

Title:

Trends for a Not-so-new Millennium

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Summary:

We construct maps of the world around us, using cognitive models, organizational principles, and narratives that we acquire in the process of socialization.

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Article Body:

We construct maps of the world around us, using cognitive models, organizational principles, and narratives that we acquire in the process of socialization. These are augmented by an incessant bombardment of conceptual, ideational, and ideological frameworks emanating from the media, from peers and role models, from authority figures, and from the state. We take our universe for granted, an immutable and inevitable entity. It is anything but. Only change and transformation are guaranteed constants - the rest of it is an elaborate and anxiety-reducing illusion.

Consider these self-evident "truths" and "certainties":

1. After centuries of warfare, Europe is finally pacified. War in the foreseeable future is not in store. The European Union heralds not only economic prosperity but also long-term peaceful coexistence.

Yet, Europe faces a serious identity crisis. Is it Christian in essence or can it also encompass the likes of an increasingly-Muslim Turkey? Is it a geographical (continental) entity or a cultural one? Is enlargement a time bomb, incorporating as it does tens of millions of new denizens, thoroughly demoralized, impoverished, and criminalized by decades of Soviet repression? How likely are these tensions to lead not only to the disintegration of the EU but to a new war between, let's say Russia and Germany, or Italy and Austria, or Britain and France? Ridiculous? Revisit your history books.

2. The United States is the only superpower and a budding Empire. In 50 years time it may be challenged by China and India, but until then it stands invincible. Its economic growth prospects are awesome.

Yet, the USA faces enormous social torsion brought about by the polarization of its politics and by considerable social and economic tensions and imbalances. The deterioration in its global image and its growing isolation contribute to a growing paranoia and jingoism. While each of these dimensions is nothing new, the combination is reminiscent of the 1840s-1850s, just prior to the Civil War.

Is the United States headed for limb-tearing inner conflict and disintegration?

3. The Internet, hitherto a semi-anarchic free-for-all, is likely to go through the same cycle experienced by other networked media, such as the radio and the telegraph. In other words, it will end up being both heavily regulated and owned by commercial interests. Throwbacks to its early philosophy of communal cross-pollination and exuberant exchange of ideas, digital goods, information, and opinion will dwindle and vanish. The Internet as a horizontal network where all nodes are equipotent will be replaced by a vertical, hierarchical, largely corporate structure with heavy government intrusion and oversight.

4. The period between 1789 (the French Revolution) and 1989 (the demise of Communism) is likely to be remembered as a liberal and atheistic intermezzo, separating two vast eons of religiosity and conservatism. God is now being rediscovered in every corner of the Earth and with it intolerance, prejudice, superstition, as well as strong sentiments against science and the values of the Enlightenment. We are on the threshold of the New Dark Ages.

5. The quasi-religious, cult-like fad of Environmentalism is going to be thoroughly debunked.

6. Our view of Western liberal democracy as a panacea applicable to all at all times and in all places will undergo a revision in light of accumulated historical evidence. Democracy seems to function well in conditions of economic and social stability and growth. When things go awry, however, democratic processes give rise to Hitlers and Milosevices (both elected with overwhelming majorities multiple times).

The gradual disillusionment with parties and politicians will lead to the re-emergence of collectivist, centralized and authoritarian politics, on the one hand and to the rise of anarchist and multifocal governance models, on the other hand.

7. The ingenious principle of limited liability and the legal entity known as the corporation have been with us for more than three centuries and served magnificently in facilitating the optimal allocation of capital and the

diversification of risk. Yet, the emergence of sharp conflicts of interest between a class of professional managers and the diffuse ownership represented by (mainly public) shareholders - known as the agent-principal problem - spell the end of both and the dawn of a new era.

8. As our understanding of the brain and our knowledge of genetics deepen, the idea of mental illness is going to be discarded as so much superstition and myth. It is going to be replaced with medical models of brain dysfunctions and maladaptive gene expressions. Abnormal psychology is going to be thoroughly medicalized and reduced to underlying brain structures, biochemical processes and reactions, bodily mechanisms, and faulty genes.

9. As offices and homes merge, mobility increases, wireless access to data is made available anywhere and everywhere, computing becomes ubiquitous, the distinction between work and leisure will vanish.

10. Our privacy is threatened by a host of intrusive Big Brother technologies coupled with a growing paranoia and siege mentality in an increasingly hostile world, populated by hackers, criminals, terrorists, and plain whackos. Some countries - such as China - are trying to suppress political dissent by disruptively prying into their citizens' lives. We have already incrementally surrendered large swathes of our hitherto private domain in exchange for fleeting, illusory, and usually untenable personal "safety".

As we try to reclaim this lost territory, we are likely to give rise to privacy industries: computer anonymizers, safe (anonymous) browsers, face transplants, electronic shields, firewalls, how-to-vanish-and-start-a-new-life-elsewhere consultants and so on.

11. As the population ages in the developed countries of the West, crime is on the decline there. But, as if to maintain the homeostasis of evil, it is on the rise in poor and developing countries. A few decades from now, violent and physical property crimes will so be rare in the West as to become newsworthy and so common in the rest of the world as to go unnoticed.

12. In historical terms, our megalopolises and conurbations are novelties. But their monstrous size makes them dependent on two flows: (1) of goods and surplus labor from the world outside (2) of services and waste products to their environment.

There is a critical mass beyond which this bilateral exchange is unsustainable. Modern cities are, therefore, likely to fragment into urban islands: gated communities, slums, strips, technology parks and "valleys", belts, and so on.

The various parts will maintain a tenuous relationship but will gradually grow apart.

This will be the dominant strand in a wider trend: the atomization of society, the disintegration of social cells, from the nuclear family to the extended human habitat, the metropolis. People will grow apart, have fewer intimate friends and relationships, and will interact mostly in cyberspace or by virtual means, both wired and wireless.

13. The commodity of the future is not raw or even processed information. The commodity of the future is guided and structured access to information repositories and databases. Search engines like Google and Yahoo already represent enormous economic value because they serve as the gateway to the Internet and, gradually, to the Deep Web. They not only list information sources but make implicit decisions for us regarding their relative merits and guide us inexorably to selections driven by impersonal, value-laden, judgmental algorithms. Search engines are one example of active, semi-intelligent information gateways.

14. Inflation and the business cycle seem to have been conquered for good. In reality, though, we are faced with the distinct possibility of a global depression coupled with soaring inflation (known together as stagflation). This is owing to enormous and unsustainable imbalances in global savings, debt, and capital and asset markets.

Still, economists are bound to change their traditional view of inflation. Japan's experience in 1990-2006 taught us that better moderate inflation than deflation.