

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN A TIME OF ACCELERATING DYNAMIC INSTABILITY

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What do the rise of the "Islamic State," the ebola epidemic, and widespread political polarization and gridlock have in common? Is it possible to understand these disparate phenomena in ways that inform and guide our reactions to them, and our planning for future events that may arise from the same conditions? If, as FPRI's founder, Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupé, liked to say, "a nation must think before it acts," about what should the United States be thinking in times of domestic turmoil and accelerating international instability?

The seeming breakdown of the Westphalian international order and emergence of differently governed regions such as those in Western North Africa, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, and the "Islamic State" that now occupies the Syria-Iraq border is viewed as a continuing source of threat to the international community. More than just artifacts of a post-World War I line-drawing blunder by the European colonial powers that ignored, and in many cases exacerbated old tribal divisions, some of these new insurgencies seem to appear from nothing, emerging in a blink from the quantum vacuum of ungovernable expanses of territory. In still other cases, however, instability takes root in the dense urban centers of states with weak governments and especially in those states lacking in functioning organs of civil society (e.g., Somalia). None of this is new, nor is it unexpected.

The prevalence of wide-spread disease and of periodic pandemics is also an old phenomenon. History records the horrific Black Death that killed, by most estimates, over one third of the population of Europe (estimates range from 75 to 200 million) in just seven years (1346-1353). Diseases introduced by European colonists such as smallpox, measles, scarlet fever, typhoid, typhus, influenza, pertussis, tuberculosis, cholera, diphtheria, chickenpox and several sexually transmitted diseases are estimated to have killed 75 to 100 million native Americans in the 150 years following Columbus. The influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 killed 50 to 100 million, reducing the global population by three to five percent. We have come to expect that disease will spread. AIDS, SARS, MERS, and ebola are just today's critical threats that crescendo against the background themes of chronic plagues like malaria, schistosomiasis, measles, and dysentery from various causes.

Warfare, like disease, seems to recur in history with some regularity, as well. Historians have noted that most regions have enjoyed relatively long periods of peace, often approaching 100 years, but that these are periodically interrupted with equally long eras of internecine unrest and civil warfare. While the United States is not yet experiencing widespread internal violence, the amount of uncivil discourse is clearly on the rise, and periodic eruptions of racial and class violence and discord are worrisome to those who long for bygone days of high school civics classes and primary identification of fellow citizens that lacked ethnic, national, religious and racial "hyphenation".

WHAT'S EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Professor Peter Turchin, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Connecticut has attempted to apply the analytical tools of evolutionary science to explain the demographic cycles that contribute to political instability and the breakdown of states that lead to wars.¹ In Turchin's *Secular Cycles*, he writes about his approach to the dynamics of human history (a science that he terms "cliodynamics")

...population growth leads to rural misery, urban migration, falling real wages, and an increased frequency of food riots and wage protests. After a certain lag time, the negative effects of population expansion begin to affect the elites, who become riven by increasing rivalry and factionalism. Another consequence of rapid population growth is the expansion of youth cohorts. This segment of the population is particularly impacted by lack of employment opportunities. Finally, growing economic inequality, elite competition, and popular discontent fuel ideological conflicts. ... Internal war among political factions is only one aspect of increased interpersonal violence. A breakdown of social order is also accompanied by increased banditry, homicides, and other kinds of violent crimes. On the ideological level, the feeling of social pessimism is pervasive and the legitimacy of the state authority is at its lowest point.²

While this description may echo aspects of post-Arab Spring Egypt, Syria, and Libya, it is also strangely evocative of much of the past several years of the American experience. While the strength of civil society in the United States has prevented the outbreak of violent internal war since the Civil War, the growth of the sovereign citizen movement, spread of extremist ideologies, and even widespread demonization of political opponents point toward stresses in society that are causing fractures that are not easily patched with the loose whitewash of appeals to patriotism or the temporary cohesion that resulted from the 9-11 attacks.

Turchin's 2007 book, *War and Peace and War*, uses three thinkers – Ibn Khaldun, Thomas Malthus, and Saint Matthew – to explain the cycles of imperial rise and fall. Khaldun was a 14th Century Arab philosopher who elucidated the concept of *asabiya*, or the ability of a group's members to cooperate with each other, to maintain their identity and discipline in the face of adversity, and to impose their beliefs, values, and control on other groups. Khaldun asserted that this quality was essential to the formation of empires, and that the loss of this cohesion spelled the end of empire as internal strife opened the empire to both internal centrifugal forces and external threats to which it could not adequately respond.

Thomas Malthus gave the world his Principle: that human populations always grow beyond their own means to provide material sustenance.³

The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction, and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and tens of thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world".

Malthus, it has been pointed out, was a cleric and historian, who had too little appreciation for the role of innovation in overcoming his dismal population trap. Over short spans of time and distance, his conclusions seemed to be borne out by history, as there were many precedents for famine and epidemic following eras of prosperity and population growth. On larger scales, however, and in the time following his death in 1834, much of the world seems to have escaped the Malthusian Trap, although famines continue to occur, induced more by politically driven failures of logistics than simple overpopulation.

¹ Turchin, Peter, *Historical Dynamics: Why States Rise and Fall*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2003.

² Turchin, Peter and Nefedov, Sergey, *Secular Cycles*, Princeton Univ. Press, 2009, p.15.

³ Malthus, Thomas R., *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798, Chap. VII, p. 61.

<http://www.econlib.org/library/Malthus/malPop.html>

Malthus did not acknowledge the importance of historic innovations such as irrigation and the heavy plow, which likely appeared to him an unchanged part of agriculture from prehistory. He wrote before the Industrial Revolution had introduced mechanization to farming, and before the invention of nitrogen-based fertilizers that multiplied food production while reducing labor requirements. Biologist Gregor Mendel was just 12 years old when Malthus died, so Malthus could not have known the benefits of the science of plant hybridization (first commercialized in 1890) or have seen the effects of scientific plant breeding and genetic modification that eventually yielded Borlaug's "Green Revolution" of the 1960s.

Saint Matthew, Turchin asserts, lends his name to the tendency in every society for inequality and social stratification to increase over time. "Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."⁴ While there is certainly an economic principle that explains income and wealth inequality and stratification (see Sugarscape, a Brookings Institution economic simulation model by Axtell and Epstein⁵), this quote from Matthew is, regrettably inappropriate, because it is taken entirely out of biblical context.⁶

For Turchin, regardless of the origins of his three principles, they fuse in the crucible of human societies to produce a cyclic instability of empires that rise, flourish, decay, and fall in explicable ways. These cycles are then exacerbated by external forces including invasion and invasive pests once the society has begun to weaken, resulting in the eventual fall of empire.

MODERN ACCELERATORS THAT DISRUPT HISTORIC CYCLES

The present outbreak of ebola is different from all previous instances because this time, it has spread to the densely populated urban centers of West Africa. From 1976, when the virus was first identified in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, until 2013, small outbreaks had infected dozens to hundreds of patients, with mortality rates up to 90%. The latest World Health Organization projections for the 2014 outbreak are for 500,000 to 1.4 million cases by mid-winter, with a mortality rate of 50%. One reason for this difference is population densities of the cities in West Africa. Population density is a prime factor that differentiated plagues in Imperial Rome, Medieval Europe, and other more recent pandemic outbreaks. Urbanization and the intimate contact it necessitates, amplifies the intensity of disease propagation.

Another more recent amplifier of pandemic is that modern urban populations have more access to inter-city transportation, and thus, infected individuals may travel widely before they become symptomatic. For this reason, airlines have curtailed flight schedules to the major cities of the affected region. Still, there exists a strong possibility that infected individuals will travel elsewhere, spreading the virus, and intensifying the emergency. In historic times, travel was slow, and someone infected with a disease like ebola would have died en route, and the body would have been interred there. The disease would have "burned itself out" before spreading to populations in distant lands. Today's critical difference is velocity – we travel at speeds that outpace the progression of the disease, and thus spread the disease. Like the fleas that harbored *yersinia pestis*, and the rats that carried those fleas, humans of the jet age have become carriers.

THE MEME IS THE MESSAGE

The other critically important factor in today's unstable dynamic, and one not addressed in Turchin's work, is the density and velocity of information. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, FRS, often refers to the units of idea

⁴ Matthew 13:12. New International Translation. After Merton, Robert K. "The Matthew Effect in Science", Science, 159 (3810): 56-63, January 5, 1968. (<http://www.garfield.library.upenn.edu/merton/matthew1.pdf>)

⁵ Epstein, Joshua M. and Axtell, Robert. Growing artificial societies: social science from the bottom up. Brookings Institution Press. p. 224, (1996). <http://sugarscape.sourceforge.net/sugarscape.html>

⁶ The full context of Matthew 13:12, as in Luke 8:18 and Mark 4:25 is an exhortation by Jesus that the people listen carefully to his parables, and take them to heart. It is certainly not an economic principle. It should be noted the Robert Merton acknowledged the problematic nature of his use of Matthew in naming his effect in his later article, "The Matthew Effect in Science II" (ISIS, 79: 606-623, 1988, fn.7) (<http://garfield.library.upenn.edu/merton/matthewii.pdf>) but not, critically, that he had taken the quotation entirely out of context in the first place.

propagation as “memes”.⁷ Dawkins originally defined a meme as, “an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture.” It is increasingly clear, however, that the last qualifier is unduly and unnecessarily restrictive. Memes, it turns out, often spread across cultural boundaries, especially when they are propelled through mass media by skilled propagandists. Using the tools of modern media including video and the Internet, a concept may, in short order, be transformed from a baseless and bigoted fringe conspiracy theory (e.g., that Israel’s Mossad executed the 9-11 attacks as a “false flag” operation) to a commonly accepted cultural truth within a large segment of one or more societies.⁸

While he did not foresee the Internet, Marshall McLuhan did forecast the changes that mass electronic media would bring about in societies around the world. Importantly, for McLuhan, who famously said, “The medium is the message,” the actual programming content mattered less than mere access to communications media, which he predicted would bring all, “social and political functions together in a sudden implosion.”⁹ In a world where there is no barrier to publication, all information tends to be perceived as equal in value. Humans’ natural tendency toward self-reinforcement of our beliefs through selective media consumption often means that competing viewpoints are ignored by those who should most hear them. Frustratingly, many citizens of developed countries hold a deep-seated need to be perceived as fair and open-minded that gives cultural real estate to harmful propaganda, including beheading videos and Islamist recruiting materials that would be ruthlessly suppressed in more authoritarian states.

ACTING TACTICALLY, THINKING STRATEGICALLY

Professor Turchin stated in 2010, “The next decade is likely to be a period of growing instability in the United States and Western Europe... Quantitative historical analysis reveals that complex human societies are affected by recurrent — and predictable — waves of political instability.”¹⁰ Nearly half way through this decade, it appears that Professor Turchin was a grand optimist.

If, as Turchin and others assert, we have entered into a period in history that is inherently unstable, how should the United States think, and specifically, how should it act? As any pilot will explain, it is best to correct altitude with small control inputs, and to give these sufficient time to take effect. Move the controls too much, and you will over-correct, necessitating another change, this time both more forceful and sooner than the last. Within just a few seconds, the aircraft is climbing and diving in a “porpoise” maneuver as the pilot falls further behind in the attempt to regain equilibrium. So, too, in international relations, our idealist desire to make big gestures, and to have immediate results often makes a bad situation worse, and necessitates additional actions, while the realist urges the careful application of power.

Taking a page from Turchin, the correct leadership group for this new age may actually be Ibn Khaldun, Mendel, Epstein and Axtell, and Marshall McLuhan. Study of history and current events, informed by knowledge of the dynamic and chaotic nature of the world’s regions and peoples should lead to a range of rational prescriptions for policy. A focus on social cohesion, sustainable growth in population and resource consumption, realism, and rapid, restrained and coordinated action in both deed and media may permit the United States to establish some stability in an inherently unstable world. If, as the President recently asserted, the United States is, for the modern world, the one nation that others call, effectively the world’s “Ghostbusters” (Who ya gonna call?), then the nation must be prepared for each call, but with due care that each response is well prepared, thoughtful and measured. Of that, Robert Strausz-Hupé would approve.

⁷ Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene* (2 ed.), Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 192.

⁸ One, mostly humorous, explanation for this phenomenon is referred to as the DOPElar Effect (a reference to the Doppler Effect in physics that relates wavelength to relative velocity of a source - the reason that an approaching train whistle is higher pitched than the same whistle as the train recedes.) The DOPElar Effect, simply stated is: The tendency of stupid ideas to seem more intelligent when they come at you rapidly.

⁹ McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media*. Signet Books, NY, 1964, p.4.

¹⁰ Turchin, Peter in *Nature*. 463:608, “Political Instability May be a Contributor in the Coming Decade”.