

‘Back to the Future 4’: Creative Destruction & The Re-emergence of the Rational Meme

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Having read David Deutsch’s incredibly thought provoking book, “*The Beginning of Infinity*”, I was struck by the wisdom of his thoughts on culture.

On culture, Deutsch argues convincingly about the ability of memes, that is, the self-replicating cultural thought that is analogous to genes, to transform societies over time. Deutsch points to the short-lived but profound impact of the ‘Golden Age’ of



Classical Athens (508-322BCE) and the Italian Renaissance (1330-1550CE) which were the precursors to

the European Enlightenment (1600-1800), which over time, sparked more and more human ingenuity and creativity on the European continent that was then transferred to North America and to a lesser degree, to non-European entrepôts and colonies elsewhere in Africa, Asia, Oceania and South America.

One of Deutsch’s main points is that dynamic thought from one society can transfer over distance to influence non-dynamic, or ‘static societies’, like a virus infects its host. Sometimes this has the effect

of destroying a static society outright because of the static society’s inability to adapt to new conditions which challenge its social preconceptions. At other times, through gradual acceptance of foreign ideas, static societies transform themselves and as a consequence become more resilient and dynamic. The central theme Deutsch returns to is that people are universal creators and problem solvers, but for every rational, creative thought, there are a multiple of irrational, superstitious cogitations that often snuff out the former. It is with this in mind that we’ll reflect in the following paragraphs on global events to see whether the possible impending collapse of the current world order is something to mourn, or to celebrate.

In the media much has been made of events in the Middle East and the so-called ‘Arab



Spring’. But leaning on Deutsch’s theory of meme replication and the social context in which innovation and dynamism are the basis for true social and political change, what has been achieved during the Arab Spring so far? Yes, long-lived tyrannies were felled in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and more recently, Yemen, but nowhere have the people of these countries hit their stride in terms of offering themselves new political

and social alternatives to the abusive dictatorships that ruled them for so long. Perhaps it is still too soon to expect the deliverance of an ‘open society’ which is dominated by rational memes and makes progress, vis-à-vis a ‘static society’ which is dominated by anti-rational memes and changes so slowly that people do not notice. Or, perhaps it is because the Arab people have not known anything other than being ruled by benign or despotic rulers whether they came to power as a consequence of foreign (i.e., Western) support/intervention, or were drawn from tribal families where certain local alliances prevailed in indigenous struggles. Indeed, if one were to take a fast tour of Arab history, much of it is punctuated by the rule of royal or tribal courts with the legitimacy of the ruling elite often held together by force of arms against sometimes restive populations.

The Islamic ‘Golden Age’ (750CE-1258CE) was a period of great artistic expression and scientific inquiry before the European Enlightenment, but the political leadership



of the various centres of Islamic power were largely a product of static societies. Therefore, the political forces at play circumscribed the great Islamic discoveries in mathematics and physics. If the outcome of scientific discovery was useful as either

tools of trade, transportation or warfare, then they were adopted. If they led to inquiries that freed up political and social discourse or more importantly, challenged the preconceptions of the Muslim faith upon which most political power rested, then inquiry was quickly shut down. The fact that religion and politics never underwent the violent transformation of the European reformation and counter-reformation that essentially broke the nexus between religion and political power in Europe, once the Arab empire reached the limit of its territorial conquests, it went in decline. Questioning those in power was tantamount to questioning the will of Allah. Interestingly, Islam is a faith that *should not* be limited in terms of political, cultural, economic, technological or social evolution. There is nothing in the Koran that explicitly states that God’s will prohibits the full use of the mental faculties bestowed upon an individual by the Creator, so long as thoughts and ideas are used for ‘the good’ and are not antithetical to the teachings of Mohammed (PBUH). This might mean that certain, minor areas of scientific or social enquiry might indeed remain taboo; nonetheless there remain a vast number of sub-headings within a large number of topics to be explored by Arab Muslims to their collective benefit. Arguably what is interesting about the Arab Golden Age is the length of time it took to run its course, some 500 years. It was an age of constant warfare and conquest where one relatively static society rubbed up against another, where the strongest group often destroyed, forcefully assimilated or converted rival groups. For

the more enlightened within the Arab social elite at the time, warfare and court intrigues provided the social lubricant to keep competition and innovation going. In essence, it provided the Arab world with dynamism from which the Golden Age was a consequence. But once checks and balances were placed on Arab expansion, the wheels soon fell off the cart of inquiry and innovation. The Arab leadership became more fearful of losing control over its populace and became more introverted, thus weakening their polity and society as a whole.

As the Arab world weakened, it fell victim to other non-Arab predatory powers seeking aggrandisement, the Mongols (1236-1368), followed by the rise of the Ottoman Turks (1299-1922).

Those deliberately targeting the Arab world were, to a great degree, also tribal in nature. The Mongols, after their conquest of Arab territory, were particularly adaptable.



They voluntarily converted to Islam, recognising that Islam's lack of separation between the secular instrumentalities of state and the clergy promised a guaranteed way of controlling vast Muslim populations under their sway, and provided a better way of administering their diverse holdings.

The end of the Mongol Empire saw the rise of the Ottoman Turks. The Ottoman Empire

at its height saw much in the way of military, artistic and architectural innovation. But politically, following their Arab and Mongol predecessors, the Ottomans were not good at encouraging social and political debate. In the end, as with the Arabs and Mongols before them, after the heat of battle and conquest ended, so too did any form of technical and economic progress, making it the terminally 'Sick Man of Europe' by the mid-1800s.



So, fast-forwarding to the Arab Spring of 2011, what can possibly be in store for the Arab world of the early 21st Century?

The Arab Middle East has known one consistent truth. It is not wise to question authority, whether imposed on them by foreign interlopers, or by their own local elite. More often than not, resistance to elite rule has ended in violence – not creative violence – but violence designed to break the spirit of local resistance. There has not been a tradition of respectful or even openly rebellious politics to this day. Political, religious and social expectation to 'obey' is intertwined and ingrained in the Arab psyche. This is one of the reasons that no political opposition has managed to develop a 'meme' (within a Muslim context) of political opposition based on new ideas, new laws and a redefined concept of what it means to be a good Muslim and a

responsible but critical citizen. Consequently, in the ‘new’ Arab world – a world without Hussein (Iraq), Ben Ali (Tunisia), Mubarak (Egypt), Qaddafi (Libya) and Saleh (Yemen) does not mean that the people of these countries are going to be any more politically liberated than they were under the old dictators and kleptocrats. Indeed, it is more than likely that after a period of intense internal instability, many of these states will return to a more familiar form of stability with new dictators and kleptocrats – more ruthless and technologically adept – coming to power on the promise of democratic reform, but delivering nothing. This might be a cynical observation but in the end, the ‘social media’ revolution that brought down the old Arab dictatorships did in no way demonstrate this medium’s ability to replace those dictatorships with something genuinely new and profound. It simply introduced a new means of protest, leaving in its wake a power vacuum. Yes, people can be brought out onto the streets faster with Facebook and Twitter, but protesting without a plan provides those in control of the real power, that is the military, the interior ministries and the intelligence services, the opportunity to reimpose authority rapidly. Superimpose on this internal Arab constraint the fact that the West does not want to see genuine democracy in the Middle East for fear that an emboldened and organised Arab state may choose not to play a subordinate role, then the omens do not look good. Indeed in about five years from now, when the flurry of anti-government protests dies down, the

new Arab world might very well resemble the old Arab world unless something unexpected occurs, such as the creation, dissemination and consolidation of a new political meme that can give rise to the acceptance (within the Muslim Arab context) of critical thought, strongly organised and popularly supported democratic political parties and the willingness and ability to question secular/temporal authority.

In contrast, a region undergoing a truly fundamental power shift is Europe.

In 1993, after the signing of the landmark Maastricht Treaty, there was an expectation that following the collapse of Soviet



occupied Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union itself, a massive new democratic multi-country supranational state would emerge – the European Union. That for the first time in the history of Europe, all parts of that much fought over continent - Western, Central, Eastern, Northern and Southern Europe would come together and unify voluntarily, giving away jealously guarded multigenerational cultural, social and national independence for the common good of all Europeans. The EU would become the world’s biggest market. For this,

however, the European states would need to sacrifice age-old economic practices of nation/region-specific production in order to standardise and centralise what the EU could export. Many domestic industries collapsed – deemed old fashioned, outmoded and incompatible with EU edicts. Others were forced into ‘shot-gun’ marriages to give the impression of centralised and efficient modes of production being established to fulfil the expectations of the multitude of international, multilateral economic forums. Those who lost out in this new European order found succour in nationalist and racist right wing politics, a brand of political expression thought well and truly fringe in modern, rational Europe. Political power was gradually ceded to the EU capital, Brussels. Underwriting the economic basis for the EU was the powerful German economy. A country that after two World Wars, enforced division during the Cold War, and reunification after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from East Germany in 1989, sought to re-establish itself as the centre of the EU venture. This was considered a way of normalising itself in the eyes of other European states which found themselves victims of German predation in previous generations. However, the political, economic and social EU experiment remained incomplete without a commensurate focus on developing internal security and external security mechanisms to hold this vast enterprise together. Like Japan, the EU was a ‘soft power’ superpower. An entity without the hard power assets needed to defend its emerging identity. As such, it looked strong and

irresistible as long as nothing happened to the idea of economic growth. Had the global economy come to terms with the unsustainable levels of corporate crime that kept growth artificially high, the reckoning that we are now experiencing might not have tested the grey men in Brussels – the dispassionate bureaucrats who founded a ‘rational empire’ with no teeth.

This leads to an interesting question. Could the EU experiment actually account for a new round of European strategic and cultural dominance as occurred between the 17th-20th Centuries? The pessimistic, and arguably correct answer is ‘no’. The EU, while having fine sounding rhetoric about upholding democracy and human rights embedded within its structure, gave no thought on how it could independently uphold those values without the use of force. The memes of the EU bureaucrats were limited to the creation of a non-offensive strategic space so attractive, that no other power would dare challenge it. Furthermore, these same bureaucrats conceived of a Europe that was internally standardised and homogenised, where innovation that comes as a consequence of open competition between many different variants of similar goods and services ceases to exist, given that there would be only one type of approved EU product and service available on the international market. This style of economic and technical production is something that can only spring from a bureaucrat’s mind where the impulse to develop is confined to the lowest common denominator and the imposition of stability at all cost. Moreover,

as being currently witnessed, it is impossible to standardise national economies that are so different from one another, from industrial bases so highly differentiated. If it were to be made operational, the EU would have to become a totalitarian supranational state with all the horrors of Soviet-style oppression and collectivisation to force internal 'harmony'. As this is unlikely to occur, the EU, under the pressures of the current Global Financial Crisis, is either going to have to reconfigure itself – which means breaking itself up into new zones of production that are more naturally harmonious and internally consistent, or snuff itself out of existence. Either way, the EU in its current guise will break apart.

This is not necessarily something to be upset over. Sure, many EU bureaucrats will be downsized from their superministries as some ministries become redundant as a consequence of a smaller Eurozone (or the complete dissolution of the Eurozone), but what will occur in the years to come is the re-birth of a multiregional, disaggregated Europe where regions or independent states will be able to compete, often viciously, for market share, territorial aggrandisement and cultural dominance. In fact, the new Europe may end up looking a little like the old Europe. The out of work EU bureaucrats will no doubt find new homes in reinvigorated and re-established national bureaucracies and European internal competition may again fuel a new round of European global dominance in terms of technology, culture, art and industry.

The contemporary global order assisted the progress of a relatively stable and peaceful time thanks largely to the reality of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the ability to eliminate entire countries at the push of a button. These weapons have certainly kept people's baser instincts in check. There are no ruthlessly ambitious and totally senseless cultural groups poised to conquer territory in the Arab world, or elsewhere, who would risk annihilation of their own. The current aggravated discourse regarding the international north-south divide and unchecked immigration from poor, underdeveloped countries to the developed West notwithstanding. A long period of peace is, for some, an obvious matter for celebration since they believe that stability is needed for social, political and cultural progress. Money can be made when trade routes are open and social and commercial intercourse is untrammelled by war. However, this overlooks one important aspect of human history. Massive fortunes were made as a consequence of war and while some commercial transactions were impeded by war, war has never completely shut down trade. In fact, in some instances it facilitated a desire to find alternate routes – to be innovative at many levels – in order to survive. The Global Financial Crisis has been a reckoning for those 'idealists' who dreamt of permanent dictatorships spanning the Arab world wedded to defending Western interests, and to unimaginative bureaucrats in Europe who thought they'd be able to create their convoluted and contradictory empire of paper. But whereas the egalitarian bureaucrats in Brussels did

not extinguish the meme for political reconstruction and renewal, this concept never really grew roots in the Arab Middle East. So while the Arab world might be in a state of flux, its flux might not lead anywhere except back to the future – to stability under a strongman. In Europe, going back to the future might indeed resuscitate the horrid ghosts of past wars and prejudices, but it was only during those times of existential threat that European empires and nation-states found form and came to dominate the world. With this in mind, it might be too early to call the 21st Century the ‘Asian Century’.

Acropolis image:

<http://withfriendship.com/images/i/41869/Classical-Greece-picture.jpg>

Arab Spring poster image:

http://www.iranreview.org/file/cms/files/1308139044_arab-spring.jpg

Islamic Caliphate image:

http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_owrUg5R925A/Tavhr4FNeOI/AAAAAAAAAAEc/70I0mIBgMXI/s1600/Age_of_Caliphs.png

Mongol Archer image:

<http://www.romanianhistoryandculture.com/mongolarcher.jpg>

Ottoman Janissary image:

<http://images.art.com/images/products/regular/11723000/11723080.jpg>

EU image:

http://drezner.foreignpolicy.com/files/EU_0.jpg

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