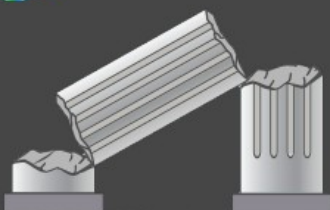
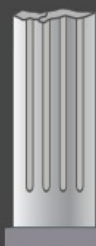


THE DESCENT INTO



C O M P L E T E



O R D E R

JONATHAN WOOD

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A Note on Monetization

I am writing this book to formulate and articulate my own ideas, and to spark thought and discussion. I'd much rather you read this book for free than buy a copy that just collects dust.

That said, I did spend thousands of hours writing these pages, so the physical books are for sale for those who would like to read a bound copy, however there are also free PDF and ePUB electronic versions available for download.

Those links, and further details, are available on this book's homepage: [**jonathanpaulwood.com/complete-order**](http://jonathanpaulwood.com/complete-order)

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Chapter 1: Framing

Over the past few centuries, life expectancy has more than doubled from less than 30 years to more than 70¹; literacy rates have dramatically risen from under 20% to over 80%.²

Globally, our diets have become more diverse and balanced, incorporating larger amounts of food.³ That means we are eating more healthily and suffering far less from famine or malnutrition. And as we've become richer and more productive, we're spending fewer hours working⁴ and so have more time to spend on leisure activities or with our children, friends, and other family.

More subjectively, the number of people living in open democracies has exploded in the past century⁵, and as we've begun taking measurements of life satisfaction we find that people are generally becoming happier.⁶

Are the gains perfectly distributed? No. Are they the best they could be? No. However they are all immensely positive, persistent, and substantial changes that have manifested in almost every corner of the world. These are causes for jubilation!

Perhaps you sense a giant “But” coming. Surely this is all too good to be true. ‘What’s the catch?’ you may be wondering.

I won't lie, this book will provide no shortage of depressing statistics and sober news in the following chapters. This chapter's purpose though is to provide some broader framing. While much of this book will focus on recent and contemporary events, it's important to step back and look at today's world in the context of the long history that has brought us here.

1 <https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy>

2 <https://ourworldindata.org/literacy>

3 <https://ciat.cgiar.org/the-changing-global-diet/>

4 <https://ourworldindata.org/working-hours>

5 <https://ourworldindata.org/democracy>

6 <https://ourworldindata.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction>

ARC OF HUMANITY

For much of our history, we were scattered small tribes, never more than a few million in total. Agriculture, writing, mathematics, and back breaking labor built civilizations around the world, allowing skilled craftspeople and artisans to specialize and expand our understanding and experiences.

Since then, engines, electricity, and advancements in transportation and communication driven by millions of dedicated individuals have built a global civilization capable of supporting billions of fascinating people.

At every point in that history, there were problems. There were always inequalities and social divisions. There were always existential threats to cultures from external incursion (by man or virus) or from internal decadence. And yet, more oft than not, a combination of intelligence, resourcefulness, and collaboration saw us through those challenges as we built better and better futures for ourselves and our children.

That is the arc of our global history. There have been plenty of highs and lows along the way, yet we prevail. Today is no different. We have problems. We have inequalities and social divisions. We are threatened by disease and pollution. And we have the tools, knowledge, and resources to address those problems. We have the means and the ability to address those inequalities and social divisions, the technology and wealth to address those threats.

It won't happen automatically, it never does. Just because it can does not mean that it will. It will take, just as it has always taken, individuals remaining vigilant in the world to identify and to categorize the threats. It will take the initiative of millions willing to do the hard work of fixing the problems of the world and of our communities.

PROBLEMATIC RESPONSIBILITY

That's what this book is about. This is an attempt to identify problems in the world, and propound solutions to some of them. It is my way of articulating some of my own views so that you might learn from them, or voice your dissent.

The process of this book was useful to me because it forced me to clarify my ideas, explain them at length, and seek counter points. I hope by sharing it to spark discussions and new ideas. And I hope that the process of your reading of this book provides you with new ideas and perspectives.

This book will talk about a wide variety of very big problems. You may find yourself thinking that the intricacies of the money market rate, the bureaucratic tangle of conflicting regulations, the increased politicization of our public discourse, or the poverty of people halfway around the world is not your responsibility. You would probably be right. At the same time, I'd like to leave you with this quote to keep in mind as you read this book.

*“This is not your responsibility
but it is your problem.”*
- Cheryl Strayed⁷

Is it your responsibility to develop robust testing procedures and quarantine best-practices? No. And yet when no one does these things and a pandemic roils the globe, it does become your problem. Is it your responsibility to balance your nation's budget? No. And yet when your government defaults on its debts and inflation spikes, it does become your problem. You can complain about that, or you can figure out how to chip in and help solve those problems.

Sometimes the problems can be solved by someone else. Some distant expert implementing a program in a top down manner. Other times solutions need to be driven by individuals rolling up

⁷ <https://quotecatalog.com/quote/cheryl-strayed-this-is-not-you-X7q3M2a>

their sleeves and chipping away at the problem, bit by bit, bottom up.

This book is about the complex issues that aren't necessarily any one person's responsibility, and yet are often a problem for all of us. This book is also about potential processes for how to start fixing those problems.

WITH A HEAVY GRAIN OF SALT

One final note before diving in. This book is meant to propound ideas, not to pronounce beliefs. I select that word with care. To propound something is to put that thing forward for consideration. Propound does not mean endorse. Rather, to propound is to say that I believe an idea is worthy of your time and attention to hear and consider, something worth discussing and investigating.

I am propounding, not professing. I don't know if I am correct about everything in this book. I'm open to the large possibility of being wrong on many fronts. However I spent the (very) many hours to write these pages because I believe the problems I perceive are substantial, that their causes are not well understood, and that we are not deploying optimal solutions that will solve them and improve our lives as best we could.

I hope to begin to change that. I hope you will approach this book with an open mind and a willingness to grapple with these complex ideas, disagreeing or agreeing as you judge fit, in the shared goal of determining better processes for living our lives and improving our world for our selves, our communities, and our families.

So enjoy! And may you prosper in your future endeavors to solve the problems of the world, whether at the scale of nations, or in your own local community. God Bless.

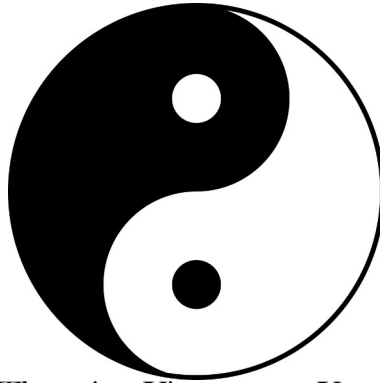
Chapter 2: On the Necessity of Ordered Liberty



“Who are you?” - Kosh, Vorlon Ambassador, Babylon 5



“What do you want?” - Mr. Morden, representing the surrounding Shadows, Babylon 5



There is a Yin to every Yang.

This is a dualistic concept, the two mirror each other. Yin is the moon; Yang is the sun. Yin is night; Yang is day. Yin is chaos, change, variety; Yang is order, stability, consistency.

The Yin-Yang symbol most will be familiar with has a swirl of yin (black), and a swirl of yang (white), with a dot of each in the other. The dots represent Humanity, which finds its balance by having one foot in each of these universal ideals.

Neither is inherently bad.

BABYLON 5

The first two quotes at the header of this piece – Who are you, what do you want – are asked repeatedly by the Vorlons and the Shadows, respectively. They are both ancient alien races from the SiFi show *Babylon 5*.

In the show the Vorlons are going around testing people by asking who they are, and the Shadows are doing the same by asking people what they want. And it's these questions that are at the core of their race's respective philosophies. Both believe their philosophy is the best guide for helping the younger races of the galaxies mature.

The Shadows are the epitome of chaos. *What do you want?*⁹ - completely focused on change and the future. They believe progress is born of the struggle, when faced with adversity nations innovate. The best ideas are forged in the trial by fire. And so they seek to subject the universe to chaos in order to ensure it never becomes stagnant and frail.

The Vorlons are the epitome of order. *Who are you?*⁹ - as if your currently defined identity were fixed and all that mattered. They believe that only with careful nurturing can the greatest growth happen. The strongest people are raised with a guiding hand and a safe environment. So they seek to impose order on the universe to cultivate it.

So, the Vorlons and Shadows are busy with their galactic war over ideals and who's better at 'guiding' development, while trying to press the smaller races into picking sides.⁸

Captain Sheridan of Earth, as the bad-ass he is, rejects the choice. Instead he lectures both super ancient alien races with *really* big space fleets and planet destroying weapons as if they are whiny children. Chastising them, he insists on a third path.

As Sheridan says, "We can find our own way between Order and Chaos [...] Now get the hell out of our galaxy! Both of you."⁹

That's humanity. We need order to grow, and chaos to change. Yin AND Yang.

Chaos can be dangerous, but it also allows change. It is the root of choice, freedom, and liberty.

But with total liberty nothing is consistent and we have no chance to pause and enjoy our liberties.

8 The show's theme of Order versus Chaos was actually inspired by Babylonian creation myths, which gave the show its name. <https://web.archive.org/web/20071013085744/http://midwinter.com/lurk/guide/072.html>

9 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tj4qfe9afs>

Order seems to offer safety – stability, predictability. But it also stagnates us. The application of too many constraints sacrifices our ability to enjoy our safety in our own unique ways.

Too much freedom, or too much order, and we become sickened.

We need both. Sufficient stability so that our freedoms are lasting. Sufficient freedom so that we might enjoy our stability.

We don't have to choose. We can have both.

Unfortunately, that isn't easy.

Maintaining the balance between stability and freedom is less having equal footing on two pieces of solid ground, and more planting your feet on two sides of a wooden plank, putting the board on a bowling ball, and trying to keep off the ground.

We can do it, but it's not easy.

And all too often we get it wrong.

And when we've been delicately balanced for so long, the fall can seem long and painful.

The fall into complete chaos, lacking all stability, is anarchy. It is a collapse of civilization, a world of war and gangs and thuggery. Even if you crawl on top of the pile, it's so unstable you're unlikely to stay on top for long. Fortunately this world, and its perils, are well known, and largely avoided by our societies and cultures and institutions. It is designed away.

The fall into complete order, lacking all liberty, is stasis. It is the expulsion of choice and individuality, a world of monotony, and routine. And everyone slowly wilts and rots away, devoid of any Self.

With a world fallen into total chaos, it's obvious to most people that the state of things is terrible, and it's generally easy to get peo-

ple to agree that things need to change. Galvanizing support for reasserting some level of stability to a world wrought by war and conflict isn't hard. It may take some effort to bring about that stability and make it last, but we as a species have done that plenty of times.

A world fallen into complete order, however, is another beast entirely.

One of the central arguments of this book is that we are tipping too far into complete order. While our stories and abstractions of the world spin a narrative of more chaos, the fundamentals of life are in fact becoming more stagnant. I believe that, at this moment in the 'developed' world¹⁰, we¹¹ face a greater risk from too much stability rather than too little.

In a world of complete order, the stasis that slowly rots away everything for lack of creativity can happen gradually, almost imperceptibly. So glacially, you can almost pretend that nothing's changing at all. And that stability, or rather that temporary stability masquerading as permanent stability, is sold as a feature, not a bug.

'We're not slowly sinking into quick sand, Oh no! We're comfortable right where we are, thank you very much. Absolutely no

¹⁰ "Developed" and "Developing" are fluid categories. In this book when I say "Developed" I'm talking about countries that have nearly all modern products and services accessible to nearly all of their citizens nearly all of the time. So that includes all of North America, all of Europe, Australia, New Zealand, many East Asian countries (Including China, minorities excluded. Much more on that later.), and Russia. Those are the main ones. Far more (eg: the Gulf states and OPEC countries, Chile, Peru, South Africa) fall into a gray area where they're wealthy enough that they should be developed but either they remain poor from corrupt/underdeveloped institutions or their economies remain under-diversified in only a few state-owned enterprises (usually owing to corruption). Others are probably soon-to-be developed (India) or look like they'll stay undeveloped for the foreseeable future (North Korea). We could get a lot more nuanced but that's enough for our purposes here.

¹¹ Let's be honest, most people reading this book will be not just living in a developed country, but also W.E.I.R.D. Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich (by global standards), and Democratic (living in a democracy).

need to move. We were here yesterday and everything was fine, and we'll be here tomorrow, just fine. Everything will stay just as it is! Forever!

And who's selling that pretty illusion? Is it some overbearing dictator or shadowy bureaucracy? Sometimes. But more often it's millions of everyday people who desperately want it to be true. It's a comforting story that our elected leaders and appointed bureaucrats repeat, but also our family members, our colleagues, our friends and even our selves, who repeat the comfortable story that this is the way things are and will remain.

It's the default assumption, that things will remain unchanged, and it certainly is comfortable to feel like you're staying in place. But you're not fixed, you're sliding, ever so slowly like tectonic plates. And you're sliding downwards.

The Descent into Complete Order is where we now live. Our path? To take a saying from Frank Herbert's novel *Dune*, we are on a journey where we always choose "the clear, safe course that leads ever downwards into stagnation". Our destination? A sclerotic world stifled by a society designed to persist, but never taking the risk to thrive.

It is a world which does not worry about the future. For the future means change and we are wrapped in our pretty illusion that things will stay the same forever. Instead of confronting an inherently shifting world, we impose systems and regulations on all manner of human expression and natural trends, pretending that we can control it all. And if enough people believe this sleight of hand, it will even appear to work, for a while.

WHEN THE MIRAGE OF ORDER SHATTERS

Just look at Hong Kong. "One Country, Two Systems". Hong Kong is part of the People's Republic of China, but it also has it's own separate political system, one with elections and rule of law. Except China has never let that separate political system fully manifest as the island's constitution supposedly requires. Yes

there's an elected legislature for the island of Hong Kong, but in practice China makes sure that a majority of its members¹² are always loyal to the mainland.

This pseudo separation let China administer Hong Kong with a great deal of control in practice while maintaining a formal veneer of Hong Kong independence. Until, that is, a few students in the summer of 2014 said enough was enough. Then a few students turned into hundreds of thousands of citizens marching in the streets in what became known as the Umbrella Protests (the protesters used umbrellas to shield themselves from police tear gas).

The China-led Hong Kong police firmly stamped any public dissent. They locked up thousands of protesters, particularly anyone who looked likely to become a leader or spokesperson for the grievances of the protesters calling for proper democracy.

And for a time it seemed to work. Life in Hong Kong went back to 'normal' for a few years, with a pretty illusion of quite obedient citizens living lives in productive service to Hong Kong and the Beijing government.

For a time it looked like Complete Order was restored. Until the controlling arm of Beijing reached a bit too far, trying to pass a law that would grant them much more control over Hong Kong's court systems. The picture of Complete Order was pretty, but in reality things were always sliding, it just took a while for the cracks to burst.

And burst they did. Hong Kong citizens said enough is enough¹³, and again marched in the streets, this time by the millions¹⁴. Again the police responded with tear gas, riot gear, and clashed with protesters in the streets. Rather than conform to the demands of order and stability, the protesters continued to march.

12 <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/07/07/explainer-hong-kongs-legislature-broken-long-protesters-invaded-complex/>

13 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_RdnVtfZPY

14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCyrJTmUpNQ>

But they also did not succumb to the siren call of armed rebellion, of complete chaos. They kept their protests remarkably peaceful, although there was still some tragic violence¹⁵. Though certainly not without incident¹⁶, they took a middle path, and they persisted. For months. From July of 2019 through the rest of the year, the protesters marched in the streets, temporarily occupied malls and airports¹⁷, made signs, videos, and songs¹⁸ to draw global attention¹⁹ to their struggle for the freedoms their Hong Kong constitution promised but Beijing trampled.

Those protests got the original proposed law that sparked the protests withdrawn. And they did help lead to a landslide victory in late 2019 for pro-democracy parties in the local elections that help determine those legislature seats that are not appointed by Beijing loyalists.

However the protests, and the militaristic police response to them involving mass arrests and beatings, led to massive disruption. Hong Kong's airports were shut down for a few days at one point. Many shops and subway stations were closed on numerous occasions. Streets were damaged in the clashes between protesters trying to demonstrate and riot police trying to evict them from public spaces. Many schools and universities closed early for the fall semester, and foreign investment dipped slightly. All this had actually caused Hong Kong to slip into a small recession by the end of 2019.

The Hong Kong protests are much more complex than the brief summary I'm giving here.

I'm primarily sharing this as an example of what could soon happen in many other parts of the world. In just the last quarter of 2019 there were protests (simplifying a lot) in Chile (against economic inequity), Iraq (against political corruption), Lebanon (re-

15 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHAvdBIFN5w>

16 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qi7i3P_q8yA

17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-AzfXMJkI8>

18 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hK31N0UQkqw>

19 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dY_hkbVQA20

duction in state subsidies), Iran (also state subsidy reductions), and India (laws with possible religious and ethnic discrimination consequences), to name a few. 2020 has added to that list Belarus and Kyrgyzstan (rigged elections, in both cases) among others. In each of these instances a government tried to take a little bit more control, and a mass demonstration movement rose against it to protest the latest power grab.

Whether these events have meaningful, long lasting impact remains to be seen. Regardless, they highlight an important point. A little bit of chaos often is not necessarily a malaise in itself, but often an important symptom of wider instability.

These situations are not monolithic, they vary greatly in what exactly their spark was, the level of response, and their effectiveness at translating popular will into lasting change. In all of them though, there is a deeper story than the immediate spark and backlash. There is also the buildup of tension over years.

SANDPILES

One analogy for that buildup of tension, which I first learned from Mauldin Economics²⁰, likens our global economy to a Sandpile. This analogy actually works for any social system.

If you have a pile of sand and slowly add one grain at a time instability will build up and eventually a single grain will spark an avalanche. The grain didn't do it alone, it was just the latest straw on the camel's back. The challenge is to predict when the next avalanche will occur, and how large the avalanche will be.

Put simply, it's impossible to predict in exact terms, but we can derive several useful insights. First, avalanches are unavoidable. You can try to strategically drop the grains of sand, but as they pile up, the pile becomes steeper and steeper, and thus less stable. You only have a finite number of places to put the next grain,

²⁰ <https://www.mauldineconomics.com/frontlinethoughts/the-growing-economic-sandpile>

so you eventually are left with only steep cliffs on which to drop the grains, which is ever more likely to trigger an avalanche.

I'll pull a money quote from the Mauldin piece:

*“To find out why [such unpredictability] should show up in their sandpile game, Bak and colleagues next played a trick with their computer. Imagine peering down on the pile from above and coloring it in according to its steepness. Where it is relatively flat and stable, color it green; where steep and, in avalanche terms, “ready to go,” color it red. What do you see? They found that at the outset, the pile looked mostly green, but that, as the pile grew, the green became infiltrated with ever more red. With more grains, the scattering of red danger spots grew until a dense skeleton of instability ran through the pile. **Here then was a clue to its peculiar behavior: a grain falling on a red spot can, by domino-like action, cause sliding at other nearby red spots.** If the red network was sparse, and all trouble spots were well isolated one from the other, then a single grain could have only limited repercussions. But when the red spots come to riddle the pile, the consequences of the next grain become fiendishly unpredictable. It might trigger only a few tumblings, or it might instead set off a cataclysmic chain reaction involving millions. The sandpile seemed to have configured itself into a hypersensitive and peculiarly unstable condition in which the next falling grain could trigger a response of any size whatsoever.”*

Second, and this might seem redundant but is important to restate: the longer you go without an avalanche, the more likely a future event will cause an avalanche. This is not like flipping a coin, where each event is independent of the next. As you build up the pile, you create more cliffs, and thus more opportunities for avalanches to occur.

Thirdly, the longer you go without an avalanche, the bigger an avalanche can get, because there have been more opportunities for instabilities in one region to spread and influence others. Avalanches come in all sizes, some only a few hundred grains, some millions, some cataclysmic shifts that collapse the whole edifice.

However if you have lots of small avalanches early on, you prevent the pile from growing too steep, thus you can plan for and deal with minor set backs which are harmful but not existential. If it builds up and up, it has opportunities to result in bigger avalanches, causing system wide catastrophes.

And from this we're going to derive the last important takeaway: the longer we go without an avalanche – the more the pile builds up without any disruption or chaos – the greater chance of a cataclysmic avalanche that collapses the entire pile.

That Sandpile is not a stable system that builds and builds forever, even if it may appear so for a time. It is constantly creating pockets of instability that could collapse at any moment, and for the long term survival of the pile as a whole, it's important, necessary even, for small pockets to collapse.

By frequently allowing small pockets of instability to collapse, you prevent large pockets of steep cliffs from growing and risking the collapse of the system as a whole. Order, the methodical adding of sand grains, and Chaos, the unpredictable tendency for some unknown portion to collapse. You can't remove one and expect to keep the other forever.

The same is true in society.

THREE BODIES, ONE PROBLEM

You can't try to keep society static. Humans change, culture changes. People change, and society's preferences and dreams and needs change with them. You can try to keep things the same, but you're going to have to change with them or be left behind.

That doesn't mean we need to abandon everything we know and hold dear with each generation. Many of our existing ideas and practices are good and should be kept – it's too disruptive to lurch into Complete Chaos. But it is equally untenable to keep things the same forever.

Some would try to solve for an ideal society. If we can just track everyone's preferences, map all the inputs, gather enough data surely our fancy deep learning and neural net programs can black box us an Answer that will satisfy everyone. Unfortunately not, because many things in this world are Three Body Problems.

A Three Body Problem is an issue for which it is not possible to predict an answer. It may be possible to calculate the current state, but that state needs to be constantly updated and recalculated.

The term Three Body Problem comes from a physics problem, and it's the namesake of the first book in an excellent SiFi series²¹. The financial and political blog Epsilon Theory also provides an excellent and entertaining explanation²². You can take a deep dive in either of those, or the Wikipedia entry²³, but here's a quick summary.

Imagine you have a solar system empty of any planets. Some solar systems have one star. In here you have a giant ball of gasses fusing in a bright ball of plasma and it's just sitting there (we're going to ignore for these purposes the relatively inconsequential effects of other distant stars, let's treat this as a closed system).

Now, if instead of one star we have two, the gravity of each will pull on the other. They'll make wide swings around each other, like dancers joining and parting from a partner, they might fling out of each others' orbits or even slam together and fuse. The interesting thing is that if you know the initial mass, volume, speed,

21 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Three-Body_Problem_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Three-Body_Problem_(novel))

22 <https://www.epsilontheory.com/three-body-problem/>

23 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three-body_problem

and direction of both of the stars, you could design an equation to predict any future position of both stars at any point.

Predict, not compute. With just nine variables (mass, volume, speed, and direction for each, as well as time), you can plug in the numbers and have a definite answer.

If we add a third star, however, we lose this powerful predictive capability. The stars continue to swerve and spin, trapped in each others' orbits. But you can't predict where they'll be in 5,000 years, or even tomorrow.

Of course, this is all still just geometry and physics, so you can use all the known laws about gravity with their masses and velocities and taking their current positions, you can calculate the position in the next instant. And then taking that next position as the new starting state you can calculate the next position and so forth. But now we need to calculate each instant in the process, we can no longer plug in the numbers into an equation and instantly know the solution.

There is no equation, no model, no possible way to solve a Three Body Problem. Now, *if* we have perfect information on all the elements of the system, we can still calculate the future states, step by step. But only if we have perfect information.

In a complex system like, say, a human society, that's just not possible. Sure, you can ramp up surveillance, you can mine more big data, but there will always be unknowns.

Human society is like a Three Body Problem, and it's impossible to know all the inputs.

Human society is also like a Sandpile. You can try to make predictions, you can try to use those right-sounding predictions to enforce Order on society. But that Order is a Mirage. Like a mirage in the desert, as we hold the false image in our mind and think we're getting closer, we're just shoring up instability until inevitably, everything collapses, and the mirage falls away.

Of course, like all Sandpiles, collapses are necessary and unavoidable. Just like there will always (sorry Fed) be declines in the stock market and recessions. We can delay them and let them build up until they are infrequent and cataclysmic. Or we can accept some order and chaos, have small disruptions that are frequent, but never an existential threat to the whole organization.

Earlier I shared examples of several mass protest movements, examples of where the Mirage of Complete Order collapsed. The different movements had varying levels of organization and effectiveness.

Among them, Hong Kong is perhaps the best case example. The protesters were very well organized and civil, with almost no violent outbreaks given the fact that they lasted months. The police were also largely well disciplined, and there have only been a handful of cases where lethal action was taken. Yes there was disruption (it was a protest movement after all), but it was always clear what the protest was about and exactly what the 5 demands of the protesters where. In Iran hundreds were killed by deliberate live fire by police. These movements can very easily turn deadly.

However this could happen here...

The Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements both started out with the potential to define massive social change. Despite renewed attention on BLM in the summer of 2020, many of the grievances raised by both those movements have not been addressed. Those piles are still building. Don't pretend an avalanche will never come. We can accept small frequent changes, or try to keep everything static until the tension builds into an extreme collapse.

What this book is working to do is define a few of the trends heating up those revolutionary forces. Moreover we're going to explore what forces are working to contain society. What in our society is restraining our liberties, preventing the regular release of the build up of tensions, and what can we do about it?

Ideally, I'd say we ought to have a little more chaos in the world, in order that we might enjoy a more stable long term equilibrium. Let's accept that the world is not completely controllable, and have more frequent small disruptions. Otherwise society grows frail and susceptible to massive shocks. And in the long run that can do far more harm.

We don't want to suffer deadly outbursts of violence in anger at 'the system'. The Shadows are wrong, disorder is not the only solution.

We also – and I think we are at a greater risk of this and so will focus more on it in this book – do not want to suffer the shackles of self inflicted authoritarianism. The Vorlons are also wrong, control is not the only solution.

How can we define our own path? That's what this book is about. Pulling a Sheridan, defining your own path, as well as recognizing and addressing the challenges to doing so.

It's important to keep in mind the stakes. In the abstract sense there is at stake our liberties, our freedom, and our way of life. In a more immediate sense it's worth remembering that these decisions we make about how to shape our country and our lives have practical implications for standards of living and prosperity. If we get it wrong badly enough for long enough, people get frustrated enough to march on the streets, and that's a path that can easily turn to violence.

Chapter 3: A Troubled World

So the world is in trouble. Or more accurately, the institutions and social systems which so many of us are accustomed to and in which we seek fulfillment, sustenance, and satisfaction in life are being altered, and this state of flux brings risks for and demands change of us all.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that these systems which make up our world are being changed. Changed with intent and premeditated, and directed toward a specific end goal. That goal is the accumulation of power in the hands of those effecting the change.

Now I'm not suggesting some global Illuminati. The actions I'm describing in this book are not some Master Plan being executed by some shadow organization, but rather they are intentional decisions taken by millions of individuals around the world, and even though they are not coordinated they accumulate, and it is the trends that emerge from these accumulated actions that have such world changing effects.

No one driving a car intends to create acid rain or suffocating smog, but millions of us driving cars regularly over many years contributes to a cumulative effect that does just that. Not all of the effects of our actions, and certainly not all of our cumulative effects (which are so much harder to predict or see), are intentional. But the actions themselves are intentional.

When you get in your car you certainly intend to drive it, and intend to get from point A to point B. And in the back of your mind you know there is some marginal pollutive effect. You very intentionally and with premeditation give yourself the power to cover hundreds of miles in a single day, a truly empowering feat of human engineering, fully knowing that you are contributing to trends bigger than yourself.

You do it anyway. It's not justified because everyone else is doing it. It's not justified by ignoring the unpleasant side effects. But it can be justified if you do it with a full comprehension of what you are doing and take responsibility for your actions.

What you do with that responsibility is your burden. I'm not saying you need to offset every single side affect you have on the world. Every action has side affects and it's impractical to directly offset all of them. What's most important is that you're aware of them and own up to them.

Many of the actions described here are not effected by some plotting individual, but they are the way our world works (shaped by many individual choices) that have an affect on us all, and it is this affect that we must recognize and respond to. In short, the accumulated choices of millions can create situations which no individual planned.

NUDGES AND FRAMINGS

One of the biggest affects we should dwell on is Framing. In media and pubic relations this is called the Spin. It's the same concept that Thaler and Sunstein called a "Nudge" in their book by the same name. Framing is how you phrase something, particularly to downplay some aspect and play up another. When we want some accomplishment to sound more impressive than it is, we reframe or spin it, emphasizing the benefit and downplaying the shortcomings. Every person sitting in an interview has done this, whether about their own skills, or if you're on the other side of the table about the benefits of working for the company.

Nudges are similar. They are ways of presenting choices that guide people toward choosing one option over the others. Just like spins and frames are used intentionally to craft a particular message, so too are nudges intentionally designed to lead to a desired outcome (at least as desired by the designer). The big example from the book *Nudge* is to switch retirement plans from opt-in to opt-out, with higher default contribution rates. So in this scheme you can still choose to not contribute to your 401(k), but

you now need to make an active choice to change the default setting, whereas before the default setting was to not contribute. Since people tend to procrastinate and don't like making tough choices, the result is that more people save for retirement. The intention and result here is fairly benevolent, but one can easily conceive of decisions structured in such a way to 'nudge' people towards choices that might not be in their own best interests.

There isn't anything inherently bad about the act of framing or spinning or nudging. These are things all of us do all of the time. They are incredibly useful for us to help communicate to others a focus on a particular aspect of a complex topic. If you bring up in a discussion the American Civil War, we could easily go on a million different tangents about the motivations and causes of the war, the loss of life, the poor medical conditions of the battle field, the life of families left behind, and on and on. Or you could frame the discussion by opening with some choice quotes from European observers of the war and so steer the conversation to how the war in the States affected the Old Continent.

There's nothing bad about that at all. In fact it was incredibly effective at sparking a discussion that might not have happened otherwise. However the same tools could be used to distract from larger issues (politicians do this all the time to avoid talking about uncomfortable events). What's important to recognize is that these are powerful tools that can be used to shape how people think about concepts. And the ability to shape, even ever so subtly and slightly, someone's thoughts, is a very potent tool indeed. So we should all be aware of this tool, be careful to use it well, and recognize when it is being abused or deployed to our detriment.

NARRATIVE

There's one other type of thought-shaping that's very much worth discussing. While framing, spins, and nudges can shape how people think about a given event or decision, people can also employ similar tools to shape how society as a whole talks about issues or ideas. Ben Hunt and Rusty Guinn over at Epsilon Theory²⁴ call

24 <https://www.epsilontheory.com>

these society-wide framings ‘Narratives’, and have done some work worth checking out about how these Narratives form and how to spot them.

Narratives are stories about a thing, abstractions. With a Narrative, the story about the thing becomes what you talk about, rather than the thing itself. It may sound simple, but that subtle shift is incredibly powerful in shaping your thoughts.

One stark example of a Narrative being used to shape public thought²⁵ is by many southern newspapers during the 1950’s civil rights marches and boycotts. African American communities used boycotts and other demonstration tactics to draw attention to their issues and start dialogues about what sort of changes were being asked by their communities.

Rather than engage with the grievances of the thousands of communities that marched, many southern newspapers instead dismissed the protesters²⁶ as criminals and lawbreakers. This had extra salience because back in that time boycotting a business, or even calling for a boycott publicly, was illegal, so what the civil rights protesters were doing de jure made them criminals.

The intended effect of that framing was not to discourage the civil rights protesters from marching, nor was it to persuade them to end their boycotts. Rather the audience was white readers in the south who respected the rule of law and social order. By consistently casting the protests as unlawful (which they were), they automatically categorized anyone who engaged with or supported the protesters as law breakers as well.

But you are not a law breaker, are you? No, of course not. You’re a good law abiding citizen, so there’s no way you’ll collude with such rude rabble-rousers.

25 <https://www.epsilontheory.com/letter-from-a-birmingham-museum/>

26 <https://southernspaces.org/2004/television-news-and-civil-rights-struggle-views-virginia-and-mississippi/>

This allowed these news outlets to neatly avoid discussing why the boycotts were happening, what issues were so horrible that they motivated millions to march. Instead these newspapers could simply focus on the illegality of the boycotts, rather than the reasons for the boycotts, and in that way delegitimize them in the eyes of their white readers.

On the flip side, the civil rights movement and NAACP used photos and footage of police violently breaking up marches and beating demonstrators to gain sympathy. That's a very different Narrative employed in a very different way. Narratives are not inherently good or bad, they are tools. What's important for us is to learn to recognize them, and so prevent them from warping our thoughts without us realizing it.

And warp our thoughts they do. For the Narrative of *Illegal Boycotts*, The goal was not to change the minds of any African Americans. The goal was to prevent whites from becoming sympathizers (or worse, supporters) of the civil rights movement.

And for a good while it worked.

And why wouldn't it? If you live in a media bubble and all you hear about a movement, over and over again, is commentary like this:

“They're a terrorist group, they're quickly becoming a terrorist group committing hate crimes...” - Rush Limbaugh in 2016.²⁷

Then of course you are going to be wary about associating with that group. In fact, much easier if you ignore the issue all together.

Except that quote above isn't about the 1950 and 1960s Civil Rights movement. It's from 2016 about the Black Lives Matter movement. Just like the Civil Rights, a feature of the response to BLM has been an attempt to focus on the methods employed

²⁷ <https://www.breitbart.com/clips/2016/07/08/rush-black-lives-matter-is-a-terrorist-group-quickly-becoming-a-terrorist-group-committing-hate-crimes/>

and the civil unrest. If we can deligitimize the actions of the movement in the eyes of the public, we don't have to bother with discussing what situations are so terrible as to motivate people to spend the time and energy to protest in the first place.

As the **BLM** movement caught its second wind this past summer, this same tactic has been used again by some outlets. Many have focused on the looting, rioting, and monument toppling. All of that is indeed very much illegal, and should be decried. Rioting should be punished and set apart from peaceful demonstrations, and looting should be prosecuted just as vigorously as peaceful free speech be protected.

The problem is not when looters and rioters are publicly shamed. Those are crimes and they should be called out. The problem is when an outlet spends all their time criticizing the violent fringes in order to avoid engaging with the much larger peaceful protests.

Complaining about the lack of effort spent protecting storefronts and monuments is a valid complaint. But when that's all you do, and when you don't *also* ask the deeper questions like 'why are so many people protesting in the first place', then you're drifting from calling out crimes because they're crimes into the more murky territory of calling out crimes as a distraction from what might be for you a less comfortable topic.

Same for the flip side. If you use complaints about a broken system as an excuse for the crimes of the violent looters, that's also conflating what should be two separate issues in what's probably an attempt to avoid what for you might be an uncomfortable topic.

This isn't just about protests however. This problem is absorbing much of our news, and it's crowding out coverage of facts.

Here's a clip from a skit by Stephen Colbert, just a couple of minutes of mocking President Trump for being a dumb racist. "That

statement of Trump's is old school racism, minus the school" (*haha, silly racist! What a laugh!*).²⁸

While in one sense it might seem odd to hold a satire piece to any level of journalistic integrity, late night comedy shows are an important source of news for many Americans.²⁹ They could change their structure and shift away from that, but for now many of those shows have embraced that role, so the criticism holds.

Now, let's put aside the question of whether Trump is a racist for a moment, you've probably already finalized your view on that and hashing it out further here is a waste. What is worth mentioning further is that when it comes to assessing the harm and benefit of his policies, it's besides the point.

If someone is causing measurable harm with their words or actions, that deserves to be called out. However if all you're going to do is dismiss someone as a racist, and in so doing avoid engaging with them on their actual proposals, you pass up opportunities to level substantive critiques that can lead to constructive discussions. Many news outlets have the idea that Trump is a dumb racist and we should just dismiss anything weird he says or does as a dumb mistake of a stupid fool, and that stance impairs their ability to level serious critics of policy decisions.

Even if he is a racist, he can still have good ideas. Character is an important part of every individual. At the same time by focusing on character to the exclusion of all else, you ignore a person's actual actions, and you miss opportunities to highlight successes and failures and areas of improvement.

But it's just so easy to dismiss him, right?

I mean, sure he might have some useful policies, but come on. He's a racist! You don't support racists, do you? No, of course not. You're a decent human being, so of course you'll vote against the evil racist, won't you?

28 <https://youtu.be/gbCTfELmneI?t=73>

29 <https://www.vulture.com/2017/06/the-credibility-of-late-night-comedy.html>

That's the power of a strong narrative, to frame the topic and shape your thoughts, nudging you to a specific course of action. Create the proper narrative and you can nudge people to do extreme things they would never have otherwise considered.

It's certainly a very effective technique at getting other people to shut up and sit down.³⁰

Let's not forget that this technique has been perfected by many others, notably Fox News. Talking about some Democrats in this 2018 clip: "These people are *communists*, and that's a real problem".³¹

This is a news commentary calling an elected official a 'communist'. Not because it's true (it might be, but that's not why they're doing it). But because they know that using that language will spark an emotional response in their audience and allow them to dismiss the congressperson without having to actually engage the merits of their policies.

And that's the point. They may even be correct to use the term communist, but the point of using the term is to frame the viewer's opinions. This is the logical fallacy known as ad-hominid.

Even when it's true, it should not be used as an ad-hominid weapon, an attack on the character, to dismiss legitimate ideas. Used this way, it's simply a distraction, an attempt to avoid even acknowledging the ideas that the person represents. Responding to serious policies with ad-hominids is a way to control the thoughts of the listener. We should demand more from our news, and from ourselves.

I mean, she might have good ideas, but come on, she's a communist! You don't support communists, do you? No, of course not, you're a good freedom loving American. So of course you'll vote against the evil commie, won't you?

30 <https://www.epsilontheory.com/punting-and-the-tyranny-of-risk-memes/>

31 <https://youtu.be/BDpXYINyGLE?t=105>

What were her policies again? I dunno, doesn't matter, commies suck!

SEX SELLS. SO DOES DISGUST

Commies are disgusting. Racists are disgusting. Media know this, they know that disgust evokes a powerful emotional response, an instinctual drive to disassociate yourself from the disgusting object. Just like framing an act as illegal, associating an idea with disgust instantly makes it much less appealing.

The Nazis knew this. That's why they worked the national propaganda machine hard to dehumanize their enemies. Not just while they were locking up and executing Jews, Roma, Sinti, the mentally and physically disabled, and POWs, but also in the years leading up to those atrocities. The scary thing is that it could happen here.

David Smith, author of *Less than Human: The Psychology of Cruelty*, discusses his findings with NPR:³²

“It's all too easy to imagine that the Third Reich was a bizarre aberration, a kind of mass insanity instigated by a small group of deranged ideologues who conspired to seize political power and bend a nation to their will. Alternatively, it's tempting to imagine that the Germans were (or are) a uniquely cruel and bloodthirsty people. But these diagnoses are dangerously wrong. What's most disturbing about the Nazi phenomenon is not that the Nazis were madmen or monsters. It's that they were ordinary human beings.”

Narratives are tools. They are used with good and ill intent. This isn't something we're going to stop, but it is something we can recognize, and in so doing take back our autonomy of mind. Most of the power of narratives is in framing, in shaping how you think. If you know that your thoughts are shaped and how, you can rise

³² <https://www.npr.org/2011/03/29/134956180/criminals-see-their-victims-as-less-than-human>

above that framing and actively choose whether to accept or reject the spins, and then the thoughts once again become your own.

NARRATIVES IN ACTION: TRANSPARENCY

Let's take a less obvious example than ad-hominids to dismiss political opponents, police body cameras.

In response to critiques about police brutality, a narrative emerged around police body cameras a few years back, which goes something like this:

Body cameras would hold police accountable, because there would always be footage to review their behavior, and therefore would improve police conduct.

Body cameras, we are told³³, are about *Transparency!*

They help us see what officers do and allow us to hold them accountable. Except that they do nothing of the sort.

Why not? Because of who owns the data.

The Narrative around body cameras took on new urgency when ordinary citizens began recording videos of police encounters on their phones, and posting them online. This crowd-sourced style of public accountability is supposed to help bring attention to police misconduct and bring pressure on abusers. This makes many officers uncomfortable.³⁴

Many police departments have responded by embracing body cameras for their officers, and saying that this means bystander videos are no longer necessary. They would have it that police video is equivalent or even more professional than and superior to bystander videos.

³³ <https://cpoa.org/police-body-worn-cameras-transparency-achievable/>

³⁴ <https://psmag.com/news/are-bystander-videos-as-effective-as-police-body-cameras-at-stopping-misconduct>

This is a spin, however. Because now instead of just anyone controlling the footage, police departments themselves do. Shifting control of the footage from bystanders to officers changes the dynamic.

For police departments, officer body cameras aren't about transparency, they're about having the tools to control the story around a police encounter. They can do this now because they have the footage and they can release (or not) the parts they want, helping them shape public perceptions.

It's perfectly understandable for police to do this, and I'm not blaming them one bit for it. I don't take issue with them having body cameras. I do take issue however with the framing of police body cameras as primarily for the public good.

It's about police controlling the story of a given incident.

Even if you scrub the possibility of overt bias in how footage is released, there is still the matter of perspective. "Police body cameras and bystander cameras can tell different stories because they're often at different angles, and they are focusing on different aspects of the encounter, and may turn on at different times and capture very different stories." says Mary Fan, a professor at the University of Washington School of Law.³⁵

Now, of course, body cameras can also help improve transparency, police conduct, and public trust, assuming that the video is freely published on the request of others involved. That way those that accuse police of acting improperly towards them can use the same footage in their defense. There is absolutely a way for body cameras to be part of responsible policing.

That would be nice, however in practice many departments rarely disclose footage, but as the New York Times reports³⁶, "Already,

³⁵ <https://www.theverge.com/21293502/police-violence-protests-camera-bias-body-cam>

³⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/06/us/police-body-cameras.html>

at least 19 states have enacted laws restricting public access to footage, and a dozen more are proposing legislation”.³⁷

So much for transparency. At least we still have a story of *Transparency!*

That NYT article opens with an example of a police shooting where in the aftermath the department released hours of footage from their officer’s body cameras, but “Absent from that trove of video was footage of the fatal shot — a fact that led to weeks of protests and claims of a police cover-up.”

The reason I share all this is to illustrate an example of a huge program of control (police departments controlling the story of their officers) that we are told is for our own good. We are told police body cameras are for our own safety, that they promote *Transparency!* In reality that is a Narrative used to make a system of control sound nice and appealing, after all, you’re not against transparency, are you?

This topic is way more complicated than “Transparency is great! You should allow police body cameras for your own good!”. It’s also a way more complicated story than “The police are corrupt and just using body cameras to control you!”

Take back your autonomy of mind. As with any issue, read about the actual benefits and costs. Listen to those who have been directly involved, on all sides. Then think for yourself.

This doesn’t just relate to contentious social issues, it’s relevant to even basic facts about our world. They too get distorted in service to Narratives and the Spins people put on information they share.

For example, what percent of deaths are attributed to suicide in the US? Pick a number.

You probably guessed a number far larger than the true amount.

³⁷ <https://www.rcfp.org/resources/bodycams/>

Based on Google search frequencies, people inquire about suicide in relation to cause of death in the US roughly 12% of the time³⁸. Based on the cause of death as reported by The Guardian and the New York Times papers, it's 14% or 10% respectively. In reality it's less than 2%. The story is similar for terrorism (reality <0.01% of deaths) and homicides (reality 0.9% of deaths). Violent deaths get far more attention than their frequency of news coverage and public interest alone would warrant.

In the other direction, heart disease is the leading killer of Americans (over 30% of deaths), but receives almost no attention from google searches (about 2%) or the two aforementioned newspapers (each about 3%).

The way we consume information matters, because it shapes our perceptions of what is real and how we should act.

Take back your autonomy of mind. Search for disconnects and biases in what you are being told and work to collect data for yourself.

NARRATIVES IN ACTION: TERRORISTS

Let's cover one more example, terrorism (from the same study, media coverage: over 30%, google searches: 7%, actual: <0.01%).

Terrorism, even in just the last two decades, is a very broad topic. It includes the stories of thousands of disgruntled and sidelined people who for a variety of reasons were driven to adopt violence to enact change, or just feel safe. It includes the stories of tens of thousands in dozens of countries who were targeted or killed in the crossfire. It involves a complex story of the tactics and psychology employed by terrorist organizations and governments working to combat them.

And it also involves a massive lie propped up by a Narrative. That is the Narrative of *Security*!

38 <https://ourworldindata.org/does-the-news-reflect-what-we-die-from>

In the wake of September 11th 2001, people were afraid.

A mere *four days* later, the first draft of what eventually became the USA PATRIOT Act was prepared, and introduced to congress on October 2nd. Congress was not amused, rejecting it for its “constitutional flaws” and “threat to civil liberties” (Here’s a useful timeline³⁹ of relevant legislature and articles).

In fact, the USA PATRIOT Act attracted a lot of criticism. That’s despite being named the “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001”. I mean, with a name like that how can you disagree! It’s about ‘uniting’ America with ‘appropriate tools’. Nevertheless, critics had a lot to say.⁴⁰

“No one has pointed to the absence of the powers the government is now seeking as a reason why we missed the September 11 attacks altogether,” said David Cole, a law professor at Georgetown University Law Center. “And no one is suggesting that having these powers will help us prevent further attacks. What is certain is that these laws could ensnare many innocent people.”

“If this bill passes as written, it will affect absolutely everybody in this country who uses a telephone or a computer,” Nadine Strossen, national president of the American Civil Liberties Union, said. “It will threaten our most basic constitutional rights against unreasonable search and seizure, and it will have a chilling effect on our rights to free speech and free association.”

Other concerns raised by Strossen, who is also a constitutional law professor at New York Law School, as well as other civil liberties experts include:

39 historycommons.org/timeline.jsp?timeline=civilliberties&civilliberties_patriot_act=civilliberties_patriot_act

40 <http://www.crimelynx.com/expfear.html>

- Expanded surveillance could invade people's privacy and erode Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable search.
- The vague definition of "terrorist" could threaten First Amendment rights to free speech and free association, as membership in a group or financial support of it could become suspect.
- Racial or religious profiling would make innocent people scapegoats.
- Americans subjected to more rigorous inspections at airports and other public places may be lulled into a false sense of security while little is done to address real threats.

Despite those significant obstacles, the proponents of the bill pressed on, and later that month the House passed the bill under unusual pressure. Rep. Bobby Scott was one who expressed concern with the nature of how the bill was pushed through:⁴¹

"I think it is appropriate to comment on the process by which the bill is coming to us. This is not the bill that was reported and deliberated on in the Committee on the Judiciary. It came to us late on the floor. No one has really had an opportunity to look at the bill to see what is in it since we have been out of our offices."⁴²

This bill was pushed through amid an atmosphere of fear and panic, and passing it in the name of 'national security' isn't exactly a subtle spin. Rep. Ron Paul was able to pick out the use of framing, explaining to the *Insight* in 2001.⁴³

41 <https://sunlightfoundation.com/2009/03/02/congress-had-no-time-to-read-the-usa-patriot-act/>

42 To be fair, many congressmen have explained that since they vote on so many bills, they actually don't read most of the bills at all, and rarely in their entirety. So this isn't necessarily an outlier.

43 <http://web.archive.org/web/20020811110042/http://www.insightmag.com/main.cfm?include=detail&storyid=143236>

Paul tells Insight, “The insult is to call this a ‘patriot bill’ and suggest I’m not patriotic because I insisted upon finding out what is in it and voting no. I thought it was undermining the Constitution, so I didn’t vote for it — and therefore I’m somehow not a patriot. That’s insulting.”

Insulting, yes. And also very effective at cowing people into falling in line.

You don’t hate America, do you? No of course not, you’re a good patriot. Now sit down and shut up.

Now, you could read all this and still think that, even if all these worst fears are realized, the Patriot Act is still worthwhile because of the tools it provides for combating terrorists.

If you wanted to argue that, I’d respectfully dissent, and we could have a very long and interesting talk about the many aspects of a long running bill in an attempt to come to agreement on its costs and benefits. We’d need to talk about the threats to civil liberties, and to what extent those threats have actually been realized. We’d need to talk about the threat of terrorists, and to what extent the bill has actually prevented attacks. And so on.

But the point I’m making here is not about the effectiveness of the Patriot Act.

I’m saying that in the name of *Security!*, rather than in the name of effective policy, we’ve allowed a wide sweeping law to give unelected bureaucrats the power to sidestep the Fourth, First, Fifth and Sixth Amendments. Even if that power is never used or abused, they have it. We did it, and renewed those powers, not because they were proven to be effective, but because they were for our *Security!*

I’m saying that even if the Patriot Act is a worth while piece of legislation, the fact that it was pushed through and continues to exist with so little scrutiny is dangerous.

How many records has the government collected? How frequently do they peer into the lives of US Citizens? How often do government agents and contractors engage in LOVEINT⁴⁴ (the practice of cyber stalking romantic interests⁴⁵)?

We don't know. Hopefully few, infrequently, and almost never. Probably few, infrequently, and almost never. However we're not allowed to know. We're not allowed to know not because knowing would make the programs less effective (although it would do that), that's not the reason that is used to justify these programs. If it were I'd have far less of a problem with them. No, the justification is a Narrative of *Security*!

The point I'm making is that this is possible because of a Narrative. The bill has been framed as trading liberty for security. I'm saying this is a false choice.

I'm also very worried that this justification will continue to be used to further concentrate power in this country, and that we will let it happen. Today I see parallels with the coronavirus.

There are measures that can and should be taken when proven effective at saving lives. And then there are measures that may or may not save lives depending on how they are implemented, but certainly help expand the powers of certain groups.

Things like contact tracing apps, which can help slow the spread of the deadly coronavirus, but can also be used to ramp up surveillance; like many things it's a tool. The way it's used, and the way its use is justified, matters. We'll have to see how this develops.

The Patriot Act and its massive expansion of government power isn't the only thing justified by a fear of terrorism. We'd be remiss

44 <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2019/09/13/edward-snowdens-memoir-reveals-some-but-not-all>

45 <https://www.cnet.com/news/nsa-offers-details-on-loveint-thats-spying-on-lovers-exes/>

to forget that the same arguments used to justify the global surveillance network were used to declare a 'War on Terror'.

Nineteen years later, we're still fighting. The war isn't over, and of course it's not. For you to be able to win a war you need to know what victory looks like.

Have you or any politician or general you've heard been able to describe what victory against terrorism looks like? What does the end of the war look like?

Of course the war is still going on nearly two decades later. We have no clear definition of victory, no plan to establish stable governments in the countries we toppled, and no offer for the terrorists in those lands for why laying down their weapons and working with us will allow them and their families a better life.

So we're stuck with an endless war. Maybe it is a fight for the ideals of democracy and freedom. Maybe it would even be justified, if that were why we were fighting. But it's not (maybe so for some individuals, but not the nation). We're fighting this endless war because of Narratives like *National Security!* and *Boo Terrorists!*

Isn't that nice?

Chapter 4: Stasis In Markets

Now where does this narrative actually show an effect in the real world? To be sure shaping the information we consume and the thoughts we have is pertinent, but what are some places that this actually manifests itself?

One large area is in our economy. In the structure of our firms and in the nature of our regulations and government. All of it is shaped by how we talk about our society. And some of those spins are decisively by and for a select few.

The desire for Order has caused the economy to become more centralized, with more regulation and fewer firms.

A 2017 paper by a number of economists that was summarized in the Wall Street Journal⁴⁶ observes the change in concentration of firms broken down by select industries (see chart on next page).

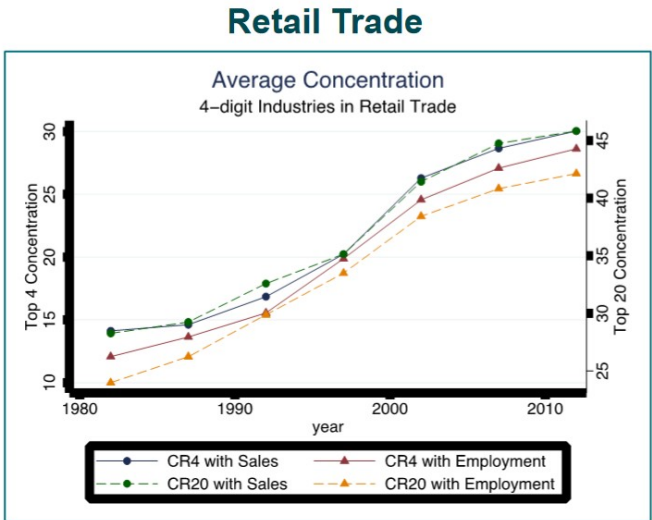
For each industry, the authors map the change in concentration from 1990-2010, showing what percentage of the entire industry's sales are accounted for by the four largest firms (CR4 with Sales) and what percentage of the entire industry's employment is accounted for by the four largest firms (CR4 with Employment). The same is done for the twenty largest firms by sales and employment (CR20 with Sales and Employment).

In either breakdown, and across all six industries studied, we see gradual and persistent increases in concentration, with fewer firms taking greater control over the markets.

For the manufacturing sector, CR4 with Sales rose from 38% to nearly 44%, that is, just four manufacturing firms accounted for 44% of manufacturing sales in 2010. In retail, CR4 with Sales expanded from 15% to 30%, and for employment from 12.5% to

⁴⁶ https://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/van_reenen_paper0824.pdf - Autor, Dorn, Katz, Patterson & Van Reenen (2017)

28%. That means the top four firms doubled their share of the sales and employment of the entire retail sector.



The story is similar in the Service sector, with CR4 climbing from 10.5% for sales and 9% for employment to 27% for sales and 23% for employment.

The authors also looked at the Wholesale Trade, Utilities & Transportation and Finance sectors. Same story. During the period of 1990 to 2010, the four largest firms in each sector accounted for a larger share of employment and sales as time went on. In three of those sectors (manufacturing, utilities & transportation, and finance), by 2010 the largest 20 firms accounted for more than half of sales and employment in their respective industries.

So the extent of the increase is different in different industries, and those industry-wide numbers do hide some geographic-based variations, however across the board the trend is a clear increase in the dominance of a handful of firms.

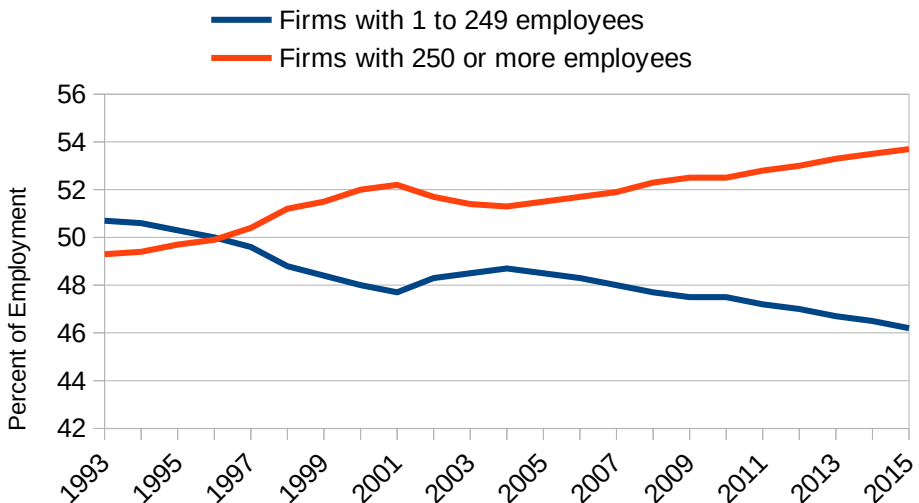
Firms aren't just concentrating in terms of revenue though, there's also consolidation in terms of the number of employees. That's shown in the charts above with the right-side axis, but for a more

general view we can also look at this chart from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

BIGGER! LARGER! BETTER?

Firms are getting larger both in terms of what percent of the workforce they employ and in terms of what percent of their industry's revenue they are capturing.⁴⁷

Percent distribution of private sector employment
by size of firm, 1993-2015



BLS: Entrepreneurship and the U.S. Economy⁴⁸

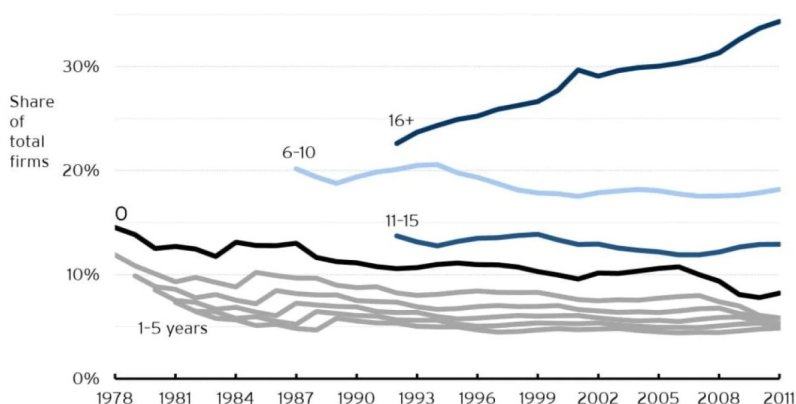
Firms are also getting older. The simplified versions of microeconomics theories state that older firms should die off as newer entrants bring new ideas and improvements, drawing away employ-

⁴⁷ Although this next chart from the Bureau of Labor Statistics only goes back to 1993, a small business owner I showed this to described how this is only a continuation of trends he saw during his time as a member of the board of his local Chamber of Commerce in 1980/1981. At that time small businesses accounted for 60% of employment, he says.

⁴⁸ For higher resolution, chart has been recreated from: https://www.bls.gov/bdm/entrepreneurship/bdm_chart7.htm

ees and customers from the older firms as they innovate and replace the status quo. But this is not the story that the data tell.

Share of Total Firms over Time, grouped by Firm Age



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, BDS; Calculations by Washington Post⁴⁹

The data are telling us that there are fewer new entrants, that a small handful of larger firms are controlling an increasing share of the economy, and that fewer old firms are being competed away by rivals.

Now, while these charts show both a growth in the proportion of large firms and the proportion of old firms, those are not necessarily the same firms. The 16+ yr category may represent a growing number of firms that stay small but don't go under, while the large firms are frequently replaced with other large firms. Even if this is the case, it is worrying that there are fewer new entrants, and this still suggests greater centralization.

More likely though, the old firms and the large firms are predominantly the same. The dearth of IPOs certainly suggests so. So does the fact that in 1979 startups accounted for 14% of all firms in the

⁴⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-apps/imrs.php?src=https://arc-anglerfish-washpost-prod-washpost.s3.amazonaws.com/public/3QXV6ZA4JQ3MT-DEMVLBJU7IIQ.jpg&w=1440>

US, which fell to only 8% by 2014⁵⁰. This points to a great degree of concentration in industries, and fewer companies taking home a larger share of the pie.

All this suggests that the economy is experiencing less competition, as fewer firms are being started and driving older firms out of business, and as a handful of large companies are able to consolidate their dominance. This is uniquely concerning. Competition is the grease that keeps the wheels of capitalism and free markets turning. Without competition our industries and institutions atrophy and become sclerotic.

Competition in business works like checks and balances in government, dispersing control and power to make certain no one group can dominate and abuse the system. Once you lose that decentralization it becomes increasingly likely that corruption will occur.

MORE ~~FOR~~ FROM YOU!

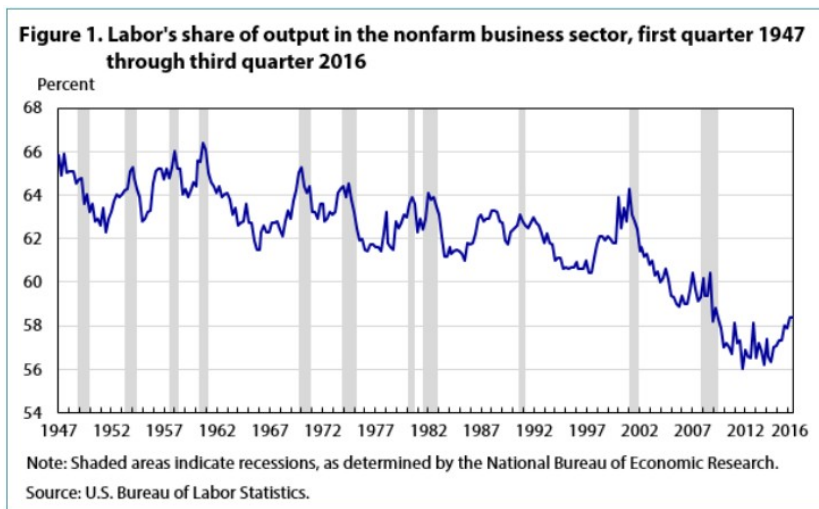
What does declining competition mean for you personally though? Well, for one, it may mean you are getting paid less. While fewer firms employ more of the workforce and take in a greater share of the industry's revenues, fewer of those gains are going to employees, and more is being retained by the businesses.⁵¹

In the next chart we see the change over time in the relative output of Labor. That's a fancy way of saying the proportion of firm costs that go to paying people, as opposed to buying machinery, licensing software, leasing land, or other expenses. If Labor's share of output goes up, it implies that productivity is improving because people are getting paid a larger share of the pie.

⁵⁰ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/thirteen-facts-about-wage-growth/>

⁵¹ We are talking about percentages, not the actual numbers, so while more may be going to both groups as a gross amount, if employee's earnings grew more slowly than did firms' revenue, then employees' share of revenues still declined.

For a time it fluctuated between 62-66%, and slowly drifts down until by the 1990's it was fluctuating between 60-64%. Then by the 2010's it was stuck well below 59%. While it appears to have been declining slowly since the data set began in 1947, there is a clear acceleration after 2001. Since the turn of the 21st century Labor's share of output fell by nearly three times as much as in the preceding half century (gray bars indicate recessions, a common practice in economic charts).



The exact causes of this can be hard to pinpoint. Part of the decline is likely due to automation, as tasks get automated firms spend less on employees and more on robots and software. Part of the reason may also be declining competition. When competition for employees is fierce, firms compete on the price of labor, boosting salary and wages to attract workers. Less direct competition from the concentration of firms would reduce the pressure to raise wages.

I'm not the first to suggest a link between firm concentration and declining Labor compensation. Honestly though, economists are not completely unified over whether firm concentration is a seri-

ous contributor to declining labor compensation, or even whether wages are falling at all over the long term.⁵²

While underpaid PhD students continue to pour over the data to pick apart that particular puzzle, let us turn to a broader question. Why might this concentration of market power be taking place at all? What's driving this trend of centralization?

DATA CONCENTRATION

Data is the new oil, or so they say. The analogy isn't perfect, but it's certainly true that the few companies with petabytes of data have figured out how to turn those insights into billions of dollars. Mostly by researching your behavior and selling the insights into your psyche to the highest bidder in the form of advertising slots.

But that data is valuable for a lot more than just figuring out how to better manipulate you to click on an ad. Having massive amounts of data on anything can help you make better decisions about that topic, simply because you know more than anyone else. Researchers quickly sorting through drug candidates, banks tracking the flow of money to detect fraud, or a dictator hunting down political dissenters to lock up.

Data is a form of power, and like any power it's not good or bad. It's a tool that can be used by good and bad people alike for good or ill. However culture, institutions, and many more factors can tip the scales when looking at whether the net good of all this data is positive or negative.

Unsurprisingly, not everyone has equal access to massive amounts of data. You have on your phone, laptop, and cloud storage many photos, documents, and files that maybe, all told, amount to a few hundred gigabytes, maybe a terabyte. Higher up the totem pole, there are a small number of firms that have situated themselves well to scoop up *exabytes*⁵³ of data. They do this mostly by main-

⁵² <https://www.brookings.edu/research/thirteen-facts-about-wage-growth/>

⁵³ For a comparison of scale, GMail limits file attachments to 25 Megabytes, a Tweet without an attachment is less than 1 Kilobyte. The progression of data

taining platforms on which millions of others interact (such as social networks and digital marketplaces) and tracking everything that happens on their platform. Some of the most successful companies include Alphabet, Amazon, Microsoft, Netflix, Apple, Tencent, Baidu, and Alibaba.

Most of these companies will say the primary use of all that data they collect on you is to ‘improve how they deliver services to you’, which just out of the gate is an incredibly vague way of saying ‘whatever we darn please, you sucker!’ They legally squeeze permission to abuse your personal data by forcing you to ‘Accept’⁵⁴ onerously long Terms & Conditions (T&C) which we all know no one reads.

And just in case the ‘improve our service for you’ excuse doesn’t cover every which way they might want to abuse your personal data, Google has an extra open ended purpose in their terms⁵⁵ for why they will collect your data: “...for the limited purpose of [...] **developing new technologies and services** for Google consistent with these terms” (emphasis in original). What new technologies and services? Well since no formal definition is given, and since pretty much anything digital can be considered a ‘technology’ or a ‘service’, it means ... well, you can see where this is going.

Furthermore, there really is no limit to what types of data firms allow themselves to collect on you. Most firms keep their T&C vague, but occasionally you find something more explicit, like this clause in a Privacy Policy which explains that by using their website, you consent to them collecting, among other things:

“sensitive personal data such as your race or ethnicity, your political opinions, religious beliefs, membership

sizes is: bytes → kilobytes → megabytes → gigabytes → terabytes → petabytes → exabytes (each unit being 1000x larger than the one before). Facebook collected, on average, 4 Petabytes of data every day in 2019 <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/how-much-data-is-generated-each-day/>

54 <https://techcrunch.com/2015/08/21/agree-to-disagree/>

55 <https://policies.google.com/terms?hl=en>

in a trade union, physical or mental health condition, sexual orientation, or criminal offenses.”⁵⁶

Yep, no way sharing that information could ever come back to haunt me! (cold sweat ensues)

Now, massive amounts of data is not in itself a problem. If the data is publicly available for anyone to use so that no one group monopolized access, and if individuals had direct control over how their own data was used and shared through robust encryption, that would address many critiques of our current data collection regime. The challenge is that only a few companies actually have access to these reams of data. Combined with the vague T&C, this allows companies to freely and legally abuse your personal data.

So how have companies been using this power?

Well to start with, they’re making a lot of money. The primary use of all this data is to profile you, assess your interests, and sell your attention to advertisers. The lengths companies like Facebook go to collect and monetize your data and attention are quite expansive.⁵⁷

Beyond advertising however, there are many many uses of the data these platforms generate.

Like what? How about stealing from their clients to directly compete with them? “Contrary to assertions to Congress, employees [of Amazon] often consulted sales information on third-party vendors when developing private-label merchandise”, reported the Wall Street Journal, on April 23rd of 2020.⁵⁸

Amazon has detailed information on what gets sold on its platform. They use that to promote and recommend products, link

⁵⁶ <https://www.driverloaninvestorsclub.com/privacy-policy>

⁵⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/11/technology/facebook-privacy-hearings.html>

⁵⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-scooped-up-data-from-its-own-sellers-to-launch-competing-products-11587650015>

related items, and sometimes even change the prices of goods listed on their platform to help their third party sellers sell more.

However, Amazon also could use this to support its other business lines. For example, in addition to hosting the Amazon Marketplace platform, Amazon also has its own line of products, called Amazon Basics that they sell alongside other firms.

Amazon could (and allegedly has) use the data it has on all the other products on their platform to give them an edge when designing their own products. Sharing that data with everyone so that everyone can make better products is a very different thing from hoarding the information for yourself.

This isn't unlike superstores selling their own private brands, however Amazon has far more data than other stores, and so it would be worrying if they were to use their powerful market position to also compete with their own sellers.

Amazon has insisted they don't do this, claiming that "we strictly prohibit our employees from using nonpublic, seller-specific data to determine which private label products to launch."

However, according to interviews conducted by the Wall Street Journal with over 20 current and former employees of Amazon, the company has been doing exactly that (Amazon claims it had no knowledge of this) and Congress has launched an investigation into these practices.

If Congress finds that Amazon did improperly abuse its market position (a recent report it published suggests this is almost a certainty), it could lead to penalties, potentially even a breakup of Amazon's different lines of businesses.

Of course no one's been convicted at this time, so for now let's give Amazon the benefit of the doubt. Let's assume that their upper management had no clue this was going on in their own company, that supervisors did not explicitly approve or implicitly turn

a blind eye to this behavior. Let's even assume that this is the exception and only a few individuals did this.

The problem remains that it was at all possible in the first place. Such corporate espionage was only ever possible because of Amazon's size and centralization. With that scale you inevitably have opportunities for abuse, and it's only a matter of time before otherwise good people find themselves pressured (either explicitly by management or implicitly by business goals) to inch over the lines. To say nothing of individuals with less than good intentions. The potential is huge, and there's limited oversight or checks to the abuse.

That's why the petabytes of data collected by a handful of organizations can be so powerful and dangerous.

But what about when a company doesn't have reams of competitors' data to mine, millions of consumers' data to exploit, or just doesn't want to take such an approach? Well, for these data poor juggernauts, there's always the option of changing the rules of the game.

CASH FOR ACCESS

Lobbying remains a powerful force in politics. We can track that because congressional lobbyists actually need to register with the federal government, and their general activities are reported by the Senate Office of Public Records. While the total number of registered lobbyists remains relatively constant, there was a surge in spending in the early 2000's, with total spending doubling within a decade, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.⁵⁹

This rise in lobbying spending has halted, but spending remains at the heightened level. Still, with 12,000 lobbyists working full time to petition for their particular industries, and with over \$3 billion annually to grease the gears of politics, it's worth asking what exactly they're lobbying for and how they use all that money.

⁵⁹ <https://www.opensecrets.org/federal-lobbying/summary>; accessed 2020-04-09

The thought of lobbyists can often conjure images of smooth talking folks in suits treating politicians to extravagant dinners in exchange for direct access to stress the interests of their clients. That certainly goes on, but a lot of lobbying is much less pleasant looking.

It's no secret that money is important in politics.⁶⁰ However beyond mere 'donations', many politicians have been caught outright accepting money in exchange for proposing or backing specific legislation, such as Pablo Bidegain in Spain⁶¹. Many lobbyists or senior politicians will casually accept money in exchange for access to key figures or changes to regulations, as Sir Malcolm Rifkind and Jack Straw offered to do, on camera, for undercover reporters in Britain⁶².

In America, politicians convicted over the decades of accepting bribes for legislative action include Frank Brasco⁶³ (bribes from the Mafia to award them lucrative government contracts), Raymond Lederer⁶⁴ (filmed accepting a \$50,000 bribe. His offer? "I can give you me". And yes, that citation is a link to his obituary. How's that for a tombstone quote?), and Daniel Flood⁶⁵ (convicted with five counts of bribery from contractors and lobbyists and three counts of perjury. Again, the link is to his NYT obituary).

The above 6 examples range from the 1970s to the 2010s. Over that time, and long before it, there have been many incidents of outrage and laws passed attempting to prevent repeated incidents. Unsurprisingly, an edict from the government telling you not to

60 <https://theintercept.com/2015/07/30/politicians-admitting-obvious-fact-money-affects-vote/>

61 <https://www.politico.eu/article/spanish-mep-named-in-influence-for-cash-scandal/>

62 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/cash-for-access-scandal-what-is-it-about-what-impact-will-it-have-and-who-is-involved-10064105.html>

63 <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/07/20/archives/rep-brasco-guilty-of-bribery-conspiracy-brasco-convicted-of-bribery.html>

64 <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/04/us/04lederer.html>

65 <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/29/obituaries/daniel-flood-90-who-quit-congress-in-disgrace-is-dead.html>

accept bribes doesn't seem to do much when \$50,000 is offered directly to you.

Of course, if paying politicians to write laws for you seems like too much work, you could always write the laws yourself and get politicians to sign on the dotted line.

That is the charge often levied against the American Legislative Exchange Council. From their own website, "ALEC provides a forum for experts to discuss business and economic issues facing the states"⁶⁶. The criticism is that this forum is restricted to wealthy influencers who therefore have wide access to push their agenda⁶⁷. ALEC and organizations like them have helped pass many controversial bills⁶⁸ with next to no oversight over their involvement.⁶⁹

Let's step back from the bills themselves however. The biggest concern with organizations such as ALEC is not the exact laws they help pass. Many of their template bills I would actually be in support of if they were proposed by my own state legislatures, such as this well researched template for restricting the use of solitary confinement in prisons.⁷⁰

Rather, my main critique is that ALEC represents a centralization of political decision making in our state legislatures, which are by design supposed to be the bastion of diffused decisions. Say what you will about ALEC's positions, they are undeniably very, very large. Their 'about' page claims "nearly one-quarter of the country's state legislators" as members, which their 'membership' page elaborates includes "nearly 300 corporate and private foundation members".

There are situations in which centralized decision making is beneficial, perhaps most notably for rapidly coordinating well con-

66 <https://www.alec.org/about/>

67 https://www.alecexposed.org/wiki/ALEC_Exposed

68 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeTnF2SELE4>

69 <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2002/09/ghostwriting-law/>

70 <https://www.alec.org/model-policy/resolution-on-limiting-the-use-of-prolonged-solitary-confinement/>

nected bodies in real-time crisis situations. State legislatures are not built with that in mind. Their purpose is to collaboratively make decisions representing the interests of their own local constituents, not ALEC's 'experts'.

In case we need a refresher on just what the role of state legislatures was intended to be, let's pull some powerful quotes from state constitutions.

Constitution of Massachusetts, 1780⁷¹

"The body politic is formed by a voluntary association of individuals; it is a social compact by which the whole people covenants with each citizen and each citizen with the whole people that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good" (Preamble)

"All power residing originally in the people, and being derived from them, the several magistrates and officers of government vested with authority, whether legislative, executive, or judicial, are the substitutes and agents, and are at all times accountable to them." (Article V)

Constitution of Alabama, 1819⁷²

"All political power is inherent in the people, and all free governments are founded on their authority, and instituted for their benefit" (Article 1, Section 2)

Constitution of Wyoming, 1889⁷³

"All power is inherent in the people, and all free governments are founded on their authority" (Article 1, Section 1)

71 <https://www.law.gmu.edu/assets/files/academics/founders/Mass-Constitution.pdf>

72 https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/ala1819.asp

73 <https://sos.wyo.gov/Forms/Publications/WYConstitution.pdf>

“equality in the enjoyment of natural and civil rights is only made sure through political equality” (Article 1, Section 3)

Political power is inherent in the people. Legislatures are mere substitutes for the people, and instituted for their benefit. The social compact of government is made for the common good, and to ensure equal enjoyment of that good political equality is to be protected.

Powerful statements to be sure. All this presupposes and relies on as much power as possible being held as close to the people and individuals as possible.

BARRIERS TO ENTRY

Many of these lobbied laws take the form of barriers to entry. Barriers to entry are rules that rig the game in favor of the incumbents, laws that make it harder for new players to enter the field and disrupt the cushy position of the old guard.

Barriers to entry means everything from onerous and excessive licensing requirements that make it hard for firms to even be allowed to operate, to subsidies, to poorly designed bailouts which serve to excuse management for running a business carelessly. There are other ways for firms to protect themselves against competition, however for this section we’re going to focus on those barriers derived from legislative action.

In a completely unregulated market, poorly run firms would be unstable and quickly collapse, making way for better run companies to take their place. Firms that couldn’t operate profitably over the long run would go under, as would firms that treated customers unfairly.

While some regulation, say for preventing the breach of citizens’ liberties, is desirable, many regulations only serve to make life easier for entrenched businesses. Some of these are the result of

explicit lobbying. Some are politicians who would make these decisions anyway. All serve to erect barriers to entry.

Let's take a look at some of these barriers to entry that are the result of legislative action.

NON-EDIBLE BARRIERS

Perhaps the easiest to harp on are explicit government subsidies, often to the tune of billions of dollars. There are a lot of areas to look at, from energy to automobiles.⁷⁴ However one of the most distorted markets is agriculture.

It's no secret that American farmers receive generous subsidies, however exactly where all that money goes can be hard to keep track of. To start, most of it goes to the largest 10% of farmers, who received 78% of the \$223.5 billion of farm commodity subsidies from the US federal government between 1995 and 2019.⁷⁵ So right off the bat government action, regardless of what intention it may have had, has had the effect of distorting markets by favoring a handful of large producers, helping them increase their profits and compete more fiercely with smaller producers than they otherwise would be able to.

These subsidies also have much broader unintended consequences. Most farming subsidies go to the Big Four Crops - corn, wheat, rice, and soy. As a farmer, you see that you'll get an extra dollop of cash if you plant corn, but no extra subsidies if you decide to plant broccoli. So many farmers, even in areas where the soil and weather are better suited to cheaply producing broccoli, will choose to plant corn instead. This is part of the reason grains are so much cheaper than vegetables, one group of foods receives subsidies, the other does not. As a result, in 2016-2017 America

74 <https://www.thebalance.com/government-subsidies-definition-farm-oil-export-etc-3305788#citation-7>

75 <https://farm.ewg.org/progdetail.php?fips=00000&progcode=totalfarm&page=conc®ionname=theUnitedStates>

harvested 15.2 billion bushels of corn; however, only 1.3% was consumed as food directly (that is, as sweet corn).⁷⁶

Much of that extra corn gets processed into ethanol, livestock feed, as well as high fructose corn syrup and other ingredients common in unhealthy processed foods. Indeed, without such broad subsidies, many types of junk foods would never have even been researched and developed.

The result is that America, and the world to which we export, is flush with cheap processed junk. Fruits and vegetables don't get anywhere near the cushy subsidies as corn. Under the Agricultural Act of 2014, if a farmer plants or sometimes even double crops⁷⁷ fruit, vegetables, or tree nuts in areas earmarked for subsidy programs, they will suffer "an acre-for-acre reduction in payment acres".⁷⁸

Why plant asparagus when corn is backed by the US government?

I don't blame the farmers who take these government subsidies one bit. Who wouldn't take free money? But the cumulative effect of these subsidies and the individuals who lobbied for them is a distortion of our economy, our diets, and our health.

Besides direct fiscal subsidies however, governments have tried lots of support schemes for farmers. The US government has been buying up excess crops for decades. In one regard this makes sense, the governments buys up excess production in good years and holds crops in reserve, as a hedge against a food shortage in later years.

America is not alone in holding strategic reserves of vital goods. Switzerland subsidizes many industries so that they will hold re-

76 <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/red-alert-politics/farm-subsidies-waste-money-on-junk-food>

77 Double cropping is a practice of planting a second time in one year after harvesting a field <https://agricultureloan.com/what-is-double-cropping/>

78 <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/crops/vegetables-pulses/policy/>

serves of food, oil, soap, screws, and many more goods.⁷⁹ When this is done in a limited fashion to insure against times of shortage, it's just good stewardship. The problem comes when government insurance gets warped into something more.

Originally expanded during the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression, these programs in America came under criticism in the mid 1900's, as some saw the growing amounts of government purchases as just another form of price supports. Year after year, much of the food rotted away as it sat in preparation for a famine that never came.

So in the 1970's the US government pared back these purchases. However they were replaced by another form of price supports. The government paid farmers to not plant crops in certain places, in order to artificially restrict supply and prop up prices. These "deficiency payments" at one point caused 25% of cropland to sit idle.⁸⁰ And of course, most of these "deficiency payments" went to a handful of crops and farmers.

Think about that, one fourth of our farmland laying fallow. Left to their own devices, farmers would've put that land to use in order to make it productive. Instead some central planning decided to restrict production to preserve what they determined was the 'correct' (higher) price of food.

Beyond merely costing taxpayers billions, these subsidies also hurt jobs. Many subsidies today purport to protect domestic jobs, however they often have the exact opposite effect. One example of this is the US sugar industry.

Sugar is another crop that gets a lot of subsidies. Those subsidies cost us consumers about \$4 billion every year in the form of higher sugar prices, and lead to about \$1 billion of profits for the growers of that sugar.⁸¹ In other words, the program has an imme-

79 https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/business/mandatory-reserves_why-switzerland-stock-piles-for-possible-emergencies/44917424

80 <https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/oecon/chap8.htm>

81 <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-us-spends-4-billion-a-year-subsidizing-stalinist-style-domestic-sugar-production-2018-06-25>

diate return on investment of -75%. Why has the government decided that sugar farmers are worth subsidizing at the cost of consumers?⁸² But wait, it gets worse.

The subsidies keep expensive sugar on the market and means that American sugar is more than twice as expensive as global sugar prices (23.5 cents per pound vs 10.9 cents), and that cost carries over to everything that uses sugar as an ingredient.

As a result, many candy making companies have moved overseas⁸². A report by the US International Trade Administration⁸³ found that “For each one sugar growing and harvesting job saved through high U.S. sugar prices, nearly three confectionery manufacturing jobs are lost”. Why is the government deciding that sugar growing jobs are worth protecting at the cost of far greater numbers of candy making jobs?

So again, while these price supports and subsidies may have had some good intentions, the inherent complexity in the economy (which is a Three Body Problem after all) means any centralized planning is doomed to have unintended consequences, and as history has demonstrated those unintended consequences often far outweigh the benefits. The government protections cost society money, jobs, and distort the choices that we have available to us as consumers in our markets.

Why isn’t this talked about more often? Perhaps because the costs of any one program become diluted when spread out across the population. The sugar subsidies cost Americans \$4 billion each year, but across 330 million people that’s a mere \$12.12 per person, barely noticeable to most. But remember that’s just sugar. That same story is repeated across corn, wheat, rice, airplanes, film, hospitality, pharmaceuticals, and many more.⁸⁴ It all adds up and compounds over the decades, by one estimate as much as

82 <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/05/sugar-subsidies-cost-taxpayers-billions-time-to-end/>

83 https://legacy.trade.gov/mas/ian/build/groups/public/@tg_ian/documents/webcontent/tg_ian_002705.pdf

84 <https://subsidytracker.goodjobsfirst.org/>

\$68 billion from 2000 - 2015⁸⁵, and that's still just the US. Again, this same story is repeated around the world.

HOUSING BARRIERS

Beyond food, another huge industry that receives billions in protection money is real estate. There are a lot of programs for home ownership, rental housing, urban development, and conservation. By some measures, the government subsidies to mortgages helped lead to the asset bubble and financial meltdown of 2008.

Lots of these government programs are well meaning. Cities have rent controls to keep housing affordable, state and federal agencies denote 'Opportunity Zones' to encourage development in poor areas through tax breaks. As with food, the effects of these programs are many and far reaching, and central planners will never be able to account ahead of time for all the externalizes to assess which groups their program will help or harm.

Again, society is a Three Body Problem. It is structurally impossible to predict everything in advance. In addition there are too many moving variables for us to take measurements accurate enough to compute everything in advance. We must accept uncertainty.

There is at least one policy whose long term effects have become clear. Zoning regulations. In general, zoning regulations restrict what can be built, where, so rather than providing direct financial subsidies, these distort a market by dictating what activities or development is permitted. They often aim at reducing density (e.g. limiting how tall buildings can be, or how many units a building can be subdivided into), restricting land use (by preventing homes, industrial buildings, and commercial outlets from being built side by side), and preserving a community's 'character'.

As one example, the Zoning Act of 1938 in Washington DC ordered that "zoned districts should be suitable to the character of

85 <https://www.governing.com/topics/finance/gov-companies-receiving-largest-federal-subsidies.html>

the respective precincts and should encourage stability in districts and in land values”.⁸⁶ Complete Order writ in law.

Now, zoning laws vary a lot from city to city, and different regions have different bodies for listening to appeals and granting exemptions to laws, which makes for a very convoluted regulatory environment. Some companies spend millions of dollars and years trying to get permission to build some storefronts on a block zoned as residential only.

These regulations are far reaching and have many many effects. Some trumpet them for reducing urban congestion and pollution, making cities more livable⁸⁷. Others laud their role in protecting historic buildings and spaces⁸⁸. The impact of zoning regulations are many, some good, others bad, and it can be tough to judge the exact net effect.

What has become clear is that one of the largest effects of these zoning regulations is to restrict the supply and drive up the price of housing. By limiting what can be built, zoning regulations means fewer homes are built, and with a restricted supply comes inflated prices, making housing less affordable.

Zoning regulations are responsible for one third or more of the price of homes in major Australian cities.⁸⁹ Regional differences in land use regulations, researchers at the London School of Economics and Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis found, caused housing prices to be 25% more expensive in south-east England in 2008.⁹⁰ In San Francisco a single 1994 rent-control law had the opposite of its intended affect. Faced with oner-

86 <https://dcoz.dc.gov/node/1202349>

87 <https://psmag.com/environment/how-to-use-zoning-laws-to-promote-environmental-justice>

88 <http://mrsc.org/getmedia/0E24E2FB-023D-45E0-A611-96B94FF43F35/tool-kit.aspx>

89 <https://www.cato.org/publications/research-briefs-economic-policy/effect-zoning-housing-prices>

90 “Politicians are finally doing something about housing shortages”. The Economist. 2020, January 16th.

ous restrictions, “affected landlords decreased supply by 15%, increasing rents citywide”.⁹¹

The economy is complicated. Regulations have far reaching effects, and rarely do they only result in their intended consequences. In general, subsidies and protectionist laws tend to inflate the profits of incumbents, block new innovators from entering, and raise prices for consumers while reducing their available options.

That point is worth emphasizing. **Barriers increase prices.**

These barriers to entry are not a bug in our economy, they are a strategy that firms have been deliberately pursuing for decades. In the business world barriers to entry are desirable (when you’re the one being protected of course) to keep out competitors and protect your profits. The celebrity investor Warren Buffett famously stated that he seeks out businesses that are “protected by unbreachable ‘moats’”.⁹²

Companies intentionally seek to find ways to stop competitors from hurting their business. This makes perfect sense from the individual’s and business’s perspectives, and I don’t fault them one bit. The issue for society comes when thousands of companies take that approach, and the result becomes an economy filled with barriers that prevent the next wave of innovative startups from taking off.

‘STRATEGIC’ BARRIERS

Another form of barriers that structurally distort an economy is when a country favors certain industries.

In developing countries this is often justified by claiming that temporary tariffs or subsidies to a particular industry or company will help them build their assets and expertise so that they will soon be

91 “Sorry, We’re Full.” The Economist. April 20th 2019.

92 <https://www.foxbusiness.com/business-leaders/why-warren-buffett-likes-elephants-and-moats>

able to compete on an even footing with foreign firms. In economics, the jargon for this is an Infant Industry, and it does have some serious merit. Alexander Hamilton advocated for such temporary subsidies⁹³, as did John Stuart Mill⁹⁴. The challenge is that the industry never seems to leave it's 'infancy', and the "temporary" support tends to become permanent, and the firms tend to squander the opportunity to become globally competitive and instead enrich their owners.

Developed countries protect certain industries as well. There, the justification is usually to keep some 'strategic' industry alive, local, and under local ownership. Again, the devil is in the details, and here it is all too easy to define 'strategic' in very broad strokes. Many countries hold that weapons manufacturing is strategic, but what about when your yogurt is a nationally vital industry?

"In 2005, after PepsiCo briefly eyed Danone, a French yogurt-maker, France's government vowed to protect it and other "strategic" companies from foreign suitors."⁹⁵ Yep, France blocked the acquisition of a yogurt making firm because, I guess, the nation of France would be detrimentally impaired by Pepsi owning Danone's plants? Keep in mind, most of those plants would've stayed open and in France, they just would've been owned by some dirty Americans, and I guess that would somehow threaten France's national security? Anyway, Pepsi was not allowed to buy Danone.

Through much of this, you've probably had a question on your mind.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Probably the simplest solution is to remove the potential for abuse. This is the argument of deregulation. If there are no regulations, there are no regulators to corrupt. It does cleanly solve

93 <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-10-02-0001-0007>

94 Irwin; Douglas. "Against The Tide". Princeton University Press. 1996. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvzsmfjm.14>

95 <https://www.economist.com/business/2020/04/08/strategic-pile-up>

one major issue, but other issues arise. Some regulations, like those against insider trading, have largely had the desired positive effects. Completely tearing away all of that is just pure anarchy, Complete Chaos. Which is just as harmful to society and individuals as is Complete Order. I'm not advocating for that.

My point is that top down fixes are complicated, full of trade offs, and unlikely to have the complete intended result without any knock on effects. The issue is that you are trying to control the behaviors of millions of individuals on a granular level with rules that need to be carefully written, arbitrated, and updated as the times change. That's not only incredibly difficult, but also incredibly expensive and rarely effective.

Another option is that, instead of changing the behaviors of millions of individuals with edicts from above, we could persuade each individual to change their behaviors voluntarily. Achieving the same outcomes but by radically different means.

How does voluntary action take place on an individual level, at scale? There are two ways. The first is through the propagation of new stories, Narratives. Remember Narratives aren't inherently bad or good, they are human. They are tools. We can use them for good - if we tell the right story. The story of a proud England defending Democracy against invasion was powerfully orated by Churchill. That sparked change in the attitudes, words, and actions of millions.

The second way voluntary action takes place on an individual level, at scale, is that ... it just does. If millions of people look at the world, assess reality, and act for themselves on their own information, amazingly, stuff will just happen even without any politician legislating it. Of course, since we humans are story tellers and cultural beings, we always make up stories about these actions after the fact to rationalize them. But there's a big difference between Narrative driving actions and actions driving narrative.

Keep that in the back of your mind, we're going to pick up that idea of bottom up, voluntary action later.

But first, let's turn to the single most well funded Narrative creation machine in our modern age, and how its actions have, intentionally or unintentionally, helped hasten our Descent into Complete Order.

Chapter 5: Let It Rain, Let It Rain

Let it rain money, that is.

Outside of our legislatures, another powerful institution whose policies have driven increased centralization is the Federal Reserve Bank of the United States (or just the Fed). Despite the name, this is not a federal body like HUD or the FBI. The Fed is a private bank that was given special powers by an act of Congress (actually it's the 3rd such chartered Central Bank. The others were abolished for various reasons, and we've had decades-long spells with no central bank at all). The history of central banks in the US and throughout the world is quite interesting, and although a complete recounting is far outside the scope of this book, a very brief recap will be useful to us.

Before I loose your interests with a short recap of policy history, I'll drop a big number right up front to hold your attention.

\$7,000,000,000,000. Seven Trillion Dollars. In May of 2020, the balance sheet of the Federal Reserve crossed that threshold, and then kept rising. That's how much money they've unilaterally decided to create and inject into the economy. It didn't need a vote of congress or input from the people. It's worth asking how they are able to do that and what the many many effects of such a large amount of money can be. So let's dive in.

The Fed was given the power to issue its own debt, essentially allowing it to print money (see the mark on your dollar bills that says "Federal Reserve Note"?). It was given this power in order to ... actually, that's an interesting question.

What is the purpose of the Federal Reserve?

A textbook answer has something to do with balancing unemployment and inflation, which an economic phenomenon dubbed the Phillips Curve⁹⁶ observes to be inversely related. Either inflation or unemployment getting too high is obviously a problem. Tradi-

96 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phillips_curve

tionally, the Fed has balanced the two by intervening in the market for US government bonds (Treasury Bonds, or Tbills). They also allow banks to deposit money with them and can set the interest they pay on those deposits. More recently though the inverse link between inflation and unemployment seems to be breaking down.^{97 98}

Either way though, managing inflation and unemployment are definitely beyond the original scope of the Fed, that mandate would come much later with the Federal Reserve Reform Act of 1977⁹⁹. The term “unemployment” appears just once in the 1913 Federal Reserve Act that chartered the current US Central Bank for 20 years¹⁰⁰, the word “inflation” also appears only once¹⁰¹, and neither appear a single time in the text of the Banking Act of 1933¹⁰² which extended the original charter indefinitely.

Rather, the 1913 Act prefaces the creation of the Bank with the intention:

“to furnish an elastic currency, to afford means of re-discounting commercial paper, to establish a more effective supervision of banking in the United States, and for other purposes.”

Well, that last clause is obviously the Get Out of Jail Free card. Nothing in here though is strictly about inflation or unemployment. As for the other economics jargon, let’s give some quick definitions. Those will make more sense however with some short background.

97 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/louiswoodhill/2014/02/03/the-great-federal-reserve-fallacy/#265a27cd24b0>

98 <https://www.thestreet.com/mishtalk/economics/yet-another-fed-study-concludes-phillips-curve-is-nonsense>

99 <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-91/pdf/STATUTE-91-Pg1387.pdf>

100 Section 2B, subsection (b), on page 6: <https://www.federalreserve.gov/about-thefed/fract.htm>

101 Section 7, subsection (C), on page 15

102 https://ia802702.us.archive.org/7/items/FullTextTheGlass-steagallActA.k.a.The-BankingActOf1933/1933_01248.pdf

THE BETWEEN-FED DAYS

In the years between the abolition of the Second National Bank of the United States and the establishment of the current Federal Reserve in 1913, there were some financial crashes caused by money being abundant in some regions (big cities) and scarce in others (small rural counties). Today we could just electronically send cash from one place to another, but this was before phones, let alone the internet, so a big central clearing house for spreading money around was a compelling case.

One way to do that is to print more money, or destroy money. This is what is meant by having the currency be ‘elastic’, the supply of cash is variable. Before computers and the internet, a central bank was the only realistic way to do that on a national scale.

Rediscounting commercial paper refers to buying up bonds and selling them again. By acting as a large purchaser and seller of debt, and by timing those purchases and sales, the Federal Reserve can ~~distort~~ manage market prices for debt and its availability, and thus the price of money. That ~~distortion~~ management is intended to be a stabilizing force.

More effective supervision of banking is, well, also very broad. Congress still handles a lot of that itself, but the Fed was empowered to lend to banks directly, usually to cover short term cash issues (like those small rural banks), and manage an insurance pot of money to bail out the depositors of banks (FDIC).

Even just that though is a very powerful set of tools, but still, all this had nothing explicitly to do with unemployment or inflation. These are descriptions about *what* the Fed is allowed to do, but does not provide a *reason for* doing those things.

That’s where the argument for stabilizing inflation and unemployment come in. It’s a policy that developed over years, and was formalized with the 1977 Act. Institutions don’t remain static, they change and grow along with the rest of the world.

DEBT! DEBT! DEBT!

So how has the Fed grown in recent times? Mostly through its balance sheet. A Trillion dollars in response to the 2008 crash, followed by another \$2 trillion over the following half decade. Three more Trillion in the first half of 2020.

The reason they've given to defend this is to stabilize the economy. Did it? Short answer: we don't know for sure and we can't know for sure, since we can't run randomized control trials on the US economy. That doesn't stop many, many economists from arguing about it though. (At least I know I'll never have a lack of stimulating economics articles to stay up late reading!)

Regardless, the Fed (and to be fair, every other central bank in the world) loaded up on assets. When the Fed buys things, they don't do it with money they've received from someone else. They create new money. They then use that new money to buy things, mainly US Treasury bonds. So the effect is to create new money, and give that money to the government or some investor.

For those of you who don't daily swim in these financial waters, let's very briefly review the effects of this. Not all of these are the intended effects, but creating trillions of dollars has some pretty far reaching effects nonetheless.

First, we're using the money to buy things. Usually federal bonds (i.e. government debt), but sometimes other types of bonds. By purchasing more of something we bid up the price, exactly like an aggressive bidder in an auction.

We also buy up a lot of the available supply of bonds. Like someone hoarding all the toilet paper in a super market¹⁰³, that means there's less for everyone else. So now, seeing a restricted supply, others are likely to feel pressured into paying more, and may also feel the need to stock up as well. So the first effect of buying \$3

¹⁰³ How much toilet paper would \$4 Trillion get you? A worthy question! At \$0.75 per roll, that would be over 3.975 trillion rolls, enough for everyone in America to last 17.7 years. You are very welcome for the useless trivia.

trillion dollars worth of something is to drastically push up the price of that thing.

However \$3 Trillion dollars is a LOT of money, and it doesn't just sit around in people's pockets. They go and spend it at other places, and so on and so forth.

This is the dream of 'trickle down' economics. The Fed would give trillions to banks and investors, who would find ways to spend it places that would boost the economy for every American.

TRICKLE DOWN (TO MY POCKETS)

Except those banks and investors mainly spent it on more bonds and a lot of stocks (often their own stocks, part of a big rise in corporate stock buybacks). So the money did spread around, but mainly within a very small circle of financial asset owners.

All that Fed-fueled stock buying helped raise the price of stocks. This is called asset appreciation (the assets, stocks and bonds in this case, appreciated in value – their price went up). Since half of Americans don't own stocks¹⁰⁴ – and among those who do the distribution unsurprisingly looks like our right-tail-heavy income distribution¹⁰⁵ – only a relative few have benefited from this massive monetary experiment.

It certainly was an 'experiment'. But not a proper scientific experiment. In a proper experiment we do something to one group, and have a separate control group which we leave alone. By observing the differences between the two groups we can isolate and study the effects of what we did.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/211052/stock-ownership-down-among-older-higher-income.aspx>

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.theglobalist.com/u-s-stock-ownership-owns-benefits/>

¹⁰⁶ Maybe we could design an experiment, say by randomly selecting 25 states to bail out, and 25 to leave alone, then observe the differences. That might work as an experiment, but perhaps you can foresee the political difficulties of such an approach.

With our economy, we just do stuff and see what happens, however without a separate control group we have no way of telling if what happened was a direct result of our actions, or some outside force. So we can take action, but we have few tools to actually learn what actions were effective and improve over time. We're flying blind and making it up as we go along. If that's how we operate, fine. I would raise issue however with flying blind while pretending our toy instruments are giving reliable readings.

Let's see how the latest non-scientific 'experiment' went.

I GOT SEVEN TRILLION PROBLEMS

Money Printer Go 'Brrr'¹⁰⁷



Well remember the sudden 2008 \$1 Trillion dollar temporary emergency which gradually morphed into a \$3 Trillion not-so-temporary 'economic weakness' that needed constant life support? The Fed did start to sell off those assets, very gradually, in 2018 and 2019.

¹⁰⁷ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/WALCL>

Then, there was a scare in the fall of 2019 in the overnight bond market which motivated the Fed to backtrack a bit¹⁰⁸, and then in early 2020 the coronavirus hit the US and the Fed rapidly gobbled up \$3,000,000,000,000 more worth of bonds (Corporate bonds this time, not just treasury bonds, another first).

So that \$3,000,000,000,000 ‘experiment’ we ran over the past decade, well we just repeated it in a matter of months, and this still might not be the end.

We already knew that this massive injection of liquidity would boost stock prices, and they certainly appear to have led to a “V-shaped” recovery in markets (even if the real world situation those markets are supposedly based on remains bleak).

What else does this do though? It funds bailouts (just don’t call them that). With this monetary expansion, the Fed is not merely buying up bonds. They are also funding loans to companies through the Boston branch’s Main Street Lending Program.¹⁰⁹ This is not unlike Congresses Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), which provides money to banks to lend out to businesses.

BUT HOW DO YOU SPEND IT?

The two programs, funded at \$75 billion and \$350 billion respectively, raise some challenges. One of the largest perhaps is ‘moral hazard’, which refers to how bailouts run a large risk of warping long term incentives.

Many companies do find themselves in dire straights due to being forced to close for months due to the pandemic. Many will not reopen.

The argument in support of providing loans is that many of these companies are otherwise perfectly healthy, and that if they are given a loan now, they will soon reopen and have the cashflow to

108 <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/what-happened-in-money-markets-in-september-2019-20200227.htm>

109 <https://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/mainstreetlending.htm>

pay back their loans. In these situations, where a company's fundamentals are sound and their financial troubles likely to be short lived, there absolutely is a business case for providing that money.

Without government intervention, that money would come from thrifty and frugal savers who had tucked away money. The businesses would be loaned the money either directly by financiers, through Peer to Peer platforms, or by banks who held the deposits of those savers. Thus the risk adverse savers who opted out of buying up stocks act as a social insurance system, they provide the resilience a society needs to whether a short term shock.

Without government intervention, people and banks can't afford to lend to everyone. Some businesses will clearly not reopen, with or without a loan, there's no need to throw good money after bad and drag out a painful closure. Some businesses also won't be deserving of a loan because their financials aren't sound.

In this last category fall businesses who spent extravagantly and loaded up on debt while times were good. These businesses were mismanaged. Now that the good times are over the bill has come due. That's the price of poor stewardship.

Businesses, particularly public companies, have a responsibility to generate a return on their investment for investors. This includes hedge funds, yes, and also the millions of Americans with retirement savings who are relying on long term stock gains to meet their financial goals. For these investors, and for the privilege of being entrusted with their money, companies have an obligation to protect their assets and grow them over time. They are called to act as stewards of our wealth.

Some people, and some institutions, are bad stewards. When times are good and money is flowing easily, it can be easy to cover up bad decisions. When an economy dips or crashes and people pull back on spending or lending, poorly run and fragile companies are revealed. It's painful, but it's healthy. The small breakdowns in the Sandpile reveal the rust that has built up and allow us to uproot it before it spreads too far and wide.

Ideally, frequent small setbacks would reveal poorly run institutions, end them before they ruin many more people's lives, and we allow their failed corpses to serve as examples to others to avoid their mistakes. Thus their follies serve as lessons and help others to stay nimble, resilient, and focused on being stewards.

The other consequence of not having any bailouts is that you have to fend for yourself. In the past twenty years we've suffered economic declines from 2001, 2008, and now 2020. Three times in 20 years. Most companies and people plan on living longer than 20 years. These are not unprecedented events. Although we know not where the next shock will come from, a 'next time' is coming. This is a fact to recognize and a reason to prepare, to have cash in reserve and emergency plans. To stay resilient, and not frivolously hedge all the chips on one go. That is what many companies have done and why our economy is more fragile than it could be.

What I mean by fragile is that risky corporate debt has grown substantially in recent years. Some debt can be very beneficial if it allows you to expand quickly and seize new opportunities you couldn't otherwise afford. Many individuals do this for college, leading to higher incomes (though not without some risk). Businesses frequently use it to open new stores or factories, leading to greater sales (though not without some risk). The issue is that much debt is wasteful (lots of risk and little reward), and doesn't actually generate the money needed to pay it back.

When a corporation issues debt, it gets a rating by credit agencies, with triple-A plus (AAA+) being the highest grade. If the debt is rated as **BBB-** or better, it is considered investment grade, if it is one notch lower, **BB+** or below, it is considered below investment grade, aka junk bonds.¹¹⁰ Many mutual funds are legally not allowed to own junk bonds. Generally, a bond is rated junk if the company issuing it runs a higher risk of being unable to pay back and needing to default. While all forms of corporate debt have been growing, including junk bonds, an interesting fact is that **BBB** debt, just two notches above junk, has grown 400% from

¹¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bond_credit_rating

2007 to 2018, substantially more than the market for corporate debt overall.¹¹¹

At \$3.8 Trillion dollars, BBB is the largest group of corporate debt.¹¹² In other words, most corporate debt is just barely considered investment grade. That's before a pandemic wrecked everyone's finances.

THOSE WHO FAIL TO PREPARE

So companies have been loading up on debt, and not in a good way. They have become more fragile.

And now coronavirus has wrecked all their rosy financial forecasts. Could they have predicted COVID, specifically? Of course not. Should they have built into their long term financial models the possibility of *some kind* of 'black swan' event, and should they have set aside some resources to deal with that eventuality? Absolutely. That's their job as stewards, to balance seeking growth with protecting what they have from storms. Some companies have been good stewards of what they've been entrusted. Many have failed as stewards.

And now they want to be bailed out. Because the virus is 'not their fault'. Regardless that it was entirely within their power to prepare for *something like* COVID. It's not terribly complicated. Save a bit of money, identify potential backup suppliers, stock up a little on inventory, and you're already far ahead of most. Many companies did nothing. Apparently preparation and contingency planning wasn't considered 'efficient'.

The danger is that, like with 2008, we bail the failures out along with those who deserve and need it, and the bad behavior spreads, only to become more pervasive for the next time. We stop the Sandpile from collapsing too much this time, only to al-

¹¹¹ <https://www.mauldineconomics.com/the-weekly-profit/the-corporate-debt-bubble-is-strikingly-similar-to-the-subprime-mortgage-bu>

¹¹² <https://www.spglobal.com/en/research-insights/articles/u-s-corporate-debt-market-the-state-of-play-in-2019>

low the steep cliffs of instability to grow further, creating the perfect condition for an even more devastating collapse the next time something bad happens.

But what about individuals? Don't many individuals suffer from the closure of so many businesses? Shouldn't we intervene to protect them?

Yes, they do suffer. And yes, our unemployment system stinks. That doesn't mean we should bail out every corporation. The employees and the corporate entity are separate things. You can assist the former while letting the latter die the death it deserves.

Case in point, American Airlines asking for an extension of the Payroll Support Program while simultaneously laying off tens of thousands of employees.¹¹³

BAILOUTS ARE FOR BIG BOYS

What about small Main Street companies? Aren't they even more at risk from the types of shocks like these lockdowns? Yes, they are. And loans should, and are, being extended to them. My point is that even in a crisis, perhaps especially in a crisis, it is important to still lend based, at least in part, on ability to repay.

Loans should be available for those who need it *and* actually have a chance of paying it back. There's a wrong way to do that, and a right way to do that. I'm not qualified to give the exact winning formula, I can only say that the right way involves the kind of due diligence that government and large banks aren't easily able to conduct.

The Wall Street Journal on May 4th of 2020 reported how in the administration of the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), in which banks were given the power to determine who received the government funded loans, large banks exhibited favoritism for large publicly traded companies. Small banks punched above

¹¹³ <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/4515/000000620120000091/a8kexhibit9911lettertoe.htm>

their weight and came through for Main Street businesses, often reaching out proactively to the businesses to help them apply.¹¹⁴

“[Banks] with \$1 billion or less in assets account for just 6% of all U.S. banking assets, but they and other small specialty lenders approved nearly 20% of loan dollars.”

Why were smaller banks so much more nimble and effective at getting loans in the hands of the small businesses it was intended for? Because they are local institutions that actually have personal relationships with the small business owners. They know the people in their community, and they were willing and able to pick up the phones and reach out directly, while large banks waited to develop online platforms to process applications.

On the one hand small banks were able to meet the needs of their communities. On the other we have the Fed’s Main Street Lending Program, which will never reach many of the main street businesses it is named after. Why not? Because many of those mom-and-pop stores are much too small. From the program’s FAQ (as of May 27th 2020):

“borrowers may not receive a loan that is below the minimum loan size, which is \$500,000 for MSNLF Loans and MSPLF Loans, and \$10 million for MSELF Upsized Tranches.”

\$500,000 is a rounding error to publicly trading companies, but for many companies that are only a single storefront, they can’t afford to borrow that much. They’re looking for a small loan to tie them over for a few months, something like \$10,000, \$50,000, or maybe even \$200,000. But probably on the smaller side.

In 2016, there were over 5.7 million loans made to small businesses in amounts of less than \$100,000.¹¹⁵ So the Fed’s \$500K

114 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/small-businesses-were-at-a-breaking-point-small-banks-came-to-the-rescue-11588590013>

115 <https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/advocacy/2018-Small-Business-Profiles-US.pdf>

cutoff for a ‘small business’ program likely leaves out a great many small businesses. Getting money in the hands of responsibly run companies who have the ability to repay is great. Calling it a program for ‘main street’ businesses while implementing terms that exclude many of them, not so great. At least give it an appropriate name.

We can say that small, local institutions were more adept at quickly (and speed was important) delivering loans. We will see in the months to come how good of judges the different banks were at assessing ability to repay. Local institutions and communities are effective vehicles for out-sized impact however, a point we will stress in the last chapter of this book.

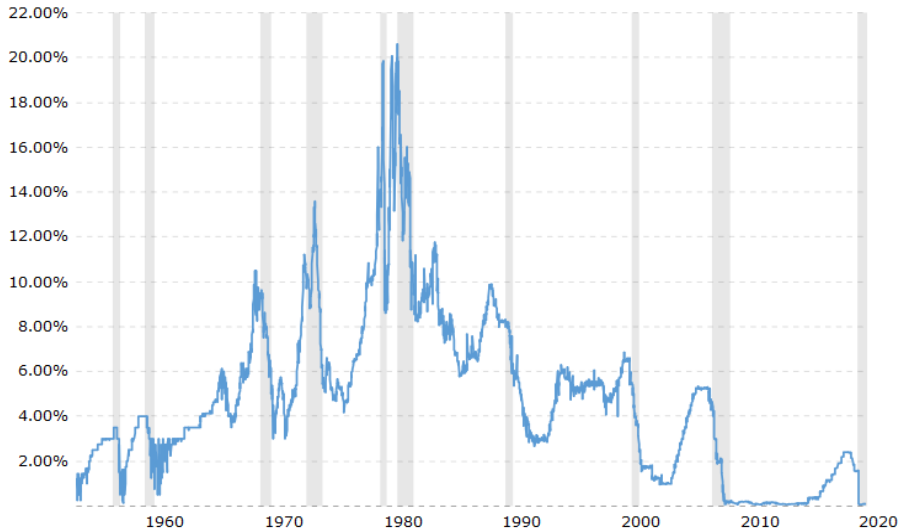
It’s troubling, though, that as useful as small banks showed themselves to be, they’ve been getting the short end of the monetary stick by the Fed in recent decades.

The reason for this is low interest rates.

Small banks rely on their deposits. They take your money and loan it out to other businesses, but they also deposit some of it in the Fed. The next chart is of the Federal Funds Rate, which is how much banks can charge for lending to each other overnight. It functions like a floor for interest rates in general, and drives almost every other interest rate in America, if not the world. The decline of the Federal Funds Rate is the reason mortgages and auto loans and almost every kind of debt has been getting cheaper.

The Federal Funds Rate’s Rise and Fall¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ <https://www.macrotrends.net/2015/fed-funds-rate-historical-chart>



Since small banks rely on deposits, lower interest rates squeeze their profit margins. Larger banks can offset this because they often have other business divisions that invest in equity markets, or manage the wealth of individuals. Because of this bigger banks have been growing at the expense of smaller banks. This centralization is reflected in the first study shared in chapter four, which looked at concentration in sales and employment in finance, as well as other sectors.

Slashing interest rates also punishes savers, who earn less on their cash reserves. The explicit goal is to incentivize people to save less and spend and invest more. This has a ‘negative externality’ (unintended downside) with regards to the economy.

When people have less in savings, they have smaller cash cushions to fall back upon. When that situation is repeated across millions, we are left with a more fragile economy where small shocks are more likely to drive many into financial stress.

To circle back however, we were looking at the effects of loose Federal Reserve monetary policy. The first big effect was to pro-

vide liquidity to markets in the hope that it would ‘trickle down’, but in reality it has circled among a few well connected groups of investors.

A second big effect is the creation of a moral hazard, by extending loans with little oversight and thus bailing out poorly run companies. This prevents small clusters of instability in the Sandpile of our economy from collapsing and enables those small clusters to instead grow into widespread systemic risks.

REGULATING RISK INCREASES RISK

A third big effect of the Fed buying up bonds is to incentivize investors to seek riskier investments.

Traditionally, bonds are a low risk/low reward investment. You put in your money, and you’re pretty assured to come back in 10 years with an extra 35%, that’s at a little more than 3% APY. Typically bonds have a guaranteed, but small, return.

Three percent might seem high for a bond, but it really wasn’t until very recently. They’ve cratered so much because they’ve gotten so much more expensive.

The very simplified version goes like this. A bond is set to return a fixed amount of interest. So if you pay \$97 for a bond that promises to pay you \$100 in one year, that’s called a 3% coupon bond, because you are buying the ‘face value’ of the bond (\$100) for 3% off. If however, you sell the bond that you paid \$97 for to someone else immediately for \$98.5, then they now paid \$98.5, but the bond is still set to pay out only \$100. So their potential gain is only \$1.50.

The more you pay for a bond, the lower its return is. When the Fed buys up so many bonds and resells them (“rediscounting commercial paper”) it drives the price of bonds up, which drives their return on investment down. If you want something more than almost 0%, you need to look elsewhere, at riskier invest-

ments, like stocks (which again is part of what's driving money into stocks, driving up their prices).

To put hard numbers on that, let's look at the 10 year Treasury Bond. Treasury Bonds in the US Government are supposedly one of the safest investments in the world, and so have one of the lowest yields. That yield on October 1st 2020 was 0.696%.¹¹⁷ In 1990 it was 8.08%. Treasury bond yields have fallen more than ten-fold in thirty years!¹¹⁸

So this lowering of rates incentivizes investors to take on more risk, which translates into buying more stocks, and also all those just-barely-not-junk BBB bonds we saw earlier. At the same time the massive influx of currency the Fed is fueling provides excess cash for these investors to make those risky investments.

Before we move on, I do want to stress that the US Fed is not alone in these actions. All major central banks in the world have been generally cutting rates and printing money, and all have been contributing to these same problems I am outlining with the Fed's interventions.

The other major central banks in the world are the European Central Bank (ECB), the Bank of Japan (BOJ), and the People's Bank of China (PBOC). Combined they have created over 23 trillion dollars worth of money as of May 29th 2020.¹¹⁹ If that debt were its own economy, it would be the largest in the world.

But let's get back to the OG central banker of our era. The Fed was originally simply a 'lender of last resort', someone to back loans and prevent financial ruin for the entire nation. In other words, someone to prevent entire collapses of the Sandpile.

Over the decades it has used increasingly broad measures to take action in response to economic catastrophe. However since 2008,

117 <https://finance.yahoo.com/quote/%5ETNX/>

118 Implies that the US government is a substantially safer investment than 30 years ago (at least relative to other available investments). Of course the Fed owns 15% of the total of that debt. More buyers bids up the price and lowers the return.

119 <https://www.yardeni.com/pub/peacockfedecbassets.pdf>

the quantitative easing (QE, printing of money) of the Federal Reserve has been almost non-stop, and in the face of the pandemic is now exploding.

I look at the continuous monetary policy and see an increasingly desperate and decreasingly effective effort to freeze a pile of sand. Only it just keeps driving new grains to fall faster and faster. By preventing collapse, they are hastening the development of more and larger points of stress, and it will continue to require ever more extreme intervention to delay an eventual collapse.

Until that eventual collapse, we seem to be stuck with ever more massive monetary stimulus. Currently the Fed is sitting on a balance sheet of \$7 Trillion dollars, nearly twice the Federal government's annual spending (around \$4 trillion dollars in the years leading up to 2020. With the pandemic that number has also ballooned). \$7 Trillion is a lot of money, and it's worth asking what effect it's had in our world as it's lingered and grown over the past decades.

WHERE DID ALL THE MONEY GO?

One way in which the Fed stimuli have affected the world is through inflated asset prices (propping up the value of stocks). One of the chief goals of monetary stimulus is to reduce the cost of borrowing money. This is meant to help companies whether financial shocks, and help them take loans to expand their businesses. In response to an abundance of cheap loans, many companies have taken on massive new debts. But they haven't always used that cheap money for the best of purposes.

While cheap debt does help otherwise healthy companies cover the gaps created by temporary shocks such as coronavirus induced lock downs, it also helps poorly run companies cover their not-so-healthy business negligence. While a temporary shock like the coronavirus or housing bubble may justify such temporary stimulus, the continued cheap borrowing we've been provided with over the past decade has changed that paradigm.

Normally a crisis, as devastating as it can be, helps reveal what was rotting away and should probably be replaced. Thanks to continuous stimulus however, weak institutions and mismanaged companies are able to paper over their weaknesses and avoid reform, for a time. So we are deprived of a vital aspect of our society, creative destruction. Too much order, not enough chaos.

Maybe you think that price is worth paying if it means we won't suffer economic collapse. However we have not achieved an end to economic busts, and never will through monetary or fiscal stimulus. The economy, remember, is a Sandpile. Small and frequent collapses in isolated segments are normal as people inevitably pursue businesses or programs that turn out to be mistakes. Their collapse teaches us lessons that help us avoid building bad institutions and improve the rest of our society.

However when we intervene to such an extent that we attempt to prevent those small collapses, when we try to impose a world of Complete Order where the stock market only ever goes up, we don't stop people from building bad companies or enacting bad policies. Those still happen anyway, only now they have much more leeway to grow and grow unchecked, until their rot spreads throughout the whole organism of society into a systemic rot that creates mass failures¹²⁰ such as the 2008 housing mortgage bubble.¹²¹

Many of those cheap debts have been used to fund stock buybacks. Right now there's a huge debate in the financial community about the ethics of stock buybacks. I've already spent a lot of time elaborating on the Federal Reserve system, so I'll keep this explanation very brief (and thus probably leave out important details).

Publicly traded companies on the stock market exists to do one thing – take investments from people, whether that be hedge funds or individuals saving for retirement, and deploy that capital

120 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnmauldin/2020/01/03/the-fed-is-creating-a-monster-bubble/>

121 <https://mises.org/library/did-fed-cause-housing-bubble>

in their businesses in order to make money. They then return that money to their shareholders (and thus padding your pensions, 401(k)s, and IRAs). They can do that in a number of ways.

One way you as an investor can get your money back is with asset appreciation (stock goes up, you sell at a profit). Another way is through dividends (you get paid for owning the stock, sort of like interest in a bank, but it's typically larger given your greater risk, and the company decides how big the dividend payment is). A third way is through stock buybacks. This is where the company uses its own money to buy back stocks from the public (in effect removing the stocks from the market). This reduces the supply of stocks and boosts the price.

Stock buybacks are a legitimate way to return money to shareholders. However they've also been used to inflate the price of stocks and make managers look like they're performing better than they actually are.

More egregiously, many managers receive a lot of cheap stocks in the form of performance-based compensation. If they do a good job in making sure the value of the company goes up, they get rewarded with stocks, which they can then sell at a profit if the company continues to go up in value. This is supposed to align the incentives of managers and shareholders. Shareholders want the company to become more valuable, and so we give managers a big financial incentive so that they will want the same.

The unintended problem is that now managers also have an incentive to artificially raise the value of their companies, by taking on massive debts to finance stock buybacks that, while they boost the value of their stocks in the short term, may not be in the best interests of the company in the long term. But who cares, because the managers will long since have cashed out!

Epsilon Theory has done some excellent work documenting just how egregious this practice is¹²², perhaps most notably with the airline industry.¹²³

These aren't small numbers either. The stock buyback trick alone rakes in hundreds of millions¹²⁴ at many public companies, money that flows from general shareholders to a handful of rent-seeking managers.

Of course, this is all perfectly legal. However it doesn't exactly hold up to the Veil of Ignorance.¹²⁵

It also wasn't planned or foreseen. The world is a complex interconnected system, a Three Body Problem of unpredictable events. These distortions have arisen gradually, as individuals were faced with new incentives and made decisions in their own lives. Those decisions have compounded to create these new problems. Centralized action alone can't account for the nuance of a multi billion person world. To address these problems, we will need to change our actions as individuals.

We've covered a lot of areas of market distortion. Let's step back to why we started this topic in the first place. I purported that numerous actions by central bankers and legislatures have been taken in an attempt to distort the economy to some more ideal form. I argue that those policies often fail in their intents, create more widespread distortions than can be foreseen, and have led to a concentration of economic power in the world.

I would argue that that concentration is harmful for the majority of people on Earth. That doesn't mean these are bad things done by bad people. The Federal Reserve is a very large organization filled with smart people, and I by no means believe they are all in on some conspiracy. I'm certain that the presidents of the Federal Reserve branches and the members of the Federal Open Market

122 <https://www.epsilontheory.com/sneak-preview/>

123 <https://www.epsilontheory.com/do-the-right-thing/>

124 <https://www.epsilontheory.com/the-rake/>

125 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veil_of_ignorance

Committee are genuinely interested in promoting a healthy economy. I'm not questioning anyone's motives or intentions. Those are nearly impossible to discern.

What can be discerned quite plainly is what actions these institutions have taken. And what we can question is the effect those actions have had.

While the Fed's loose monetary policy has given extra fuel to the trend of centralization, even without "QE4Ever"¹²⁶ many of these trends would be underway.

What I'm painting here (the narrative I'm spinning, if you will) is a clear picture of increasing centralization in our economy, and how that centralization has benefited a few well connected individuals at the expense of most everyone else. To be fair, our 'economy', even when two people are able to completely agree on exactly what that means, is a dynamic and incredibly complex social system that is impossible to completely capture in charts and statistics. That means any such analysis is bound to be flawed.

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

What are some of the flaws in these last two chapters on economic policy? Well to start I opened with statistics showing concentration of firms in six different industries. What about other industries, am I missing a larger picture?

I cite examples of lobbyists manipulating legislatures for corporate interests and bribing officials, but that's not all lobbyists. Many are talented experts who provide valuable advice to law makers. After all, our elected officials need to vote on issues ranging from education to immigration to taxes to public safety, and can't possibly have adequate expertise in all those areas. Something needs to fill that gap.

¹²⁶ <https://www.fxstreet.com/analysis/the-feds-not-qe-is-morphing-into-qe4ever-201910251930>

I cite examples of subsidies distorting the economy and costing taxpayers billions, but the Infant Industry argument still has some merit, if its supports are well implemented and actually temporary.

I argued that the continual economic stimulus enacted by central banks around the world (well I mainly talked about the US Fed, but central banks everywhere are behaving very similarly) are distorting the economy and creating more instability than they are removing. Almost every one of my arguments on that topic however are contended by other very smart and well researched economists. The full effects of these trillion dollar programs may never be fully clear.

I talked about rent seeking behavior by corporate managers. On the one hand it is morally dubious, but on the other it is perfectly legal.

Most of all, do keep in mind that I'm presenting the information I think is relevant to the point I'm working to make. I'm excluding information I think is irrelevant or simply am unaware of. Everything we talked about regarding narratives, spinning of information, providing a frame, I'm doing that here. I'll take this opportunity to reemphasize that none of that is inherently bad, so long as it's clearly understood that such framing is normal and part of the process of everyday communication we engage in, and so long as that framing is done with the intention to focus the conversation on a particular topic while providing balanced reporting on that topic, as opposed to sharing just one side of a given topic.

I am not a journalist. While I'm going to try to present honest facts and not ignore important counterpoints, this book is not journalism. It's an **argument** (that the world is growing more centralized and embracing too much Order), a **warning** (of the cost to personal liberties and social durability that is incurred by that shift), and a **proposal** (of what we as individuals can do to reverse this Descent into Complete Order).

So my analysis that the economy is growing more concentrated may well be wrong. I hope it is.

I hope that I'm wrong, but for the moment I live convinced that the economy really is becoming more centralized. What does this mean for you and I?

It means we pay, through taxes and higher prices, for the subsidies and protectionism of a few politically favored industries, inefficiently paying en mass for the enrichment of a few.

It means cheap borrowing keeps broken companies and systems above water, allowing their rot to persist and spread.

It means a few well connected individuals are able to rake away large percentages of the economic pie and use the loose monetary environment to paper over the diversion of funds.

It means regulations that purport to protect consumers, fail to do so, and cost us both money and social freedoms.

It means monetary policies that purport to minimize crashes fail to do so, and cost us both money and economic stability.

It is a series of millions of decisions justified in the name of providing us with Complete Order, fail to provide anything of the sort, and cost us both money and freedom.

This is what happens when our economy is distorted by attempts to control the uncontrollable fabric of society.

What happens when our information and very thoughts face similar distortions?

Chapter 6: Stasis in Thought

You may have heard recently about social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter announcing more content ~~censorship~~ moderation initiatives. Some are blocking political adverts, others are stepping up their programs of reviewing posts. We are told that this is good for us, it will make the platforms safer or something.

Twitter's CEO on ~~censoring~~ moderating malicious posters stated¹²⁷: "We're going to start kicking these people off right and left and making sure that when they issue their ridiculous attacks, nobody hears them."

But who are 'these people', who is classifying 'these people', and what metrics are being used to identify 'these people'? There's a difference between an individual calling someone out for what they believe to be ridiculous and a massive organization systematically erasing the posts of thousands of people under opaque programs for what they unilaterally decide is ridiculous.

Regardless of what their standards are (and there has indeed been a tremendous amount of work put into designing them), these platforms have expansive powers to shape the information that we consume. Power which, even if responsibly used, is concentrated in the hands of a very few, and without the transparency for us to judge for ourselves whether it's actually responsibly used. Are we OK with that?

And even if we are OK with the premise of the ~~censorship~~ moderation, are we comfortable with the cost of implementing it? The actual logistics of all that ~~censorship~~ moderation is not fancy Machine Learning (ML) automations, it is subjecting tens of thousands of people to grueling, traumatic, underpaid torture.

¹²⁷ <https://www.theverge.com/2015/2/4/7982099/twitter-ceo-sent-memo-taking-personal-responsibility-for-the>

CENSORSHIP MODERATION SWEATSHOPS

Facebook, Twitter, and other companies with large censorship moderation strategies have reporting systems for users to flag posts, and ML bots to automatically flag content, but AI still doesn't come close to humans for assessing context. So these companies then contract out the job of actually reviewing those posts to contractors making as little as \$28,800 annually (yes, that's in the US) who make the final call as to whether it should be taken down¹²⁸. That involves sending all those posts flagged as potentially abusive, violent, or unpleasant to actual humans, who have to sit through and review these posts, often only getting a few seconds each to decide whether or not to ban the post.

What kind of posts are these people viewing? Content moderators are bound by Non Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) that prevent them from discussing their work (to protect users' information, according to the firms), but a few have broken NDAs to discuss what they view as abhorrent conditions.¹²⁹

One army-veteran-turned-moderator recounts that “on his second day of moderation duty, he had to watch a video of a man slaughtering puppies with a baseball bat. [He] went home on his lunch break, held his dog in his arms, and cried.”

Other moderators in the office “were crying, breaking down, throwing up. It was like one of those horror movies. Nobody's prepared to see a little girl have her organs taken out while she's still alive and screaming.”

All those bottom of the barrel twisted nightmares humans invent? There are people who spend day after day watching all of it. These jobs are so traumatic, that many contractors develop PTSD. Imagine that, PTSD, from a desk job! The problem got

128 <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/02/what-facebook-told-insiders-about-how-it-moderates-posts/552632/>

129 <https://www.theverge.com/2019/6/19/18681845/facebook-moderator-interviews-video-trauma-ptsd-cognizant-tampa>

so bad that Facebook eventually agreed to pay out \$52 million to 11,250 of its contracted moderators.¹³⁰

Think about that the next time you're scrolling through your newsfeed. Your feed is kept clean of nightmarish videos because tens of thousands of underpaid humans are toiling in filthy and abusive conditions to watch all that traumatic content so you don't have to.

Facebook and the rest of them, of course, will deny any responsibility. They will point to their contracts and say that the companies they contracted the work out to are responsible. Google will tout how it is extending some benefits to contractors.¹³¹ Those are all token gestures. The reality remains unchanged.

Of course, it doesn't have to be this way. Facebook, Twitter, Google, and the rest could simply hire these moderators directly as employees. Then, instead of being 'shocked and awed' at the abuse of their contractors, and declaring they will launch an 'audit' before sweeping the incident under the carpet and continuing as normal, they could actually manage the moderators directly and ensure decent pay and working conditions. Contracting out the work is a way to shift responsibility, but it doesn't change the source of the problem. And that is the design of the platform.

The complete story is that this is far from new. Although now social media platforms are coming under pressure to moderate content, they've actually been heavily reviewing the content you see since their inception. Think about it, across all your friends and connections and the accounts you follow, there may be thousands of posts, comments, and likes each day. You can't be shown them all, and they have to be sorted in your newsfeed somehow.

130 <https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/12/21255870/facebook-content-moderator-settlement-scola-ptsd-mental-health>

131 <https://www.vox.com/2019/4/4/18293900/google-contractors-benefits-policy>

CALIBRATED ADDICTION

So companies have made a science out of curating your news feed to decide what posts you see in what order. But if we are filtering and sorting content, we need to have some criteria by which to do so. What is that criteria? Do they curate the posts to show you a diverse view of your entire network? Nope. What about trying to give you accurate and insightful exposure to the world as viewed by your network? Not even close.

These companies all provide services for free, and they've got to pay for their servers and developers somehow. Your newsfeed is curated with the sole intent of maximizing your time on the platform, so that the company has as many chances as possible to hit you with targeted adverts that make them money. You aren't the customer.

To these platforms, you are the sweatshop worker. From their perspective, as long as they keep you drugged on new and 'engaging' content, you'll keep clicking, tapping, and swiping to generate data for them to mine.

To keep you on the platform, they've designed their interfaces to be addictive.¹³² The infinite scroll nature of the platforms, such that there's always more to be had, the autoplay to make the content stream non-stop, the big red notifications to get your heart racing in anticipation, it's all to keep you stuck to their platform¹³³. All the while they profile your activity.

And as they continuously profile your habits and personality, they'll package you and thousands of others up into a 'market segment' to be auctioned off to the highest advertiser, whether that buyer be an auto brand, a clothing outlet, or some random activist bankrolled by a foreign government.

¹³² <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2017/03/13/519977607/irresistible-by-design-its-no-accident-you-cant-stop-looking-at-the-screen>

¹³³ <https://listverse.com/2018/05/23/10-creepy-things-social-media-does-to-control-your-mind/>

Algorithms are carefully designed to give you not the more accurate or informative posts, but the most emotionally charged, particularly those that incite anger, which has been shown to be very effective at getting you to share and engage with the content¹³⁴ (thus increasing your time on the platform and the number of ads you are force fed).

Sure, the platforms pay lip service to combating fake news, and will throw up some more banner warnings, maybe even find the odd sacrificial goat. But the core feature of the platform – targeted posts to suck your attention – that remains unchanged.

That’s it. These platforms aren’t built or designed for you at all. Any benefit you get from the platform is, from their perspective, a happy coincidence. You are a resource from which they extract attention to sell to advertisers. In exchange for your endless attention these companies have designed engaging platforms to periodically hit you with dopamine and foster an addiction in you to your preferred newsfeed.

A friend of mine put it well. “Too many people now a days like to be entertained rather than educated”.

THE HARM WROUGHT

Well alright, so social media isn’t designed with our best interests, but it’s not actually like that’s really harmful for us users, right?

Unfortunately there are at least three severe detriments that algorithm curated social media has on your life.

The first detriment algorithm curation, on social media or on search engines, inflicts upon you is mental. There have been many studies looking at the effects of social media on sleep, depression, hyperactivity, and loneliness.^{135 136 137} However most of

¹³⁴ <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1309.2402.pdf>

¹³⁵ <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/324372#The-real-effect-on-mental-health>

¹³⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140197116300343>

¹³⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140197117301318>

these are purely observational. This allows us to draw correlations, such as that those who use social media are more likely to be depressed, but doesn't allow us to say whether using social media causes depression or if being depressed leads to more social media use.

To establish causality, we need to set up an experiment, in which some people receive treatment (the treatment group), and others none (the control group) in order to establish a baseline with which to compare. For best results, we want to rule out the chances of confounding variables (if all the members of our control group are men and everyone in the treatment group are women, we can't tell if the differences are due to sex or the treatment).

So to rule out those confounding variables we want to randomly assign people to each group. Having a large group of participants is also useful. If our findings hold up in a group of 10,000 people we can be much more confident in the results' accuracy than if the study was only done on six individuals.

Several studies that have done this, split participants into two groups randomly and allowed them different amounts of social media to measure changes in well being, have found notable effects. One, which sampled 143 UPenn students, found those who limited social media to 30 minutes per day versus normal use had "significant reductions in loneliness and depression" after just three weeks.¹³⁸

A much larger study¹³⁹ of several thousand people conducted by researchers from New York and Stanford Universities also conducted a randomized controlled trial in which the treatment group was paid (around \$100) to quit Facebook completely for four weeks.

This study found that those who took a one month break from social media had about one hour of daily free time reclaimed

138 <https://guilfordjournals.com/doi/10.1521/jscp.2018.37.10.751>

139 <https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/facebook.pdf>

from Facebook. They spent that mostly watching more TV and socializing with family and friends, not on other social media sites. The treatment group consumed less news, and was generally less up to date on current events but also less politically polarized. They also reported feeling happier.

In a sign that they felt the benefits of leaving Facebook were worth continuing, the participants also stated that they intended to reduce their time spent on Facebook even after the study concluded. That leads nicely into the second detriment of social media, they take up a lot of time. They're designed to.

While the exact numbers vary across demographic groups and around the world, the average person is forecast to spend over six and a half years of their life on social media platforms.¹⁴⁰ On a daily basis, YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram alone account for about two hours of that.¹⁴¹ In general, women use social media more than men, the young far more often than the old, and people in Africa and South America use social media for longer than do people in Europe. But across the board, the numbers are increasing over time.

Is that really all time well spent? Do you get more enjoyment catching up on tweets for an hour, or having a phone call with a close cousin or sibling for the same hour? Which will you cherish more, the morning spent sleepily in bed scrolling through your newsfeed, or that same morning waking up over coffee with a friend in a local cafe?

WHAT OF THE CREATORS

All of this is relevant to everyone who uses social media, whether consuming or uploading posts. However the story is a bit different for those who rely on social media for their livelihood. Let's look at this from a different angle, that of the content producers. Many individuals have come to rely on social media as a way to attract

¹⁴⁰ <https://www.broadbandsearch.net/blog/average-daily-time-on-social-media>

¹⁴¹ <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/marketing/how-much-time-do-people-spend-social-media-infographic>

customers, or simply to view their content and live off of the ad revenue they split with the platform.

Those who make a living producing content, whether digitally or physically, face a lot of stress. Professionals such as artists, performers, musicians, comedians face a constant pressure to keep their skills and content up to date and relevant. While digital platforms allow more creators to reach more viewers than ever before, the inherent stresses in the job remain in some form.

Those same challenges will exist no matter what distribution system one uses. And there are plenty of options to choose from. Patreon, Podia, Ko-Fi, and Memberful all allow content creators to share their work freely or in a restricted manner and solicit recurring membership fees or tips from fans. Twitch (owned by Amazon) is a platform for creators to stream videos, usually related to video games, and although it does have ads, also has a membership system and allows viewers to tip content creators.

My point is that, from both the perspective of the consumer and creator of content, the current mainstream platforms aren't the only option. We can change how we produce, share, and digest information, by voting with our eyeballs and supporting platforms that give us greater control over our own experience.

And we can do it gradually. We don't have to blow up the social networks and throw things into chaos. We can move one at a time, allowing time for others to adjust.

That's not to say it will be easy or universally beneficial for all content producers and businesses that rely on social media advertising to shift to alternative models. Only to highlight that alternatives exist, and to help you begin to imagine what a life without the advertising giants might look like for you.

THE AUTONOMY OF YOUR MIND

The third detriment is perhaps the most pernicious. Curation by algorithms erodes your autonomy of mind. Algorithmically cu-

rated thought bubbles in social media have helped contribute to hysteria over immigrants,¹⁴² election manipulation,¹⁴³ and genocide.¹⁴⁴ Yes, genocide.¹⁴⁵

Did social media cause those things? No. It's a tool. It can be used for good or ill. It has been used for good. It has also been used to exacerbate much ill.

How does social media erode your autonomy of mind? By tracking your actions and constructing an artificial concept of who you are, and then filtering all the information you see to conform to that artificial concept. The platforms we use daily know that when you browse the web, scroll through your newsfeed, or search on Google, you are far more likely to click on something that you agree with than something you disagree with. Since they want to maximize your time on the platform to maximize the ads they show you, you simply won't see things that you've historically not shown an interest in.

And so you only see stuff you agree with, which creates a confirmation bias to constantly reinforce the same ideas, never challenging them. Of course, online platforms don't have to be constructed that way, but it's how they've chosen to be designed because of their underlying incentives.

Our use of these platforms empower them. In view of the tremendous good and tremendous ill they bring, are they tools we wish to empower?

GEOGRAPHIC THOUGHT BUBBLES

Social media isn't the only way we've become trapped in ideological bubbles of course. We've also done it to ourselves, physically. Recently, we've found that many neighborhoods in America are

142 <https://www.economist.com/europe/2016/02/04/girl-not-abducted>

143 <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/2020-philippines-disinformation>

144 <https://www.dw.com/en/inciting-hatred-against-rohingya-on-social-media/a-45225962>

145 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Rohingya_persecution_in_Myanmar

steadily becoming more racially segregated.¹⁴⁶ Why is that happening?⁹ To be sure, some of it could be top down design decisions. Just like our digital social platforms, housing laws have been designed to shape incentives (in this case for explicit segregation) in the past¹⁴⁷, and nothing creates a thought bubble like living only around people who are like you.

But this recent trend appears to be something different. Rather than being driven primarily by top down social engineering, this shift appears to be driven primarily by individual decisions. Individuals have varying social networks, daily routines, and a complex web of preferences, and these subtle effects compound when added up on a societal scale.¹⁴⁸

This doesn't even necessarily mean that deep rooted racial bias is to blame (it might, but it's not necessary for what we are observing). The Nobel Prize-winning Thomas Schelling wrote that "inferences about individual notices can usually not be drawn from aggregate patterns".¹⁴⁹ In other words, just because a complex system produces a certain result, doesn't mean that all, most, or even any of the individuals within that system would have chosen that result.

Programmers Vi Hart and Nicky Case made a fun interactive website based on this insight.¹⁵⁰ Through their small puzzles, they explain how even if no individual in a group expresses any overt group-based preferences (race, religion, wealth, politics; it doesn't matter which group) for who they live around, a largely homogeneous neighborhood can still result.

Take the following example. You have a group where no one minds being around people who are different from them, but since few people want to stand out in every way, most people have

146 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/major-u-s-cities-may-seem-integrated-but-not-for-long>

147 <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-federal-government-intentionally-racially-segregated-american-cities-180963494/>

148 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/segregation-us-cities/>

149 https://www.stat.berkeley.edu/~aldous/157/Papers/Schelling_Seg_Models.pdf

150 <https://ncase.me/polygons/>

a preference to move if less than one third of their neighbors are like them. As a result of the compounding preferences that creates, we see some degree of segregation, even if one intends for that outcome. We end up with communities surrounded by people who have similar habits, preferences, and beliefs as us. A physical thought bubble to reinforce our digital one.

Fortunately this is a problem we've caused with our own choices, and one we can fix with our own choices by being more willing to live with people who disagree with us and even seek out less homogeneous living. Not for the sake of *Diversity!* in itself. Not for the sake of virtue signalling for some abstract notion of what someone else has framed is the 'correct' level of 'diversity'. Rather for the sake of a more varied, challenging and interesting life.

So there are many places where thought bubbles, physically and especially digitally, are constructed. Maybe you don't have a problem with how those bubbles shape your choices, how they Nudge you into viewing the world a particular way. I certainly do. But even if you don't, my main critic is something different.

INVOLUNTARY FILTRATION

On a search engine, you often have the option to apply filters. These are enormously useful for narrowing your choices down to what you believe is relevant to you. Common filter options include by date created, popularity as measured by view count or upvotes, or posts by a specific individual or group. These are the filters you choose to apply and configure, or not. However there are other filters applied to your searches that you don't get to decide.

When you search for 'Chinese sit down restaurant', search engines will automatically assume you want something nearby, not on another continent, so they will narrow your search results to those nearby, effectively adding a shadow-filter based on location. They know what your subjective 'nearby' is because of trackers on

your device to feed them your location.¹⁵¹ This can be somewhat annoying if you are not actually searching for restaurants in your home town of Sammamish, WA, but rather for results in downtown Seattle where you'll be later that night, but that's relatively easy to fix by adding 'Seattle' to your search (thereby correcting the search engine's presumptive filter with one you intentionally applied).

OK, so that's a pretty simple and innocuous example. But here's the kicker. By using your entire history of engagement on the platform, and often reaching beyond to pull in your activity from around the internet, companies like Google and Facebook also filter your results based on what's most likely to keep you engaged. Thus, the shadow-filter applied amounts to something like 'what they are likely to believe, agree with, and enjoy watching'.

And you can't turn it off.

And so your digital world becomes a gated community of content that's similar to content you've consumed before. Things that are different or contrary to your browsing history are silently filtered out, and you are left with a narrower and less informed set of options. Like with our example of where people choose to live, it doesn't even take a very large bias for extreme results to arise.

This isn't an issue that is confined to social media. It's a principal-agent problem¹⁵² that arises whenever you abdicate your decision making authority to another person, or an algorithm. The principal-agent problem is well understood and varying degrees of checks and balances exist in many industries where individuals delegate some of their decision making powers to another person, or where one person has the ability to shape the decisions of their clients, like doctors or financial fiduciaries.

¹⁵¹ Although this can be a cookie or session token, the most common is just to reference your IP address, a unique marker that every device has and, because of how they are exchanged through routers, keeps track of your approximate location. Accordingly, your IP address changes with your location, updating each time you reestablish an internet connection. Many apps will also use your GPS location data as well.

¹⁵² https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Principal%E2%80%93agent_problem

One area where such checks are largely absent however is algorithms. Algorithms are used to inform decisions such as whether you get a loan, whether you get hired, whether you get bail or investigated as a suspect in criminal cases. These are decisions that powerfully shape your life, and the algorithms that make them are biased.¹⁵³

The reason for this is that algorithms are given enormous data sets and trained through repetition to recognize patterns. They then use the heuristics (rules of thumb) they develop to make decisions about real world events.

UNDISCLOSED BIAS

One of the biggest challenges is that the example data sets that they algorithms are trained on may not reflect real world circumstances. This means that when an algorithm encounters a problem that falls too far outside of what it is used to, it will still generate a response, but it will become much less accurate. The challenge is that it's difficult to detect whether any individual case is mislabeled by an algorithm, much less what might be causing the issue.

One example of this is with facial recognition software. Algorithms are trained to recognize facial features and distinguish mood as well as identify individuals. This can be used to track criminals (or, if you're Putin, political dissidents¹⁵⁴) in a crowd. It can also be used to keep track of the mood of customers in a store (or, if you're Taylor Swift, screen your concert's attendants for stalkers¹⁵⁵).

The widespread problem is that many facial recognition algorithms are trained on data sets that aren't very diverse, so they tend to be much more accurate with certain faces and more likely

153 https://www.ted.com/talks/joy_buolamwini_how_i_m_fighting_bias_in_algorithms

154 <https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/moscows-smart-city-russian-activists-surveillance/>

155 <https://news.northeastern.edu/2018/12/14/taylor-swift-used-facial-recognition-tech-at-her-concert-to-identify-stalkers-heres-why-thats-a-slippery-slope/>

to misidentify, or simply not detect at all, other types of faces. Often times, the data sets are disproportionately filled with white male faces, so minorities get the short end of the stick. This has real consequences. As one headline put it starkly, “There’s software used across the country to predict future criminals. And it’s biased against blacks.”¹⁵⁶

And the potential bias of algorithms doesn’t even touch the privacy concerns associated with widespread data collection. For now it’s enough to acknowledge that algorithms suffer from complex biases, and we are often delegating our decisions to them. Should we?

Are regulations needed to review algorithms, or would that stifle innovation? I’d argue we should start with greater transparency and disclosures about how the algorithms are trained and what their biases are, to allow us to better make those decisions. In the end though, perhaps the easiest and most powerful thing we can do is choose which algorithms to opt out of.

FEED A COLD, STARVE AN ALGO

Let’s apply this to something everyone can agree on hating: fake news. Perhaps no one quite agrees on what exactly counts as fake news, but we all know it’s bad.

At no point in human civilization have we been strangers to rumors, but the digital thought bubbles we now live in allow fake news, as long as the Algos promote it, to echo endlessly without being challenged by opposing perspectives. Thus exaggerations and rumors get re-tweeted, shared, and forwarded.

Fake news works because it neatly fits into the system that we empower through our online activity. It doesn’t take large acts to create such ugly distortions when they are compounded across tens of millions of people. Fortunately, it also doesn’t take big changes

¹⁵⁶ <https://www.propublica.org/article/machine-bias-risk-assessments-in-criminal-sentencing>

to smooth out those distortions when they are again repeated across tens of millions of individuals.

How do you fight fake news? You starve it. You starve it of attention and you demand a higher standard from your news, by seeking out and consuming long form content instead of five minute satirical videos. And by taking back control over the way our information is filtered, we can better distinguish balanced facts from one-sided slurs.

By starving social media of cheap clicks, by avoiding surface level coverage packaged primarily for entertaining jabs, you incentivize publishers of content to up their quality and nuance in the form of long form articles, and then it becomes easier to distinguish the fake from the authentic.

It's the same way you tell a real person from a fake bot: engage with it at length. Long form text gives you the time and detail with which to do so.

A lot of times we see big glacial trends in the world and ask 'what can I possibly do about it?' Here's one thing each of us can choose to do: take back your independence of thought and ownership of time and attention from social media and their designed nudges. Read the news in long form and read critically, but don't be sucked in. Step back into your own life and don't let others pull you into theirs for their own ends.

Another way to take back your autonomy of mind? Burst the algorithm induced thought bubbles. There are a variety of ways you can browse online while reducing the amount of data collected about you. This makes it harder for advertisers and search engines to filter content individually, and therefore makes it easier for you to shape the lens through which you view the online world, as opposed to having your lens shaped for you.

I do this by browsing the internet without accounts as often as possible. When I watch YouTube, I often do it on Tor. This is a free open source web browser that doesn't track you, and indeed

is the strongest privacy protecting browser around. In addition to blocking cookies and trackers by default, it reroutes your internet traffic through several layers. This way your request for a video on YouTube, instead of being sent to YouTube directly, is sent to another tor router, which passes it to another and another, which then sends the request to YouTube.

So your request is sort of like the baton in a relay race, and at the end YouTube thinks this last router, which can be based anywhere in the world and has none of your identifiable information, is making the request. This way its response is not biased by its comprehensive profiling of your habits. The router then takes the response and the relay race happens in reverse to give you the result. That may be a bit complicated, however this all happens very quickly.

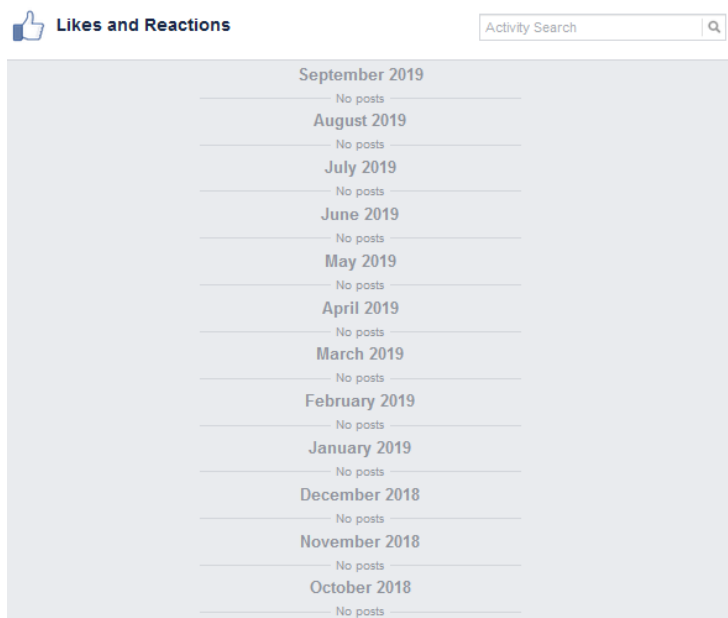
Tor is a bit extreme for casual web browsing of course, you can get some of those benefits by booting up a private browser and not logging in to your account. That way each time you visit a site it will appear to them as if you are a different person, and they will have a harder time aggregating your data. Private browsing doesn't actually stop sites from collecting information on you, but it makes it more difficult for them to associate each of your separate visits as originating from the same person.

Naturally, this doesn't work for everything. You still need to log in to sites like Netflix and Facebook to use them at all. And then it doesn't matter if you're using private browsing, tor, a VPN, or other privacy tools.

For these sites, pop into your settings occasionally and just clear your records on the platforms of searches, likes, views, posts, etc. Again, this doesn't stop the sites from collecting your data, but it helps limit what they can aggregate over time.

On YouTube and Netflix, you can completely clear your browsing history.

With the exception of accepting friend requests, all your comments, likes, and posts on Facebook can be taken down and removed from your history. I can still chat with those friends, but who needs to know what I posted three years ago? Facebook's mining the data, but none of my friends are looking at it.



Jonathan Wood's Facebook Inactivity Feed

As for blocking trackers, here's a nice guide from GeekThis explaining how to limit Google Analytics tracking you across the web.¹⁵⁷

Amazon sucks in this regard. On Amazon, while you can delete your browsing history of products you've searched for, there is currently no way to permanently delete your purchase history. You can 'archive' orders, but "Archiving orders doesn't delete orders permanently. It removes them from your default order history view. Archived items will always show up when you search for them."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ <https://geekthis.net/post/block-google-analytics/>

“Even if you disable your account, Amazon will maintain a record of everything you purchased”, according to a Huffington Post assessment.¹⁵⁹

For those sites where you do have control over your history, deleting historical data still allows you to use the sites while limiting the personal details of your lives collected by these tech giants.

Of course, the most powerful thing you can do to exercise your autonomy is to simply stop using those sites. It’s easy for me to keep my Facebook history cleared because I almost never go on it (usually for about 5 minutes once a month or so to check for any messages. I’ve responded to messages as old as three months. Most friends have learned by now to simply text or message me on Telegram).

And if you need just one more reason to quit social media, remember the moderators. When asked about the brutal job and what they thought needed to change, one said:

“I think Facebook needs to shut down.”

*– Speagle, a contracted Facebook moderator.*¹⁶⁰

Or, as more sophisticatedly put by Ben Hunt at Epsilon Theory, “Facebook delanda est”.¹⁶¹

All of this you know. I’ve explained how social media platforms are designed in ways that create thought bubbles and erode your autonomy of mind, but this is nothing new. Lots¹⁶² of others have explained this before. We all know these things.

158 Inquiry with Amazon customer service representative Tovseef via online chat on 2020-06-07

159 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/delete-amazon-history-orders-browsing-activity_1_5cf42a75e4b0a1997b6c4204

160 <https://www.theverge.com/2019/6/19/18681845/facebook-moderator-interviews-video-trauma-ptsd-cognizant-tampa>

161 <https://www.epsilontheory.com/facebook-delanda-est/>

Can you have meaningful, nuanced, thoughtful, and level headed discussions on Twitter? Can you reconnect with loved ones and strengthen familial bonds on Facebook? Can you network and land your dream job on LinkedIn? Of course. All that and much more good is possible, however we all know that none of that is the point. Those may make for great marketing lines, however it's all ancillary.

We all know that the point of these platforms is to package our attention into ads. They may have these other features that allow them to be used for things like socializing, reading the news, or networking, but that's just the nectar in the fly trap. And we're the flies.

We know this. We all know that social media platforms are designed for virality, not authenticity. We all know that they are designed to generate an infinite pool of user generated content that sucks us into its gravity well of data-mining to deprive us of our time and attention and rake in the sweet sweet advertising dollars.

Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Snapchat, TikTok, Tumblr, Twitter and more are all cesspools of content. Sure, they can be used for organizing communities, or chatting with friends. But that has never been and will never be the primary purpose of those organizations.

Also, throughout this chapter, I'm including Google in this list. Though not a social media company, they still contract content moderators for their search results, as well as YouTube, which they also own. Google may not have a prominent newsfeed, but they still track you across their many products. They also provide a tool called Google Analytics, which they freely provide to anyone to put in their website and let them see detailed analytics about their visitors. Conveniently, this is also a free way for Google to collect that same information from millions of sites it doesn't even own.

162 <https://www.alternet.org/2019/01/the-future-of-mind-control-how-social-media-is-supercharging-the-propaganda-system/>

Facebook does the same thing, tracking you on sites you use their OAuth to login with (ever notice how you can ‘login with Facebook’ to comment on a blog. That ‘free’ service Facebook provides also allows them to mine more data).

Let’s be fair to the employees of these companies however. As individuals, most are good people (at least I have yet to meet any Facebook or Google employee that wasn’t). Many genuinely care about designing good products that are useful. Some even to the point of outright activism within their companies.¹⁶³

That above paragraph is not a throwaway line or token reference. It’s one of the most important points in this chapter. Most people, as individuals, are decent human beings with loving families and friends and a full heart who want to do good by their fellow people. None of the criticisms of companies I lay out in this chapter extend to the individuals of those companies. My point is that *in spite* of the intelligence and compassion of many of these individuals, they are still operating within an organization reliant on monetizing consumer personal data.

As Chamath Palihapitiya, former vice-president of user growth at Facebook, put it in 2011, “The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works. No civil discourse, no cooperation, misinformation, mistruth”.¹⁶⁴

Good intent will fall short if it’s trapped within an institution that is organized around goals contrary to that good intent. Data-collecting advertisement platforms are organized around selling your data to marketers. You are the product, the marketers are the customer. And the customer is always right.

Social media companies all rely on advertising money, and so that business necessity will always drive their design and decisions.

163 <https://www.theverge.com/interface/2019/8/14/20804403/google-walkout-legacy-activism-microsoft-amazon>

164 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/dec/11/facebook-former-executive-ripping-society-apart>

We all know this. We've known it for years. So what do we do about it?

If an institution is broken, we can lobby for change. Having our voices heard and expressing discontent en masse can often affect change.

However not all systems are responsive to outside opinions, however loudly they are expressed. Mark Zuckerberg will never remove the "short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops" at the heart of Facebook's profitability so long as it is profitable, no matter how many Change.org surveys are submitted.

If the system is resistant to outside voices, exert pressure with your actions. Move outside of the system, or, where no alternatives exist, work to build a better one. We'll explore that idea in more depth in chapter 14, when we talk about community structures.

Here, the answer is very simple: take back your data. How, exactly, you do that is up to you. I however will offer a few suggestions.

SAY NO TO SOMA

I've already explained above steps to reduce how much you're tracked. But the most powerful action you can take is the simplest.

Stop using the platforms.

You don't even have to delete your account, if that's too drastic. Remember, the platforms don't make money from your account, they make money from using your content to hold others' attention hostage for advertisers. Stop giving them content. You can text, email, call, DM, or mail letters to your close friends instead of posting online for all.

Stop surrendering your attention to the dopamine-driven feedback loops. Just stop logging in for, say, one month. See how much impact one month's abstinence actually has. I'm willing to bet it's less difficult than you think.

Earlier we talked about a study which paid people to temporarily leave Facebook. They found that leaving Facebook improves your mental health, reduces anxiety and stress, and makes you happier.

For me, I still email, text, group text, and call. SMS still works fine. Or some of the newer apps like Telegram (they're funded by a grant, so they aren't pressured by advertisers). Those tools aren't perfect either, but they're a lot less cluttered than Facebook's interface and I don't waste my time with ads. I promise you you'll still be able to socialize, organize events, and participate in the latest drama of friends without social media.

Treat the cesspools of content as the virus they are. Maintain your distance and starve them of content. Without you, their host, they will die.

And don't worry, many other companies will step in to fill the virtual void left by the collapse of the former giants. And as these new entrance step over their predecessors' corpses, they will know that they'd better act differently, or soon meet the same fate.

One last important point on this topic of leaving social media platforms. I'm not calling for any drastic social campaign. I'm not advocating for the government to breakup, regulate, or ban any particular company or the industry as a whole. Those measures might be useful, however I don't believe they are needed for us to solve this particular problem.

I'm also not telling you that you must leave, just laying out my view for the benefits of abstaining. If you read this chapter and still believe using social media to be worthwhile, not only do you have every right to continue to use them, but I would also love to

hear from you on why you weigh the tradeoff differently than I. Same for any disagreements you may have with this book.

What I am trying to do in this chapter is lay out what I see are the hidden costs of using social media. For me, those costs make using social media, and many other ‘free’ online services, unacceptably harmful to myself and society. For those reasons I choose to remove myself, for the most part, from their influence.

Will it make a difference? Not if it’s just me, no. At the same time, we don’t need everyone to leave Facebook for it to be drastically changed, even just a few hundred thousand people abstaining could be enough to squeeze its profits.

I’m not trying to tell you to delete Facebook. What I am asking is that, after reading this chapter, if you also decide that these costs outweigh the benefits you derive from social media, know that it is perfectly acceptable for you to also remove yourself. To step back from the digital giants and take back your data from their platforms, to take back your autonomy of mind from their algorithms.

And if enough of us decide to abstain from these data mining giants, and go off and create our own groups, then these companies will be forced to restructure their business models and their platforms with a greater respect for individual’ control over their own data.

This isn’t a call to revolution. This is a call for a referendum. Each of us voting with where we choose to swipe, tap, and click.

This is not a revolution. This is a referendum. And **that** *is* revolutionary.

Chapter 7: Fear

“SECURITY is greater than LIBERTY”

This is what we are told to think in America. Not in those exact words, of course, that would be too brash. But it is plainly the choice, a false choice, between security and liberty that we are presented with all the time, and then told, in a carefully framed nudge, that the Only Possible Solution is security.

Where are we asked to make this choice?

We are bombarded with stories of mass shootings, and told that the Only Possible Solution is [gun control / more armed citizens]. Solutions which, what do you know, just so happen to [strengthen the political power of the government / improve sales for the gun lobby].

We are bombarded with stories of migrant invasions, and told that the Only Possible Solution is a boarder wall. A Solution which, what do you know, just so happens to increase the power of the politicians telling us this.

We are bombarded with stories of terrorists lurking around every corner, and told that the Only Possible Solution is a massive conglomerate of surveillance, pat downs, checkpoints, and cameras. A Solution which, what do you know, just so happens to increase the power of numerous government agencies and the ability of the government to control society.

We are bombarded with stories of the heinous acts of the Bad Political Party which is hopelessly stupid and corrupt, and told that the Only Possible Solution is to vote for the Good Political Party, who has never ever been wrong and never ever will be wrong. A Solution which, what do you know, just so happens to strengthen the grip of the political party telling you how great and caring they are.

These Solutions are nice sounding, and some of them may even be well-intentioned. But they all frame the issue with a false choice.

VOTE FOR ME OR DIE

The threats are framed as existential. The stakes are framed as do-or-die, life or death. The solution is held up as the Only Possible Solution. And any disagreement with the Only Possible Solution is framed as stupidity or treachery.

You don't support terrorists, do you? No of course not. So of course you support this surveillance program. *Boo Terrorists! Yay Security!*

Isn't it convenient how the Only Possible Solution being offered always seems to strengthen the political power of the one offering the Only Possible Solution?

These are carefully framed arguments that serve the interests of those making them, not you the person listening to them. These nudges widely appear across the ocean of online news and social media content, as well as in our newspapers, on television, on the radio, and on blogs. Whether you're watching Fox News or NBC, whether you're reading the New York Times or Brietbart, whether you're listening to John Oliver or Rush Limbaugh. All of them frame issues as existential threats to your safety but, if you just do this one thing, you'll be safe.

Sometimes the authors are even well-intentioned, sometimes they even believe it. That doesn't change the fact that what they are asking is not the Only Possible Solution. There is never a single 'Answer'. That doesn't mean that all these people and publications are always wrong. No, they often have a lot of interesting and useful facts and insights to share. But when they frame their Solutions as the Only Possible ones, when they dismiss any disagreement as treachery, then it becomes dangerous. Dangerous to your autonomy of mind.

Because if someone can tell you over and over again that theirs is the Only Possible Solution, and get you to believe it, then they've successfully nudged you into accepting their view of the world. They've successfully kept you from imagining any other possible solution or even considering that maybe sitting down with other people and hearing different perspectives might help you collaborate to find a (Sorry mother, I'm about to use the C-word) compromise.

There, I said it. Compromise. Oh, the horror.

So how do they get away with it? How do they frame their arguments and nudge people to accept the Only Possible Solution?

MISDIRECTION AND OBFUSCATION

One easy tactic is to be as vague as possible. Normally when we want to understand a complicated problem, having specific facts is very useful. But specific facts are troublesome if we want to blow an issue out of proportion or twist people's perceptions of the world.

For example, people might not be very concerned about terrorism in the US if they learned that it killed only 79 Americans worldwide in 2016.¹⁶⁵

But we can't have that, no, we need people to be terrified of terrorists so we can justify all that new military-grade equipment for our police state (er, I mean the personal protective equipment for your friendly neighborhood cops).

To be perfectly clear, purchasing military-grade armament for police, or any number of other programs, may be well intentioned and justified. It just shouldn't be justified by an imaginary threat.

We could show people more data, looking at cause of death in the US and find that fewer than 0.01% of all deaths in the US in

¹⁶⁵ https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_AmericanTerrorismDeaths_FactSheet_Nov2017.pdf

2016 were from terrorism. You are 180 times more likely to die from suicide, over 3,000 times more likely to die from heart disease. Terrorism is scary, that's the point, it's just not a big threat to Americans.

Globally, terrorism is a bit more deadly, responsible for 0.05% of all deaths in 2017.¹⁶⁶ Even so, that's still a vanishingly small amount. We pay an outsized amount of attention to terrorism.

So sure, we could spread the word that terrorism isn't such a big deal. But then people would stop being afraid. And we couldn't use that fear as an excuse to take more control.

Much better if we stick to telling people that terrorists are a 'huge problem' that risks 'tearing the country apart'.

Oh, and be sure to spend a few hours of airtime ever single time even a minor incident happens anywhere in the country. That way people will think that this is happening all the time and terrorists lurk around every corner.

See, this way they don't have to bother with accurate or specific facts. When they (whichever person or publication is using this tactic) can keep things as vague as possible it becomes easier to spin stories however they want, and it helps them avoid having to put things in perspective. That might risk people like you realizing that this Existential Threat isn't that big of a deal. Much better to keep the threat vague and ominous.

Because if they can make you afraid, then you're not going to think properly. If they can keep you afraid, they can tell you what to think. If they can keep you afraid they can justify the Only Possible Solution – which, would you look at that, just so happens to strengthen their political power.

And you know what, maybe that Only Possible Solution being proposed actually is a good idea. But if it is, we shouldn't adopt it because we're being terrified into embracing it as the Only Possi-

¹⁶⁶ <https://ourworldindata.org/what-does-the-world-die-from>

ble Solution. If it's actually a good idea, it should be adopted because we've come together to review the facts, shared our different perspectives, and identified this as one of many possible responses we can take that, while it might not fully address the problem, we can be pretty sure that it will do more good than harm.

But it's just so much easier and nice sounding to say that we have an Answer that will finally solve everything!

Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.

- Benjamin Franklin, AD 1755

I know, I'm quoting out of context.¹⁶⁷ On its own though it superbly captures the trade off, so I'm keeping it.

Another tactic to twist public opinion is for someone to avoid making specific citations and instead try to make their opinion seem like it's common knowledge. This is particularly true when a speaker or anchor starts a statement with "Some people say..."

Well some people say that February has 30 days. Some people say that Abraham Lincoln puffed four Juuls every morning before his crossfit class followed by a bubblegum flavored martini - shaken not stirred. Some people are five year old children that will gladly say anything for a piece of candy. I don't care what 'some people' say.

As a news organization, if you're so lazy or incompetent that you can't send someone on the street or to an internet forum and actually interview a real life human being that says those things, and

¹⁶⁷ <https://techcrunch.com/2014/02/14/how-the-world-butchered-benjamin-franklins-quote-on-liberty-vs-security/>

then clearly portray that this is an opinion, then you're probably just making stuff up.

Seriously, don't tell us 'some people think...' followed by your personal opinion. Tell us who, specifically, thinks those things, and why we should treat them as an authority on the subject.

That's right, tell me their credentials. Is this a PhD researcher? Is this a blue collar worker who's been honing her trade for the past 25 years?

Or is this the guy on the Metro sitting next to me slurring his words and smelling like liquor at 4pm while rambling about how he just got fired and the world sucks but it's OK now because I'm his 'comrade' and we've got to stand up to 'The Man'? True story. He might be a nice fellow, however I would not buy a used car from him.

Maybe we should have a rule of thumb. Any time someone says 'some people say' or 'people are saying' or 'a very close friend' or 'I've heard that' and don't immediately follow that with an actual example or named source that you can look up, let's mentally replace that with 'some drunk guy on the train'.

Try it out for a few days and see how often you need to make that change. Just a thought.

I'm not just ranting about problems for the sake of being frustrated. All of these things I'm writing about - speaking in vague terms instead of hard facts, fostering fear, saying 'some people say' instead of citing specific people - these are tactics that we can learn to become aware of, train ourselves to notice when they are being used on us.

In that way we can hopefully become more astute consumers of information and filter out the BS, protecting our autonomy of mind from being corrupted by Narratives others hoist upon us.

So what are some other tricks that we can learn to become aware of? There are many, and at this point instead of listing them I'll just let you wiki 'logical fallacies'. My goal here was to draw attention to the fact that our information streams are distorted and framed to control perspectives. I don't mean the Right Media or the Left Media distort and frame conversations, I mean that all publications, every newspaper, every single politician or salesperson, all of them.

They all put their own spin on the stories they communicate. Yes, the newspaper you read, the blogger you follow, the YouTube commentators you listen to, your friends and family. All of them are constantly nudging you, spinning stories with their own frames. Some are small and almost unconscious, others are elaborate and planned. Some are in your own interests, like when your spouse tries to coax you into exercising more. Others are not in your best interests.

RISK MANAGEMENT, NOT ELIMINATION

Everyone puts a spin on the stories they share. That's not a bad thing or a good thing, it's a thing all humans do. I'm doing it in this book by choosing what topics to include or exclude.

What's important is that we, as consumers of information, are aware of the biases of our sources of information and work to counter them. Once you do realize that the stories you are being told are always at least part fiction, well, you're a smart person, you'll be able to figure out for yourself how it's being done and how to recognize the fallacies.

Not to paint a false equivalence however, the way a parent tries to corral their kids out of bed for school is a very different type of manipulation than a company lobbying for a certain regulation. I'm much more concerned with the later, both because it involves a much greater scale and has the potential to affect millions of people for years to come, not just one or two children for the day.

BE VERY AFRAID

There is one fallacy that I do want to spend more time on. Fear. And fear is perhaps the most powerful of all the fallacies, because it's so effective at short circuiting your rational thinking and shifting you into immediate impulsive action.

Let's take one example, fear of migrants. Many believe migrants are more likely to commit crimes. Some politicians have taken advantage of this fear.

In 2015, Germany accepted over 1 million Syrian refugees. Some heralded doom, claiming that "In Europe right now the crisis is so intense, the entire European Union may collapse".¹⁶⁸

Now, integrating 1 million people was obviously going to be a challenge for a country of 80 million, and public services have struggled to provide enough language and job training quickly. Turbulent though it may have been, society is far from a 'collapse'.

As for violent crime, overall, the trend in Germany was the same in the years before and after the spike in migrants.¹⁶⁹

Does that mean everything was smooth sailing for Germany? Absolutely not. Besides the inevitable challenge of moving so many people through the immigration process, assessing their asylum claims, helping approved migrants transition into schools and jobs, there has been cultural tension and, perhaps most notoriously, numerous rapes perpetrated by migrants (particularly the 2015-2016 New Year's Eve sexual assaults¹⁷⁰).

There is a difference, however, between the actual crimes migrants have committed, and the fear of crimes that immigrants commit. While the former is a concern that needs attention and resources, and has proven worrisome though not catastrophic, the

168 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RBmttDWI5o>

169 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime_in_Germany

170 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015-16_New_Year_%27s_Eve_sexual_assaults_in_Germany

latter has been blown out of proportion and exploited to spread division.

Perhaps the most salient example of this division-by-fear was the case of a 13 year old girl named Lisa. On January 11th of 2016 Lisa disappeared on her way to school. 30 hours later she returned home, and reported to police that she had been abducted by foreign men who did not speak good German and forced her to have sex with them. The police opened an investigation but, as she was a minor and the investigation was ongoing, did not release many details.

Media, particularly Russian media outlets¹⁷¹, pounced on the developing story. They reported the case as an abduction of a minor by refugees who turned her into a sex slave, and alleged that this type of crime was common, despite citing no other such cases. In response to this story, there were several protests across Germany against migrants.

Several weeks later, once the investigation concluded, the German police reported that the girl was stressed about school and had actually gone to her boyfriend's house and appears to have made the abduction story up. There was no evidence of a kidnapping or that she had had any sexual encounter during her disappearance.

After that, the story got even more attention¹⁷², this time as an example of misinformation¹⁷³ and propaganda being used to sow distrust and fear.

The response to a refugee crisis is complicated, and needs public debate, developed plans, and time. What it doesn't need is reports leaping ahead of the facts that spread fear.

171 https://www.itv.ru/news/2016-01-16/3330-avstriya_vremennopriostanavlivaet_deystvie_shengenskogo_soglasheniya_iz_za_sluchaev_nasiliya_v_germanii

172 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criminal_case_of_Lisa_F

173 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-russia-idUSKCN0VA31O>

If you dislike immigration and want the process changed, then let's engage in a discussion on the merits of our system, raising critics of its challenges and flaws (of which there are many). Then we have a chance at a clear headed discussion over the costs and benefits to different groups and how to compromise and actually get something done. The alternative (of just piling into someone else's simplistic sounding arguments motivated out of fear) just leads to a shouting match in which nothing gets done and everyone is left unhappy and angry.

Fear categorizes people into 'Us' and 'Them', which is great for riling up emotions. It's a good tactic to replace the need for sound policies and good governance with emotional platitudes and vague slogans.

EVERYONE IS YOUR NEIGHBOR

The way to shift out of this is to shift worldviews.

If you split the world into groups based on race or nationality or identity politics, in which the "other" side is alien and can't possibly be like you, then we will always be divided and struggling against each other, a bleak self fulfilling prophecy.

If, however, the groups of the world are divided by worldview, and if each worldview allows for communication, then we can collaborate, debate, reach consensus, and occasionally change someone's mind, even while maintaining our distinct cultures.

In this case the world isn't full of good and bad people. It's filled with individual people who have good and bad ideas, where those ideas can change, and we're all living in the world together trying to figure out which ones are good and bad and which ones need changing.

Let's try a different question: if you honestly believe that the other side is comprised of evil elitists / racists / commies / criminals, what do you do? If you believe that those who disagree with you are not decent people who happen to hold different views and

opinions but rather less-than-human beasts that seek to destroy you, what does politics mean to you?

Politics can no longer be a marketplace of ideas where we listen to each other and broker compromise. Politics becomes a battlefield where the other side *must* be defeated, and where any tactic is justified to win.

We devolve from an environment where compromise is possible to move forward as one, to an environment where competition is enteral and nothing gets done. That leads to a very vicious, zero-sum, race-to-the-bottom, un-American environment. Instead of cooperating to build something great we end up competing over the rubble we created. Is that where we want to go?

~~The solution is~~ strike that. There is no one Only Possible Solution.

One potential process for avoiding that nasty competitive state is to evoke the Golden Rule.

Love God, and Love your Neighbor. Who is your neighbor? Everyone – be like the Good Samaritan. Empathy, compassion, generosity. Unconditionally extended to all people.

Might there be other processes that can help us build a better world? Certainly. I maintain that the Golden Rule, unconditional Love, is the most important one and serves as a foundations for many others.

Remembering that the vast and overwhelming majority of humans are individual people like us with hopes and dreams is a powerful first step for dispelling fear and building a better world.

What other processes can we take to dispel unwarranted fear?

CELEBRATE THE GOOD

One is to arm ourselves with some common and boring facts: that while everything in the world has the potential to implode, most

of the world is currently not doing so, and is in fact doing quite well.

The current pandemic is horrific. At the same time, it is wonderful to remember that such events used to be far more common and more severe. Though still not eliminated, many infectious diseases have become far less prevalent in recent decades.

Over the past century malaria has been eliminated from two continents and many other countries.¹⁷⁴

Another cause for celebration is that fewer mothers are dying in childbirth. Although not uniform across regions, and with much progress still to go, infant mortality and maternal deaths throughout the world have collapsed, falling from over 500,000 in 1990 to 300,000 in 2015.¹⁷⁵

Access to electricity, running water, the internet, vaccines, and abundant food are all much more universally accessible than a century ago, or even thirty years ago.

Certainly, much progress remains. However changing the world doesn't happen over night. We should acknowledge the fantastic victories we've won for humanity over the years, and use that as motivation to continue to make those small meaningful changes that will further compound.

Above all, remember to be optimistic, and let your imagination soar.

This is not a call to ignore uncomfortable realities, or scary truths. It is important to meet that discomfort and fear head on. Rather, this is a call to refuse to be ruled by fear. Sometimes that requires a pause to let a moment of fear pass. For that we have tricks like counting slowly to ten, three deep breaths, or little mantras and

¹⁷⁴ <https://ourworldindata.org/malaria-past-prevalence>

¹⁷⁵ <https://ourworldindata.org/how-many-women-die-in-childbirth>

sayings like – and I enjoy this one so much I will copy it in full here – the litany against fear from the *Dune* series:¹⁷⁶

I must not fear.

Fear is the mind-killer.

Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.

I will face my fear.

I will permit it to pass over me and through me.

And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path.

Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.

Only I will remain.

Sometimes, however, what we fear does not pass in a moment. Sometimes what we fear is a gaping chasm (financial ruin, rejection of a loved one, mortality). For these problems, we must develop better processes to build resiliency, an ability to withstand external shocks and continue to grow. We will discuss building that resiliency in our selves and our communities in Chapters 13 and 14 of this book.

In the face of all these headwinds, and existential risks, the future may seem rather bleak to some.

Many would take this as reason to despair.

I would agree that there is much unnecessary hardship in the world. You'd have to be a fool to deny that. It is proper to look out with open eyes and see the world for what it is, the beauty and the flaws.

It is also proper to identify the problems left to be solved and let your mind imagine how to fix them.

The problems of the world are not insurmountable barriers over which to despair. See how far we've come, and know we as a human race have the potential to overcome anything.

176 A calming prayer used in the 1965 fiction novel *Dune*, by Frank Herbert

See these global challenges as exciting and interesting problems to engage with and to enjoy the process of solving.

A cynical pessimist sees the problems in the world and decides that it is broken and always will be. A realistic optimist sees those same problems, admits what is broken, and sets about fixing them.

Rather than begrudgingly settling for our problems or ignoring them, investigating them with open eyes allows us to learn what is broken and how it can be fixed. The knowledge that it is feasible to greatly improve the world is a source of hope. It's not easy, it's not quick, and it's not permanent. We need to work both to build a better world and to maintain it.

It's worth doing. And it's worth doing joyously.

Chapter 8: Make Those Liberties Disappear!

For those who find joy and purpose in fixing serious problems in the world, there is fortunately (in some twisted way) no shortage of problems. Some of the most fundamental problems are in how our basic rights are abridged on a daily basis.

The American founding held that government is rooted in the people. Individuals and citizens are what matter, and the national and state systems we agree to live under are designed for our convenience.

To the extent that they uphold the rule of law and provide for our defense, allowing us to live out our lives as we please, then they are useful tools. To the limited extent that we need to sacrifice some personal liberties to empower the government to defend us, that is begrudgingly acceptable.

However we should never forget that we are only giving up a subset of our rights. That's why the 9th Amendment was created, to make crystal clear that even if a given action was not explicitly permitted anywhere in the Constitution, that does not mean that you do not have a right to it.

The Constitution, and by extension America's entire legal framework, is not a list limiting individuals' rights. It is not an enumeration of rights graciously granted to the people by the government. The government has no power to grant any rights.

CITIZEN VESTITURE

Rather, the Ninth Amendment makes clear that all rights are vested in the people. The Constitution is an enumeration of certain powers that the people choose to grant to the government, and also certain rights which we as a society may choose to give up and make illegal for our collective good. We choose what powers to grant the government, not the other way around.

This framework for governance is born from the fundamentally bottom up nature of our society. We recognize that we are free, free to do whatever we please, even get ourselves into trouble. Our actions are not without consequence, however we are truly free to do whatever we please.

If you want to run around naked through the town square juggling knives and hurling invectives at our neighbors while threatening to burn shops to the ground, you are fully capable of doing that. You probably won't however because we as a society have a consensus that such actions would make life unpleasant for everyone else, so anyone who does such things would be whisked off to jail.

That's not because you don't have a right to behave how you want, nor is it because the government has a right to lock up anyone it thinks is disruptive or unpleasant.

Rather, our society is built on the framework that we as individuals are vested with all the rights possible, and we voluntarily give some of them up in order to live more peacefully with each other, and we choose to allow the government a limited set of powers in order to enforce the restrictions that we've designed for our communities.

That might not sound very novel to someone who's lived in such a system their whole life. If you are one such person, you are truly Blessed. Most people live in very different societies. In most societies throughout human history, and even quite a few today, the fundamental contract of society is that the government is in charge, either because they've seized all the power, or because they have some divine right to be in charge, and the government is gracious enough to allow its subjects certain limited freedoms, so long as they understand that the government's interests come first. This is the flip side of the modus operandi of most democracies.

Even though this was well understood by the American founding fathers, there was some serious contention over how best to write that intention into law. Some felt that certain rights were so impor-

tant that they needed to be explicitly protected. Others felt that by enumerating rights, it would imply that citizens only had what limited rights were enumerated.

Thus the 9th Amendment within the larger Bill of Rights was a compromise. The constitution would enumerate certain significant rights (free expression, due process of law) and also make clear that this is by no means an exhaustive list. The 10th Amendment was made in a similar vein, stating that any rights not granted to the government were retained by the states or the people.

That mindset, of rights being inherent to the people and given up in a limited capacity to the government, has since spread throughout much of the world. However many of our rights, even those enumerated in our constitution, have been hollowed out. Hollowed out in that they no longer work in practice, even if on paper they still exist. This chapter will be investigating some of the ways in which that has happened.

DISTORTIONS OF SPEECH

Starting at the top of the list with the 1st Amendment, and we're instantly thrust into the heat of a world wide discussion about free speech, censorship, and permissible expression.

Now, there are very few democratic governments rushing to implement laws censoring speech, and that is what the 1st Amendment protects against; "Congress shall make no law" abridging the rights of personal expression. The 1st Amendment prevents the government passing of laws that restrict, it does not require the government to actively protect speech from censorship by non government forces.

Protections from distortions of speech by governments does not guarantee against distortions of free speech by private entities, as we saw earlier with social media platforms and the construction of framing and narratives. Maybe that kind of protection takes more government actions, and us ceding more power to it.

I would suggest, rather, that a more robust solution is for us as individuals to more critically assess our information sources and also to consciously develop the spaces for free discourse, rather than allow others to shape our space for their (advertising) needs.

Back to the issue of distortions of free speech by government, there are still activities it can engage in which are not explicit bans by law, but which come oddly close.

Largely this comes down to the power the government, by the fact that it naturally has a large megaphone to promote its messages, can exert through propaganda.

This was perhaps most aggressively employed by governments of all stripes during WWII. You may have seen some of the Disney flicks, produced at the behest of the government, which supported the war effort and extolled ‘patriotic sacrifice’. They also demonized the Germans and Japanese in ways which today would be considered painfully racist. Japan and Germany were at least as eager in their characterization and demonization of the Allies.

All of that was designed to shift public perception and bolster support for the war, and it was quite effective. Before Pearl Harbor, entering the war was unpopular in America. That understandably shifted after our own shores were attacked, however the propaganda also shifted the range of acceptable opinions.

Was there an explicit law banning public support for Germany? Not exactly, but how propaganda shapes the range of acceptable discourse matters. Is it an abridgment of the 1st Amendment? Probably not, however you can probably still see the problem with it. Once you give a small group of government propaganda producers such control in shaping public perception, is thought really still free from government interference?

How difficult would it be for those handful of bureaucrats to shift public perception in other, more political ways? Examples such as the sophisticated work of Joseph Goebbels would suggest that it’s far from impossible. Something to be vigilant about.

Now, governments aren't the only threat to free expression, public mood and the common zeitgeist greatly affect it as well. Across the world, there are growing calls to counter hate speech.

Hate speech is an ambiguous term. It has been described as language that “diminishes tolerance” and “enables discrimination” and “can cause violence by one group against another”, states Mr. Stengel in a 2019 opinion piece.¹⁷⁷

Make no mistake, the discussion around hate speech is heavily influenced by narrative, with the explicit intention of censoring. Regardless of whether you agree with such calls, they are undeniably having an effect.

About 62% of Americans now agree with the statement “the political climate these days prevents me from saying things I believe because others might find them offensive.”¹⁷⁸ That represents either steady or significant increases in agreement with the statement by nearly every demographic from 2017 to today.

Is this right? Should one person's arbitrary definition of hateful speech limit what another person is comfortable saying in public? Are we really to believe that hate speech laws would only stifle their intended target? Would that mean that 62% of Americans are hateful?

Now, I'm not suggesting that there is no such thing as hateful speech. There undeniably is. People can clearly inflict intentional harm upon others with merely their words. And yes, we should seek to prevent such harm. However, how do you define hate speech in a way that is commonly agreed upon? Even as Mr. Stengel in the article above admits, “there's no agreed-upon definition of what hate speech actually is”.

177 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/10/29/why-america-needs-hate-speech-law/>

178 <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/07/28/americans-are-getting-more-nervous-about-what-they-say-in-public>

So therein lies the rub. Who's defining hate speech? The 1st Amendment would suggest that the government isn't allowed to. The survey above would suggest that we, through our collective discussions, are. Companies also are. Facebook, Twitter, and many semi-private forums are defining their own standards of hate speech and applying them to their platforms. As we read in Chapter 6 with regards to content moderators, that system creates a host of other issues.

Perhaps the biggest issue though is about power. We've allowed a handful of private firms a great deal of power to define acceptable speech on their terms. That makes them important gatekeepers who governments feel the need to petition¹⁷⁹, and makes them able to grant boons to politicians¹⁸⁰. Regardless of whether we agree with their definitions of hate, should we continue to let them define it and push their version of it on us? Is that liberty?

The 1st Amendment is far from the only protection that the constitution enumerates. A lot of the original BoR is devoted to criminal law, and the rights of defendants when accused. Amendments Four, Five, Six, Seven, and Eight, fully half of the original ten, deal with civil or criminal law, juries, investigations, testimony, or punishments. That's not surprising. Thirty five of the fifty five founding fathers were trained as lawyers or judges¹⁸¹, so they understood the importance of a sound justice system for society to function with trust and the rule of law.

So what happens when someone is accused of a crime? We all know the adage - innocent until proven guilty - the Due Process clause from Amendment 5: no person shall "be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law". Except today there are a lot of ways defendants are deprived of liberty, have their property taken, or have their life impoverished, without ever being convicted of a crime or even stepping foot in court.

179 <https://www.dw.com/en/facebook-zuckerberg-promises-merkel-action-on-hate-speech/a-18744036>

180 <https://gaurilankeshnews.com/facebook-bjp-ties-censorship-of-dissent-and-promotion-of-hate-speech/>

181 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Founding_Fathers_of_the_United_States#cite_ref-Brown_1976_27-0

YOUR PROPERTY IS GUILTY

One of the most glaring examples of this is the abuse of civil asset forfeiture.

Under civil asset forfeiture laws, police can seize property (money, vehicles, even real estate) that they think may be being used to carry out crimes. They can do this without convicting or even indicting the owner of the property with a crime. There have been many absurd cases where police, often after searching someone's car on a routine traffic stop, find no evidence of a crime, but do find a stash of cash and confiscate it.

What's the narrative being used to support such behavior?

"Civil asset forfeiture is a key tool that helps law enforcement help defund organized crime, prevents new crime from committed and weakens the criminals and cartels," Attorney General Jeff Sessions said in 2017.¹⁸²

Ah, a narrative of *Security!* You don't want to fund organized crime, do you? No, so of course you'll support civil asset forfeiture. Just please don't question whether it's actually effective. *Yay, Security!*

It's one thing to say that we're going to seize the assets of convicted criminals that were used in the crime, that makes some sense. If you have a cartel that's moving drugs around, being able to not only arrest the ringleaders but also seize their cash reserves, drug supplies, vehicles, and warehouses helps ensure that they are shut down for good. That exact thinking is what originally led to greater use of asset forfeiture in the late twentieth century. However a different sort of action is undertaken when people's cash, cars, or houses are taken when the owner hasn't even been charged with a crime.

¹⁸² <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sessions-signals-more-police-property-seizures-coming-from-justice-department/>

The Fourth Amendment reads (emphasis added) “The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against **unreasonable** searches and **seizures**, **shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause**, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly **describing** the place to be searched, and **the persons or things to be seized**.”

Civil asset forfeiture is undeniably a seizure of a person’s property, and in the way they are currently implemented, they are almost never legitimized by a warrant, much less one specifying the “things to be seized” ahead of time. So, in my personal and not-lawyer-trained opinion, the legitimacy of civil asset forfeiture comes down to whether or not they are “unreasonable”.

There are plenty of outrageous cases of civil asset forfeiture.¹⁸³ A teenager charged with selling \$40 of heroin out of his parent’s house, and the house (his parents’, not his) being seized by police. Cases where someone was stopped on the highway, had their car searched with the only thing found being a few thousand dollars, and then the police seized the money, often for suspected drug use (suspected, not indicted or convicted).¹⁸⁴ Because of course the only possible reason to have more than a thousand dollars in cash is for illicit drugs!

What’s problematic about this is threefold. First, due process isn’t being followed. Police can seize property merely for suspecting that it is being used in a crime, but don’t need actually have any evidence, let alone a conviction of guilt.

Second, the burden of proof is placed on the owner to retrieve their property. Rather than police having to prove that someone’s property was being used in a crime, the owner must prove (with expensive legal proceedings) that they and their property are innocent.

183 <https://dailycaller.com/2015/01/30/the-7-most-egregious-examples-of-civil-asset-forfeiture/>

184 <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/special/forfeiture.html>

The third major issue is a misalignment of incentives. We want to reward officers for good work. As part of that, they may get bonuses for booking a major criminal or even just a high number of criminals. Where this becomes problematic is that, with civil asset forfeiture, police departments keep some or even all of the assets that they seize, again, without having to provide evidence of a crime. So this creates an incentive to be on the lookout and ‘suspect’ any cash you see as being of criminal intent.

This also isn’t a fringe issue. Even back in 2008, the DOJ’s Asset Forfeiture Fund held over \$1 billion dollars in seized assets, and across each state the annual take from seizures typically ranged from millions of dollars to tens of millions of dollars, according to a 2010 report by the Institute for Justice.¹⁸⁵

That same report compares the use of civil asset forfeiture between states, which have greatly varying guidelines, protections, and practices. They found that “When laws make civil forfeiture easier and more profitable, law enforcement engages in more of it”. That’s a problem. Asset forfeiture should happen where there is a crime, and where the assets were used in abetting that crime. Not where it is easy and profitable to carry out.

That report may be a decade old, but the practice of asset seizures has only grown. “Police property seizures on the rise”, reads one mid 2019 headline, detailing how the state of Illinois took in \$11 million dollars from asset seizures the previous year.¹⁸⁶ That money flows directly into the coffers of the very police agencies who seize it, propping up their struggling budgets.¹⁸⁷ In fact the practice of civil asset forfeitures to support police budgets has grown so widespread that the practice has earned the name “policing for profit”.

¹⁸⁵ https://www.ij.org/images/pdf_folder/other_pubs/assetforfeituretoemail.pdf

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.kare11.com/article/news/politics/police-property-seizures-on-the-rise/89-b79bb186-ce9b-4c82-8205-aa0c3401e2f4>

¹⁸⁷ Underfunded public services is itself a huge issue. Many agencies fail to fulfill their duties simply for lack of resources.

The 4th Amendment enumerates “the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects”. What happens when someone’s money, car, or home can be seized without warrant, trial, or conviction, and diverted to the budgets of the very people who seized it, unless the victim sues in court? It makes a mockery of due process.

And so, for lack of intervention by dedicated and conscientious individuals, the 4th Amendment too, has fallen. Is it a cataclysmic implosion? No, it’s still kinda sorta there, for many people, much of the time. But it’s been sliding for a while, and is well along its Descent.

Fortunately, there has been push back against ‘policing for profit’ specifically, and civil asset forfeiture more generally. In February of 2019 the Supreme Court unanimously ruled against its application in *Timbs v Indiana*.¹⁸⁸

So all good now right? Well, no. First off, the Supreme Court rarely makes sweeping statements, and this was no exception. Although civil asset forfeitures did factor into the case, the Court only ruled that Timbs, who was convicted of a crime, had been forced to pay an excessive fine (his \$42,000 SUV was seized, when the maximum penalty for his crime was \$10,000), and that the constitution’s protections against excessive fines do extend to the states under the 14th amendment.¹⁸⁹

You might be forgiven for thinking that the Supreme Court had done something more dramatic, based on the flood of headlines at the time.

188 https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/courts_law/supreme-court-says-constitutional-protection-against-excessive-fines-applies-to-state-actions/2019/02/20/204ce0d4-3522-11e9-af5b-b51b7ff322e9_story.html

189 https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/18pdf/17-1091_5536.pdf

Supreme Court unanimously rules against policing for profit.

 <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/02/supreme-court-rules-against-civil-forfeitu...>

Prepare for a flood of litigation urging federal courts to determine when **civil asset forfeiture** crosses this constitutional line. There is, regardless, a great deal to celebrate in *Timbs v. Indiana*.

Supreme Court Limits Police Powers to Seize Private ...

 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/us/politics/civil-asset-forfeiture-supreme-court...>

Feb 20, 2019 · In a similar case in Philadelphia, where law enforcement agencies once took in \$5.6 million a year in **civil forfeiture**, according to the Institute for Justice, a couple's home was seized in 2014 ...

Unanimous Supreme Court decision limits states' ability to ...

 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klI8EN7Oeq8>

The Supreme Court ruled Wednesday to limit **civil forfeiture** laws allowing law enforcement to seize property from those suspected of committing a crime. In the unanimous decision, the high court ...

September 2020 search results from DuckDuckGo.com

In practice the ruling of the Supreme Court is unlikely to be relevant to most civil asset forfeiture cases.¹⁹⁰ Because the case simply ruled that civil forfeitures can constitute excessive fines, it only puts a cap on how much can be seized, without setting any guidelines for what that cap may be. Also, this case related to a situation where someone had been convicted of a crime, and so may not cover the tens of thousands of situations where someone's property is seized without any evidence of a crime.

So the top down fix, to get a clear and ironclad Supreme Court decision, failed to materialize.

However the bottom up solution, countless individuals calling out what they see as abuse and pressuring their local leaders to take action, has brought progress. A 2015 update to the Institute for Justice's report highlighted how actions in some states had led to meaningful reforms, albeit in only six states.¹⁹¹ They highlight how reforms thusfar have been beneficial, particularly in New Mexico, while at the same time work remains.

In New Mexico, the use of forfeitures was changed such that the government must first convict someone of a crime, and rule that

190 <https://www.armstrongeconomics.com/international-news/rule-of-law/supreme-court-did-not-rule-on-civil-asset-forfeiture/>

191 <https://ij.org/report/policing-for-profit/grading-state-federal-civil-forfeiture-laws/>

the property was used in that crime, for it to be seized. This reestablishes due process, whereby someone doesn't have their rights or property forfeited until after being proven guilty. They also eliminated the profit incentive for police, so that now forfeitures go into the state's general fund instead of to police agencies. And it still keeps asset forfeiture on the books as an important tool to more permanently shut down criminals who are convicted.

Civil asset forfeitures are a unique case of our legal system however, because they often don't involve an individual being indicted, arrested, or brought before a court. What about the far more common situation about someone being accused of a crime, trivial (traffic violation) or serious (murder)?

CAN YOU AFFORD YOUR FREEDOM?

Many legal cases start with the posting of bail¹⁹².

The reason for bail is simple. If you have a large portion of your wealth held by the court, you're much less likely to skip town before your hearing or trial.

If you are deemed too dangerous to release (most commonly for indictments of violent crimes), you get kept in jail until your court date. Unfortunately you also get shipped to jail if you merely can't afford your bail, and that's where the first problem arises.

The 8th Amendment states that "excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted." Bail amounts vary by crime and other factors, but are routinely in the thousands or tens of thousands of dollars. Again, holding on to a large portion of your wealth is a good way to ensure defendants attend their own trial. But the amount cannot be "excessive" - so high that you have no hope of affording it.

¹⁹² Well, rightly they start with patterns of police patrolling, interactions between citizens and cops, and the circumstances surrounding the investigation and arrest. And those situations relate to education, individual situation, and a myriad of other factors. One of the messages of this book is that everything is complex and interconnected, and nothing is the whole story. So I'll start with bail because one has to limit the discussion somehow to remain comprehensible.

10% of American households have a negative net worth, and a further 10% have a net worth of under \$5,000.¹⁹³ That includes your car, house, and money locked up in retirement accounts, not just cash on hand. According to widely cited research by the Federal Reserve back in 2019¹⁹⁴, 40% of Americans can't afford an unexpected expense of \$400 or more. With even the lower levels of bail, around \$500, you're already above that threshold. High bail is one of the reasons so many people face jail time, and are thus more strongly pressured to accept plea deals.

What does it mean when the typical bail amount is far higher than one's life savings or even net worth? It means the protection of the 8th Amendment is hollow.

And so, for lack of intervention by dedicated and conscientious individuals, the 8th Amendment too, has fallen. Is it a cataclysmic implosion? No, it's still kinda sorta there, for many people, much of the time. But it's been sliding for a while, and is well along its Descent.

But bail isn't the only expense that burdens defendants. Tim Fugatt and his wife were in between jobs as they cared for their terminally ill son. Caught up in life and worried about their son, they didn't notice that their car registration had expired, until they received a court summons in the mail. After explaining their situation they were found not guilty, however they were still ordered to pay "court costs" of \$500.¹⁹⁵

CAN YOU AFFORD YOUR INNOCENCE?

What for many would've ended there – with a slap on the wrist and a lesson learned – went much further for the Fugatts, as a PBS story reports.¹⁹⁶ Unable to pay, they were placed on probation, racking up late fees. They were told that they needed to pay

¹⁹³ <https://dqydj.com/net-worth-brackets-wealth-brackets-one-percent/>

¹⁹⁴ <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2019-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2018-dealing-with-unexpected-expenses.htm>

¹⁹⁵ That's a further cost with our court system. Even if you're innocent, you often need to pay for your innocence. Ultimately it comes down to an issue of funding. Courts are expensive, and finding fair ways to fund them is tricky.

the fine, and interest, or go to jail. After a few months they managed to scrape together the money, but by then their fees ran to nearly \$2,500. And so Mr. Fugatt was thrown in jail. For the crime of not being able to afford being found not guilty.

Now technically, it is unconstitutional, as ruled by the Supreme Court in 1971 *Tate vs Short*¹⁹⁷, to sentence someone to jail simply because they are unable to pay a fine (called indigency). Of course, if they can pay the fine and simply refuse, then they can still be thrown in jail. And that's the rub; how do you determine if someone can or cannot afford a fine?

Ideally you'd develop some test to look at their wealth, income, and maybe hold a quick consultation to assess circumstances. However that's often not done, and even if it were would be difficult to do fairly. Which brings us back to jail time, which carries with it the risk of missed work and the complications of child care.

That's why many people will do anything to avoid going to jail. Even plead guilty to a crime they are completely innocent of.

WHEN GUILT IS CHEAPER THAN INNOCENCE

The following article from the LA Times¹⁹⁸ details the story of a man, pseudonymed Arthur, who was arrested after getting in a fight with his partner. They claimed he assaulted them, he claimed they were the aggressor and he was defending himself.

196 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/without-funds-pay-fines-minor-incidents-can-mean-jail>

197 <http://cdn.loc.gov/service/ll/usrep/usrep401/usrep401395/usrep401395.pdf>

198 <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-raphling-bail-20170517-story.html>

OPINION

Op-Ed: Plead guilty, go home. Plead not guilty, stay in jail

By JOHN RAPHLING

MAY 17, 2017 | 4 AM

His lawyers argued that, while awaiting his trial, he should be released on bail, since he had no criminal record, was working two jobs, and had a separate apartment to stay apart from his partner.

The prosecutors argued that he was violent and too dangerous to release. The judge agreed with the prosecution, and so set a very large bail. Unable to afford bail, Arthur was faced with the prospect of being kept in jail for 30 days, and certainly lose his job, until trial. Keep in mind that at this point, no evidence has been presented to a jury, and no one has been convicted of a crime.

That's when the prosecution provided a deal: plead guilty, and get released immediately in exchange for paying a fine, attending classes, doing community service, and going on probation. In other words: keep your job and your life in exchange for a criminal record. This is emblematic of a core problem in our criminal justice system: power is slanted heavily in the hands of prosecutors.

Arthur took the deal. And he's far from alone. A whopping 97.4% of crimes at the federal level end in plea deals, not trial convictions.¹⁹⁹ It's not hard to presume that many of those pleas are not truly guilty.

¹⁹⁹ <https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/annual-reports-and-sourcebooks/2018/Table12.pdf>

Wait a minute, you might say. Less than two percent of indicted citizens are receiving trials?²⁰⁰ Doesn't that fly in the face of the 7th Amendment's guarantee that "in suites at common law, [...] the right of trial by jury shall be preserved"?

Well not quite. First off, because these people aren't being denied trials, they are simply placed in a situation with strong incentives for them not to go to trial. Also, the 7th amendment specifically refers to cases of 'common law' (practically speaking many types of civil cases, though it's actually much more nuanced²⁰⁰). The 6th covers criminal cases.

More significantly, the 7th Amendment actually is only recognized to apply to the federal government, not states.²⁰¹ Now, that could change, most likely with a Supreme Court ruling. Remember *Timbs v Indiana* mentioned above? That 2019 decision was actually the first time that the Supreme Court ruled on the question of whether "excessive fines" applied to states. Before that ruling, states had no federal obligation to respect a citizen's right to be free from excessive fines (though there were state standards).

It's unlikely though. The question did go before the Supreme Court, back in 1916.²⁰² Then, the Court ruled that the 7th Amendment only applied to the federal government, and placed no requirements on states. This differs from most other parts of the constitution, where the Supreme Court has said that the protections extend to the state level.

And so, for lack of intervention by dedicated and conscientious individuals, the 7th Amendment too, has – not so much fallen or Descended as languished on the sidelines for centuries. At the federal level, there are less than 1.5 million cases pending²⁰³, versus more than 80 million across states²⁰⁴. And so for the vast majority of cases concerning US citizens, the 7th amendment preser-

200 <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/interpretation/amendment-vii/interps/125>

201 <https://www.cantonrep.com/article/20130512/NEWS/305129922>

202 <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/241/211/>

203 <https://www.uscourts.gov/statistics-reports/federal-judicial-caseload-statistics-2019>

204 http://www.courtstatistics.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/40820/2018-Digest.pdf

vation of trial by jury doesn't apply. It's still there and relevant to some, just not most.

For now though, back to the situation of ubiquitous plea bargains. What does it mean when 97.4% of defendants, tens of millions of individuals annually, are being found guilty of crimes without a trial, while rushed into a decision with the threat of jail hanging over their head and the associated loss of job and livelihood?

It means that your right under the 5th Amendment, to not be “deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law”, is turned into a joke. Yes, you were convicted of a crime, but not because a jury of your peers weighed the evidence and found you guilty. Not because you stood and lost at a fair trial. But because you were too poor to afford to undergo justice²⁰⁵. You were pressured by a lack of legal council, powerful prosecutors, and a rushed judge. Pressured by a legal system that is too overwhelmed to give you the attention you deserve as a citizen.

And so, for lack of intervention by dedicated and conscientious individuals, the 5th Amendment too, has fallen. Is it a cataclysmic implosion? No, it's still kinda sorta there, for some people, some of the time. But it's been sliding for a while, and is well along its Descent.

At the heart of this issue is the balance between Type I errors and Type II errors. Those terms come from the field of statistics, where Type I errors are when you say something is false that is actually true (e.g. you say someone is innocent when they are in fact guilty, and inadvertently let a criminal walk free), and Type II errors are when you say something is true when it is in fact false (e.g. you convict an innocent person, and lock up someone who committed no crime).

Most systems will have some degree of both types of errors, the trick is to find the line on which to balance the two risk. This type of thinking is common in medical diagnoses. Doctors want to find

²⁰⁵ I would highly recommend this post, “Being Poor”: <https://whatever.scalzi.com/2005/09/03/being-poor/>

out if you have an illness, ideally as soon as possible to put you on the best treatment. They don't want you to miss a screening and develop a much more severe illness. But they also don't want to mistakenly prescribe you expensive drugs with risky side effects if you don't actually have an illness.

Same with our courts. We want to convict criminals, but we don't want to lock up innocents. How do we balance this? The rights in the constitution, the role of public defenders, and the concept of innocent until guilty are all balanced against the powers of the prosecutors and the threat of conviction, however the above stories highlight how these forces may not be optimally balanced.

All that said, even the most carefully designed systems are thrown out of wack when they get overwhelmed.

UNDER RESOURCED, OVERWHELMED

Back in 2010, a large scale report²⁰⁶ by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the NLADA, and reviewed by the American Bar Association, among others, collected data in 2007 from every public defender office that was funded by state or local sources. They found that, across the 15,000 public defenders, there were over 5.6 million cases received.

That works out to 373 cases per lawyer in just that year. Assuming they all work an absurd 80 hr per week, 52 weeks per year, that's just over 11 hours to review, research, prepare for, and argue each case; not to mention consult with the defendant, cross examine the prosecution's evidence, write and file briefs and appeals, and the myriad other things lawyers must do to properly provide for someone's defense. Even with every lawyer pulling double time, that raises doubts as to whether an adequate defense can possibly be provided.

That 2010 report concluded that only "about 1 in 4 county-based public defender offices had a sufficient number of attorneys to

206 https://www.jrsa.org/events/conference/presentations-10/Donald_Farole.pdf

meet caseload standards”. That unfortunately hasn’t changed much.

Over the last decade, some passionate lawyers have teamed up with the American Bar Association, the main national body of lawyers that set standards and helps different states coordinate on best practices.

Through the Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defense, they’ve worked with lawyers across the nation to develop empirical standards for how much time lawyers should be expected to spend on different types of cases in order to provide adequate defense service for their defendants. They’ve then looked at caseloads in various states to make staffing recommendations.

In 2016, one report by the ABA determined that Louisiana, to sufficiently meet its current caseload, would need approximately 1,769 public defenders. It only had 363, merely 21% of what was considered adequate.²⁰⁷

According to a July 2020 report²⁰⁸ – also from the ABA – standards in the state of Indiana for what is considered a maximum caseload were routinely found to be set too high for attorneys.

For adult criminal cases in particular, the ABA’s recommendations would have Indiana lower its caseload standards by between 21% and 94%.

To put that in perspective, for non-capital murder cases, Indiana stated that a single attorney should be able to take on 120 such cases in a year. The ABA recommends no more than 9. To go so drastically beyond that suggests that lawyers are strained and may be unable to adequately prepare defenses for or advise their clients.

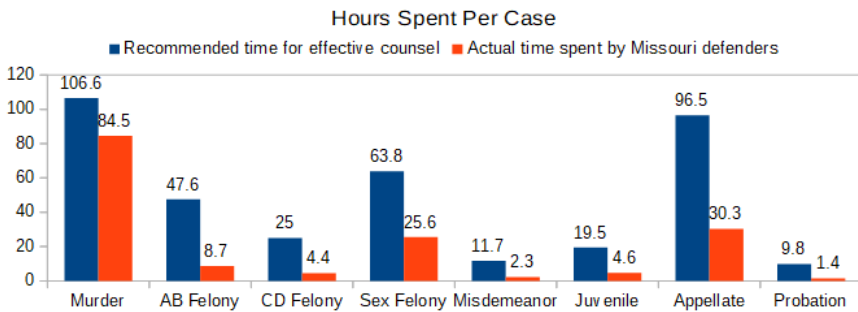
207 https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/ls_sclaid_louisiana_project_report.pdf

208 https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/the-indiana-project-july-2020.pdf

For Rhode Island, the report also found public attorneys to be overworked, and recommended to increase the state’s public defenders from 49 to 136; that is, by 177%.²⁰⁹

The following chart displays the American Bar Association’s recommended time to be spent on different types of cases, and how much time attorneys in Missouri were actually spending on such cases.

Lawyers aren’t the only part of judicial systems that get overwhelmed. A lack of judges also serves as a bottleneck. The 6th Amendment also enumerates “the right to a speedy and public trial”²¹⁰. When there are too few judges then cases are delayed until one has time to hear it, meaning people whose lives are hanging in the air must wait in anguish for longer.



Times are averages and come from 2014 data; appellate cases include post-conviction relief, and “probation” refers to probation violations. Chart from NPR²¹¹; Data from ABA²¹²

209 https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/ls_sclaid_def_ri_project.pdf

210 At least in cases of criminal offense. Civil law is left for the 7th amendment. The split between civil and criminal caseloads has been roughly equal over the past few decades, with criminal caseloads comprising of a slight majority. http://www.courtstatistics.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/40820/2018-Digest.pdf

211 <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/08/04/488655916/overworked-and-underfunded-missouri-public-defender-assigns-a-case-to-the-govern>

212 http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/events/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/2014/ls_sclaid_5c_the_missouri_project_report.authcheckdam.pdf

Before jumping into the US (which again, I'm biased towards covering more since I live here and understand it better), we should remember that this is far from a US-only problem. In 2018, India had a backlog of over 2.7 million cases, in part because their courts had 26% fewer judges than the prescribed amounts.²¹³

In the US, the largest strain is on immigration courts. Most migrants at the southern border don't try to sneak across, they walk up and turn themselves over to Border Patrol agents seeking asylum.

HORDES OF QUEUES

America has international commitments to accept asylum seekers from around the world, taking in those fleeing violence or political threats and offers them safe harbor. But some try to cheat the system and falsely claim hardship to sneak in. So we have imperfect immigration courts to assess each person's claims on a case by case basis and decide whether to grant them asylum.

That system is at a breaking point. The NYT in May of 2019 found that there were over 800,000 pending asylum applications, and only 395 judges, which meant that the current backlog would take up to four years to clear.²¹⁴

All that leads to overcrowded facilities that spread disease, built up anxiety for the migrant families, lost opportunities as they languish in a system that was not designed to handle so many cases, and stressed border agents and judges scrambling to respond.

America is supposed to be a land of justice. What does it mean when justice is four years late?

The backlog of cases may be most severe in immigration courts, but it's still painful across the nation. Across the federal judicial

213 <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/india-has-19-judges-per-10-lakh-people-data/article25030009.ece>

214 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/01/24/us/migrants-border-immigration-court.html>

system, from 1993 to 2013, cases grew by 28%, while the number of federal judges only rose by 4%.²¹⁵

The shortage of federal judges, to quote the ABA once more, “has real consequences for the financial well-being of businesses and the personal lives of litigants whose cases may only be heard by the federal courts.”²¹⁶

Interestingly, the situation looks different at the state level. A report by the Court Statistics Project²¹⁷ compiled data across states found that cases fell consistently and across the board from 2009 to 2018. Civil (-16%), criminal (-17%), domestic (-18%), traffic violations (-24%), and juvenile cases (-41%) all fell. In total incoming caseloads across states fell by 21% from 106 million in 2009 to 83.8 million in 2019. That’s fantastic news! It means across the board, there is less crime, fewer victims, and fewer people needing to be locked up.

So there are some bright spots, certainly reasons to be optimistic. Yet much work remains. Although caseloads have fallen in some areas, they are rising in others, and the burden on lawyers and defendants remains high. Even with falling state caseloads, state judges too remain overworked, which is partly why some even encourage the pre-trial settlements discussed before: it helps clear their dockets and prevents the system as a whole from collapsing.

At the same time, it contributes to the distorted incentives of trials and jail that still hurt too many.

FOR LACK OF FUNDING

Now, the fix might seem apparent: hire more judges and lawyers. The problem with that is twofold: where do the people come from, and where does the money come from? Budgets are tight,

²¹⁵ <https://trac.syr.edu/tracreports/judge/364/>

²¹⁶ https://www.americanbar.org/advocacy/governmental_legislative_work/priorities_policy/independence_of_the_judiciary/judicial_vacancies/

²¹⁷ http://www.courtstatistics.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/40820/2018-Digest.pdf

and training people takes time, assuming you can find enough qualified people in the first place.

Of course, that's not to say that this is excusable. 'Budget shortages' are not an acceptable excuse for the failure to uphold inalienable rights. It is, though, to say that we have our work cut out for us.

Another area we could turn our attention to is jury selection. For those who do make it to trial, justice is still not assured. Juries have long been criticized for suffering from the racial biases of lawyers and courts in selecting jurors.

ARE THESE YOUR PEERS?

Many courts have remarked on the occurrence of racial bias in jury selection and the harm it causes, most recently by the Supreme Court of North Carolina earlier this year, in *N. Carolina v Hobbs*.²¹⁸ In that ruling, the court held that there was a racial motivation in the frequent cutting of black jurors from the selection process.

Even when juror selection is not biased, racially or otherwise, jurors are still humans, and numerous studies show how we do not make logical rulings. We are prone to developing leading verdicts²¹⁹ (wherein someone determines guilt before hearing all the available evidence), we struggle to appropriately disregard evidence that is presented in court but later ruled inadmissible,²²⁰ and public coverage of cases, either before or during trial, further distorts perceptions.

What does it mean when there are bias in jury selection? It means an "impartial jury" is turned into a joke.

What does it mean when "speedy" is a matter of months, if not years? What happens when that pressure pushes courts to rush

218 <https://appellate.nccourts.org/opinions/?c=1&pdf=39338>

219 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0025802418791062>

220 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247826634_Jury_decision-making_biases_and_methods_to_counter_them

through your hearing in less time than it takes to reheat your dinner?²²¹ ‘Justice delayed is justice denied’, goes the appropriate adage.

What does it mean when lawyers rush through your case file and are only able to devote a fraction of the time to your case that it needs? It means that your right under the 6th Amendment for “the assistance of counsel for [your] defense” is turned into a joke.

And so, for lack of intervention by dedicated and conscientious individuals, the 6th Amendment too, has fallen. Is it a cataclysmic implosion? No, it’s still kinda sorta there, for some people, some of the time. But it’s been sliding for a while, and is well along its Descent.

Now, I don’t mean to imply, with all this talk of Descending liberties, that hope is lost. I don’t mean to imply that we are on this fixed downward spiral without a chance of stopping or recovering, far from it. There is widespread recognition of these problems, such as the North Carolinian Supreme Court calling for an end to racially selected juries.²²²

Similarly, we know about the problems with overburdened lawyers and have the robust data on caseloads because there are dedicated individuals in the ABA collecting them for the purpose of developing better empirical standards for how much time lawyers need to spend on certain cases, and how many lawyers states need to meet those needs. A few dedicated individuals have done remarkable work to uncover the problems with our judicial systems and identify valid solutions that we can support.²²³

221 Subsection of article entitled “In Courtroom 4C, the Lucky Ones Get Five Minutes” <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/01/31/us/public-defender-caseloads.html>

222 <https://www.adl.org/media/13058/download>

223 https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/books/ls_sclaid_def_securing_reasonable_caseloads.pdf#page=11

The same goes for nearly every problem outlined in this book. There are many problems in the world, but there are also many individuals working to solve them.

PRIVATIZING JUSTICE

Before, we touched on how often people aren't assessed for their ability to pay fines, rather simply charged or jailed. That's partly because those collecting the fines don't have an incentive to assess ability to pay. You see, while the courts issue the fines, they often don't collect them. Overwhelmed with work and understaffed, many contract out the work of collecting fines to private companies.

In the previous case of Tim Fugatt, the court transferred responsibility of collecting his "court costs" to the private firm Judicial Corrections Services. JCS doesn't charge the courts to collect fees for them, instead they are "offender-funded", meaning they make money off of those who are charged.

Having your fees collected by Judicial Corrections Services will cost you \$45 per month until the fees are paid off, plus a \$10 'start up' fee. As one Alabama judge stated, this amounts to a "judicially sanctioned extortion racket."²²⁴

A more infamous area where an over-strained justice system mills out work to the private sector is with prisons. The duopoly of private prisons is GEO Group and CoreCivic (until recently known as CCA).

A common argument in favor of private prisons is that they are cheaper. Studies on the actual costs are mixed, but a more salient reason for any lower costs is that private prisons have some control over which inmates they take, and routinely reject older or

224 <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/14/us/judge-in-alabama-halts-private-probation.html>

sick inmates²²⁵ which carry higher medical costs. After all, they get paid per head.

Also contentious is levels of violence. Some argue it's more prevalent in state run prisons than private prisons, others less. The arguments are complicated by the same problems clouding the discussion of costs: private prisons routinely reject more violent offenders, making comparisons difficult. Even so, we do know that violence is a big problem.

A 2012 verdict looked at reports of “barbaric, unconstitutional conditions in the Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility”, which held young men who had been charged as adults (67% of them for non-violent offenses). That court found that the abhorrent conditions of the prison “paints a picture of such horror as should be unrealized anywhere in the civilized world”.²²⁶

We might be distracted from terrible conditions by narratives of being tough on crime, however it bears remembering that convicts are still human beings deserving of decency, and they are still citizens deserving of constitutional rights. Prisons are meant to punish criminals and help them reform before reentering society as productive citizens. Private prisons are not well equipped to do that.

But private prisons only imprison about 9% of the total prison population. Although that proportion grew rapidly earlier this century, it has since leveled off from a high of 11% in 2012.²²⁷

So private prisons account for a minority of prisoners, however it is not like the situation in state or federally run prisons is much or any better. Rape and abuse by guards holding their power to deny parole for ‘disciplinary infractions’ over inmates is rampant.²²⁸ Other investigations reveal prisoners living alongside sewage and

²²⁵ <https://www.justicestrategies.org/publications/2005/cost-saving-or-cost-shifting-fiscal-impact-prison-privatization-arizona>

²²⁶ <https://www.aclu.org/files/assets/order.pdf>

²²⁷ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/private-prisons-united-states/>

²²⁸ <https://msmagazine.com/2020/04/23/sexual-violence-in-womens-prisons-reaches-constitutional-proportions-will-lawmakers-step-in/>

rodents²²⁹ and officials who are “deliberately indifferent to the risk of harm” to those in their care.²³⁰

The reasons for this are many, from warped incentives (like how private prisons often can fine states that do not send a certain quota of convicts), to the nature of a system largely outside of the public eye. Perhaps the biggest issue is that the system is simply overwhelmed beyond its capacity. An NPR report from 2001 highlighted prison overcrowding that was overflowing into county jails.²³¹ That situation was caused by too many prisoners and not enough space or budget or personnel to handle them. That story from two decades ago could easily describe today’s situation.

So if private prisons aren’t much different from public prisons, in that they are generally terrible places, why do they persist? Partly due to lobbying and government favoritism, the bane of free markets everywhere.

Beyond contracts setting quotas for prisoners, private prisons may be pushing for legislation to drive police to more aggressively arrest people. One widely reported case of this is regarding Arizona’s State Bill 1070, which pushed for much more aggressive arrests of illegal immigrants²³². That bill was drafted by ALEC, a private body that advocates and educates (it avoids the word ‘lobby’) on behalf of its corporate sponsors, which includes all the large private prison corporations.

Many pointed to the funding by those private prisons as perhaps being influential in passing such legislation, which is seen as boosting private prisons by driving higher incarceration rates.²³³

229 <https://www.insider.com/justice-department-investigation-mississippi-prison-conditions-violence-2020-2>

230 <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/03/709475746/doj-report-finds-violence-in-alabama-prisons-common-cruel-pervasive>

231 <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1125132&t=1598113677700>

232 <https://www.npr.org/2010/11/09/131191523/how-corporate-interests-got-sb-1070-passed>

233 <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/the-cold-hard-facts-about-americas-private-prison-system>

The success of private prisons is also, and perhaps more substantively, a response to judicial systems that are strained to a breaking point. At the end of the day, there are simply not enough staff and not enough funding to properly deal with our large prison population.

None of these are isolated problems. From strict ‘tough on crime’ laws to excessive bail, from rushed courts to a lack of adequate legal council, from abysmal prison conditions to bias in juries, all these problems are interconnected. They are also relevant to the larger economic and social issues discussed thus far in this book.

Strained budgets lead to poorer public services. That, compounded with greater poverty leads to higher crime, which understaffed and under resourced judicial systems struggle to handle fairly. All this leads to worse outcomes and restricted opportunities for individuals with prison records who aren’t properly reintegrated into society.

Our judicial system has become ineffective at administering justice. This is because of many factors, some of the largest of which are that our system is overwhelmed, under-resourced, and being short-changed by business and political forces not aligned with the letter of the law.

Like with so many of the problems I’m trying to draw attention to in this book, this is no one’s ‘fault’. There is no one individual to blame. Which means there is no singular decisive action that will magically fix everything overnight. No one woke up one day and said ‘let’s hamstring the US court system!’ Rather, we’ve come to this point as a result of millions of individual decisions over decades. From many small choices these problems have emerged. And, like all other such problems, a solution will only emerge from millions of small choices taken over decades. Not a breathtaking and inspiring program, but persistent action by many individuals.

We’re not going to fix this by electing some well spoken representative who will wave a magic pen and materialize a perfectly

crafted and well incentivized system to meticulously implement from on high.

It is going to be fixed by tens of thousands of dedicated civil servants taking a hard and uncomfortable look at their systems and asking how they can be designed better. And not the national civil servants, rather the small town council member, the city clerk, the public defender, and many more who work out of the spotlight.

It is going to be fixed by millions of concerned citizens reaching out to those civil servants, or becoming those civil servants, and sharing their experiences and expertise to help craft those better systems. And it is going to be fixed by all of us in our billions reaching out to those around us and asking, “how can I help?”

Chapter 9: Is the Descent Really so Bad?

Although largely discussing universal human values such as Narratives, fear, Nudges, and social structures, much of this book thus far has focused on their implementation in the West, particularly in the US. Let's look at some countries with very different political, economic, and social structures.

We'll start with the Chinese Communist Party. Note that I'm specifying the CCP, not China. China includes over a billion individuals and several millennia of history which encompasses dozens of tribes, cultures, dynasties, religions, sociopolitical structures, and languages. All of that is fascinating, however it won't be the exact focus of this section. Instead we'll focus on the CCP, its structure and policies, and how those structures shape its governing of more than one billion humans.

The Chinese Communist Party (or sometimes the Communist Party of China) was founded in 1921, when eastern Asia was highly fragmented.²³⁴



²³⁴ Map retrieved from <https://omniatlas.com/media/img/maps/eastasia/eastasia19210625.png>

Asia was a messy place in the 1920's, and the CCP campaigned against and waged outright war against many groups, one of the largest of which was the Nationalists (also known as the Kuomintang). That fighting continued for many years between many groups, until the Empire of Japan began expanding into northeast Asia, and in 1936 many of the warring groups formed a temporary truce (the United Front) to combat the common enemy.²³⁵

After World War II was winding down and the United Front successfully beat back Japan, they promptly returned to each others' throats. The CCP ultimately won that struggle by 1949 and established the People's Republic of China, while the only remaining opposition, the Nationalists, withdrew to Taiwan where they established what remains a separately governed state (the Republic of China). To this day mainland China (the CCP) claims Taiwan as rightfully part of itself and insists it will eventually integrate Taiwan.

After establishing itself on the mainland, the CCP consolidated control over regions to the west (see map on next page). This effort brought under the CCP a diverse set of peoples from various ethnicities, cultures, and spoken languages. From this, the nation of China as we know it today was crafted.

Ok, nice history lesson, you might be thinking, but what does this have to do with Complete Order and the rest of this book?

Most of this book so far has been about the slow Descent into Complete Order, particularly in America, and what trends are driving this Descent. This chapter is about what a society looks like when it embraces Complete Order. The way the CCP has built, maintained, and governed China is a blunt case study of this, because social stability and unity are core principles of the CCP that are embedded in its history and culture.

²³⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chinese-Communist-Party>



Mainland China's ethno-linguistic groups²³⁶

The CCP isn't just the ruling government. It is the largest party in China, boasting over 90 million individuals and approximately 70% of the National People's Congress, making it the second largest political party in the world by membership (only the BJP in India is larger).

In fact, in China the CCP is the only party that is constitutionally allowed to lead the government, with all other parties (derived from the other factions of the United Front) relegated to minor roles. So what does it mean to be a member of the Chinese Com-

²³⁶ Modified chart from: https://saylordotorg.github.io/text_world-regional-geography-people-places-and-globalization/section_13/aabce181a-ca9781a95f2716a3ffd93cf.jpg

munist Party? Here's the pledge new members take when joining the CCP:

*It is my will to join the Communist Party of China, uphold the Party's program, observe the provisions of the Party Constitution, fulfill a Party member's duties, carry out the Party's decisions, strictly observe Party discipline, guard Party secrets, be loyal to the Party, work hard, fight for communism throughout my life, be ready at all times to sacrifice my all for the Party and the people, and never betray the Party.*²³⁷

Imagine an American making that pledge to the Republican or Democratic party. In democracies, politicians exist to serve you, and parties are a convenient construct that exist to help them do that. In China, loyalty to the Party is seen as another way to promote social unity.

So how has the CCP been running their society with Complete Order, and how has that gone?

From many perspectives, very well.

AN ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

In a footnote back in Chapter 2, I mentioned how China is developed, excluding minorities. Let's go over the definition I gave for developed countries: "countries that have nearly all modern products and services accessible to nearly all of their citizens nearly all of the time" China has this. High speed trains, major airport and maritime shipping hubs, any good you can imagine buying, and high-tech, convenient services a tap away. That's life for most Chinese, which is why I say they're developed. For many living in China the rise of the CCP has coincided with a dramatic and spectacular advancement in wealth and living standards.

Well, alright. The economic miracles only came after decades of famine, massive social upheaval, and political infighting. Chair-

²³⁷ https://cpcchina.chinadaily.com.cn/2010-09/14/content_13901592.htm

man Mao of the CCP is credited with the deaths of 30-65 million of his own citizens (a necessarily vague guess due to the lack of independent journalism).²³⁸ But that was then and this is now. And now China is rich. China's people are rich. And most of that staggering change happened in the last forty years.

Imagine being one of the people to live through that spectacular change. Your childhood is spent helping your parents and grandparents and extended family on a small farm, eking out rice paddies on a terraced hillside. You are likely the only child of your parents because of the One Child program (though many rural families were allowed a second child if their first was a girl), and your life is very similar to the lives of your parents and grandparents.

Mostly the same, with one difference, change is in the air. Occasionally you see government officials or businessmen from across the country come through your small village. They wear nice clothes and drive a shiny car.

They and their families are well fed and taken care of, and you know there is one thing that can ensure you end up like them, the *gaokao*. This is the national standardized college admissions test, and you know that if you ace it, you'll have a golden ticket to prestigious universities and a government guaranteed job, able to take part in the prosperity on the coast you're increasingly hearing tales of.

So you work the fields, and you study relentlessly. For years. Until that one single test comes, and you ace it. You get to travel a thousand miles from home to university, get a degree in engineering and a job in a huge factory floor designing machines. The money you send back home pays for a larger house and a nice retirement for your parents, and you have enough left over for a flat in the city for yourself and your fiancé.

Fast forward a few more years and you are a respected manager. Not unimaginably high on the social ladder, but with your smart

238 <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/the-legacy-mao-zedong-mass-murder>

phone and car and closet full of clothes, you are far far better off than you ever could have been back home.

And your kid will never work the fields. They are also studying relentlessly for the *gaokao*. But they also have some leisure time with which to roam the city with their friends. When you go back to your village for the annual Lunar New Year's festival, you do so in the coach of a high speed train, passing the sweltering countryside in the comfort of an AC cooled car.

From farm to urbanite, in a generation. The exact details vary greatly, but for hundreds of millions of Chinese adults, that is the vague shape of their life. And so even if you find some faults in it, is there really so much to complain about?

KEEP UNREST ON 'SIMMER'

China has always been a large place with many people. In the past few decades, it has beheld the greatest reduction of poverty in history, and it has become rich.

Despite that, a country as large as China is unlikely to ever be completely without some unrest. For decades some of that has come from Tibet, a region in southwest China (most of the orange section in the previous ethno-linguistic map).

Between March 2011 November 2012, sixty one Tibetans set themselves on fire and burned to death in protest of China's repression of Tibetans' ability to speak openly and practice their religion. More than half of them were younger than 20.

There is an ongoing challenge, even to this day, of the CCP repressing expression and detaining individuals "merely for exercising fundamental rights like freedom of expression, association and religion".²³⁹

²³⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/03/world/asia/un-rights-official-faults-china-on-tibetan-suppression.html>

Of course, in China speaking and practicing religion as you see fit are not guaranteed freedoms, but may be dangerous crimes which threaten social stability. Officially atheist, the CCP has routinely discouraged religions such as Christianity and Islam.

This is nothing new however. The CCP has been criticized for decades over its treatment of Tibet, almost since it annexed the lands in 1950²⁴⁰. From the moment the CCP issued the Seventeen Point Agreement to incorporate Tibet into its territory (later renaming it the Tibetan Autonomous Region), it has faced criticism.

To start, the original agreement was never acknowledged by the officials who held themselves to be the government-in-exile of an occupied land (there remains to this day a government of Tibet in exile, based out of India.). Nevertheless, the CCP began slowly trying to integrate Tibet, despite armed resistance in 1956 and 1959.

Integration has faced many barriers. The majority ethnicity in China is Han, who speak Mandarin. Tibet has a different written and spoken language, is predominantly Buddhist, and has a variety of distinct governmental and social traditions. The CCP has slowly tried to change that. Between 1959 and 1960, the CCP destroyed nearly 6,000 temples. Shortly thereafter, the Red Guard destroyed countless cultural sites, symbols, and artifacts as part of the wider Cultural Revolution.

Let's be clear, if there were an active and violent separatist movements in Tibet, that would be one thing. However there is not a violent rebellion taking place, nor notable calls for such.

Now, the CCP will claim that these assimilation measures are needed to prevent future unrest or violence. However that claim

²⁴⁰ East Asia has a long and complicated history. The area now referred to as Tibet has been, at various points over the millennia, a patchwork of tribes, the center of an empire, ruled by the Mongols, ruled by the Yuan dynasty, self governed, and ruled by the Qing dynasty, to give a painfully brief overview. Some consider Tibet an independent nation occupied by China. China considers it just another one of its rightful provinces. For more: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Tibet

is questionable. There are plenty of multi-cultural societies in the world that get on just fine. What is it about Tibetan and Han cultures that cannot coexist? Personally, I don't see that claim as justifying the actions the CCP has taken, however it does provide clarity as to why they view them as necessary. And perhaps they are right, I am an outsider after all.

At the same time, the actions of the CCP have not been confined to toppling temples. In 1992 Amnesty International filed a report²⁴¹ with the United Nations detailing a pattern and history of repression in Tibet by Han authorities. Drawing from numerous reports of those detained and their relatives, they report detainees being deprived of sleep or food, denied medical care, and beaten, among other offenses.

To be clear, that is not normal in China, where the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China²⁴² forbids extracting a "confession from a criminal suspect or defendant by torture". Hopefully these reports are of the actions of a few individual officers greatly overstepping their mandate. Furthermore, these are reports by escapees and released suspects, and they have not been able to be corroborated by independent investigations. That said, what these few accounts do share is stark.

The detainees detailed in the Amnesty International report include Tsering Dhundrup:

"Tsering Dhundrup, a 26 year-old woodcarver, was reportedly first detained in December 1988 for making wood-blocks inscribed with slogans in favour of Tibetan independence. He was held in Utridu Detention Centre in Lhasa, where he was reportedly made to stand barefoot in cold weather on an outdoor concrete platform while guards poured water on his feet. When he was allowed to move his feet, some skin stuck to the ground."

241 <https://web.archive.org/web/20090912004834/http://www.tibetjustice.org/materials/un/un8annex2.1.html>

242 <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/criminal-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china>

Imagine that happening to anyone calling for Scottish independence from Britain, or Catalan independence from Spain, or Texan independence from the USA.

I guess we need to lockup all the Zazzle.com employees and freeze their feet to concrete now.²⁴³



Available at Zazzle.com; frozen skin sold separately

Every nation has its problems. Look no further than the yellow jacket protests in France, Brexit, or the summer protests in America, first over virus lockdowns and then over George Floyd and racial grievances. The difference is that these social discourses happen in the open, and the nations acknowledge and speak about them. The press covers the events, and leaders are forced to respond. That's democracy.

China takes a very different approach to public dissent: censor any public discontent, and if things get bad enough some leaders will quietly move things in the background.

REVERSION TO THE MEAN

For the most part, individuals in China are content to let that be the way of things. Deeply ingrained in Chinese culture are the principles of Confucius thought, one of which is *zhongyong*, which roughly translates as the Doctrine of the Mean.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ https://www.zazzle.com/secede_t_shirt-235889205064357242

²⁴⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctrine_of_the_Mean

The Doctrine of the Mean promotes non-confrontation and compromise-seeking in order to promote harmony and balance (so the exact opposite of the current American political climate, we could learn something here). The advantage of this is that you don't waste time fighting your friends, neighbors, or colleagues.

The disadvantage is that some things rightly deserve aggressive and vocal opposition. When *zhongyong* is applied universally to all areas, it is difficult to raise your voice. No one wants to be seen as a bother to others, no one wants to be seen as dangerously unconventional. And if everyone else seems to be moving in one direction, *zhongyong* also pushes you to conform and avoid being left behind. This gives clarity to some of the CCP's actions. They act decisively to suppress cultural differences because they perceive any variation from the mean as a risk to social stability.

If you seek non-confrontation in all things and seek to revert to the mean of society, you'll probably avoid crisis. However you might also be silently allowing a Sandpile to grow unchecked.²⁴⁵ Some things are terrible mistakes or cruel incompetences and deserve to be called such. The most notorious example of this in modern China may be Tiananmen Square.

NOTHING HAPPENED IN TIANANMEN

In 1989, protest broke out across nearly 400 cities in China as demonstrators called for greater transparency and accountability from their leaders. At the height of the protests as many as one million were gathered in Tiananmen Square, just in front of the Forbidden Palace in Beijing.

The CCP answered these calls for reform with violence, deploying as many as 300,000 troops to clear the gatherings, which cul-

²⁴⁵ A related idea to Confucianism's Doctrine of the Mean is Buddhism's 'Middle Way', which similarly advocates for moderation. A notable difference, at least in the way that the Middle Way was best described to me by Dr. Alan Fox, is that Buddhism teaches to take "everything in moderation, including moderation". Seek conformity, but only most of the time. Occasionally it is appropriate to indulge in or express extremes in order to maintain moderate, since an unwavering commitment to conformity in all things is itself a form of extremism.

minated on June 4th with the military opening fire on protesters and bystanders alike.



Now, that example, and others shared here, are decades old. However the CCP remains touchy on these topics, and has never formally admitted to any of them, even actively suppressing information about them. To this day, the CCP forbids any official mention of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, and works furiously to remove any mention of it online. On the 2020 anniversary, they even strong-armed Zoom (an American video conferencing service) to shut down remembrance events scheduled on its platform and had it terminate the accounts of the (non-Chinese) individuals hosting the events.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/12/zoom-admits-cutting-off-activists-accounts-in-obedience-to-china>

That censorship isn't completely heavy handed of course. One young engineer who earned his doctorate in America but who grew up in China shared with me details of his upbringing (he asked to remain unnamed, so we'll simply refer to him as Liu Bei). Bei said the first time he heard of Tiananmen Square was actually from one of his teachers. However it wasn't in any of his textbooks.

The CCP does not zealously pursue every single case of someone saying something they don't agree with, partially because they don't have to. As long as they censor official statements and block public events, they can control the narrative and define what is acceptable to talk about. And most people in China are mostly OK with this. After all, tip toeing around a few topics your government disapproves of is in some ways a small price to pay for the tremendous economic prosperity that that government has brought you and your families over the past several decades.

"We've been through a lot of dynasties", says Liu Bei, "even though a lot of people want to see reforms, I think people would rather prefer stability, than a chaotic situation". Order versus Chaos, it really does appear everywhere. In China, proposes Liu Bei, people "care more about individual prosperity, economically; and also peace" than the exercises others might consider essential, such as free speech or voting.²⁴⁷

It's a perfectly understandable stance. After the warring factions between 1921 and 1949 and the horrors of WWII, including the rape of Nanking, after the Century of Humiliation in which foreign powers carved out influence in China, after millennia of different dynasties, warring states, and invasions by Mongols and other groups, a period of repressed revolutionary spirits in exchange for exponential economic growth begins to sound rather appealing.

That economic prosperity is not evenly distributed, however. And unfortunately, the biggest gains are concentrated in the coastal regions and the fertile river valleys of the Yellow and Yangzi to the

247 Interview with Chinese national "Liu Bei", 2020. Quotes have been condensed.

east, mapping closely to the distribution of people of the Han ethnic majority (and, to be fair, population density). The following chart displays per person income, after taxes, broken down by region. These 2015 amounts are also adjusted for price differences across regions, so they reflect the relative weight (or purchasing power) of a given amount of money.

Adjusted Provincial Median Discretionary Income per Capita



11,000 Yuan per person

49,000 Yuan per person

2015 amounts, adjusted for provincial CPI. Data from St. Louis

Fed.²⁴⁸ Map modified from d-maps.com.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ <https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2018/january/income-living-standards-china>

²⁴⁹ Map shows controlled borders of the People's Republic of China, with territories shaded by income. <https://d-maps.com/m/asia/china/chine/chine60.gif>

So if you're in the major cities and are Han, then you have much to celebrate. If, however, you live in the western provinces and are among the 8% of people living in China who are not of the majority Han ethnicity²⁵⁰, life is often very different.

These regional and ethnic inequities have sparked social unrest. The CCP has applied a formula of repression and censorship to produce an illusion of calm and competence, papering over that unrest.

One of the more famous current examples of this is the Uighurs. Located mostly in the northwest province of Xinjiang, the Uighur (sometimes spelled Uyghur, roughly pronounced Oo-ee-grr) are a Turkic Muslim group that lives in a land rich in oil, gas, coal, cotton, and strategic trade routes connecting central Asia to the rest of China. Rather than supporting systems that help enrich the region, the CCP has kept the populous under control with a totalitarian police state.²⁵¹

To be clear, the levels of control the CCP has applied to its Xinjiang province are different in scope and nature to those in much of the rest of the country. In Xinjiang these measures have manifested themselves in the form of expansive social controls and extensive surveillance.

KEEPING AN EYE ON YOU

Start with social controls. The CCP watches its citizens extensively.

China has over 200 million CCTV cameras right now installed on buildings, streets, and public places, and that number is only set to continue rapidly expanding. One city, Shenzhen, has plans to increase its cameras from less than 2 million to more than 16 million. Even after adjusting for their large population, China has 8 of the 10 cities with the highest number of cameras per person in

²⁵⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Han_Chinese

²⁵¹ <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/01/09/dismantling-chinas-muslim-gulag-in-xinjiang-is-not-enough>

the world (London is 6th, LA is 10th).²⁵² With this extensive network, China has perhaps more surveillance data than anyone in the world.

That data includes a lot of pictures and video of people and their faces, which has helped China become the global leader in image recognition technology. This has led to an explosion of convenient services for many consumers, from pay-by-face checkouts to automatic office doors keyed to employee and guest faces.

The same image recognition technology and database of faces is used to track people of interest wherever they go, identifying who owns what vehicles and the exact model of those vehicles, who takes what trains or planes, and which people interact with each other. Beyond just identifying people and tracking their habits, the image recognition technology is used to identify what clothes someone is wearing, measures how long they loiter in public areas, which guests you bring into your home, and on and on.

As the VP and spokesperson for Megvii, one of the larger companies involved with rolling out these surveillance systems in China, explains, “we can know exactly what is happening at every second, in every corner of the city.”²⁵³

WE ARE THE NARRATIVE

Mass surveillance is just one way in which the CCP exerts control. It also does so by controlling the flow of information. Start with the media.

In China, the press looks very different from what you might be used to. Rather than simply releasing press statements for newspapers to report on, the CCP has its own newspaper, the People’s Daily. And China’s leaders expect the same level of devotion from that and other state papers that the Party creed implies.

252 <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3023455/report-finds-cities-china-most-monitored-world>

253 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLo3e1Pak-Y>

“All the work by the party’s media must reflect the party’s will, safeguard the party’s authority, and safeguard the party’s unity,” Xi Jinping, leader of the CCP, said in a 2016 tour of state papers. “They must love the party, protect the party, and closely align themselves with the party leadership in thought, politics and action.”²⁵⁴

The newspapers themselves echo this sentiment. “State media should play due role in properly guiding public opinion” reads one headline from China Daily.²⁵⁵ China’s media is regularly ranked near the bottom of lists for press freedoms, and it is no exaggeration to describe these papers as figurative mouthpieces of the CCP.

The surveillance, prisons, control over media, and repression of minorities is not emergent behavior, it is by deliberate design of the CCP’s rulers. Chinese government policy is very much a top down process. This is wonderful for exercising control and concentrating power in the hands of a few (the few, in this case being President Xi Jinping).

A LESS UN-EXCELLENT WAY

Of course, nothing about China or its people forces its society to be organized this way. It’s certainly possibly for reform and other models of government to exist. For that we need look no further than the ongoing civil code reforms.

Recently China’s legislature passed a draft civil code bill that would broadly reform and update its hodgepodge of rules. The code includes provisions for how to deliberate disputes between citizens, from how debt is handled by spouses in divorce to how apartment tenets share responsibility for communal waste.²⁵⁶ One of the most remarkable things about these reforms, however, are that they aren’t solely one of many top down directives. Instead

²⁵⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/19/xi-jinping-tours-chinas-top-state-media-outlets-to-boost-loyalty>

²⁵⁵ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2016-02/22/content_23580181.htm

²⁵⁶ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/beware-of-falling-tofu-china-takes-on-high-altitude-littering-11592317379>

these codes were drafted with extensive input from communities across China, including a forum for online feedback and discussion.

And it clearly worked. The civil code went through intense public debate, and the code that resulted as well as the process by which it was developed are widely popular. A process which looks far closer to democracy than China is normally known for. Why can't more decisions be made this way?

For the most part, however, laws and policies in China are not designed with open community feedback. Instead Xi Jinping sets the agenda and direction, the central CCP members translate that into policy goals and directives, and local administrators and bureaucrats work to meet those standards.

Obviously the central government needs to keep a pulse on the national mood and keep its citizens satisfied. This is done most notably perhaps regarding corruption. Liu Bei recounts several high profile celebrities who were prosecuted for corruption - fame is no shield. "[The government] knows if they are seen as corrupt, they lose the people's trust". For this reason, if a common individual provides evidence of corruption, even if it's of a senior official, it will be seriously investigated.

In most areas however, the government supports society not by creating an environment for each individual to chart their own path allowing open discussion for society to work through its own problems, but rather by surveying everything their citizens do and curating what information they have available.

This system of surveillance, censorship, filtering out of content, and blacklisting of news sources is so sophisticated that it employs an estimated 50,000 individuals to maintain the so called Great Firewall.²⁵⁷

257 <https://www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/great-firewall-of-china>

PROTECTING SOCIETY FROM THE PEOPLE

That Firewall isn't to protect against computer malware like typical firewalls. Rather, it aims to filter public comments and restrict its citizens' access to information in order to prevent the spread of 'extreme' ideas and promote social stability. This Firewall is designed to protect society against the virus of radical individuals. This has probably most concretely been manifested in Xinjiang.

Many places in China have an abundance of surveillance cameras. In Xinjiang, this is complimented by large concentrations of police officers, most of whom come from provinces outside of Xinjiang itself. In Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, security checkpoints, each with over two dozen officers, dot the streets every 500 meters (1640 feet). One of these officers described how the citizens have grown to fear the police and their authoritarian practices. "The police can question and investigate anyone walking on the street at any time. An Uyghur I know was stopped 34 times one day."²⁵⁸

That same officer explains how police can demand to see your cell phones to look for incriminating information "like critical remarks about the government". These searches are made easier by the fact that police regularly force Uighurs to install state spyware on their cellphones, turning it into another node in their surveillance network. The police conduct searches on any suspicious individuals. Naturally, they mainly stop the Uighurs, Han Chinese pass through the checkpoints without incident.

All this surveillance and police scrutiny results in a lot of arrests. Xinjiang accounts for 1.5% of China's population, but over 20% of its arrests.²⁵⁹

In 2016, human rights watchers noticed a surge in Uighurs being held in prisons which the CCP insisted did not exist.

²⁵⁸ <https://bitterwinter.org/the-police-region-of-xinjiang-checkpoints-camps-and-fear/>

²⁵⁹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/xinjiang-province-china-police-state-surveillance-2018-7>

In the prisons, Uighurs (and they are nearly all Uighur) have been imprisoned for a wide range of seemingly innocuous offenses, most for simply expressing their beliefs, or failing to toe the Party line. Reports from the Economist²⁶⁰ and the Wall Street Journal²⁶¹ detail people locked up who prayed in public, men who grew breads or women who wore veils, some who were “suspected of wanting to travel abroad”, an undertaker who washed bodies in the Islamic tradition, family members (of detainees) asking where their relatives were, and individuals who failed to recite the national anthem in Mandarin.

For a long time, the CCP flatly denied that the camps existed.²⁶² Given that over a million Uighurs had been detained and escapees were sharing their stories with increasing frequency, that lie became untenable. When the CCP admitted that such camps did exist, they downplayed the number of detainees and suggested that their purpose was to deradicalize terrorists.

To be fair, there have been some terrorist attacks in the region by Uighurs, including the 2014 Kunming attack at a train station that left 31 civilians and the four knife wielding perpetrators dead²⁶³. China’s response however has not been to address the problem with measures commensurate to the threat, but rather has been to show “absolutely no mercy”²⁶⁴ by putting over 10 million Uighurs under constant surveillance and locking up over 1 million in gulags (or as many as 3 million by one estimate²⁶⁵).

There is, at some level, a problem of terrorism in China. And the CCP’s claims that radicals from further west in Asia from Afghanistan or Syria may infiltrate China through the Xinjiang region may have merit. But preemptively locking up over a million

260 <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2018/05/31/china-has-turned-xinjiang-into-a-police-state-like-no-other>

261 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-repression-of-the-uighurs-1534114124>

262 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-china-denies-accusations-of-creating-internment-camps-for-uyghurs/>

263 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Kunming_attack

264 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>

265 <https://www.saveuighur.org/camps/>

of your own citizens simply because you think there's a small chance that they *might* become radicalized isn't fair governance. It's using the narrative of *Security!* either out of fear or as an excuse to expand your own power and control.

So after enough holes were poked in the 'deradicalization' story, the CCP again changed tune, and now also claims that the internment camps double as vocational and training centers.²⁶⁶ Apparently the inmates are actually students who are attending classes willingly.

All of this was wrapped in the justification of Complete Order. Unite the people in obedience to the state, and they'll prosper under our rule, goes the promise. The explicit goal of these camps, as a leaked internal report put it, was to "thoroughly eradicate erroneous thinking" in their own citizens. The CCP, of course, is the one defining "erroneous".

Mr. Kaisaier Abudukeremu, the president of the Xinjiang Medical Center and himself an ethnic Uighur, explained at a UN summit in 2018 that the centers' purpose was to promote social unity. "Without the unity of all ethnic groups, there is no social stability in Xinjiang, and without stability it's impossible to do anything," he said. "In recent years there is prosperity and stability in Xinjiang. Economic development is proceeding at a fast pace, and there is progress in all areas of social life. People's contentment with life is improving."²⁶⁷

So the purpose of locking up millions of Uighurs for infractions as minor as growing a beard is all to promote "social stability". Yep, society is pretty stable if no one's allowed to act differently, think differently, or believe differently from how the government wants them to. And society is *very* stable when you lock up anything and anyone you deem to disrupt that stability. It's a fragile sort of stability though. Like a Sandpile that the authorities insist

266 <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/china-muslim-training-centers-slowly-disappear-61623692>

267 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-china-denies-accusations-of-creating-internment-camps-for-uyghurs/>

will never crumble, it just keeps growing and growing forever. Except it won't grow forever, Sandpiles always collapse eventually.

All the obfuscation by the CCP came to a head in early 2020 when one Party member leaked internal documents related to the Uighur prisons. The reports included an internal memo that serves as a 'How To' manual for running the prisons, and in the wake of these details a slew of articles were published condemning the now very much confirmed prison camps.

The memo issued by the regional Xinjiang government²⁶⁸ doesn't refer to the inmates as prisoners, but rather as students. However it's hard to see how anyone who reads the report would voluntarily enroll in these 'job training schools'.

Readers are instructed to "strictly manage and control student activities to prevent escapes during class, eating periods, toilet breaks, bath time, medical treatment, family visits, etc. Strictly manage students requesting time off, if they really need to leave the training center due to illness or other special circumstances, they must have someone specially accompany, monitor and control them". Why do you need to prevent the escape of people supposedly there willingly?

The prisoners aren't just detained, their entire life is controlled by the CCP. In a section marked "Ideological Education", details are given for how prisoners should be controlled. "The students should have a fixed bed position, fixed queue position, fixed classroom seat, and fixed station during skills work, and it is strictly forbidden for this to be changed." There is also criteria given for releasing prisoners, which include the condition that prisoners must serve a minimum of one year internment.

The report ends by stressing security and 'strict secrecy'. "It is necessary to strengthen the staff's awareness of staying secret, serious political discipline and secrecy discipline. It is strictly forbidden to bring video and video equipment".

268 <https://ia803109.us.archive.org/15/items/China-Uighur-Leak-2019/China-Cables-Telegram-English.pdf>

Another leaked document detailed the court proceedings of one Uighur sent to the prisons. It sheds light on exactly what the CCP sees as dangerous behavior that requires correction.

One man, according to this leaked court summary signed by the Deputy Party Secretary of the Xinjiang Region²⁶⁹, was sentenced to prison for ten years. His crime? “He incited extremist religious thoughts in his colleagues [...] such as: Do not say dirty words, do not watch porn or you will become a kafir (non-believer) ...”

He was discussing the concepts of Halal (how Islam determines what is legal) and Haram (how Islam determines what is illegal) with his colleagues, something which in the West would probably have been a routine conversation of little note, and unquestioningly in the realm of freedom of religion. The most egregious thing the convicted man said (from the CCP’s perspective) was probably “All people who do not pray are Han Chinese kafir”, but even that is fairly benign. The court file made absolutely no accusations that the man harmed anyone, nor is it implied that he called for violence; he just talked with some colleagues about the tenets of Islam.

For this he was sentenced to ten years. In China, apparently, asking your colleagues not to curse or watch pornography makes you guilty of “the crime of inciting ethnic hatred and ethnic discrimination”.

This is not an outlier incident. Although no comprehensive statistics on the reasons for incarceration in these camps is public, numerous examples of citizens being detained for expressing their religion have emerged. Many of them were forced to choose from a list of crimes to be accused of.²⁷⁰

Some individuals have been released or escaped from the prisons, and have spoken out about their treatment. One woman,

269 <https://ia803109.us.archive.org/15/items/China-Uighur-Leak-2019/China-Cables-Court-Case-Enligsh.pdf>

270 <https://www.dw.com/en/china-convicts-uighurs-in-sham-trials-at-xinjiang-camps/a-53699982>

Sayragul Sauytbay, described how in the five months she was forced to teach other inmates Chinese, she witnessed “an elderly woman who had her skin flayed off and fingernails pulled out”. Another woman she saw was gang raped by guards to force a ‘confession’. Sayragul also relates how those with preexisting conditions had their medication withheld and medical treatment was routinely denied for those who grew ill.²⁷¹

Needless to say, these leaked documents have only further stoked international anger and suspicion of the CCP’s treatment of its citizens. China’s government denies any affront to human rights, and continues to insist that the camps are both necessary to reduce the threat of terrorism and beneficial to the Uighurs for the job training they provide.

There are two interesting points about how the CCP defends its actions. Firstly, in an exercise of framing, the CCP tries to limit the definition of human rights to economic prosperity.

While justifying the Uighur camps, the a spokesperson for the Chinese embassy in London recently wrote “Xinjiang is purely China’s internal affair. Human rights in the region continue to develop and progress. From 2014 to 2019, GDP in Xinjiang grew at an average annual rate of 7.2%. The incidence of poverty has fallen to 1.2%.”²⁷² Impressive, certainly. But that wealth isn’t much use to many if they aren’t free to spend it how they please. What good is money if it can’t buy the things you want?

The second defense is that the reports are rooted in a small number of unverified first hand accounts. True, although the only reason they remain unverified is that the CCP is hostile to foreign journalists, and has yet to allow independent investigators or foreign media into one of the camps to assess there conditions.

That simple act of transparency could easily settle many of these concerns in China’s favor. Opening up a little could quickly quell

271 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7599941/Whistleblower-escaped-Chinese-education-camp-reveals-horrors.html>

272 <https://www.economist.com/letters/2020/10/24/letters-to-the-editor>

their critics, if the camps truly are what the CCP says they are. However they have not provided that level of transparency, and they likely will not.

In the West, this is easily seen as further evidence of their culpability. We expect transparency from our leaders, and have learned to perceive any sign of a cover up as a smoking gun. The CCP isn't a Western nation however, and their different culture can in part explain their response. In China, there is no 'fourth estate' of independent investigative journalism, nearly all major publications are owned by the state. When speaking about the camps, Liu Bei admitted that he didn't know much, saying "this type of thing would not be on Chinese news".

So the CCP's lack of transparency in itself is not a smoking gun. It's just business as usual.

It's also worth re-emphasizing that, while the details may be obscured, the nature of what the CCP is doing – blocking political activism, massive surveillance, and 'reeducation' of 'extremists' (as vaguely defined as those terms may be) – aren't secrets. The majority of Chinese citizens are at least generally aware of these things, particularly the first two. They are aware, and for the most part not greatly disturbed. To many, giving up a few freedoms seems a reasonable price for their economic prosperity and peace.

To be clear, the CCP continues to deny the testimonies of the Uighurs I've shared above. They insist that no one has been mistreated, and portray the camps as a state funded benefit to provide impoverished members of an ethnic minority with free training and economic opportunity.

And to be honest, all I know to dispute that telling is the testimonials I've read in articles and newspapers over the past three years. I've never been to China or seen any of this reported abuse firsthand, I only relate it to you here because I've read about it in multiple widely read publications that I trust. Knowledge by expert testimony, that is; it's a weird thing sometimes.

So maybe, hopefully, this is a case of a few bad stories within a mass social program that could perhaps have been implemented a bit better. I won't pretend to have all the answers in these pages. What I will do is offer a question.

AT WHAT COST

Let's suppose for a moment that every one of those stories, from the rapes and the religious sacrilege to the oppressive surveillance and discrimination, is true. Let's think about how it could be possible for as many as 3 million people to be locked away in re-education camps and tortured for years with so little details emerging to the wider public.

In that situation, I would raise that a lack of transparency and a culture of bowing to the state would make such acts far easier to carry out. Many in China are willing to trade a few privileges, like a free press and open debate, that they see as non-essential, in order that they may enjoy prosperity and peace in a sometimes tumultuous world. They judge that trade off, personal freedoms for personal prosperity, to be worthwhile. Fair enough, it's an understandable sentiment. Here however is the question I would like to offer up.

Is that personal prosperity and peace still worthwhile when the price is no longer merely your own liberties, but that of others?²⁷³

THE LAND OF RUS'

The Chinese Communist Party is far from the only government that cultivates social class divisions to cement political power. Sadly, there is no shortage of case studies in the world, but we'll dwell on just one more in this chapter, Russia.

The region of Russia, like China and any other place on Earth, has a long and nuanced history, however in the last two decades

²⁷³ Maybe you can think of another complex social ill that afflicts groups unevenly to which this rhetorical question could be applied. I could list dozens, you probably far more. The same standard applies to any such situation.

its politics have been dominated by a singular individual, Vladimir Putin. Since the turn of the 21st century he has continuously held the highest office in Russia, which at various times was the presidency or the prime ministry. The top job changed because he drove through constitutional changes as he hopped between jobs, most recently just this year.

Along the way Putin has consolidated power, bringing most media under the control of himself or his allies, banning many political opponents (and stands accused of ordering the assassinations of some), as well as driving economic changes that have seen those close to him come to own much of Russia's wealth.

Those shifts did not happen in a vacuum. The World, a public radio station, put together an excellent timeline²⁷⁴ summarizing several national crises, such as the Kursk submarine disaster in 2000, the Dubrovka theater hostage situation in 2002, and the Beslan school siege in 2004. Over a hundred died in each disaster. Each sparked outrage at the government's mishandling of the events, and each preceded a wave of the central government gathering more power (in the name of security, naturally).

In the backdrop of these political changes, and in the years leading up to it, there was a huge economic shift underway in Russia as it transitioned away from socialism.

Bill Browder, author of *Red Notice*, invested extensively in Russia during its economic liberalization in the early 1990's, and from his experience running one of the most successful emerging market funds in history he experienced firsthand the workings of the Russian state and its bureaucracy, including its widespread corruption.

Through his involvement in Russia, he and his associates uncovered massive tax fraud conducted by Russia's own police, in which they raided his corporation's offices, seized control of his businesses, and claimed that the \$230 million in taxes Browder's companies had paid the Russian government were a mistake, and

274 <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-08-09/20-years-putin-power-timeline>

lobbied to get it reimbursed to themselves. The Russian police filed that claim and got it approved the next day, walking away with \$230 million of their own citizens' tax dollars.

When accused of the theft, they responded by arresting Sergei Magnitsky, the main lawyer who put together the evidence while working for Bill Browder. Though never convicted or even brought to court, Sergei was thrown in prison for several months, where he was tortured and beaten to death.

From this drawn out tragedy and other instances Browder and his team identified how Russian civil servants use their positions to steal public funds. Browder summarizes that the “entire functioning of Russia is a criminal state”.

In other words, Russia has descended farther than most down the path towards the mirage of Complete Order. When Putin came to power, he offered people an implicit deal: stay out of politics, let me and my gang run the show, and you'll get quiet prosperity. The people have found that a nation run by thugs results in more theft and instability, not less.²⁷⁵ The Mirage is cracking.

I had the opportunity in June of 2020 to ask Bill a few questions as part of a (virtual) presentation he gave. Regarding any paths he sees to Russia reforming, he was dour. “Either Putin gets kicked out, which I don't think will happen, or Putin stays where he is and continues to steal [from the Russian people] for a very long time”.

As terrible as that is for the more than 144 million individuals in Russia, it's also a problem for Russia's neighbors and others in countries farther abroad. As Browder continues, “the more Putin steals from the Russian people, the more antagonistic he has to get to the West to distract from that. So it's not just their problem, it's our problem.”

That sentiment is echoed by defectors of Putin's inner circle. As Sergui Tretyakov, a former colonel in the SVR (Russian Foreign

²⁷⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZB3YoAvEro>

Intelligence) stated, “I want to warn Americans. As a people, you are very naïve about Russia and its intentions. You believe because the Soviet Union no longer exists, Russia now is your friend. It isn’t”.

That’s not to say that the country of Russia is predestined to be locked in conflict with other countries, far from it. Many inside Russia want to see change, however that does not come easily. Putin’s People, by Catherine Belton, sheds a well researched light on the inner workings of the Kremlin through scores of interviews with high ranking officials and retired insiders. It opens with the above quote from Tretyakov.

The book also recounts a leaked recording from 2007 between Sergei Pugachev, a former Kremlin insider and Russian banker, and Valentin Yumashev, former president Boris Yeltsin’s son-in-law and chief of staff. They are recorded discussing the political climate of Russia and Putin’s regime.

“[Putin] would have gone gladly after four years, I think,” Pugachev is recorded saying. “But then all these controversies happened. With the West now, there is such a serious standoff that it’s almost the Cuban missile crisis. And now he’s gone even deeper ... He understands that if it goes further, he will never get out.”²⁷⁶

They bemoan the fragility of the system Putin has built, saying “it’s a pyramid. All you have to do is knock it once and it will all collapse ... [Putin] understands this all this, but he can’t change it.”

What Pugachev and Valentin name a pyramid ready to collapse, this book refers to as a Sandpile. Like many dangerously large Sandpiles in the world, this one hasn’t collapsed yet. That conversation happened 13 years ago, and since then Russian society has only grown more unstable and corrupt.

276 Putin’s People, by Catherine Belton; eBook page 23

Sandpiles can persist for quite some time. That means that there is often the time to make fixes and reduce the risk of collapse. It also means that the existential threat is often ignored, a problem left for another day (funny how ‘another day’ never seems to arrive).

Unfortunately, the latter of those cases appears to be what has happened in Russia. Despite over a decade of Putin running the show since that conversation, Russia still lacks a clear path to transitioning to a future without Putin.

Meanwhile, Russia remains a rather unequal society. One common way of measuring inequality is by income with the Gini coefficient; with 0 being completely equal (everyone earns the same amount) and 1 being completely unequal (one person earns everything).²⁷⁷ Although incomes over the past two decades have risen, Russia’s Gini coefficient is the same in 2018 as in 2000, fluctuating between 0.37 and 0.41.²⁷⁸ So although incomes have risen over the past twenty years, economic stratification continues to be a point of tension in society.

Russia’s economy has also stagnated in its structure. The country is still almost completely dependent on oil, gas, and a few raw resources such as timber and mining activity. According to the World Bank, in 2019 oil and gas accounted for 65% of Russia’s exports. This has been true for decades, and means a major source of fragility in its economy is Russia’s dependence on energy prices. So again, although the economy has enjoyed growth over the decades, it remains vulnerable to shocks.

Socially, political suppression has continued to grow. Dissidents and political opponents continue to be locked up. One recent sign of dissatisfaction came in the summer of 2019. Putin’s government invalidated the candidacies of many independents run-

²⁷⁷ For comparison, as of 2020 the United States is at 0.45, China 0.465, South Africa 0.625, Ukraine 0.255, and Germany is at 0.27. Again higher is more unequal. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gini-coefficient-by-country>

²⁷⁸ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?end=2018&locations=RU&start=2000>

ning for city level Duma positions in Moscow, claiming that many of the signatures they canvased to become eligible were invalid. Tens of thousands protested in the streets, and security forces carried out widespread arrests, taking into custody 1,373 individuals on July 27th alone.²⁷⁹

So although Russia has enjoyed respectable growth so far this century, it has not used that growth to diversify its economy to add resiliency to its gains, and its people have not benefited as broadly as they could have. While a small number of political insiders have grown fat on the system by fleecing their citizens, many have expressed growing frustration and anger, with those expressions increasingly repressed.

Whatever else Putin is, he certainly is no fool. He knows that the economy has systemic weaknesses, he knows the government is hopelessly corrupt, and he knows that his people are dissatisfied. But he's also limited by his role, as Yumashev and Pugachev discussed in the above conversation, "he understands all of this, but he can't change it".

As Ms. Belton aptly writes in her book, Putin has been holding on to power for so long that he has built around himself and his allies tremendous wealth. At the same time, they've made a lot of enemies in the acquisition of that wealth and power. If they ever let go, they'd certainly face retribution from others looking to get even, or just from whoever is newly in charge and wants to ensure they don't come back.²⁸⁰

The infighting and instability that would result from that would also be harmful to the country. So the rulers try to extend their reign. This doesn't fix the root problem: that Russia lacks a clean way to transfer power or enact far reaching reforms. So the extension of Putin's dictatorship does not bring calm, it only delays the storm. And so the Sandpile grows.

²⁷⁹ <https://ovdinfo.org/news/2019/07/27/spisok-zaderzhannyh-na-akcii-protiv-nedopruska-kandidatov-na-vybory-27-iyulya-2019>

²⁸⁰ Putin's People, by Catherine Belton; eBook pg 460-461

There's a regularly touted rule of thumb in Silicon Valley, almost an adage. Before you pitch to investors, before you even start your company, be able to answer one simple question. What's your exit strategy? Are you going to be able to sell the business, pass it on to someone else, or will it be forced to close down when you are too tired, old, or broke to continue? If you don't have an exit strategy, then your startup will only last as long as you.

Putin doesn't have an exit strategy. He's built up power and influence, eliminated his rivals, and ruined, imprisoned, or killed anyone who opposes him. Now there's no way for him to let go of the reigns of power without the beast he's helped create turning on him. If a founder leaves a startup without an exit strategy, it collapses. What happens when a country loses its leader of the past twenty years without an exit strategy?

The Mirage of Complete Order is shattered.

Chapter 10: The Absence of a Global Vision

This chapter marks a transition of this book. All of the preceding chapters looked at specific aspects of life, society, and history, and strove to demonstrate to you what I believe **is** in the world. As I've said before, none of this book is journalism, it is a set of ideas being propounded. I've written what I believe to be the most widely impactful trends and events that effect everyone's lives, and worked to substantiate my opinions with citations and sources, however this is still only my own view of what is. Yours will differ, as I believe it should.

This chapter aims to take a step back from the specific trends of the preceding chapters, and use a broad stroke to survey how these trends are bubbling up on the world stage and effecting all of our lives. The later chapters will transition into my thoughts on how we as individuals can respond to these global shifts in each of our own lives and together as a society.

If I were to summarize this chapter in a single sentence, it would be this. **At this time, no single group has both a coherent vision for what the world as a whole should look like, and at the same time has the means and resolve to implement that vision; and so we as individuals must provide that vision and means and resolve.**

Plenty of people and groups have ideas about how a small part of the world should look, and many have varying means and resolve for cultivating such. On the global scale, however, leadership is lacking. And so we fracture.

OLD HEGEMONY

The United States used to provide that global vision, means, and resolve. In the wake of WWII, it built a global society, and supported the creation of numerous international bodies to support it including the United Nations, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and many more.

The United States provided ample amounts of dollar loans, cementing the dollar as the single global reserve currency which has facilitated international trade and commerce. The United States provides the world's largest navy, keeping the international oceans and seas largely free of pirates and conflict, which allows for the free passage of ships carrying luxury goods and vital food supplies.

Beyond that economic stability and political buy-in, America also provided a cultural frame with which to implement it. The economic, military, and political organization was the means, and it was committed with sufficient resolve, but the actual vision was one of individual liberty. It was the dream that all individuals were autonomous citizens who should have equal opportunities to enrich themselves through their own work and achievement, that all individuals should have the liberty to express their beliefs through whatever life they wished to live, so long as it did not harm others.

This vision espoused the “dignity and worth of the human person” to be “protected by the rule of law”²⁸¹ and called for everyone “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours”.²⁸² Those quotes are pulled from the UN Charter, of which 193 nations are party to, and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the UN in 1948 without a single vote against it. This is the vision of the world post WWII. And to support that vision, we were to organize ourselves through consensus building, acknowledging individual differences and working towards compromise.

The United States did none of this alone. Many many other nations, nonprofits, corporations, and individuals played crucial roles in designing and supporting these institutions. However none of it would have been possible without a vision of free commerce and democratic leadership that the US provided, the economic wealth and military resources that the US provided to support that vision, or the political resolve of the US to commit those resources to that vision.

281 <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

282 <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/>

Over the last few decades, that vision has faded. The resolve has weakened. And in recent years the United States has pulled back on its previous military and economic commitments.

Perhaps that is not entirely a solemn note. After all, in the name of maintaining world order America propped up its share of dictators. Perhaps this restructuring of the world is just a re-evaluation of the instability that was festering all along.

Let's be honest though, even while the main power in the UN has withdrawn, it is not as if the entire responsibility for the international order rested with them. Plenty of other countries have dithered or reigned on their international commitments just as much as the US.

Regardless, this has created a global power vacuum. No single organization is powerful enough to fill it entirely, but various bodies have stepped into regional pieces of it to imprint their own visions.

FRACTURED WORLD

Russia has become more assertive in Eastern Europe, central Asia, and the Middle East. China has expanded its influence throughout Asia and Africa, most notably through the Belt and Road Initiative. Iran has carved out influence throughout the Middle East, including in Syria and Iraq. The European Union is increasingly trying to chart its own path. Canada is working to shore up the old international institutions and their ideals of open discourse and free commerce. Most of those countries have competing claims on the melting Arctic regions (receding ice sheets make new shipping routes and oil deposits more accessible).

There are other nations and groups. Each of them are increasingly able to exert power within their geographic spheres of influence as America withdraws. They are crafting policies based on their differing ideals and shaping the societies in which billions of people live. And since this world is not a collection of islands but

rather one shared globe, those policies have ripple effects that touch every person on Earth.

Regardless of whether you agree with one of these bloc's policies or another, chances are that there are at least some whose policies you strongly disagree with, and my larger point is that we are loosening the single global system that used to serve as a forum for negotiating our way through those disagreements.

As the world fragments into regional blocs, there will be increased conflict between the diverging systems. Some outright shooting wars, but a lot of damage can be done without bombs or troops. Many of the old international institutions, from the UN to bilateral trade agreements, were designed to provide forums for working out those disputes. Those forums are becoming fewer and weaker. Without them, the remaining options are direct diplomacy, which is more volatile in larger groups, and military might, which we can all hopefully agree would come at tremendous cost.

Other groups could provide alternative visions for the world. China appears to have a vision, and certainly has the means to champion it, however the world is wary of their leadership. Furthermore it's unclear if China is aiming for a new world order, or just a regional hegemony in East Asia.

India has the populous and resources to be a global player. However their leaders, like so many other countries, are not articulating what that global vision might be. India is also beset by internal politicking (such as with Kashmir) and its political leaders are actively stirring up ethnic tensions between the Hindu and Muslim groups. Heavy bureaucracy on top of that which weighs down economic growth, and other forces, are likely to keep India more inward looking than it could be.

Canada, as mentioned, is working to become a standard bearer for the old democratic order. They've strongly supported international institutions, spoken out repeatedly over human rights, and championed various trade deals. However they are too small to support a global system alone.

The European Union is much larger, in terms of population, wealth, and resources. Like India, it has the means. It also has a strong interest in the old liberal systems. However it remains politically fractured, and lacks a coherent vision for itself, with its various members sometimes contradicting each other over foreign policy. President Macron of France is articulating a very clear vision for what Europe and its role as a world leader could look like, however he has thus far failed to build broad support for that vision. Europe lacks a shared resolve around which vision to unite its tremendous resources around.

Japan remains one of the largest economies in the world. However with an intentionally small military and the huge domestic challenge of a rapidly aging population, it remains mostly focused on internal affairs. Beyond that, while it does worry about growing Chinese influence in the region, it has not vocalized a new global vision.

Some groups of countries could band together to influence their regions, such as OPEC or the African Union. There are also many other nations which lack the means to independently pull strong global clout but still certainly have the ability (if not the resolve or vision) to influence their own geographic region. These include Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, Australia in Oceania, Brazil in South America, Mexico in Central America, Nigeria in West Africa, and more.

So that leaves us with no shortage of dictators and demagogues content to run their own country-sized fiefdoms, and a handful of democracies either living on the dwindling bounty of past work or uncertain of how to press forward.

I've glossed over an important point, however. It is not that America and other countries, as anthropomorphize entities, simply gave a shrug and walked away from the international stage. That drifting is the result of millions of individual decisions and decades of building resentment. Resentment that is justified because the international order failed to deliver on its key promises for many individuals.

PROPOSING NEW VISIONS

I still believe in that vision. The vision of universal rights, equality of opportunity, the freedom of everyone to speak their mind in an open forum for us to resolve our disputes, personal responsibility, and the liberty to express yourself and live your life however you want, so long as you harm no one.²⁸³

However that vision's promise over the past half century was not fully realized for too many people.

If we want to be serious about supporting that vision of equality of opportunity we need to strengthen bottom up citizen activity and involvement. The good news is that this has never died off.

From food banks to church groups to neighborhood associations to farming co-ops, there are no shortage of local groups whose heart and soul are community volunteers. These are the systems we have for building society alongside our neighbor. Society is not something primarily forged in a distant congress, it's mostly built on your own streets.

That same vision, of universal rights, opportunity, and personal freedom and responsibility²⁸⁴, is also a framing, a narrative. It is a framing for life, and a narrative for what the role of an individual is. Where do my responsibilities start and society begin?²⁸⁵

283 Admittedly, the 'harm no one' imperative can easily become quite broad.

284 There are some tricky caveats to this ideal. In America we have ingrained the idea of the Jeffersonian farmer: a self sufficient, engaged and productive citizen; a pull yourself up by the bootstraps person. Many don't reach that ideal. Some for lack of knowledge or skill or opportunity, which can somewhat be addressed with education and social intervention. Some because of physical or mental disabilities. The role of society necessarily is expanded when not everyone can care for themselves and advocate for their own beliefs effectively. It's a perennially tricky problem. Fortunately none of us have to solve it alone.

285 This is, fundamentally, one of the two core roles of government. To mediate the conflict between your freedom to host loud parties and my freedom to sleep in peace and quiet. My freedom to spray pesticides on my crops and your freedom to grow organic crops in the neighboring field. The other fundamental role being security, such that both of us can do those things without worry of foreign invasion.

Where does society stop and my liberties begin? Where do the two overlap, either in support of each other or in opposition?

Just like all the other narratives in this book, this one also seeks to shape how you think and direct your behavior. As I've repeatedly stressed, narratives are not inherently good or bad, but rather tools. Ways of framing the world, spinning an issue; organizational tools for thoughts. They are dangerous when they are used on you without you realizing them. If you recognize them for what they are though, it becomes your choice whether you wish to embrace them or not. You always reserve that choice.

So where does all this go? We will flush that out in the last chapter of this book. In brief however, I envision a future where billions of individuals strive to live life to the fullest, living each moment with grace and thanksgiving, while seeking where they can solve problems and deliver valuable work for others. A world full of people enjoying life and making it enjoyable for those around them, driven by open-hearted compassion and a humble curiosity. A world where individuals seek to contribute and collaborate together, and are free to chart their own path where they see fit. In this idyllic world, the abundance born of that enterprising problem solving would be the bounty that supports small communities and billions more.

We're a long way off from that, globally. But we have achieved it in many places in the past. It is wholly possible, however difficult.

NEW SOURCES OF ORDER

Local community based organizations, or CBOs, are started all the time for a variety of reasons. Some aim to connect people with shared experiences or interests, others to address a particular community or social problem. And many have found sustained national or even global success.

To name but a few organizations that are driven by local, self-organizing chapters, there is The Young Nonprofit Professionals Network, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the National Cervi-

cal Cancer Coalition, the National Kidney Foundation, Meetup.com, Toastmasters, the ALS Association, the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, and many many more.

From professional development to networks of patients with the same diseases, from volunteer groups to social outings, community based organizations are as diverse as the needs of people.

And the power of these community groups is well understood. National bodies have reached out to them to assist in COVID-19 contact tracing and education.²⁸⁶ The UN makes a point of engaging them with regards to many of their health or development missions, since “local CBOs are equipped better at communicating appropriately through their existing networks”.²⁸⁷ These grass-roots, decentralized organizations are a very accessible way for most anyone to get involved in their communities with existing networks, training, and support networks. Or you can start your own.

These local groups are a source of order. The kind of resilient order that can protect chaotic liberties without snuffing them out.

So what processes can we employ if we want to move to that, or any other vision of the future of society? In the next chapter we will look at models of social change and what strategies individuals can employ.

286 <https://globalhealthsciences.ucsf.edu/event/funding-opportunity-announcement-town-hall-engaging-cbos-covid-19-response>

287 <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/heart-community-work-community-based-organizations/>

Chapter 11: How Not to End the Descent into Complete Order

Viva La Révolution! Death to the Elites! To Arms Brethren!

Well, that certainly gets the blood boiling. It's exciting and even fun to fantasize about. But as for actually following through? Is revolution actually effective?

Well, that can seem a hard question to answer. Each war or revolution is different, and it can be tough to judge overall effectiveness from just a dozen or so examples off the top of the head, that would just be anecdotal. It would be really nice to have a rigorous, empirical study of the complete set of revolutions that observed their effectiveness.

Fortunately for us, some researchers went ahead and spent an immense amount of time doing just that.

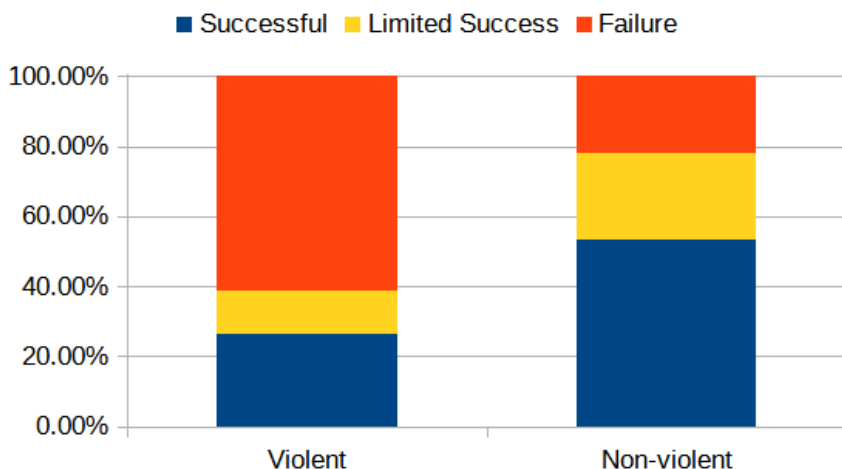
They found that violent revolts are significantly more likely to fail than peaceful protest movements²⁸⁸. Stephan and Chenoweth²⁸⁹ compiled a list of political movements seeking to change a political system between 1900 and 2006. They applied some limiting criteria, such as counting only movements that had over 1,000 participants, and classified them as ending in success, limited success, or failure. In this way they compiled data on 323 political movements and identified them as either violent (218) or non-violent (105).

So, which was more successful? Are violent movements effective at initiating political reforms?

288 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/sex-murder-and-the-meaning-life/201404/violent-versus-nonviolent-revolutions-which-way-wins>

289 <https://www.ericachenoweth.com/research>

Outcomes of Violent v.s. Nonviolent Movements



Data from Chenoweth, et al.²⁹⁰

No. Violent movements are terribly ineffective, only succeeding around 26% of the time, or partially succeeding about 12% of the time. More than 60% of the violent movements observed failed. In their stated goals.

Non-violent protests on the other hand are overall successful. They failed about 22% of the time, were partially successful 24% of the time, and in more than 50% of cases, non-violent movements were successful.

NO GLORY IN VIOLENCE

Violent revolution is often little more than a lurch to Complete Chaos. It is another extreme, and it's not a very effective position to take.

Besides not being very effective, violent revolt is costly. Remember what war does.

²⁹⁰ <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/navco?q=&types=datasets&sort=date-Sort&order=desc&page=1>



That's a photo of the battlefield of Antietam, the bloodiest battle of the American Civil War, where 3,650 died, of the 622,000 who would die in that war.²⁹¹ Below is a picture from WWI.



*“Such, such is Death: no triumph: no defeat:
Only an empty pail, a slate rubbed clean,
A merciful putting away of what has been.*

And this we know: Death is not Life, effete,

²⁹¹ <https://www.nps.gov/anti/learn/historyculture/casualties.htm>

*Life crushed, the broken pail. We who have seen
So marvellous things know well the end not yet.”*
Such, Such is Death, by WWI soldier Charles Sorley.²⁹²

War is costly. It exacts its toll in human lives and misery.



Syria, 2016. (Getty Images) Retrieved from the Independent²⁹³
How long will it take to rebuild?

WWII saw the destruction, in France alone, of 1.2 million buildings, 2,300 railroad bridges, 80% of its locomotives, and half of its railroad cards, as well as thousands of acres of arable land rendered untillable due to land mines, not to mention the hundreds of thousands of dead, wounded, or displaced people.²⁹⁴

War is costly. Even for those who survive with their lives, they are left with the burden of rebuilding from the rubble.

292 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57226/such-such-is-death>

293 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-civil-war-isis-how-it-changed-the-world-refugee-crisis-a6928796.html>

294 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3635778>



Syrian terrorist bombing; Retrieved from Turner.com²⁹⁵
What do you do when even a trip to the store can be deadly?

This isn't a new phenomenon. During the 7 Years' War, all participants suffered strained national finances. For French merchants trying to ship cargo over the Atlantic the increase risk of lost cargo from British raids caused insurance rates on shipping to spike²⁹⁶ from 3% to as much as 60%. That crippled many international shipping routes.

Financially, none suffered more than the war's winner, Britain. Already Britain's finances were strained, and a war fought on another continent was a serious expense. Britain delayed financial catastrophe through deficit spending. They borrowed over £58 million²⁹⁷, doubling the national debt.

While this borrowing binge may have appeared to keep the Empire afloat, in reality it only delayed catastrophe. Just like a Sandpile, delaying an avalanche today often shores up even more trouble for a bigger avalanche tomorrow. As a result of their massive

295 <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnnnext/dam/assets/150522151129-30-syria-timeline-restricted-super-169.jpg>

296 <https://hssh.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/hssh/article/view/40733>

297 https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/f/Land,%20Jeremy_2010_Thesis.pdf

debts, Britain needed money from somewhere, so they taxed their colonies. And of course, that was one of the major contributors to their American colonies declaring independence and breaking away (another war which further hampered Britain's finances).

War is costly. It exacts its toll in economic hardship and the disruption of the lives and livelihoods of millions of people.

Certainly, there have been violent revolts that have been successful at changing societies (case in point, the American Revolution). There are times when violence is a valid option. However these are the exception, not the rule.

Even within protest movements, violence is harmful. It delegitimizes the movement and gives an easy excuse to governments for harsh crackdowns.

Gandhi understood this well, writing often of the difference of democracy (rule by individual citizens, grounded in consensus) and what he called mobocracy (rule by violent masses, grounded in the threat of violence). He urged Indians to exercise military like discipline in their movement to avoid violence.²⁹⁸

Indeed Gandhi, famous for his hunger strikes, on at least four occasions fasted specifically as a rebuke to violence used by protesters²⁹⁹. He saw both honor and necessity in maintaining the discipline of nonviolent civil disobedience (*ahimsa* is the sanskrit word he used to name the principle).

Violence is costly, disruptive, abhorrent, and ineffective. Fortunately, there are ways to effectively enact change, with better results and far less suffering.

While I believe the above outlines the cost of violent war, and the empirical data clearly points to peaceful movements having a higher likelihood of effecting societal change than does violent re-

298 The Penguin Gandhi Reader, edited by Rudrangshu Mukherjee, page 137

299 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fasts_undertaken_by_Mahatma_Gandhi

sistance, even peaceful movements are not always successful. So what are some of the different types of peaceful movements and how might they differ in their chances of success? At its core, the distinguishing mark of a peaceful movement is often its goal.

CHANGE OF LEADER

Many movements have a very narrow goal; often to dispose of an unloved ruler. In our modern world, these movements are quite common. They involve thousands of volunteers gathering to shout slogans of change or showing up in the streets to spread their message. They involve banners and signs, and rousing speeches by leaders lifted up by these movements. All funded to the tune of hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars.

I'm talking, of course, about the type of movements all of us living in democracies are intimately familiar with, where we get to choose who heads our various governmental organizations through elections. Changing leadership on the whims of the people is the very selling point of democracies.

As all of us living in democracies know all too well, elections are often messy, contentious, and loud. You have lots of candidates competing for the commitment of citizens, and lots of interest groups competing for attention in the hopes of controlling the narrative. Then after months or even years of exhaustive campaigning, someone is elected and half the country is elated, the other half distraught, and next week we're back at each others' throats.

If you're living in 2020 reading the above paragraph, you're probably nodding your head with a tired, uncomfortable feeling. If you were living in the early 1990's, you might be puzzled at the seemingly negative light that those words cast upon democracy.

In the early 90's, democracy was running high. Democratic countries had humiliated the last of Europe's great monarchies in WWI, and then proved the horrors of fascism in the middle of the century. Then, after decades of a Cold War, the bastion of

communism collapsed and in 1991 along with the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain. Democracy was ending out the century as a messy and flawed system to be sure, but nonetheless had proved more resilient and capable than all the others we tried.

Reflecting this, in the early 1990's people had a generally favorable view of democracy. However over the past few decades that confidence has been eroded. In 1995 only roughly 23% of Americans were dissatisfied with democracy; by January of 2020 that number had jumped to around 53%.³⁰⁰

That same trend exists even in the former Soviet Union. In 1991, just before the fall of communism, fully 72% of Ukrainians and 75% of Lithuanians approved of "moving to a multiparty democracy". By 2011 those numbers had plunged to 35% and 52% respectively.³⁰¹

At its best, elections are a powerful force for keeping officials accountable and offering citizens recourse to relatively quickly punish corrupt leaders. It also allows them to constantly petition representatives to have their voices heard. Perhaps most importantly the entire system of a democracy, particularly the oft rowdy election process where every citizen has a voice and a vote, allows for a shared national conversation.

That shared conversation is important. Authoritarians like Putin's Russia, Xi's China, and Assad's Syria don't just rule with power and brute force. They also work hard to control information. That's why shutting down the internet has become a popular tool of authoritarians. Rather than suffer your citizens criticizing you, or risk them organizing against you, just pull the plug and cut off everyone's access to news, friends, and family. In 2019, this happened at least 213 times across 33 countries.³⁰²

300 According to the University of Cambridge's Centre for the Future of Democracy, as reported in *The Atlantic* (accessed 2020-05-19): <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/confidence-democracy-lowest-point-record/605686/>

301 Pew Research (accessed 2020-05-19): <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2011/12/05/confidence-in-democracy-and-capitalism-wanes-in-former-soviet-union/>

China's CCP does this perhaps better than any regime in history. Rather than cutting off the internet completely, they've devised a sophisticated infrastructure of filters and content police dubbed the Great Firewall. Chinese citizens simply can't access many foreign news sites. By cutting off its citizens from much of the internet and tirelessly tacking down any offensive or 'wrong' content, the CCP controls the information bubble of their citizens, they control what is acceptable to talk about, and in that way they control perceptions of what is permissible to do in society, and they control perceptions of the way that society should be run (their way, obviously).

In contrast, a shared national dialogue, even if it's full of disagreement, lets us know what everyone else is thinking, and allows us the chance to seek compromise and collaboration. This dialogue is completely necessary for citizen led, bottom up leadership. The alternative is controlled top down dictates from whoever controls the biggest microphone.

In the best of times, democracy allows for open discussion and collaboration. These are not the best of times. We are becoming isolated by media and thought bubbles that silo us into separate conversations from the rest of our fellow citizens. We are egged on by us-vs-them partisanship.

For a deeper look into these trends, Epsilon Theory has done some phenomenal work describing what they term the 'Widening Gyre'³⁰³. As we are pushed to the extremes, the center sinks below the waters. The online blog "Wait But Why" has also put together an excellent explanation on individual thought, the shared national consciousness, and why it is fraying (The Story of Us³⁰⁴).

302 Wall Street Journal (accessed 2020-05-19), Updated Feb. 25, 2020 12:02 pm ET: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/internet-shutdowns-become-a-favorite-tool-of-governments-its-like-we-suddenly-went-blind-11582648765>

303 <https://www.epsilontheory.com/tag/widening-gyre/>

304 <https://waitbutwhy.com/2019/08/story-of-us.html>

In its best state, I believe some form³⁰⁵ of democracy is the best way to organize society. It allows for public discourse, gives everyone a stake in the process, and as messy as it can be is far more equitable and fair than all the other systems of government we've tried.

*“Democracy is always a mess,
but the other side of the coin is
freedom”*

– Professor Stein Rigen³⁰⁶

So with that healthy heaping of praise, why am I putting this section about the merits of democracy in a chapter entitled “How **NOT** to End the Descent into Complete Order”?

Because as powerful of a system as democracy is at balancing the needs of society, it is not the way that we will go about changing society. To be sure, the passage of laws and elections do change society. However that process is not the same as the change. Democracy is the system within which change can take place, but simply having a democracy in itself is not a guarantee that change will take place.

Most importantly, some have the notion that if we can just pass this one law, if we can just vote in our guy and kick out the other team's scumbag of a candidate, then, *finally*, everything will be fixed! That hope is misplaced. You don't change society simply by cycling through which loony is in charge.

What, you think all your problems will be solved by voting in the Other Party, or some 'outsider'? If only it were that easy.

³⁰⁵ Let's just say a democracy is a system where everyone can participate both in the discussion and decision of what society will do. Beyond that the distinctions between parliamentary or presidential, direct or representative are details. Important details, but the ideology of 'Every person gets a vote' is more fundamental.

³⁰⁶ <https://medium.com/lucid-archive/if-you-want-to-co-design-democracy-leave-the-bubble-3a401912bc35>

If our institutions are corrupt, choosing which snake gets to be in charge won't change the nature of the beast.

Democracies are powerful institutions, and a democracy is a prerequisite for most of what this book is arguing for, yet it alone is not sufficient. With the process of a democracy you change the leaders and the laws; however when you lose, as we today have, the shared national conversation, then ordinary citizens have lost touch with the process, and the system begins to drift away, becoming more and more removed from the people it was intended to serve.

An election or two is not enough to change that fact.

CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT

So what about more broad changes, instead of just swapping one corrupt leader out for another, what if we work to change the system itself? Many movements will aim to alter the form of government in place, however even this goal is often ineffective.

To learn that lesson, we need look no farther than Egypt.

I was in middle school when the Arab Spring revolts began. For decades the region had been beset by corrupt leaders, poor economies, and a lack of opportunity mixed with a lack of representation for redressing grievances. In the short term a massive spike in food prices (bread prices in Egypt rose as much as 300% in a matter of months) was the figurative spark on that bonfire. In early 2011, a man in Tunisia set himself in fire in protest, providing a literal one.

What followed were marches in the streets against the government, demanding social change. And those protests soon spread to other countries.

I have vivid memories of sitting on the living room carpet in front of the TV, watching ABC's *Nightly News with Brian Williams*,

and for almost two weeks, the main story each night was of one thing: Egypt.

By late January, Tahrir Square in Cairo had become packed as hundreds of thousands flooded the streets and demanded that Husni Mubarak, the country's president of three decades, step down. Clashes with police were common, but the protests I saw on TV were largely just an enormous mass of peaceful people, self organizing and chanting for democracy.

And it worked! On February 11th, Mubarak stepped down. This was the first time I was really drawn in by and following current global events. I was studying Arabic at the time, and we would constantly talk about the unfolding events in class. As a young teenager, seeing others taking direct action and shaping their country was inspiring. As I watched, in a mere seventeen days, a country was transformed.

Except it wasn't.

On the surface, a corrupt dictator was thrown out, and the military took control, overseeing a council whose job it was to draft a new constitution and setup elections. All that happened.

But then there was significant political instability. The government elected in 2012 turned out to be ineffective and was pushed out. A former general, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, became popular in this aftermath and was elected president in 2014 (With over 96% of the vote, a result that drew skepticism, but was recognized nonetheless). Under Sisi, the government began ruling more harshly, locking up³⁰⁷ or executing³⁰⁸ far more dissidents, barring opponents from office, and funneling money to favored groups.

And what of the people of Egypt who had marched in the streets at such corruption only a few years before? They largely sucked it

307 BBC: "Egypt crackdown widens with arrest of leading rights lawyer" <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36231986>

308 Amnesty International: "Egypt: sentencing to death of more than 500 people is a 'grotesque' ruling" <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/egypt-sentencing-death-more-500-people-grotesque-ruling>

up and turned away. The economy was still struggling, people were afraid, and a strongman promising to fix everything if only he had more power seemed safe. Maybe not ideal, but stable, orderly. And a lot like things were before 2011.

How did it go so wrong?

I actually got some insight into that very question from a surprising source, one of the protesters themselves.

A few years ago, I was taking a bus from NYC to DC. I happened to sit next to a girl with what I recognized as a European standard charger (they have large squat prongs, very distinct from American chargers). Anticipating the potential for an interesting conversation during an otherwise long and cramped trip, I asked her where she was from. I was not disappointed.

Rania (not her real name) was studying in the States under a highly selective full-ride scholarship. She grew up in Alexandria, one of Egypt's largest cities which sits on the Mediterranean coast near the Nile delta. The bus ride from NYC to DC is close to five hours, so we had some time to talk.

During our conversation I learned that, only a few years older than I, she was still in her late teens when the Arab Spring started. Rania said the protests in Egypt started almost as a joke, just a Facebook event that no one took seriously.

But then the most amazing thing happened. Some people actually showed up.

At first the groups were small, mainly making calls to fellow citizens to join them in the streets. There wasn't much organization, and might not have been much momentum, until January 28th. That, Rania recalls, was when protesters, particularly anyone that looked to be in charge, began being shot in the streets by snipers. She says it was painfully obvious what the government was trying to do.

That was the moment, she recalls, when she and her friends said, “This is real, we need to be out on the streets”. They would not be cowed.

As the protests grew, people would come out onto the streets to meet others, then go home and bring back supplies. They setup tents, and began holding meetings.

Those meetings were important. People had come out for a variety of reasons: anger at poor economic conditions, government violence and corruption, the police’s violent response to the original protests. But there was no unifying agenda or set of demands for the nascent protest movement. That’s what those early meetings were about; community members self organizing and talking amongst each other to articulate their needs and desires.

Among their demands were a democratic system of government, and for the current president of 30 years to step down. And it worked!

But then, as Rania describes, the follow through was poorly organized. There was not very much effort around forming political parties or establishing a culture of civic engagement.

In the elections that did take place, a relatively new group, the Muslim Brotherhood, won. However Rania describes how their inexperienced representatives had ideas that were out of touch with the desires of most citizens, and made for fairly incompetent politicians.

In response to this, Rania says that the military seized power from the Muslim Brotherhood in order to “save and protect” people. One of the generals, Sisi, held a mock election where the Muslim Brotherhood, the only real opposition with any organization, was barred from running. Now the military government has begun nationalizing industries and concentrating its power, all in the name of “stability”.

As one example, Rania talked about a public beach in Alexandria. This was a popular spot for people young and old to gather in the cool evenings. Sisi's government nationalized the land, built a private hotel resort on it, and blocked public access to the beach as they pocket the revenue.

The really sad part, she said, was that most people in Egypt seem to be fairly disillusioned, and are resigned to letting the new dictator-in-all-but-name continue pretty much as things were before the protests.

Rania was blunt. With the current unchecked corruption, and the near universally bleak and dispirited national mood, she says she does not see a future for herself or other children in Egypt. She wants to stay in America when she finishes her studies, or maybe move to Europe; somewhere where she will actually be free to build a future for herself.

As depressing as her story was in some ways, I couldn't help but thank her. Both for sharing, and for her bravery in participating in the original protests. I told her how inspiring those were to me; watching the streets fill with people demanding freedom, and actually getting the government to concede. It was the first time I was really aware of and witnessed a mass political movement make nation wide change before my eyes.

I recount this story to highlight two important aspects that are necessary for any movement to enact lasting change. It needs organization, especially in the aftermath and implementation of the movement's successes. And above all it needs to change the culture.

CHANGE OF CULTURE

You can't just change the faces of the people in charge. If the system remains in place then the incentives and lack of transparency or accountability that led to and allowed the corruption will continue to wreak havoc. Yes, it is often needed, but often not sufficient.

It's not even enough to change the system of government. Systemic changes and new institutions without new norms to support them will be hollow, and collapse. Yes, it is often needed, but often not sufficient.

You need to change the culture of the society, AND its institutions, AND its leaders. And it starts with the culture.

Another excellent example of this is India, which achieved independence from Britain, but did not successfully institute the second or third grand goals of Gandhi and other independence activists. Indian self-rule was only the first of a “triple-goal”, the second being the dissolution of the caste system of social discrimination, and the third being “Hindu-Muslim Unity”.

Here's an excerpt from Gandhi writing in the *The Creed Of Non-violence*:

“Every condition must be given its full effect. The mention of Hindu-Muslim unity, non-violence, swadeshi³⁰⁹ and removal of untouchability means that they have not yet become an integral part of our national life. If an individual or a mass have still misgivings about Hindu-Muslim unity, if they have still any doubt about the necessity of non-violence for the attainment of our triple goal, if they have not yet enforced swadeshi in its completeness, if the Hindus among that mass have still the poison of untouchability in them, that mass or that individual are not ready for civil disobedience.”

For thousands of years, Indian society was organized in a caste system. The Brahmins were the top of the social ladder, fulfilling the role of priests. Next were the Kshatriyas, the rulers and warriors. The Vaishyas were the merchants and farmers who

³⁰⁹ Sanskrit for ‘own country’. Before Gandhi, Swadeshi was the Indian independence movement that had built the most momentum.

owned businesses and conducted trade, and then the Shudras where the laborers and servants.³¹⁰

There's a physical analogy to this, with every caste being a part of the same body – the priests sing hymns as the mouth, the rules make decisions as the head, the warriors fight as the hands, the tradesmen carry society and drive it forward as its thighs, and the servants and laborers support the rest as the feet.³¹¹ All of society only works when the whole body functions together, each part fulfilling their assigned role, or *dharma*.

In this analogy is another caste, the Dalit, or Untouchables³¹². They are literally so low on the totem pole that they are not even fit to be part of the body of society in the above analogy. For another caste member to touch or even gaze upon an Untouchable is to become unclean, they were resigned to the filthiest jobs like collecting dung. Far from a small group, over 220 million Indians are considered 'Untouchable'.³¹³

With his talk of the “removal of untouchability” and the “poison of untouchability”, Gandhi was calling for the dissolution of this entire caste system, advocating for the equality of everyone under the law and in society.

On paper, India has achieved this. The written law no longer recognizes caste, and even takes affirmative action steps to guarantee jobs to lower castes. However while on paper everyone is equal, social norms have been slower to change. Most of the top jobs in business and government are still held by members of the histori-

310 In practice there are many sub-castes. Societies are complicated and don't care that they don't fit neatly within the pages of a textbook.

311 The exact details vary throughout history, particularly as there are actually many more castes and sub-castes which have shifted over time.

312 Later these terms would both develop derogative connotations, much like 'nigger' for African Americans. The official designation of this group in Indian law is the Scheduled Caste.

313 <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/6/indias-untouchables-face-violence-discrimination/>

cal priestly, ruler, and merchant castes (who are only 20% of the population), and marrying between castes is still very rare.³¹⁴

And of course it is. Writing down a new set of ideas on paper does not change a culture overnight. That takes the collective action of millions of individuals changing their hearts, minds, and actions.

In Egypt, there was a fantastic and inspiring burst of democratic fervor. But it wasn't organized into actionable plans, it wasn't codified in balanced institutions, and there was not a new breadth of life to ensure those institutions would be respected and upheld.

Changing the leader from the top down is a cosmetic change. That's why, as important as having your voice heard through casting your vote is, it's simplistic to believe that changing the name of the elected officials is the only change that needs to happen. Even changing the laws is often not enough, if those changes lack populous support (think about the failure of Prohibition, a new law was not enough to change the culture).

To change society, we as a populous need to change our ideals and values. That is the necessary foundation for any lasting meaningful change. It doesn't happen by edict, from a strongman forcing through some vision. You can't pass a resolution declaring society to be changed and suddenly find it so. It happens bottom up, from millions of individuals changing their beliefs and behaviors. Society changes when enough of us decide that it has.

“Let me make the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws.”

– Andrew Fletcher³¹⁵

314 <https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/07/23/even-as-india-urbanises-caste-discrimination-remains-rife>

315 https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Andrew_Fletcher

And then that new cultural spirit must be acted upon, by millions of individuals taking sustained action in their own lives. Changing the way we think about the world, the way we shop, the way we consume information and talk about issues. Changing the way we engage with each other and society. Those little undetectable changes slowly amounting to an unstoppable shift.

Yes, electing leaders who will effectively and responsibly carry out the desires of citizens is important. But when it comes to changing how a society operates and what those desires are, you can't start from the top, with officials and institutions. You need to start with the individuals who make up society. Only when all of us decide that society will change will it actually change. The institutions and officials will follow suite.

And that is why it is so important to protect your autonomy of mind. Because as much as you may want society to stay the same or change in a particular way, others want to keep certain status quos or change society as well, and they will work hard to change your mind about what your world should look like.

So be aware of the stories you are told. Be skeptical of the motives of your sources. I don't mean to say that you can't trust anything you are ever told, but I would suggest that vetting information is something most of us could benefit from doing more often.

Ask things like 'What perspective is this being reported from?', 'Why are these facts being presented at this time, and not earlier or later?', 'How does this echo or contradict other things I'm hearing?', 'Are the arguments of this book I'm reading made in my best interests?'

In total however, I see this as a very heartening reality. We as individuals make up society, and we have just as much say as anyone else what that society looks like. Some outspoken groups or individuals may seem to have excessive influence, but only so long as we all choose to give them that attention, and we can always choose to withdraw from them and in so doing shift society, little by little.

Chapter 12: How to Live your Life

What, you're asking me? Stop.

Don't let anyone, not your friends, not your family, not your mentors, certainly not some loon who happened to write a book, tell you how to live your life.

It's your life.

Chapter 13: Thoughts on Individual Development

Alright, so I'm not going to tell you how to live your life. At the same time, I have been promising throughout this book to go more into detail on some processes that I believe can be useful tools for fixing the many problems of our world. This isn't an exhaustive list, however they are the thoughts and stories that I believe succinctly convey ideas you may find useful. As with anything, it is ultimately up to you what you choose to implement.

A bit of foreshadowing before we dive in. What the following two chapters will lay out are a series of processes for personal development and community development, combining into something we will call Generational Development.

The next chapter will share stories related to community development. That's all about leveraging your impact within the context of a tight nit group, however you choose to define that group. To be able to contribute effectively to communities however, we first must have something worth contributing. That's what this chapter will be about, identifying processes that we each can use to continually improve our selves.

There can never be an exhaustive list of either of those topics. Rather, I will share what I've found to be most useful for myself in the hopes that you will find it useful in your life. Before that however, I would ask that you first take two moments for yourself.

Set this book aside, if you would, and think for yourself how you want to live your life. Has anything in the preceding chapters equipped you with knowledge, ideas, or skills that would be useful to you? Have any of the problems or trends mapped out given you pause or pulled at your attention? What might you do about that?

Take an hour for yourself now, before I continue and risk crowding out your original thoughts. Perhaps even take an hour now,

then come back next week and spend another hour, before finally returning to these pages.



All done there? Well then I'll jump right into it, here are my thoughts on life, some suggestions for you to consider, and how I believe they may be helpful to you in dealing with the challenges I've laid out in the previous chapters; perhaps even help you solve some parts of them. Apologies in advance, I will get a bit preachy.

START WITH WHY

The first process I'll share, to borrow a phrase from Simon Sinek, is to start with **Why**. Why are you reading this? Why are you working in your job? Why are you studying in school? Why are you living where you live?

Why are you living at all? Really think on that.

For me, I live to lift others up, attempting to do my small part in creating a more peaceful world that allows others to more fully enjoy and prosper in. I do that in the name of God for His Glory. That is my **why**, my **fire**, and what gives me a purposeful north start to aim towards in this harrowing and confusing journey of life. It is not an 'answer' of *what* to do, it is my *reason for* doing things. As to the other questions, I ask myself how my job and activities, even this book, can meaningfully contribute to that ultimate goal.

TRAINING YOURSELF TO THINK

To help with that, I would propose developing critical thinking skills. That's a broad term; generally I mean building the skills that help you better assess what is happening around you, develop new ideas, and make better judgments. I can't give you critical thinking skills in a book (if that could be done, school would be a

whole lot easier). Rather, I can offer some processes that might help you practice critical thinking.

“It is books that are the key to the wide world; if you can’t do anything else, read all that you can.”

– Jane Hamilton³¹⁶

Read widely and wildly. Books don’t confer critical thinking skills, however they do provide you with the bricks with which to build such skills, and much else besides.

Psychology to understand human nature. History to understand the past and where current events started. Philosophy and Theology to explore logic and grow comfortable with the existential questions we all dread confronting. Even SiFi and Fiction have their place, in helping us imagine new possibilities and inventions.

“No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance.”

- Confucius

“Reading is important, because if you can read, you can learn anything about everything and everything about anything.”

- Tomie dePaola

“If you are going to get anywhere in life you have to read a lot of books.”

- Roald Dahl

Once more, with passion: **Read!**

Next, investigate. Start again with why. Why did that author envision her fantasy world that way? Why did that philosopher

³¹⁶ <https://gladreaders.com/55-famous-quotes-about-the-importance-of-reading/>

present their ideas in that order? Don't just read the text. Criticize the author and their motivations. Question the meaning of the story, and work to gather more information and understand. That's hard, which is why so many people don't look past the first meaning.

As you're thinking through those questions, write down your great ideas! Whatever the format, find what works for you. Writing down your thoughts can help you clarify them, and allows you to come back months later to see how your thoughts have changed.

This also makes it easier to share your thoughts with others. Sharing your ideas, and having to explain them coherently to others, helps improve your own understanding and makes the ideas more valuable. Unlike goods or services, ideas grow in value when more people share them, as opposed to ossifying inside just one mind.

'Critical thinking' is not some skill that can be taught. Rather it is the process of consuming information, digesting and comprehending it, and communicating that comprehension to others. That process is built only with practice.

Exploring new ideas, investigating their motives and contexts, articulating your own thoughts on the matter to others. That's a hard process to follow, certainly a lot more work than just skimming news headlines. I'll leave it up to you to decide its worth.

DEFINE THE LIFE YOU WANT

Next, I would work to define the What and the How that support your Why. Now that you know what your why is (although, let's be honest, the journey to answer that question can easily and justifiably take many years on its own, and may change), think about defining how you can organize your life to support that why. Who are the types of people you can surround yourself with to support that life? What industry or field should you try to enter? Where do you want to live and work? As much as this chapter might be about advice, all I can really do in this part is propose an abun-

dance of questions, and suggest a few processes for how you might go about living with those questions.

Notice I said ‘living with those questions’, as opposed to something like ‘discovering your own answers’. Some of those questions might not have any answers, or at least no fixed answers. You change, and the world you live in changes. Just so, your priorities will change. Life is appealingly spasmodic like that.

Maybe you’re the type of person who will lean towards mapping out a master plan, even if it needs to be updated now and then, or maybe you’ll just aim for a general direction and figure it out. My advice here is merely that you hold your goal/Why/motivation in mind when thinking about how you want to live, and have some sort of plan for actually achieving your dreams. Write it down too, preferably on paper. Your thoughts become more substantive and easier to reflect on once they are translated into written word.

Having defined how you wish to live your life, make sure you don’t do it alone. Gather your friends, your family, your tribe of like minded people, your pack of co-conspirators. Build a community of people who share your Why, and who share your vision for how to live your life. Or join an existing such group.

It might seem like you’re already getting ahead of yourself, setting and striving for a goal that seems far out of reach. To that I would propose effectuation.

Effectuation is a process of prolonged problem solving that emphasizes focusing on your current means – skills, money, connections, knowledge – and work on aspects of a problem that are currently within those means while working to gradually build up your means. That is to say, don’t bite off more than you can chew. Start nibbling, and work up to managing larger bites over time.

Start with building a base of stability from which to work off of. It should not be alien to hear it advised that having cash in reserve,

preferably several months worth of your living expenses, is a great financial position.

Just having a few thousand dollars in cash in your checking account is an amazing balm for despair. You don't need to worry about short term shocks, you know you've got the cushion for it.

Of course, several thousand dollars is for many a big goal in itself. In 2018 the Federal Reserve found that 40% of American's didn't have enough savings to cover an unexpected expense of \$400³¹⁷.

This is a wrench in the whole 'positive self improvement' sentiment. Reality is tough. Acknowledge this barrier. I could trot out the typical lecture about the importance of saving more money and spending less, and sure, that is all well and good and very important and relevant. At the same time, the reality is that many are struggling and don't have much of any fat to trim, so the advice of 'saving more' falls flat.

NO ANSWERS; ONLY PROCESS

I don't have a magic wand to change that. I do have a process. Work hard, solve problems, earn your keep, and donate the surplus to support your friends, family, and wider communities. For some the support system will be much more relevant than the advice about building your own economic stability. For those who are already rich in economic stability, don't neglect the support systems. You may one day need them desperately.

If you need to, lean on those support systems while you must, while working to become independent. Then contribute in turn to the support systems when you can. Pay it forward. I don't think anything new is being said with those words.

Even as you build communities and support systems, do not become subsumed by them. Plan and maintain room for your own individual exploration and expression. Don't let anyone take away

317 Accessed last on 2020-11-05: <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2018-report-economic-well-being-us-households-201905.pdf>

your autonomy of mind. Because if that happens, it's no longer you making the choices. Join and build communities, by all means. Just make sure that you maintain the ability to make judgments independent of whatever groups you choose to participate in.

On the note of individual exploration and expression, get creative with that time. Find new passions. Try painting or poetry or woodcarving, play the drums or ocarina or learn to rap, read philosophy or theology or trilateral trade treaties. Even if you're utterly terrible at it, even if you don't like it and stop after a month, that's fine. But keep exploring and trying weird or unusual things.

Many of those things can involve a mix of hands-on activities and creating something. That type of work is both relaxing and rewarding, as well as bringing a sense of accomplishment. Other things you try might be more intellectual or educational. These are all ways to stretch your mind and body and possibly discover new creative outlets or ways to solve problems. And of course meet different people who are part of those activities.

Maybe you're wondering where you'll get the time for this. Well you can probably start by canceling your Netflix subscription. Globally, in 2017, Netflix users consumed over 140 million hours of content per day³¹⁸. Back then, Netflix had around 110 million subscribers, and since many people share accounts, they estimated in 2016 that they had about 2.5 users per subscriber³¹⁹. So that all works out very roughly to around 280 million people each binge watching 185 hours per year. Sure, some of that is documentaries, but let's be honest, most is pure shut-off-the-brain soma³²⁰ entertainment.

Now add in all the time on YouTube, scrolling through a half dozen newsfeeds, and twiddling your thumbs on a console. Of course not all of that time is wasteful. It can serve many useful

318 <https://media.netflix.com/en/press-releases/2017-on-netflix-a-year-in-bingeing>

319 https://expandedramblings.com/index.php/netflix_statistics-facts/

320 This is not the first time this book has mentioned soma. It is a reference to a drug in the excellent novel *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley.

purposes from relaxation, social interaction, connection, and exposure to other perspectives, however as we talked about in Chapter 6, these services are not actually designed to do those things for you, those are just byproducts. They're designed to keep your eyeballs on a screen so your attention can be auctioned off to the highest bidder, which is probably not your high school calculus teacher trying to refresh your understanding of derivatives and integrals.

TV and cartoons and video games have their benefits. The problems arise with excess, and the systems through which we consume this content are all designed to promote those harmful excesses and profit off of it at our expense.

My point is, while you might be getting some benefits from all those entertainment outlets, you could probably benefit from spending less time with them, and get just as much relaxation and social fulfillment, not to mention more physical and intellectual stimulation, from less monetized pursuits.

On a similar note, I'd propose finding ways to redirect your resources to support yourself and your community, not the politicians and marketers working hard to shape your thoughts. Maybe that's a local elected official, or a youth ministry organizer. Maybe it's a librarian or particularly hardworking school teacher. Whoever it is, seek them out and help.

In that vein, practice spotting the nudges and frames that seek to shape your thoughts. Occasionally, perhaps open a newspaper (or browser tab) with the intention of not passively consuming the news, but rather actively investigating what biases might be present. Where is fear trying to be used to pull the reader down a particular path as opposed to considering other options? A useful exercise might be to write these findings down and see what persists or changes over time.

SAY *anekāntavāda* THREE TIMES FAST

Allow me to share a tactic for breaking down much of the political polarization and public vitriol that has poisoned our shared national and global discussions. I honestly believe this one change in perspective, if undertaken by millions, could solve much of our deadlock. This perspective shift combines a mindset I first learned from the entrepreneurship space of divergent thinking called “Yes, and ...” as well as the very old Jain concept of *anekāntavāda* (“many-sidedness”).

Start with many-sidedness. Chances are you’ve actually come across this concept before, in a version of the story of some blind men feeling up different parts of an elephant. In this story, a ruler calls several wizened blind men³²¹ to the palace and asks them to touch different objects and report what they feel. One man, feeling the trunk of the elephant, says it’s like a snake. Another feels the rough legs and says it’s like a sturdy tree trunk. Yet another feels the end of the elephant’s tail and says it’s like a bush, and so forth.

Up until that point, all the blind men are correct. However they then begin to argue with each other and say that the others are all wrong. And it is at that moment that each of them shifts from being correct in their own observations to being wrong as they denounce the experiences of others. The ruler duly chastises them for their foolishness.

The insight of many-sidedness is that no one perspective can accurately convey the complete and total truth, but rather that the truth has many sides to it, and to fully understand any situation one must draw on different experiences and perspectives. That’s a process that involves plenty of nuance and leaves room for caveates. While that leads to a much more robust understanding

³²¹ In many cultures the blind are seen as wizened. This may be because blindness often causes one’s remaining senses to be heightened. So blind people can provide wisdom not necessarily from knowing more, but by providing different insights derived from differently tuned senses.

of reality, nuance is very difficult to boil down into a five second political slogan or marketing phrase.

To come at the same idea from another angle, let us contrast the reaction of the blind men denouncing each other to the concept of “Yes, and” thinking. This is a concept used in design thinking, improve theater, entrepreneurship, and other creative fields, most often in the early stages of planning. This concept states that, particularly early on, it is beneficial to not rule out anyone’s ideas or opinions (that can come later), but rather to try to build upon each others ideas. When someone suggests something, instead of saying “no, but we could do it this way...”, say “yes, and we can also add in...”.

Similar to the Jain concept of *anekāntavāda*, the “yes, and” mentality aims to create space to listen to many different perspectives and ideas and explore how they might be reconciled and integrated together. Another phrase for that process is consensus building (pardon my language, I know that’s a censored term in politics these days).

Let me put the above into a more concrete example. To talk about politicized issues with many-sidedness is to use “yes, and” language. YES, George Washington was a slave owner who in today’s age would rightly be denounced for those practices, AND he showed bravery on the battlefield and in office as he helped shape a country built on the ideals of freedom and liberty (which would eventually be universalized, though not in his time).

Should his statues be taken down because he was a slave owner? Or should we build more of them because of his valor and pacifist foreign policy stances while president? My answer would be both. The good he did as general and president in no way erases the harm he inflicted as an owner of human beings, just as his ownership of people in no ways invalidates the achievements he won for our nation. Both are true. To ignore either one is to idealize history and humans.

There are plenty of people and situations filled with good and bad aspects, and we should be intelligent enough to be capable of acknowledging and celebrating the good while with the same breadth denouncing the sins derived from the same source. It's messy and at times incredibly uncomfortable, and it's also a lot closer to the reality of life that we're all stuck in.

As some advice for gaining that variety of perspectives; read. That point has been made before in this chapter and it's worth repeating. Read pieces by liberals and conservatives, capitalists and socialists, anarchists and marxists and imperialists and monarchs. Write down the borders of your understanding and seek out works that will expand them. Read articles, blogs, but most of all books.

Books, because of their long form nature, make it more likely that the ideas within will be more flushed out and comprehensively covered, whereas a shorter blog is more likely to gloss over nuance and detail.

The extra length also gives you more time to grapple with the arguments and spot fluff. Anyone can fill a 500 word article with BS-ed fluff; it's much harder to do that across a 50,000 word book and still come across as credible. I offer that as a heuristic, but by no means a rule.

Books, the mindset of openness (many-sidedness), avoiding systems that suck away your precious time, participation in community, habits of thoughtfulness; these are all tools we can use to lead better lives. Lives which we define, not which others prescribe.

What else? What other tools can we arm ourselves with so that we may be prepared to endure in a world descending into Complete Order, and still create beauty and worth in our own lives and for others?

ACTING ON OUR HABITS

Self Reflection, for one. Political action, for two.

Self Reflection is any process that helps you to focus your attention on self improvement. This can be through prayer, through keeping a journal and writing in it regularly, or through meditation, to name a few.

Meditation is a mental process, and it comes in many forms. Several of the exercises suggested above could be meditative. Meditation often involves relaxation and calming practices, a focus on stilling the body and distractions to focus more keenly on a particular idea, or on ones own thoughts.

Meditative practices can be used to strengthen ones own ability to think. Prayer is one form, and by extension many religious services are too. Many books discuss a variety of meditation practices with an array of uses. I'd particularly recommend *Into the Magic Shop* by James Doty, MD; "A gripping, well-told journey into the mysteries of the human mind and brain".

All told, various forms of meditation practiced over time have been shown to reduce stress and anxiety³²², alleviate PTSD³²³, improve sleep quality³²⁴, lower blood pressure³²⁵, and lengthen attention spans³²⁶.

The takeaway is that almost any pattern of thought, if repeated intently, can reinforce habits and strengthen your ability to think. It comes back again to that idea, that responsibility we all have to ourselves: training yourself to think.

What of political action? Like training yourself to think, there is no single way to go about it. It depends greatly on the society you live in, your means, and the issues facing you.

Sometimes, it looks like organized protest. Sometimes it looks like voting in elections. Other times it looks like calling your representatives or attending rallies. One of the persistent arguments

322 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24107199/>

323 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22669968/>

324 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26390335/>

325 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23890919/>

326 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23643368/>

in this book is to advocate decentralization and transparency as remedies to Complete Order.

Pulling down the influence and power and dispersing it across the local level (even more disbursement than the state level, down to the county or neighborhood) is one way to make individual involvement more impactful. As this would greatly increase the number of town halls and council meetings, it would also become easier for the average citizen to attend and participate in them.

If you have some discomfort, feeling that all this might still seem a bit vague, know that I share your discomfort. I believe that discomfort is both necessary and useful. Necessary because there is no single correct way to live life. Neither I nor anyone else can proscribe a universal answer to the question ‘what should I do’. Useful because it serves as a nagging urge motivating us to constantly seek new and better answers to the question, to innovate and improve.

So these thoughts are not a final answer. They are perhaps a useful start. Self reflection to develop your own thoughts, and political action to articulate them to your community as part of a dialogue with your neighbors as you work towards consensus on how to govern yourselves. It might not seem like much, however that process, backed by compassion, can go a long way to diffuse many of the social tensions we are plagued with.

Chapter 14: The Power of You Plus Community

All that talk in the previous chapter may be well and good, but what, you may be asking, is the use in improving ourselves if that's all it accomplishes? The world is full of massive, complicated problems, from crippling debt to gray tsunamis to plummeting biodiversity. How does reading more, improving oneself, and finding a community mean anything when compared to all that?

What do your choices and contributions mean in the face of world shattering forces? They mean everything.

Your actions taken in your own life mean everything for your own autonomy. Your very being derives from your intentions and actions.

Your actions taken in your own community mean everything for your community. Your community, whether family, neighborhood, or society, is derived from the actions of each of its participants, including yourself.

Some organizations, however, marginalize the actions of some of their members. Some organizations marginalize more than others, however even in a democratic society, some amount occurs.

So what do you do about that? How do you, as an individual, take meaningful action if your nation does not respect your voice? Even in a nation that does, how do you maximize your impact?

You create impact by improving your self, perhaps using some of the advice in the preceding chapter. You create impact by critically observing your world and identifying the complex problems and underlying causes, similarly to what much of this book has attempted. You create impact by finding problems within your means to address, and addressing them with your community.

You create impact by supporting those systems and communities that allow you to deliver impact, and shun those that shun you.

If a solution to any problem – whether that be a product, service or system of government – is not to your liking, you can advocate change. If, however, that system does not allow you to effectively advocate for change, then you can boycott it and setup a parallel system. If your parallel system is actually effective and more useful, others will join you, until you have effectively disrupted the established system by providing viable alternatives.

That's what was proposed earlier by urging for people to leave social media platforms and use alternative forms of communication. Develop alternatives to draw people away from broken solutions to systems that more effectively address the problems you see.

If the problem you think is ineffectively addressed is governance, get more involved in local councils and setup neighborhood groups.

If the problem you think is ineffectively addressed is related to the environment or business, setup a nonprofit or company to provide better solutions.

If the community you are involved in is broken, start better communities.

Particularly local ones, small enough in scale where each individual's voice can be heard and not drown out in a multitude.

Networks of multiple specialized communities can also support and build on each other, providing together the benefits of larger organizations in more robust ways.³²⁷

LOCAL CITIZENSHIP

One way to support your local communities is to participate in your local level politics. National politics gets all the attention, but

³²⁷ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-to-slay-a-tech-giant-apple-11593375647>

far more legislation is passed at the state level, and county and city governments also pull a lot of weight. Start by attending your city council meetings (or local equivalent). You'll get to hear directly from your representatives, ask them directly pointed questions, and often hear from lobbyists trying to secure contracts.

In previous meetings I've attended, I've seen proposals brought forward by consulting firms to restructure a city's accounting system and adjust their electricity rates (the city was the sole provider of electricity to all residents, so that directly hit everyone's pocket-books), as well as models from real estate developers asking for exceptions to zoning laws.

In both instances, residents who happened to be present got to voice their opinions in real time directly to their representatives. And let me tell you, it's a lot harder to brush off someone's concerns when a room full of people just heard you hear them than it is when that same complaint is sent in an email.

Growing citizen involvement in local government, and pulling more decision making down to the local level, would also lead to more effective governing.

It can be hard to keep up with the tens of thousands of spending proposals and the billions of dollars that pass through the halls of a national legislature, much less get involved in the process. It's much easier to do this when it's a few dozen proposals for projects in your own community, particularly when it's your taxes being spent.

In this model, you also can more easily meet, on a regular basis, the individual responsible for spending your money on projects in your community, and give them some real time feedback, advice, or complaints, even lend a hand.

That level of accountability leads to more effective, and less costly, public services. "In the Philippines, schools that rely more heavily on local funding are more efficient, and operate with

lower unit costs, than comparable schools financed centrally”, finds the 1993 Human Development Report by the UN.³²⁸

That level of involvement and accountability is hard at the national level, but made far easier at the local level. So go give your local community governance a boost of participation.

CITIZENS, ASSEMBLE!

Besides more federated governance, another way for national governments to further democratize is through Citizens’ Assemblies.

The idea is to take a contentious issue, particularly one that politicians have long been unable to come to consensus over, and put the question to an assembly of citizens.

Crucially, this assembly would be chosen by lot. Although often weighted to ensure that the group reflects society overall, the individuals are selected randomly. No concerns about being re-elected, no messy campaign attack ads or dark money donations. Just average citizens convened to deliberate on serious public matters.

The assembly is given time to deliberate, and resources – access to researchers or officials to question, lawyers to consult with to ensure their solutions are legitimate, and so forth – then pass their proposal back to elected officials to execute on.

Does it work? Although still not common, they are gaining popularity, and early signs point to success.

Two Citizens’ Assemblies in Ireland broke political deadlock over same-sex marriage and abortion.³²⁹ In France an assembly was part of the government’s response to address the grievances

328 UNDP. 1993. Human Development Report 1993. <http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr1993>

329 <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/09/19/politicians-should-take-citizens-assemblies-seriously>

of the Yellow Jacket protest. Other assemblies are taking place in Britain and Chile.³³⁰

When given legitimacy by reflecting the population and commitments by politicians to follow through on its proposals, and when focused on a specific enough question, these groups have repeatedly broken through toxic polarization to produce meaningful, and popular, proposals.

CAN YOU SEE ME NOW?

All levels of government can also benefit from increased transparency. As espoused by the Open Government movement, transparency is the active sharing of information by government to help promote citizen involvement and government accountability.

As one of ALEC's³³¹ template bills asserts, states have "a duty to affirmatively disclose certain information, in a timely manner, and to shift the burden from citizens and journalists to the state, to share all information necessary, so that citizens may hold their elected officials accountable."³³²

A government by and for the people is a wonderful idea, but how do we best execute on it? There's no reason to believe that the way things are now will always be the best way. We should constantly be evaluating new ideas, with skepticism of course.

If we're changing our constitution every other week that leads to it's own problems. And yet there are lots of ideas about how to organize an effective democracy.

Some, like transparency, have been implemented in many places and probably deserve to be implemented more widely. Others,

330 <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/09/19/citizens-assemblies-are-increasingly-popular>

331 Yes, the same ALEC that I earlier criticized as being overly centralized. I can critique the structure of an organization while also endorsing select ideas it has. We humans can hold two ideas simultaneously in our minds.

332 <https://www.alec.org/model-policy/transparency-and-government-accountability-act/>

like Liquid Democracy³³³ or Open-Source Government³³⁴ might be worth discussing further and experimenting with.

The goal is to build a robust society. One that scrutinizes new ideas and adopts what proves viable. Not something that continues unchanged in a Mirage of Complete Order, however comfortable the entrenched interests within that system may be.

DIY COMMUNITIES

What if you live in a country without local levels of political participation, or where those local bodies are hopelessly ineffective? Well, it might be time to make your own.

“In many countries in Latin America, and in the Philippines under Marcos”, found that same 1993 UN report, “NGOs nurtured and supported a range of popular movements to oppose the excesses of national security states and to address poverty issues at the local level.”

Locally grown communities are varied, diverse, and hard to quantify, exactly because they are crafted for the needs of their local communities. And they work.

In the Mexican state of Michoacan, the largest crop is avocados. The multi-billion dollar industry was threatened by drug cartels, who were extorting businesses and burning cropland. The poorly organized police were more likely to get shot by the cartels than provide effective protection.

So the citizens of Tancítaro, one of the largest cities in Michoacan, organized their own *auto defensas* citizen’s police force, CUSEPT. Formed in 2010, CUSEPT armed and trained local volunteers to defend the city from assaults by the drug gangs. The community came together to build and garrison stone fortifica-

333 <https://medium.com/organizer-sandbox/liquid-democracy-true-democracy-for-the-21st-century-7c66f5e53b6f>

334 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open-source_governance

tions, patrol the croplands, and respond to attacks by the drug gangs in armored vehicles.³³⁵

Better armed and better trained than the local police, CUSEPT is also not run by the traditional government. Instead, the Local Council was the group that trained and organized CUSEPT, and now runs it.³³⁶ Besides being not run directly by the official government, CUSEPT's volunteers are also armed with high powered military rifles, which are illegal in Mexico. Even so, the government hasn't intervened.

Maybe that's because the citizen's police force has worked. While it remains contentious, crime is down in Tancítaro, and the drug cartels no longer directly threaten the livelihoods and lives of its citizens.³³⁷

On the other hand, there are plenty of examples of local communities breaking down. That is inevitable due to the laws of probability. In a collection of millions of communities, some will inevitably shine above the rest, and some will fail miserably. However, when a single community fails, it is a much smaller problem than when a nation state falls apart. The variation of local communities makes the collection of communities overall more resilient.

What about non-governmental problems? How can community and institution building at the local level solve the fiendishly complex problems you might see in our culture or economy?

With the same style of personal ingenuity and individual elbow grease.

ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE

Take one social issue as an example – loneliness.

335 <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/inside-the-bloody-cartel-war-for-mexico-multibillion-dollar-avocado-industry/>

336 <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/may/18/avocado-police-tancitaro-mexico-law-drug-cartels>

337 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-41635008>

Growing loneliness, while admittedly difficult to define, does appear to be taking place across much of the Western world.³³⁸ While the causes are varied, some have pointed to social media distorting perceptions and a decline in physical social interactions. Regardless, loneliness and a lack of friendship is linked to greater rates of depression, stress, and suicidal thoughts, it is a real health and economic threat.

While this might seem like a massive and intimidating problem, keep in mind that it is not a monolithic force. Rather it is an aggregation of millions of little problems at the level of individuals. Which means potential solutions can start small and have impact over time.

That's exactly what one group of entrepreneurial youths I met in college did. Dylan Nunn and Davis Pfund started a B-Corp called *Mettā* Creative. They began hosting in-person events that are planned with intention to promote novel interactions and connections between individuals while inspiring their values in a fun way.

Over the last few years, *Mettā* has hosted dozens of events and brought thousands of people together in a unique way. Has it single handedly solved mental health issues? No. But they have had a notable impact on the individuals whom they serve, and that is meaningful.

I sat down with Davis, one of the cofounders of *Mettā*, to understand how they got started and see what lessons might be useful to others working to create new solutions or communities.

They started with zeroing in on a specific problem to solve. Specificity helps focus the mind and your (probably meager) resources when you start out. Focus on a problem and the people suffering it, and work with them to figure out how to help. *Mettā* got a lot of feedback from early participants.

They also reached out to people already working on the same problem. "The fastest way to grow", says Davis, "is to collaborate

338 <https://ourworldindata.org/loneliness-epidemic>

with as many people as possible who align with your values”. If nothing else, learn from those in similar fields, even reach out and ask for mentorship.

Of course, starting anything new is hard. Perseverance is necessary. “Never give up, always keep going”. Those three things make a very simple yet powerful formula. Zero in on a specific problem and the people hurting from it, work with others to get the help you need to solve it, and persevere.

Naturally, it also takes your own talents and skills, but building a community is really as simple (and as difficult) as that. Startups and governments are just different forms of communities. All are institutions we choose to develop to address problems we see in the world, and we are free to start them wherever we see fit and can draw other people around.

GENERATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sometimes that change can take a while. Generations even. To highlight that point, I’d like to tell you the story of the tallest church tower in the world, the Ulmer Münster (The Ulm Minster; minster being an honorific title for important churches).

A few of my relatives live in a small town in Baden-Württemberg, the south-westernmost state of Germany. It’s one of those quaint towns in Europe that changes very slowly, if at all. A short drive away however is the medium-sized city of Ulm, an old city that straddles both banks of the long and windy River Danube.

The city of Ulm has a newer, denser, business district, however the old part of the city is less dense, and dominated by a single structure, the Ulmer Münster, a cavernous brick church remarkable for the 530 foot sandstone steeple decorating its front.

On my many trips to visit my German relatives, I've had the chance to climb this tower several times. The 768 steps are well worth the sweeping panoramic views of the city and surrounding countryside.



What's even more interesting than the grandiosity of this structure is the process that went into building it. Construction of the Ulmer Münster began in 1377. That's after decades of planning and fundraising.

You see, before this church was built, the city of Ulm's church lay outside the city walls. It was troublesome to get to, especially when the city was being besieged.

So the 10,000-odd citizens pooled their resources to build their own Bürgerkirche (Citizen's Church), built by and for the people. That in itself is pretty impressive, but it goes further.

While the first stone was laid in 1377, construction continued for 166 years to 1543. Then after a pause it picked up again in 1844 until final completion in 1890³³⁹. Even that isn't the end. The picture is a bit misleading, there is usually scaffolding covering one portion of the tower or another as the immense structure is undergoing near continuous repairs.

Think about that. More than six centuries ago artisans and craftsmen started working on that church, knowing that they would not see the completion of their work. That their children and grandchildren would not see the completion of their work.

Maybe you shrug and point out that they were still getting paid. But this wasn't some mega-project financed by the coffers of the Emperor or Vatican. This was funded by the donations of tens of thousands of local citizens over centuries.

Sometimes we can make a change in our own lives and see results overnight; that's personal development. Sometimes bringing people together is all that's needed; that's community development. Sometimes, to make meaningful change, we need to come together as a community and steadily chip away at a challenge over generations; that's Generational Development.

That's how we create lasting change in a society. Millions of creative individuals delivering unique solutions that compound over time into meaningful change; Generational Development. It's a long and arduous path, and it's also resilient.

339 <https://www.ulmer-muenster.de/index.php/bauwerk>

Generational Development, when done carefully and with the buy-in of a community, is not some fragile debt laden company to be knocked over by the next measly recession, the kind that come around every decade or so. Well-executed Generational Development builds on itself and benefits from the commitment of communities.

It is, to borrow a phrase from Nassim Taleb, antifragile. Something that is fragile breaks when things suddenly change. Something that is antifragile becomes stronger when exposed to changing conditions. The support of a community pulls in a variety of people and talents, so that when situations change, the community as a whole has the resources and skills to adapt, at least to a greater extent than any one individual in the group.

The construction of the Ulmer Münster, although interrupted at times, continued despite the Protestant Reformation, a declining economy due to shifting trade routes, the transformational opening up of the New World, the invention of the printing press, the German Peasants' War, a few famines and plagues, and countless other upheavals.

Grand monuments have been built in less time, to be sure. The gorgeous Taj Mahal was built in just a few decades. However it was commissioned by a single individual, Mughal Shah Jahan, to entomb his favorite wife.

The structure was built because of the passion of a single individual. What would have happened had the Mughal Jahan fallen ill and died before the nearly billion dollar enterprise was complete? Would construction have continued? Hard to say.

The Ulmer Münster however had no such concerns. Projects driven by one person are fragile. Groups, up to a certain size, confer resiliency. Entire empires and nation states rose and fell around the city of Ulm and its inhabitants; and in the backdrop of it all a few individuals continued to carve stone and lay bricks, building a church for the people.

That's a question worth asking. How do we replicate the resiliency of the citizens of Ulm in order to make Generational Development on global problems? How do we continuously work to chip away at seemingly intractable issues, making progress even while knowing that neither we, nor our children, nor our children's children will live to see the eventual results? How do we design a process that continues to benefit people amidst war, famine, plague, and the unforeseeable disruptions of the future?

I don't think there is an answer to that question. I think that the fix results from talented individuals working within a strong community. That's why I'm stressing self improvement and community in these last two chapters. However I don't have a formula for how to build community. What I do have is stories. Stories that I can share in the hopes that you will find inspiration for processes that you can implement in your own life.

There is no right, or wrong, way to become a better person. You find the way that works for you. There is no right, or wrong, way to build or enrich a community. Communities are the sum of human relationships and shared interactions; you can be human however you want.

THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP CLUB

I will share one more story, of a group that I believe did some things very well despite some missed opportunities. When I was in college I joined a student run Entrepreneurship Club, or simply EClub.

The officers elected to run the club when I joined were Zach, Jordan, Becca, and Brenna. They did a fantastic job of building a unique community.

The club would meet, twice a week, in the same place at the same time. That alone was a huge boost. Many other clubs met sporadically, or in different places. The officers of the EClub were able to negotiate the regular use of a single space, so that students had consistency and could plan ahead.

I myself and several others I knew deliberately planned our classes some semesters to ensure we'd be available for the EClub meetings. We were able to do that because of the consistency of meetings.

Why were we so eager to attend EClub meetings? Because they were always engaging, entertaining, and enjoyable. Meetings came in two types.

The first, general meeting, met in the evenings on Wednesday, where the officers would facilitate connection between members. Usually Zach or Jordan would run a workshop to teach some concept of entrepreneurship. Honestly, those workshops were better than many of the actual classes I took in college. They were interesting, energizing, and fun.

Friday meetings were different. Known as Free Lunch Friday (FLF), the club would have a catered lunch (actual food, not just pizza!) and would host a different speaker each week.

The speaker would always be an experienced entrepreneur who would share their story and answer our questions. We heard from a Cuban immigrant who built a \$60 million real estate business, a serial entrepreneur on his fifth profitable software platform business which already had 120 employees, and a plain spoken lady who made curtains and other textile designs and licensed them to large multinational firms from her living room almost single handedly (literally, she was missing four fingers).

The diversity and quality of those speakers was largely thanks to Becca, who spent many long hours reaching out to strangers, networking with them, and convincing them to take a break from their wild lives motorcycling in the Alps to give a talk to naive pimpled college students.

And behind the scenes, supporting everything, was Brenna, who filled the routine-yet-essential role of treasurer, and made sure everything actually ran smoothly. You need the wild chaotic innova-

tion of constantly trying new things to find what works, and the stable order to introduce them and give them space to grow.

These individuals had passion, ideas, and the grit to execute. That format of meetings didn't develop overnight, but rather over months as they all tried different things, threw out what didn't work and built upon what did. They experimented and got feedback from their community - the club members.

They also wrote it all down. In college, most students don't stick around for longer than four years. Knowing that, those four individuals wrote down the process behind what they did, as well as why and how.

Descriptions on the various workshops and what they were for helped to reproduce them. A detailed guide on reaching out to speakers and managing a schedule for them all helped ensure a steady stream of qualified guests. All of it being written down helped new officers, once those four graduated, to continue to deliver high quality events.

Regardless, I stopped going to EClub later on in college. The reason is I felt EClub became a victim of its own success. The meetings were so popular (FLF often had standing room only), that the club eventually just kept hosting the same style of events. The speakers blurred together. The same workshop is less exciting the third time you do it.

The events were still incredibly valuable to new members enjoying them for the first time. Just not as much for long time members like myself. In a university setting, where few students are around for longer than four years, that's probably fine.

In any other setting that lack of change would have forced the EClub on the road, traveling around to always seek a new audience, or pushed it down the long, downward descent into sclerotic stagnation.

Regardless, there are several lessons that I've drawn from the life of the Entrepreneurship Club which I will share here.

INDIVIDUALIST COMMUNITIES

First, is the importance of the individuals within the community. A system with good processes can make up for much lacking in its members, but not everything. The talents and ideas of the officers of the EClub were what brought new ideas that were tried and adjusted.

It is that innovation from individual ideas, applied continuously, and gradually adjusted in response to market feedback (in this case, what members were saying and meeting attendance), that led to a new and high quality club. Documentation of those new processes then allowed others to repeat and build upon those experiences.

A well adapted community is developed over time, by individuals systematically trying things out and adjusting over time.

Our societies need the chaos of change and experimentation, AND the order of structured systematization. Not one and then the other. Both, at the same time, continuously.

SANDPILES INTO MOUNTAINS

Regardless of how good your people and processes are, however, the actual innovation won't happen over night. It develops with hundreds of compound little changes, like grains of sand accumulating in a Sandpile.

Thus far, we've almost exclusively talked about Sandpiles with respect to their collapse, as if they are a dangerous phenomenon to be avoided. Let's build on that analogy.³⁴⁰

³⁴⁰ The original analogy was introduced earlier in this book from the research of Bak and colleagues, and as related to economics by John Mauldin, to describe the accumulation of instability in systems and the resulting collapse. Here, building on the idea, I am taking the analogy in a slightly different direction.

We've described how when a Sandpile gets too large instabilities grow throughout the entire structure. The longer the system goes without partial collapses, the bigger those instabilities grow and the greater the likelihood any one future change will unpredictably trigger a collapse of everything.

So are Sandpiles doomed to always stay small, prevented from growing past a certain point by constant avalanches?

I don't think so at all.

As a Sandpile grows, as we've already discussed, steep slopes develop which inevitably collapse. In the short run, that leads to a system that grows gradually and suffers repeated setbacks. However in the long run the pile keeps on growing. Avalanches continue to happen, however the base gets wider and the peak gets higher, despite frequent setbacks.

Over the very long run, the pile of sand becomes so massive that the grains on top begin to exert pressure on the more deeply buried sand in a process called diagenesis. Normally sand is very porous (doesn't retain water well) and loose. As the grains of sand are pushed more tightly together they lose their porousness (a process called compaction) and fuse to form solid rock (called lithification). This is how sand becomes sandstone.

It is by that process, by the sheer weight of the number of grains of sand, that the Sandpile is eventually compressed into a Mountain. The Mountain is the accumulation of billions of tiny grains of sand. The Mountain is a monument of human achievement, whether it be a beautiful church, a prosperous culture, or a peaceful world.

A MORE EXCELLENT WAY TO BUILD A MOUNTAIN

Just so, we can create Mountains. Accumulations of billions of tiny actions over time. The Descent into Complete Order is a Mirage. There is a More Excellent Way³⁴¹ to build the Mountain,

341 Shortly we will specify this phrase

with a resilient community made up of educated and conscientious individuals. Brick by brick, the Ulmer Münster rises.

I want to make clear that in both the Descent into Complete Order and in the More Excellent Way, a Mountain eventually rises. However the shape of that path varies tremendously, as does the time it takes to get there.

On the Descent into Complete Order, that seemingly ‘clear, safe course that leads ever downwards into stagnation’, while we may eventually chance upon a Mountain, the path is riddled with avalanches. The Descent is a precarious journey, prone to sudden shifts. It is fragile. The More Excellent Way is more resilient, and more assured to arrive at a Mountain given time.

Also note, the journey is never finished. As I mentioned, the Ulmer Münster is in a near continuous state of restoration. Even after a Mountain has formed of the billions of grains of our actions, sand continues to accumulate on top of the Mountain. Avalanches still occur, the Mountain gets taller. A process trying to maintain Complete Order continues to build up bigger avalanches. The More Excellent Way allows for small avalanches and more robust long term growth.

Those small avalanches are important. We will make mistakes. The small avalanches are the sweeping away of mistakes, making room for new growth. A path of Complete Order would try to prevent avalanches, and so merely props up mistakes until they accumulate in an avalanche.

Over time, the Mountain rises. Of course there will be disruptions along the way – wars, plagues, what have you – however a resilient community of dedicated and conscientious individuals can overcome those adversities.

It’s a long process, but it’s a very real and very feasible process. Even better, we don’t need dramatic perfection, or one-chance long shots.

We can make do just fine with steady improvements and perseverance.

If medieval peasants can do it, what excuse do we have?

COMPETITION TO COOPERATION

Thought bubbles and perverted narratives have warped our politics and social interactions into forums for cut-throat, unproductive competition. What this More Excellent Way can help us achieve is a return to cooperative social interactions within our communities.

That brings sanity back to our public discussions. That brings resiliency back to our society. **That brings back the hope of continuing to build a better future for our children.** Brick by brick, grain by grain, we build a Mountain, together.

LIVE WITH LOVE FOR THE SAKE OF LOVE

The Greeks had multiple words for love. One based on long term commitment (Pragma), another based on romance and passion (Eros). Some of them can overlap of course, however the added nuance can be useful.

One of those words for love is Agape, sometimes referred to as Christian love. It is the unconditional acceptance extended to all people, and at its heart is universal empathy. Agape is the idea introduced as the “more excellent way” in 1 Corinthians, and the word used in Chapter 13 of that book in the “love is patient, love is kind” passage.

Love is also an act, not a state. 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13, goes on to describe what love is and is not. Fifteen descriptions are used, and in English we translate them as adjectives (‘patient’, ‘kind’, ‘not pompous’). In the original Greek however, the descriptions used are all verbs. Love is not a state of being, it is an action.

Let us act with Love, with Agape. Let us live it.

Let us allow Love to infect every act we do.

Love for whom? For everyone.

Why? To build Mountains. To pull our world off of the Descent into Complete Order, not through senseless violence, but by building a more appealing system to replace it. To strengthen our communities and ourselves to become resilient to the inevitable chaos in the world. To lift humanity up.

That is the More Excellent Way. Living with love to develop robust communities comprising of dedicated and conscientious individuals, working gradually to build a Mountain of a better world for us all. We take the lessons from the Entrepreneurship Club and never stop trying new things, writing down what works well so others can reproduce it and always continue to build upon it. We approach a complex world with critical eyes and a mind prepared for change. All of that, backed by Agape Love.

EIGHT BILLION STORIES

As I've said before, I don't have all the answers. I can't solve all the problems of the world. I don't even know what all of them are. Fortunately, I don't have to, and neither do you. There are (nearly) eight billion humans alive today³⁴². More than 116,000 times more people than words in this book. None of us have to do this alone. None of us have to have all or even most of the answers. If we each tackle some of the problems in some of the places, those efforts compounded over the generations will reshape the world.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I'd like to reach back to the very first passage of this book. It opened with the wonderful facts of high and rising literacy rates and life expectancy. In chapter 7, while reflecting on the use of fear in media and narratives, we took a moment to remember the

³⁴² <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>

progress we've made in reducing the prevalence of infectious diseases.

As difficult the challenges we've faced are, we as a species have dealt with hardship before. Those benefits to life expectancy and literacy did not arise from some single breakthrough technology or global top down plan, but rather reflect the cumulative efforts of centuries of dedicated work, millions of little innovations. While there were some large leaps and grand plans, those few instances were filled in between by the steady progress of dedicated and conscientious individuals.

It starts with you, and the small changes you make every day. It starts with your words and actions and the mindset you cultivate every single day.

Those changes take place in, and are reinforced by, the resiliency of communities working together with Love to build Mountains.

Find problems worth solving, find others who care about them, and together let your imaginations soar.

Thank you, dear reader, for your time and attention.

Peace be with you.

Acknowledgments and Thanks

Writing a book is never a quick or solitary process, even if the actual act of writing may appear so. This book is a result of years of reading and thinking across a dozen domains.

The thoughts expressed in these pages have emerged from erratic depressing philosophizing, stimulating and wonderful conversations, and the gentle periods of quiet reflection. They've been put to paper over this past year with hundreds of hours of typing and revision, with feedback from trusted friends.

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