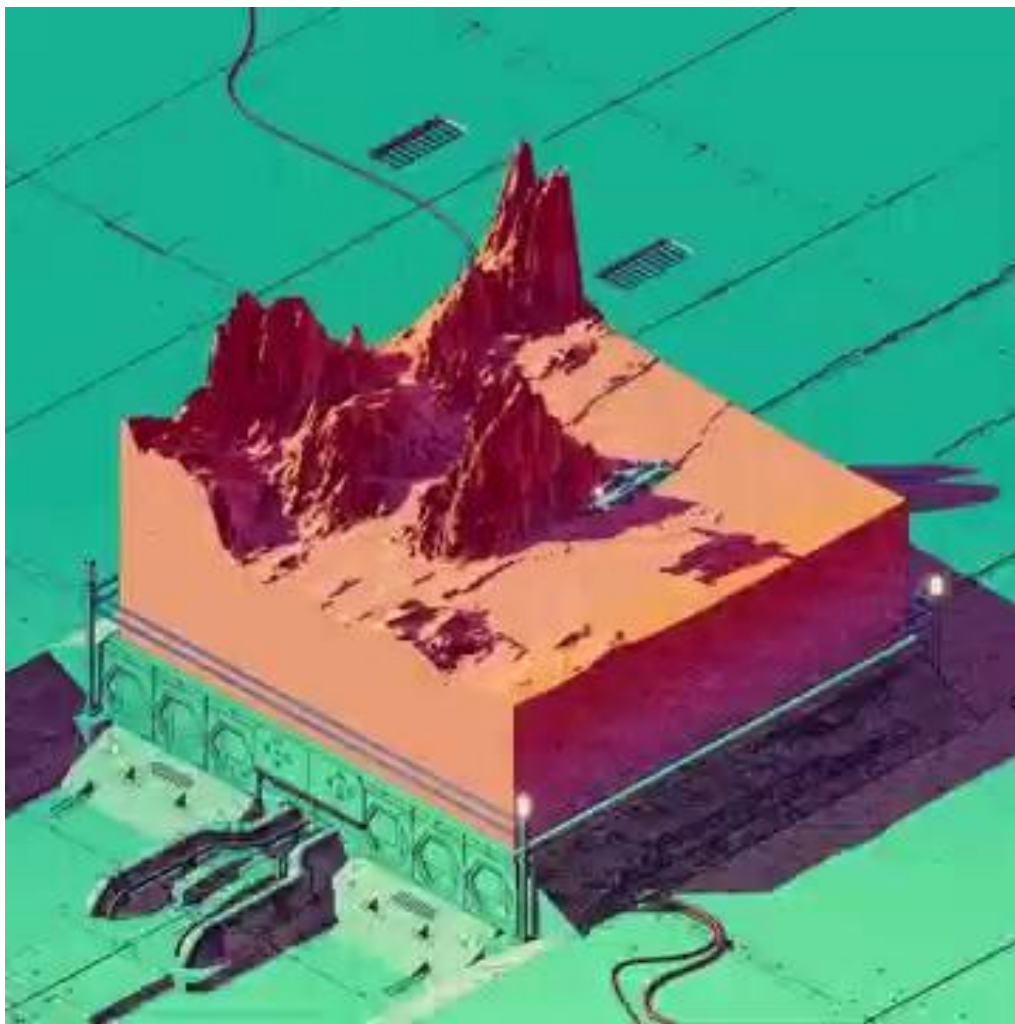
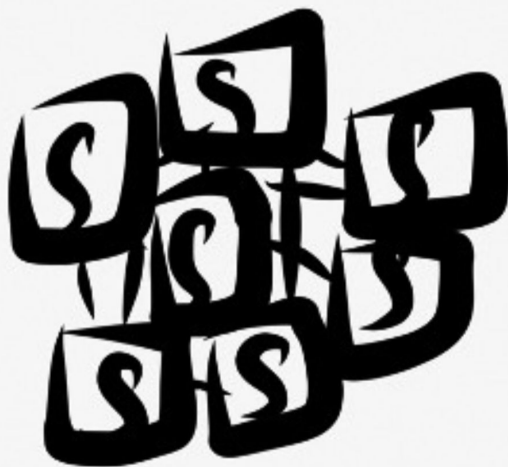


World Politics, World Building

Bruno Mações



Credit:
Calder Moore



States



Globalization



Nature

Truth seekers take feedback from nature.

Is nature the background for world politics? You could say those states that better master nature will succeed and acquire power. Rise of the West. Cold War.

But now imagine a country becomes so powerful that it acquires the power to create a virtual world. And this virtual world is so much more attractive than the real one that other countries eventually migrate to it. What then determines state competition?

What has changed is that we no longer believe in a neutral playing field. And the reason we have stopped believing in it is that we now believe the game environment is built by the players. We live 'after nature', and that cannot but change the terms of geopolitical rivalry. When your opponent is building a fully artificial or technological world that could eventually redefine your own reality, geopolitics becomes not merely existential but ontological.

The great advantage of being a global system administrator is that you can crack down on offenders and pursue your aims by manipulating the system itself, rather than through more direct means. This approach characterizes the Western response during the war in Ukraine. Rather than going to war themselves, Western democracies have adopted a set of targeted economic tools designed to reduce the Russian threat to the existing system. In the cybernetic model adopted here, they might be compared to antivirus software or perhaps even to the villains in The Matrix, programs or 'agents' designed to terminate intruders. Military aid demonstrated the ability to deploy resources across the full line of defence and grant Ukraine new miracle weapons and capacities, a way to transform the ground world that lower-level users face on the battlefield.

Geopolitics is the struggle not to control territory but to create the territory. Think of it as a clash between two versions of the world. Or, more graphically, imagine a simulated landscape in which two or more computer programmers are fighting to redesign what appears on the monitor. The pixels keep changing from moment to moment. One second, the landscape looks like a mountain scene; then the mountains grow smaller and smaller until the landscape becomes a grassy plain. Some back and forth ensues until one of the programmers gives up and the other vision wins. Or, perhaps more plausibly, different rules can be written by different programmers, and the balance of power could change from moment to moment.

Just as new technologies slowly raised the destructive potential of direct conflict, a new avenue was opened: states can now fight one another not by winning in direct battle but by setting the rules under which other states must operate. Call it a form of indirect government. Perhaps your opponent will even assume the rules are natural or given, but in reality you have moved one level up in the great game. Your opponent is playing a video game. You are coding it.

For builders, the world game is more than a metaphor; it is a reminder that they are building something much bigger than a gadget or an app. They are building a global platform that is setting the terms for global power competition. When we talk about technology we fail to ask whether technology exists as a kind of background for our actions or whether something else is the background. I think builders and technologists are not very interested in this question. Maybe we just assume technology is a set of gadgets. The thought that it could become the environment is bold, but maybe too bold. When we talk about smart cities we are moving in that direction, but still hesitantly.

The situation is fundamentally different in a human-made world. In such a world there is no recourse to an external authority. The engineering power has set the rules in advance and alone enjoys root access to those rules. Other actors may even take the external environment as somehow natural or inescapable. They have no way to access the most important levers and switches of power. The world in this case is, let us suppose, American or Chinese. Naturally, in a Chinese world the outcomes are predetermined to favor China, and conversely in an American world. The great game is indeed a game, but a game whose purpose is to create the rules of the game.

I would reserve the term 'superpower' for those states engaged in a battle to shape the global system. Everyone else is competing under their rules. For the superpowers or system administrators, the power to create the game rules and environment has two main advantages:

- It allows them to set their preferred rules or the rules that best fit their capacities.
- It allows them to change the rules or the game state when exceptional circumstances demand it. In computer programming language, 'god mode' is the ability to access the control panel settings of a system.

For other countries, the game takes three main forms:

- They can try to play by the existing rules and to constantly adapt their actions to the rules introduced by the superpowers (Switzerland is a good example of a nimble adaptor). This is the specific domain of domestic public policy, but playing a game is always a creative act. When you play a computer game, you are providing all the local detail to the game environment, subject only to the general architecture given by the game rules.
- They can specialize in a certain element or elements of the global system and attempt to shape the rules in that limited area (Russia has done this for energy and the European Union has been successful in this regarding trade).
- They can align with one of the superpowers and try to contribute to the expansion and prevalence of their favorite set of rules (the United Kingdom is an obvious example).

MAÇÃES

WORLD BUILDERS

CAMBRIDGE

'An altogether fascinating
and deeply troubling book.'
William Dalrymple

WORLD BUILDERS

TECHNOLOGY AND THE NEW GEOPOLITICS

BRUNO MAÇÃES

World politics has changed, claims Bruno Maçães. Geopolitics is no longer simply a contest to control territory: in this age of advanced technology, it has become a contest to *create* the territory. Great powers seek to build a world for other states to inhabit, while keeping the ability to change the rules or the state of the world when necessary. At a moment when the old concepts no longer work, this book aims to introduce a radically new theory of world politics and technology. Understood as 'world building', the most important events of our troubled times suddenly appear connected and their inner logic is revealed: technology wars between China and the United States, the pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and the energy transition. To conclude, Maçães considers the more distant future, when the metaverse and artificial intelligence become the world, a world the great powers must struggle to build and control.