Russia had already been invaded by an army of neoliberal Western economic advisers, whose “shock therapy” shrank its GDP by 65%, reduced male life expectancy from 65 to 58, and empowered a new class of oligarchs to loot its national resources and state-owned enterprises.

President Vladimir Putin restored the power of the Russian state and improved the Russian people’s living standards, but he did not at first push back against US and NATO military expansion and war-making. However, when NATO and its Arab monarchist allies overthrew the Gaddafi government in Libya and then launched an even bloodier proxy war against Russia’s ally Syria, Russia intervened militarily to prevent the overthrow of the Syrian government.

Russia worked with the US to remove and destroy Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles, and helped to open negotiations with Iran that eventually led to the JCPOA nuclear agreement. But the US role in the coup in Ukraine in 2014,

Russia’s subsequent reintegration of Crimea and its support for anti-coup separatists in Donbass put paid to further cooperation between Obama and Putin, plunging US-Russian relations into a downward spiral that has now led us to the brink of nuclear war.

The Cold War Is Back

It is the epitome of official insanity that US, NATO and Russian leaders have resurrected this Cold War, which the whole world celebrated the end of, allowing plans for mass suicide and human extinction to once again masquerade as responsible defense policy.

While Russia bears full responsibility for invading Ukraine and for all the death and destruction of this war, this crisis did not come out of nowhere. The US and its allies must reexamine their own roles in resurrecting the Cold War that spawned this crisis, if we are ever to return to a safer world for people everywhere.

Tragically, instead of expiring on its sell-by date in the 1990s along with the Warsaw Pact, NATO has transformed itself into an aggressive global military alliance, a fig-leaf for US imperialism, and a forum for dangerous, self-fulfilling threat analysis, to justify its continued existence, endless expansion and crimes of aggression on three continents, in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya.

If this insanity indeed drives us to mass extinction, it will be no consolation to the scattered and dying survivors that their leaders succeeded in destroying their enemies’ country too. They will simply curse leaders on all sides for their blindness and stupidity. The propaganda by which each side demonized the other will be only a cruel irony once its end result is seen to be the destruction of everything leaders on all sides claimed to be defending.

This reality is common to all sides in this resurgent Cold War. But, like the voices of peace activists in Russia today, our voices are more powerful when we hold our own leaders

accountable and work to change our own country's behavior.

If Americans just echo US propaganda, deny our own country's role in provoking this crisis and turn all our ire towards President Putin and Russia, it will only serve to fuel the escalating tensions and bring on the next phase of this conflict, whatever dangerous new form that may take.

But if we campaign to change our country's policies, de-escalate conflicts and find common ground with our neighbors in Ukraine, Russia, China and the rest of the world, we can cooperate and solve our serious common challenges together.

A top priority must be to dismantle the nuclear doomsday machine we have inadvertently collaborated to build and maintain for 70 years, along with the obsolete and dangerous NATO military alliance. We cannot let the "unwarranted influence" and "misplaced power" of the military-industrial complex keep leading us into ever more dangerous military crises until one of them spins out of control and destroys us all.

***Nicolas J.S. Davies** is an independent journalist and a researcher for CODEPINK. He is also the author of "Blood On Our Hands: The American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq."

The Significance of South Korea's New President Yoon Seok-yeol

Thomas Kalinowski
April 17, 2022

Yoon Seok-yeol, the conservative candidate, won the extremely tight presidential race in an agenda-less election. Domestically Yoon's ability to impose radical changes is limited but he can shift South Korea's foreign policy

by fostering closer ties with the US and Japan.

On March 9, Yoon Seok-yeol of the conservative People Power Party (PPP) won the South Korean presidential elections by a slim margin. Yoon won 48.6% of the vote while Lee Jae-myung, his rival from the Democratic Party (DP) was not far behind at 47.8%. After five years of rule by President Moon Jae-in of the DP, the presidential Blue House will once again be occupied by a conservative.

Ironically, Moon appointed Yoon as prosecutor general of the country. As the top prosecutor, Yoon secured the conviction of two former conservative presidents for corruption. He also pressed charges against Samsung Chairman Lee Jae-yong who was sentenced to prison in a bribery scandal. "Owing loyalty to nobody," Yoon then went on to investigate members of the Moon administration, catapulting this star prosecutor into the national limelight and eventually making him the PPP candidate.

Yoon is an outsider. He has no administrative experience and little access to Seoul's political networks. He has not even served as a member of parliament. The fact that Yoon came out on top confirms that public popularity is now more important than party allegiance and political or administrative experience in the South Korean presidential system.

The election — although very close nationwide — exposed South Korea's regional division. In this country, political parties are not primarily divided by ideology or political platforms but rather by history and regional origins. In the southwestern Cholla provinces, more than 80% voted for Lee while the southeastern Kyongsang regions voted overwhelmingly for Yoon.

A Terrible Housing Crisis and Gender Issues

The biggest surprise was that Yoon won the capital city of Seoul, a stronghold of the DP. This crucial victory helped him win the election. It hinged on the only political issue that mattered during the campaign: unaffordable housing prices. The Moon administration failed to address this burning issue, which hurt the DP.

The overwhelming importance of this matter can only be understood in the context of the jeonse rental system in South Korea. Jeonse requires lump sum payments and directly links rents to real estate prices. In addition, rental contracts are limited to two years and there is almost no protection for tenants who are left to the whims, fancies and even tyranny of their landlords. The Bertelsmann Stiftung's 2021 South Korea Report observed that: "While regulations on homeowners and tenant protection have been slightly improved, they have failed to arrest the massive increases in housing costs in the urban centers."

In these elections, a gender divide emerged among younger voters. Only 34% of women in their 20s voted for Yoon in contrast to 59% of men in the same age group. This was by far the largest gender divide among different age groups ever recorded. In the past, younger voters have tended to vote for the DP. Yoon appealed to young men by opposing "feminism" and even promising to abolish the ministry of gender equality. Note that South Korea's average gender pay gap is one of the largest in the world. Furthermore, South Korea's labor-force participation rate among women is the fifth-lowest among the 29 EU and OECD countries as per a report on Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI). The authors of the report see a "continued prevalence of traditional ideas about family and gender roles." On a related note, Shim Sang-jeung, the highest-ranked female presidential candidate of the progressive Justice Party received only 2.4% of the vote as compared to 6.2% in 2017, exposing the crisis in which the political left now finds itself in South Korea.

A Tricky Political Situation

Over the years, election campaigns have become almost completely personalized and devoid of political agendas. Negative campaigning now delves into character flaws of the candidates and even of their wives. Particularly shocking is how vital issues, such as the extreme environmental degradation in South Korea or how the country plans to combat climate change fail to feature in presidential debates. South Korea has the lowest share of renewable energy among the 41 countries examined by the SGI report. A later report takes the view that South Korea "is more focused on [its] growth aspect than on environmental protection."

It is difficult to predict the direction the Yoon administration will take during its five-year tenure which begins on May 10. As a political and administrative novice, Yoon will rely on his party and the bureaucracy. When it comes to economic and social policies, Yoon – the son of a market-liberal economics professor – promised to reduce government interventions. However, he is likely to make little headway because his party does not have a majority in the parliament. The DP commands a strong majority with 172 out of 300 seats. It can shoot down Yoon's economic policies even though it may not have the two-thirds majority needed to override presidential vetoes, amend the constitution, or impeach the president.

While the South Korean president has strong constitutional powers and can rule by decrees, his ability to impose radical changes without proper legislation is limited. If the president ends up in a standoff with parliament, the country could end up in political gridlock. This might cause instability or, on a more positive note, inaugurate a new era of cooperation and compromises between the two camps or even a complete reorganization of political parties. Yoon's election has upped the political ante for the country. Now, all parties are focused on the next parliamentary election in 2024.

Foreign Policy Ambitions

If things seem rocky on the domestic front, they are better when it comes to foreign policy. For a long time, relations with North Korea, China, Japan and the US have been one of few ideological divisions between the two large parties. Moon's presidency adopted the classic DP agenda of engaging North Korea to achieve an as-yet unfulfilled goal of signing a peace treaty or at least an end-of-war declaration. The PPP fiercely opposed the DP on this issue.

Conflict with North Korea has long been a means for the conservative PPP to rally its supporters. Members of the PPP also fear that a peace treaty would undermine South Korea's alliance with the US, risking the withdrawal of American troops.

Yoon is likely to use the PPP's excellent ties with the US to strengthen the US-South Korea alliance. His government is likely to repair relations with Japan. Japan-South Korea relations have deteriorated due to friction over Japanese reparations for its colonial atrocities in Korea. Closer ties to the US and Japan will give Yoon less leeway in dealing with China and Russia. When it comes to the war in Ukraine, Yoon is likely to put South Korea more firmly on the US side and against Russia. Under the new president, South Korea, Japan and the US are likely to come closer together to strengthen the rules-based international order in Asia.

***Thomas Kalinowski** is a professor of political science at Ewha Womans University's Graduate School of International Studies in Seoul.

Jacob Zuma Threatens to Bring South Africa to its Knees If He Is Jailed

Martin Plaut
April 19, 2022

The former president's supporters threaten to resort to violence again in a deeply divided country, putting its democracy on the line and its economy in peril.

The former President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, is the glowering figure who looms large over the country's future. The 80-year-old is determined that never again will he suffer the ignominy of being jailed — despite being charged with hundreds of counts of corruption in a case that has dragged on for nearly 17 years. Zuma has pleaded not guilty to corruption, money laundering and racketeering in a 1990s \$2 billion arms deal that he promoted.

To head off any chance of being imprisoned, he has deployed the so-called “Stalingrad defense.” This is a term for a legal strategy of stalling proceedings based on technicalities. Zuma's lawyers are fighting every attempt to put him before a judge on the basis of arcane technicalities. Finally, this strategy is wearing thin and Zuma's supporters are now resorting to alternative tactics.

Past Precedent

This is not the first time that Zuma faces time in prison. Last year, the Constitutional Court of South Africa found Zuma guilty of contempt of court and sentenced him to jail for 15 months. Zuma's supporters took to the streets in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. They blocked roads, assaulted people, and looted and burned supermarkets.

When Zuma's legal team were in court on April 11, they reminded the court of what had happened. They warned the judge that the riots that ensued after his jail sentence last year resulted in the deaths of more than 350 people. Zuma's lawyers claimed that the riots “were partly motivated or sparked, to whatever extent, by a sense of public outrage at perceived injustice and special treatment of Mr Zuma.” They were making an obvious threat.

It is important to put Zuma's July 2021 riots in context. The country's most notorious mass killing remains the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960. This occurred during the era of apartheid. The massacre cost 69 lives as the police fired into a crowd. The Zuma riots cost many more lives than the Sharpeville massacre.

To contain these riots, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa had to deploy 25,000 troops. He admitted that he had no prior warning from his intelligence services of the scale of the unrest. This is unsurprising. Zuma was an intelligence agent for the African National Congress (ANC) and has strong links with South Africa's security services. As the South African media have reported: "Former senior security agency and ANC members aligned with Jacob Zuma have allegedly instigated the unrest in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. Citing sources in the intelligence community...these former agency members used intelligence networks to spark the riots."

The government made promises to bring those who instigated the Zuma riots to justice. Duduzile Zuma-Sambundla, Zuma's daughter, was one of those accused of stoking the riots. She and none of the major figures allegedly behind the Zuma riots have been held accountable. Of the 3,000 suspects arrested, all of them have been small-fry.

Constitutional Challenge And Risk of Becoming a Failed State

Like a latter-day Samson, the former president is threatening to bring down the South African constitutional order around him. Those close to Zuma have threatened both the judges and the constitutional order itself. The South African constitution, shaped under Nelson Mandela is today questioned by factions of the ANC who want to make the judiciary and the constitution subservient to the political establishment.

Many ANC leaders, keen to stave off allegations of wrongdoing, have muttered darkly about the constitution for years.

KwaZulu-Natal Premier Sihle Zikalala recently criticized the courts, saying "It is time we should debate whether the country does not need parliamentary democracy where laws enacted by Parliament should be above all and not reviewed by another organ..." Ironically, Zikalala is calling for a return to parliamentary supremacy — the hallmark of the apartheid years.

There is a real cost to such maneuvers by ANC politicians. In its December conference, the party will elect a new leadership. If some ANC members have their way, they could even remove Ramaphosa, although this seems unlikely as of now. Nevertheless, the ANC's branches and its provincial structures are experiencing a bitter battle between the pro- and anti-Zuma factions. These factions are fighting for the support of the ANC's 1.5 million members in meetings across the country, some of which are turning violent.

While the ANC is locked in internal battles, there are warnings that South Africa might be turning into a failed state. The government has failed to provide many essential public services already. The railways have been vandalized and looted so severely that no trains have run in the Eastern Cape since January 7. Critical coal and iron ore exports are grinding to a halt because of cable theft that has gone unchecked for years because of South Africa's systemic corruption. As per Bloomberg, "more than \$2 billion in potential coal, iron ore and chrome exports were lost" in 2021.

The failure of the electricity supply system is so chronic that it is hardly remarked upon. In the Cape, the opposition Democratic Alliance has plans to dump the state electricity provider — Eskom — and establish its own power supply.

In a September 2020 report, Eunomix warned that "bar a meaningful change of trajectory, South Africa will be a failed state by 2030." The remarks were echoed in March this year by the treasury director general Dondo

Mogajane. He took the view that, if South Africa continued on its present path, it could indeed become a ‘failed state’ with “no confidence in the government, anarchy and absolutely no control in society.”

In April, Ramaphosa was forced to respond to Mogajane. The president adamantly declared that South Africa was “not a failed state yet and we will not get there.” Ramaphosa claimed that his government was taking steps to rebuild South Africa’s capacity and fight corruption. This claim remains an admirable but unfulfilled ambition.

Zuma has not been brought to court and his associates are locked in battle with Ramaphosa’s supporters for control of the ANC and the country. Meanwhile, growth rates slide, unemployment rockets and poverty remains endemic. Even as South Africa is on the slide, the world’s attention is elsewhere. This is a tragedy. Africa could lose one of its few genuine democracies and see the collapse of its largest economy.

***Martin Plaut** is the former Africa editor of BBC World Service News.

Why Did the Pakistani Parliament Pass a Vote of No-Confidence against Imran Khan?

Syed Zain Abbas Rizvi
April 21, 2022

Economic incompetence, not foreign interference, led to the fall of a populist prime minister who promised much but failed to deliver.

The unprecedented political drama finally concluded with a successful vote of no-confidence in the National

Assembly, Pakistan’s lower house of parliament. On April 9, the National Assembly of Pakistan ousted Prime Minister Imran Khan in a late-night vote. After an entire day full of dilatory tactics and backstage negotiations, the opposition bloc ultimately cobbled together 174 members to vote in favor of the resolution — two more than the required 172 vote threshold. Sudden resignations from both the speaker and the deputy speaker allowed Sardar Ayaz Sadiq to take charge. He is a former speaker of the National Assembly and a senior leader of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), known as PML-N. With Sadiq in the speaker’s chair, Khan became the first Pakistani prime minister to lose a no-confidence vote in parliament.

Economic Collapse, Not Foreign Conspiracy Led to Fall

Khan claimed there was a foreign conspiracy to oust him. He tried to subvert both the parliament and the judiciary to cling on to power. Yet his claims of a foreign hand in his ouster appear overly exaggerated. In three years and eight months as prime minister, Khan was known more for headlines than for results. He was vocal on the incendiary Kashmir issue where he sought US intervention. Khan was in the limelight for visiting China for the Winter Olympics and for visiting Russia even as Russian troops invaded Ukraine. For all his flirtation with China and Russia, Khan did little to hurt US interests in the region. In fact, Khan was a middleman between the US and the Taliban that led to the Doha Agreement. He facilitated the peaceful takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, allowing US troops to withdraw from the region.

The real reason Khan was voted out of the prime minister’s office is his lack of competence in economic matters. Inflation has run persistently high and stood at 12.7% in March. Not all of it is Khan’s fault. Commodity and energy prices have been surging. However, Khan’s government presided over the greatest

increase in public debt in Pakistan's history. The nation's debt went up by over \$99 billion (18 trillion Pakistani rupees). This unleashed inflationary pressures in the economy and caused the economy to enter free fall.

Pakistan's foreign currency reserves dropped dramatically. On March 25, these reserves were \$12,047.3 million. By April 1, they had fallen to \$11.32 billion, a loss of \$728 million in a mere six days. The Pakistani rupee also fell to a record low of 191 to the dollar.

What Next for Pakistan?

After the ouster of Khan, PML-N leader Shahbaz Sharif has taken over. He is known as a competent administrator. Political analysts believe that Sharif would pivot Pakistan toward a traditional foreign policy vis-à-vis the US and Europe. His government has already resumed talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It will try its best to avail the remaining \$3 billion under the IMF's \$6 billion loan program more speedily to stabilize its foreign exchange reserves and strengthen the rupee.

Political uncertainty was roiling markets. They might settle now that a new government is in charge. Pakistan faces a tricky situation, both politically and economically. Khan still has ardent supporters and the country is divided. The economy is perhaps at its lowest ebb at a time when the risk of a global recession is running high. To navigate such a critical period, a coalition government formed by an alliance of seasoned politicians might be a blessing for Pakistan.

***Syed Zain Abbas Rizvi** is a political and economic analyst. He focuses on geopolitical policymaking and international affairs.

A Confused Atheist's Pilgrimage of Indian Holy Sites

Ruyintan E. Mehta

April 23, 2022

Reflections after a pilgrimage in 2016 to shrines of different religions have left me more confused than ever about faith and god.

My wife and I are not religious. Monica was raised as a Gujarati Hindu while I grew up in an orthodox Parsi family in Ahmedabad, India. Formal religion — hers or mine — plays no role in our day-to-day lives. Both of us studied in the same convent elementary school and then in a Jesuit college, before she went on to medical college and I joined the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay. Marrying her in 1972 was a VERY BIG DEAL in my family, as I was the first one to marry a Parjat (a non-Parsi). After 44 years of marriage, two wonderful sons and four grandchildren, our family has become truly diverse with Polish and Chinese daughters-in-law. Since both of us are officially senior citizens, we decided to take a tour of some of the holiest places for the different Indian religious groups.

I am not an expert on comparative religions, I simply consider myself more of a curious outsider who critically observes the characteristics of each religious practice in India and develops his own impressions.

Old Goa — Basilica of Bom Jesus — Holiest Church for Catholics in India

In early January 2016, the 1970 IIT Bombay batch had its sapphire reunion, an event to celebrate 45 years of our graduation, in Goa. As part of our tour, we visited the Basilica of Bom Jesus, where St. Francis Xavier's sacred relics lie. Incidentally my high school was named after him. The church was

majestically built in the colonial Portuguese days. But the visit was more akin to a tour of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan — people in organized groups following a guide speaking in hushed tones with no shoving and pushing going on.

To be honest, the fact that the saint's body has remained intact did not make a great impression on me. All throughout my school days, there was always an undercurrent of resentment in our mandatory Moral Science class taught by Jesuit Fathers. This might have been due to the fact that the Portuguese and the British imposed Christian faiths on Indians who were primarily Hindu and Muslim. Those feelings from over 50 years ago came flashing back to me as I walked through the basilica.

Amritsar, Punjab — Golden Temple — Holiest Gurdwara for Sikhs in the World

In 2016, we visited the Golden temple twice – first around 10pm on August 26 and then again on the following morning. The temple was surrounded by a large water-filled moat and at night it really glowed like a large Golden structure. There were literally thousands of devoted visitors; more than 95% were Sikh men, women and children. We were all asked to cover our heads, wash our feet and walk barefoot. The caretakers, called sevadars, were polite but quite stern and kept people in check. We saw the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy religious scripture of Sikhism, being ceremoniously taken from the inner sanctum, called Harmandir, to the Akal Takht, the seat of power, for the night. Dozens of religious Sikhs wanted to touch the Palkhi, the carrier in which the Holy Book was placed, in order to get blessings. Walking around the entire square was a memorable experience.

The following morning, we stood in a long line to get into the inner sanctum and were able to partake in some excellent sweet halwa given to everyone as prasad, an offering to the gods. I found remarkable that during our two visits to

the Golden Temple, no one ever asked for alms. Also, considering the large crowds, the place was remarkably clean. Most of the services and management at the temple was conducted by Sikh volunteers. This was an exceptional feature not seen at other religious places we visited. I was really touched by the selflessness shown by the Sikh community.

Varanasi aka Banares, Uttar Pradesh — The Holiest of the Seven Sacred Cities in Hinduism and Sarnath — One of The Holiest Places for Buddhists

From the Golden Temple in Amritsar we made our way to the ancient city of Varanasi, which many Hindus deem the holiest of cities. We arrived in the city on August 28. Just a couple of days earlier the Ganga River had flooded over its banks making it impossible to climb down the ghats, its flight of steps. Our day started with a chaotic drive through the heart of dirty Varanasi towards the famous Kashi Vishwanath Shiva temple. After parking the car, we walked over a mile through narrow and shockingly filthy lanes. It was sad to see the emaciated cows eating garbage and plastic wrappers. To call a cow “holy” and then treat the poor animal in such a disgusting manner is almost criminal.

At first the police guards outside the Kashi Vishwanath temple would not allow Monica and myself to enter the temple. Luckily our guide intervened and we could visit the temple on condition that we left our US passports with the inspectors. Before entering the temple, we had to buy some items for the puja, an offering to the gods, in order to make the merchant who was guarding our shoes and other belongings happy. The Shiva Mandir's inner sanctum was rather underwhelming with all the worshippers hustled in and out within minutes. The place was unkempt and not up to my expectations. Or maybe it was just my skepticism about religion that made me focus on the negatives. In my opinion, Varanasi takes the first prize in being

the filthiest city in India with little or no civic sense. But to my great surprise whenever we mentioned this fact to the locals, they looked amazed and pointed out that the city had never had an epidemic of malaria or plague like other Indian cities. Even many of the educated folks sincerely believed that Ganga Maiya, which literally means Mother Ganges in the Hindi language, took care of all these issues as a divine matter. The next day we visited Sarnath, only about 13 kilometers from Varanasi. It remains one of the holiest places in Buddhism. The temple receives an extremely large number of tourists from Southeast Asia and particularly the Sinhalese Buddhists from Sri Lanka. Unlike Hindu temples, the Buddhist place of worship was austere, clean and neat. There was an aura of peace and quiet we had never experienced on previous occasions. We also stopped by the Dhamek and Chaukhandi Stupas – one of them erected by Emperor Ashoka who ruled in the 3rd century BCE. These commemorative monuments are massive structures and a real archeological rarity.

Jaipur to Ajmer to Visit Pushkar — A Rare Hindu Brahma Temples and the Holy Muslim Ajmer Sharif Dargah

We continued our 2016 pilgrimage through North Central India to Jaipur, Rajasthan. On August 31 we reached Pushkar about 14 kilometers from Ajmer and walked for quite a while to one of the five most sacred dhams, pilgrimage sites, at the Pushkar Lake. The Brahma temple that we visited was built in the 14th century. According to legend, there are only a few Brahma temples in India because the god's wife, blinded by jealousy, cursed him that he wouldn't be worshipped anymore on earth. At this site we had quite an unpleasant adventure with the pujari, the temple priest in charge of the puja. When we refused to pay the entire big sum of money he had asked for to perform the ritual, the priest attacked us claiming that our children and grandchildren would suffer as a

result. Needless to say, I gave in to his request, but the whole experience left me quite disillusioned with the significance of religious ceremonies.

After Pushkar, we drove to Ajmer Sharif Dargah of Moinuddin Chishti, a revered Muslim shrine visited by over 100,000 pilgrims a day. Despite being quite crowded, the place was surprisingly clean like the Sikh Golden Temple. My late mother- and father-in-law who were Hindus, used to send money through their Muslim servants to offer a chaddar, a sheet offered in devotion, at the Ajmer Sharif Dargah. In honor of their beliefs, my wife requested one of the Muslim priests to conduct a short prayer ceremony and asked him about the charge. Unlike the aggressive Hindu priest at Pushkar, the Maulvi replied that we could offer whatever sum we wished. For an offering of 2,000 rupees, they prepared an elaborate wicker basket with flowers and fruits and I had to carry it on my head into the inner sanctum of the Dargah. It was an interesting and enjoyable experience. We also saw a huge pot in which rice and dal were cooked. The food was to be distributed to the poor outside the Dargah. Tirupati via Hyderabad — Tirumala

Venkateswara Temple — Holiest Temple in South India

On September 1 we flew to Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh. After checking into the hotel, we visited the fanciest Sari Palace in town. So, while chatting to the shop owner, we accidentally learned that it would be rather difficult to do a Tirupati Temple Darshan without prior approval from a local official. But everything has a price in India. We were informed that if we gave a substantial baksheesh, a tip, to a certain individual, we would be given immediate access to the world-famous Tirumala Venkateswara Temple's inner sanctum. For this special visit, called darshan, women have to wear a sari or a long plain churidar dress, with tight fitting trousers, while

men wear a dhoti and angavastram, a long sarong and a shoulder cloth.

So we purchased the necessary clothes and then patiently waited for a call in our hotel room. At around 9.30pm an inspector with the Vigilance and Anti-Corruption Department with the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) announced he would be our guide and was willing to take us for a very special darshan that same night. We quickly dressed with the right apparel and followed him. Everything about the temple was highly organized in a businesslike manner. We cut across huge lines of pilgrims because of our special dispensation and were allowed to stop and observe the deity of Lord Venkateswara for well over five minutes, whereas others were hustled out with no more than 30 seconds of darshan.

All of this special dispensation came at a heavy price. The next day we were asked to give the inspector who had arranged our visit, a princely sum of 10,000 rupees. Our driver got visibly upset because we were treated as “foreigners.” He claimed that we had been overcharged and that the inspector had taken full advantage of our ignorance. Later that day we also visited a couple of other temples and everywhere the business approach was the same. It felt more like going to a shopping mall than to a temple. No wonder that the TTD Trust receives over \$30 million just in admission tickets and the sale of laddus, sweets, generates a staggering revenue stream exceeding \$10 million. All other donations are probably 100 times more than the numbers mentioned above. The TTD trust does run several universities and claims to conduct many charitable activities.

Bombay — Zoroastrian Atash Behram — The End of Our India Pilgrim Tour

When Islam came to Persia, some Zoroastrians fled to India. Since then, members of this community have been called Parsis in honor of the land of their origin. In Bombay, I decided to complete our pilgrim tour by visiting all four of

the holiest Parsi fire temples called Atash Behrams, which means the fire of victory. This is the highest grade of a fire that can be placed in a Zoroastrian fire temple as an eternal flame. The other two lower graded fires are Atash Adaran and below is the Atash Dadfah. These three grades signify the degree of reverence and dignity these are held in.

As I mentioned at the beginning, my wife was raised as a Hindu and non-Parsis are not allowed to enter these places of worship, therefore on September 4, 2016, I visited on my own the Banaji Atash Behram (AB) on Charni road in Bombay, followed by the Wadiaji AB in Dhobi Talao, then the Anjuman AB also in Dhobi Talao and the last Dadseth AB in Fanaswadi, Chira Bazaar area.

What came as a great shock to me was, unlike all the other crowded temples we had visited, the ultra neat and clean Atash Behrams were almost empty and there were more priests than lay people. I am a 67-year-old senior citizen, but the vast majority of the Parsis praying in these temples appeared to be much older than me. All the Hindu, Christian, Sikh and Muslim places of worship were teeming with young children, whereas in the Atash Behrams I didn't see any. It is a known fact that the Parsis are a dying breed in India. With our intolerance of not admitting any non-Parsis into our fire temples and the most outrageously offensive policy of disbarring a Parsi female who marries a non-Parsi in India from entering our fire temples and treating her children likewise, the Zoroastrian Parsi population will continue to diminish rapidly. Now there are only 53,000 Parsis remaining in India and about 110,000 worldwide. At this rate, Parsis will be wiped out in 50 to 75 years unless the orthodox extremists lose their stranglehold on the fast-declining community.

More Confused Than Ever

Indian society is quite religious. In daily life, religion often plays a big role in people's lives.

Many people make pilgrimages to holy sites and places of worship to thank god/gods, seek blessings and make wishes. I went to places of worship in a spirit of curiosity. I wanted to see if there was something about religion that I had been missing over all these years.

One striking thing occurred to me. There is great spiritual energy among the people who go on pilgrimages. Each of them have their own hopes, desires and beliefs. Yet while the places of worship appeared to be lush with cash, the poor do not seem to benefit from this wealth. Their religiosity benefits the places of worship and the custodians of such places.

As I said earlier, I went on this pilgrim tour with an open mind. I hoped to escape my state of “confused atheism,” achieve a deeper understanding of the religious practices and, as a result, become a better person. However, the two weeks of traveling the length and breadth of India increased my disenchantment and disillusionment with religion. Thanks to my 2016 pilgrimage, I remain even more of a confused atheist.

***Ruyintan E. Mehta** is a serial entrepreneur in plastics manufacturing. He was the president of the IIT Bombay Heritage Foundation, the US alumni association of his alma mater.

The Taliban-Occupied Afghanistan Threatens Global Security

Atul Singh and Tabish Forugh
April 23, 2022

The Taliban provide inspiration, ideology, organization, support and expertise to Islamic fundamentalists from around the world and especially South Asia who will flock to Afghanistan to attend finishing school in terror.

As Ukraine dominates headlines, Afghanistan has receded into the background. This has happened before. After the mujahideen wore out the Soviet Red Army, the US forgot about Afghanistan. To be fair, there was a lot going on. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Soviet Union itself collapsed in 1991. Washington was worrying about thousands of nukes that could go missing instead of the caves of Tora Bora.

In hindsight, this neglect of Afghanistan was unwise. It cost the US much blood and treasure. The Taliban emerged in the 1990s in Pakistan. It took over Afghanistan and ran a barbarous regime, stoning women to death and decapitating people in public. For a while, all these things seemed far away. That changed on 9/11. What happened in Afghanistan did not stay in Afghanistan. Those attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon still haunt the US.

History is repeating itself. Yet again, Europe is in turmoil. Conflict in Ukraine has proved all-absorbing for Washington. After 20 years, the Taliban are back in power in Afghanistan. They are battle-hardened, more resourceful and savvy than in their earlier avatar. They are no less dangerous though.

In much of the Islamic world, anti-American and anti-Western sentiment runs high. The Taliban are seen as the David that has brought down a Goliath. In Central and South Asia, the Taliban have particular appeal. A new generation of jihadists are looking to the Taliban for inspiration now that the Islamic State no longer has the same allure as it once did. Even as many countries engage with the Taliban, they present a growing threat to global security just as they did in the 1990s.

The Taliban Inspire Pakistan's Terror Factories

In the eyes of fundamentalist Islamists, the Pashtun-led Taliban have a new halo. They are seen as successors of the mujahideen that brought the Soviet Union to its knees. Now, the

Taliban have humbled none other than mighty Uncle Sam. They are Allah's chosen soldiers, role models for terror groups around the world and especially in South Asia.

Already, Pakistan is feeling the pain of creating a Frankenstein's monster. The Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an alliance of militant networks formed in 2007 and inspired by the Taliban, has been attacking Pakistani soldiers, policemen and civilians for a while. Most recently, they reportedly ambushed a military convoy near the Afghanistan border, killing seven Pakistani soldiers. In retaliation, the Pakistani military has carried out airstrikes in eastern Afghanistan on what they deemed to be TTP sanctuaries. Witnesses say dozens of people, including women and children have died. Many more have been injured. Instead of solving the terror problem afflicting Pakistan, this will add fuel to the fire and provide the TTP with fresh recruits.

Pakistan finds itself in a bind. It has been running with the hares and hunting with the hounds for much too long. During the War on Terror, Pakistan sold itself to Washington as a partner, even if an unreliable one, that would contain terror in both Afghanistan and Pakistan that is often referred to as AfPak region. At the same time, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) kept supporting the Taliban and other anti-India jihadi groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

This double game along with the failure of the Pakistani state to provide basic services such as health and education has fostered a desperation among a fast-growing population. About 64% of the population is under 30. Madrassas, hardline Islamic schools, have stepped in to fill the void. About 17,000 of them provide free education to nearly two million students with even five-year-olds memorizing and reciting the Quran without understanding Arabic. The 9-11 Commission's report found Pakistani madrassas were "incubators for violent extremism."

Graduates of these madrassas have long had their uses for Pakistani elites. From 1947 itself, these elites have been paranoid about the lack of strategic depth vis-à-vis India and ethnic nationalism in its western provinces. When Bangladesh won its independence in 1971, these fears were exacerbated. Since then, Pakistan has doubled down on intolerant political Islam while failing to tackle endemic poverty and endemic corruption. With a misplaced sense of both paranoia and grandeur, Pakistani elites have packed off poor graduates of madrassas to fight jihads even as they have sent their own children to Dubai, London and New York. Now, some of these madrassas graduates are turning against the Pakistani state itself.

Trouble Brews in Rest of South Asia

The Taliban are inspiring many Indian Muslims too. Most people in the West do not realize that the ideology that inspires the Taliban comes from India. When the British crushed the 1857 Indian uprising and abolished Mughal rule in 1858, this caused dismay among many traditional Muslims. Some of them founded the Darul Uloom Deoband seminary in 1866 to the northeast of Delhi. They taught their students that Indian Muslims would be able to resist British rule by returning to core principles of Islam. This puritanical Deobandi ideology spread in British India and later in Pakistan as well as Afghanistan. In recent years, it has outcompeted the tolerant Persianate Sufi tradition of Islam in the subcontinent, which has peacefully coexisted with indigenous Indian spiritual traditions for centuries.

In multireligious and multiethnic India, Deobandi clerics are celebrating the victory of the Taliban over "the defeat of a superpower such as the US." They point to the collapse of the more numerous American-trained Afghanistan National Security and Defense Forces (ANDSF) as proof of the special powers of the Taliban. Many Muslims resent India's

ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which believes in reclaiming India's pre-Islamic heritage. Some BJP leaders use inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric. Some opposition leaders fan the flames of Muslim insecurity to win votes. Loose talk by the likes of Shashi Tharoor who writes about Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "anti-Muslim jihad" gives great propaganda material for jihadists.

Quickly forgotten is the fact that Modi's BJP government is sending 50,000 tons of wheat to a Taliban-occupied Afghanistan. The reality for Indian Muslims might not be rosy but it is not as grim as Tharoor paints it to be. Being Ahmadi in Pakistan or Hazara in Afghanistan is far more hazardous. The Pakistani parliament decreed that Ahmadis were non-Muslims as early as 1974 and this Islamic sect has faced increasing persecution since. Hazaras, a Shia ethnic group, have consistently been targeted by the Taliban who are fundamentalist Sunnis. Together, extreme Hindu rhetoric and Tharoor's scaremongering are strengthening the hands of Islamic fundamentalists inspired by the Taliban. Muslim parents have been agonizing over the radicalization of their children, a trend that could accelerate with the victory of the Taliban.

Fundamentalist Islamists are also on the rise in Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka and even Nepal. Except for Bhutan, Islamic fundamentalism has been a threat to peace and stability of all nations. Bangladesh's syncretic Muslim tradition has been under threat for decades thanks to the rise of extremism. Maldives is experiencing what The Economist has called "an ominous rise of intolerant Islam" thanks to Saudi money flowing into and Salafist ideology taking over its mosques. Once Saudi-funded, the Taliban inspires many in the Maldives.

Sri Lanka's marginalized Muslim community has proved to be a fertile breeding ground for fundamentalist Islamic ideologies.

In Nepal, Muslims have become "active participants in the larger global movement of Sunni revival," adding greater instability to an already turbulent nation. Such fundamentalist Sunni movements are energized by the Taliban's victory over the US.

Unfortunately, South Asian states are unprepared for this rising Talibanization of Islam. They even lack critical political and strategic insights into the implications of the victory of the Taliban. Islamic fundamentalists from around the world and especially from South Asia will inevitably come to Afghanistan for the finishing school of terror. This has happened before. In the 1980s, young Arab Sunni ideologues and fighters such as Abdullah Azam, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden came to fight jihad in Afghanistan.

Then as now, Washington took its eye off the ball in this part of the world. After all, they had to sort out post-Soviet Eastern Europe and the successor states to the Soviet Union itself. The ball though, as the late Congressman Charlie Wilson apocryphally said, "keeps on bouncing," and is likely to hit us in the face before too long.

***Atul Singh** is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer.

***Tabish Forugh** is a contributing editor at Fair Observer. He is a policy analyst and a former Reagan-Fascell Democracy fellow of the National Endowment for Democracy.

Convergent Conversation – In fact VR is Possible, Bill!

Peter Isackson
April 28, 2022

As with everything else in a culture dominated by economics, the real problem is

that both realism and humility have become, if not impossible, then unadvisable, which is even worse.

Bill, On the topic of Virtual Reality (VR) and human experience that you so persuasively deconstructed in your recent article, I'd like to take the debate a bit further. I expect that whatever we might say today will not end the debate about whether VR should be embraced as something that expands our horizons or whether we should reject it as impertinent, immoral or unhealthy. You have made an excellent case for the prosecution, proving that VR is not only bad for one's health but contradictory with neurological reality.

First, let me thank you not just for the data and scientific principles you've provided, but especially for a style of insight we rarely see in the media. By style I also mean substance. I'll dare to call what you have formulated an example of the "integrated scientific style." In contrast with much of the science that appears in the media, your approach embraces the full complexity of the physical and neurological universe, without neglecting actual human experience.

The style we have become used to in journalism — even scientific journalism — is one that too often abusively separates the specific domains of scientific endeavor, insulating them from one another. We get a plethora of articles about physics, the mind and technology, each of which tends to remain within its silo. It is typically descriptive rather than analytical. It rarely reveals a sense of real-life consequences. It tends to develop a self-consistent logic that avoids confrontation with the real world. It should nevertheless be easy to recognize that anything we humans can hope to make sense of and learn from concerning the physical environment and its technological applications requires balancing some mix of both physics and brain science.

Why the kind of insight you have shared

with us is so rare is a point worth delving into. But let's save that for a different discussion. As a non-scientist, my interest in understanding VR stems from the fact that many voices in the media are confidently predicting that VR is destined to be a dominant part of our culture in a near but undefined future. I suspect that message has more to do with the way our economy works than with scientific or even psychological reality. But that is yet another topic it might be interesting to explore on another occasion.

VR provides a useful service

Let me begin by playing the devil's advocate. VR may be as dangerous as you make out, but it certainly has its merits. I speak from experience. The company that recently supplied my new kitchen offered to produce a VR simulation giving me an accurate idea of what I would get if I committed to their offer. The experience was convincing. I recognized the space I appeared to be moving in and saw how it could be transformed. I signed the contract, made a down payment and when my kitchen was installed months later, I recognized in the real world what I had experienced through VR months earlier.

Based on that use case, I would recommend that kind of VR experience. It helped in my decision-making and the result did not disappoint. Of course, I only spent about 45 seconds exploring my future kitchen and thus had little opportunity to feel the effects of nausea.

So that's it. That's my argument in favor of VR. Like any technology that does something previously impossible, it's instructive to assess the simple services it can provide. On the other hand, as someone who is considered an expert on technology and learning, I remain skeptical about what a purely illusory visual experience can do in the way of building understanding or skill. Unlike a professional flight simulator, where the operational physical environment is

fully duplicated for direct human interaction, VR seems to me so sensorily impoverished that although it can help to establish a sense of topological relationships, it risks creating sensorial disassociation rather than the kind of complex associations that true learning develops. That is one of the reasons why informal learning – especially in situ – has greater impact than every form of formal learning.

My experience visualizing my future kitchen that lasted less than a full minute has little to do with what people like Mark Zuckerberg are aiming at. As a convenient means of processing limited information about an environment or understanding spatial relationships, VR seems to me to deliver on its promise. But what Zuckerberg and others want, to the point of investing billions in it, is something that, like Facebook itself, is designed not to solve immediate problems but to devour people's attention and remove them from reality.

VR and hyperreality

My main argument against VR is therefore different from the one you develop in the article, which is why I found yours so interesting. Anyone who has read my columns in recent years has probably had the occasion to discover my discomfort with what Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco called hyperreality, a carefully cultivated strategy that serves to distort our perception of the social, political and economic environment. It seeks to substitute for the understanding of our relationship with reality the experience of an artificially constructed network of associations that serve two purposes: generating income (for example, Disneyland, Las Vegas or Dubai) and establishing a framework of beliefs not just about what is desirable and what isn't, but also about what can be considered natural and therefore real.

Hyperreality didn't need VR to come into existence for it to begin its political and

economic quest to homogenize popular culture. The process began with the modification of material reality itself. You might say the transformation of Manhattan, a horizontal island situated between two rivers, into a vertical forest of skyscrapers – one of which King Kong could perch himself upon to swat at human-crafted flying machines – marked the beginning of the triumph of hyperreality. But of course, cinema preceded that and encouraged it. In any case, hyperreal culture was a major consequence of the industrial revolution or at least couldn't have come into being without it.

Hyperreality is essentially a mind game that nevertheless also uses a wide range of technologies to transform the way we see and understand the things that act upon us and with which we can interact. It redefines our relationships with the world in ways that directly contradict reality, while paradoxically convincing us that it may be preferable to reality because we feel it is "ours." The late David Graeber, expressing his disappointment that well into the 21st century we still don't have the flying cars we were promised decades ago, calls what we got in its place a "celebration of the endless play of images and surfaces."

VR is hyperreality on steroids. It not only duplicates but exaggerates the notional and ideological framework our civilization has constructed to account for reality in a way that is in direct contradiction with what our senses tell us. For example, imaginary space, like the real space we see in the night sky or in the open desert, should be understood as boundless and independent of human control or ownership. But the metaverse has already been divided into plots of real estate with hefty price tags. It is immaterial but it is designed to obey laws that we apply to material things. Instead of liberating the mind and the imagination, it further constrains both.

Unlike the hyperreality we have been exposed to since the advent of marketing and

PR (thank you, Edward Bernays!), VR works by removing reality altogether. It substitutes a visual experience for everything else our senses perceive. I presume, however, that as it grows, VR will find ways of adding more sound effects than mere voice and maybe even some kinetic effects that add to the illusion, serving to further distract us from the fact that it has divorced us from the real world.

Proprioception & sensorimotor contingencies

Thanks again, Bill, for reminding me of phenomena that have been researched and known for some time. You sum it up with what I take to be a valid law derived from neurological science: “brains can only feel one reality at a time.” Twenty years ago, I read Alva Noë’s book, *Action in Perception*, which has somehow regrettably disappeared from my library. One key idea I took away from it was his complaint that the way we think about perception disproportionately privileges vision over the other senses. You seem to be saying something similar.

In an article for *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Noë claims that “vision is a mode of exploration of the world that is mediated by knowledge of what we call sensorimotor contingencies.” So here’s my question to you. Am I wrong in thinking that the question of sensorimotor contingencies is related to the reality of that much neglected but profoundly physical concept we call proprioception? It’s a phenomenon that played an important role in the practices of a team I worked with decades ago to optimize foreign language learning. Do you agree that what all the contingencies Noë claims are producing together is our sense of where we are in the world, and maybe even of where the world is in us? And that without the contingencies we are literally lost?

I’ve often claimed that the Artificial Intelligence singularity will never happen for one reason: there is no way of algorithmically creating proprioception. AI can imitate and

even accelerate the processes of intelligence. It can animate a robot whose sensors interpret the physical environment. But isn’t there a metaphysical barrier to endowing it with proprioception?

Bill, I’m sure your understanding of the science behind these phenomena will help me and others make sense of not only VR, AI and technology in general, but of who we are and what our own operating systems require. I’m looking forward to your insights.

***Peter Isackson** is the chief strategy officer at Fair Observer, an author and media producer.
