LET’S POLARIZE TOGETHER

Our three-part series Far Futures casts a long view on today’s crisis, using science fiction and other futurist thinking to explore the possibilities of other worlds, or the strangeness of this one. Today, part 1.

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SPECULATIVE FICTION  POLITICS  TECHNOLOGY

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We may have only one world, but life unfolds in many layers. A good way to understand our multitiered reality is through three seemingly unconnected cases: the flightless birds of the Aldabra atoll in the Indian Ocean; the inhabitants of China Miéville’s science-fiction classic *The City & The City*, whom we might call “the people & the people”; and, drawn from my own work, the world-dominating tech giants known as net states. Tracing how these birds evolve, how Miéville’s people struggle, and how today’s tech companies are becoming akin to nation-states reveals something vital today. Specifically, these cases show how the adaptations that help us survive come at a cost. But they also reveal how humanity is uniquely equipped to overcome these adaptations-as-obstacles, if only we make the effort.

**ADAPTATION**

There’s this bird, the white-throated rail. Hundreds of thousands of years ago, a bunch of them flew the 260 miles from their home in Madagascar to the coral atoll Aldabra, part of the Seychelles. The island had a lot to offer, including—most importantly, for the birds—no predators. Absent major threats, the Aldabran white-throated rail evolved to become flightless.

Then, two events occurred. First, about 136,000 years ago, a massive flood hit the islands of Aldabra. The Aldabran white-throated rail was wiped out; these flightless birds became extinct. However, as time passed, the atoll eventually resurfaced. And a new crop of Madagascan white-throated rails, for whatever reason, once again made the epic trek to Aldabra, resettling into a threat-free existence. And once again, without any predators to worry about, the new batch of Aldabran rails also evolved to be flightless.

This matters, because birds are sort of known for their ability to fly. Flight is, I would argue, their defining characteristic. The conditions of the Aldabra atoll—an expanse of 60 square miles stretched out across 46 islands, with no predatory creatures save, today, its 12 or so (nominally peaceful) human researchers—had the same effect on the same species of bird, twice: the loss of their most significant power, flight.

This raises the question: In the same situation—facing the same, threatless opportunity—how would humans evolve? What, indeed, is our most defining characteristic, our most significant power? What would we lose, if we had nothing to struggle against?
The answer may be found, as so many are, in science fiction. Specifically, Miéville’s award-winning 2009 novel, *The City & The City*. In this book, reality is wholly defined by what people choose to see or to actively not see. Two cities share exactly the same physical space, their inhabitants adapting to the same physical environment. However, the people of the two cities live entirely separate lives.

**CAN WE BLAME OURSELVES FOR ADAPTATION? BECAUSE EVERYTHING EVOLVES, REALLY.**

For the two cities’ residents, existence is perilously maintained. They’re only free to go about their lives so long as they rigorously maintain their governments’ requirements to literally only see their own cities’ people, places, and things—despite sharing the same streets and shops and air and space. So, they learn to see only what they are allowed to see, becoming so expert at the act that they eventually lose their ability to see anything else.

Like the white-throated rails, these two groups of people adapt to their surroundings. Separate from one another yet molded by the same environmental conditions, the people & the people wind up at separate but parallel inglorious ends: partial but consistent blindness.

In so doing, the people & the people lose one of humanity’s most defining characteristics and, arguably, its greatest power. They lose *awareness*: not just the ability to see the world as it is, but, crucially, the ability to see and recognize a whole set of people as real and valid human beings.

The question, really, is: Have we, in our world, done any better?

**LAYERED REALITIES**

Perhaps I’m being too hard on us. Maybe we do see the world selectively, conditioned by our own little friend bubbles and our own little culture bubbles. But what if this, too, is an evolutionary adaptation? Can we blame ourselves for adaptation? Because everything evolves, really.

Take buildings, for instance; yes, buildings. Even these static structures morph as years pass and the needs of their inhabitants change. It can be helpful to think of this in geologic terms: some external or superficial layers of a building might change rapidly, while deeper layers change much slower.
It’s possible to imagine a cross section of a house as if it were geological strata: layers building up over time, from the longest-lasting elements at the structure’s base to the topmost layer of things that change weekly or daily. Starting with the base layer of largely unchanging elements (the foundation, for instance), we move up to the space plan (how the rooms are laid out), then up finally to the stuff the house contains (the pictures and lamps and decorative pillows that one may swap out routinely, as fashions and tastes change).

In this way, buildings, adapting to the changing demands of the environment, evolve. Note that nothing foundational is lost. New adaptations are simply layered atop preexisting ones, evidence of what came before still visible to the careful observer.

We live our world in such geologic layers as well. Think of the base layer: our shared biology. Regardless of nation, religion, ethnicity, or culture, we are all of us similar assemblages of muscle and bone. We all need the same basic stuff to survive, like air and food and water and sleep. These are our foundations: unchanging, lifelong.

We add layers to our beings through what we learn. And this starts with the shared values of our people: our families, our friends, our neighbors, our compatriots. In the United States, we learn freedom, damn it: freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, of an unmuzzled press and of lock-and-load at will; the right to choose our leaders and judge our neighbors; the ability to gather and protest and believe and worship in the service of whatever one deems worth going to the bother of gathering and protesting and believing and worshipping for.

But where does this belief in freedom fall? Near the foundation, where it doesn’t change? Or near the walls, where it might last only a few decades?

For instance, compare the cross section of the United States to that of a social democracy like Sweden. Shared national values look a little different there, with less of a focus on individual freedoms to tote around weaponry and such. But they place considerably greater weight on social responsibilities: ensuring health care for all citizens and maintaining a social safety net that prevents the entrenched and inherited destitution we see in our land of the free.

If our biology is the foundation of the house of human life, then the nation-state—whose values permeate formal and informal education—is the structure of the house itself. The nation-state’s protection against invaders serves as our roof; its promise to guarantee rights acts as the struts and beams holding up our walls. The state’s expectations of citizens—that we vote and serve on juries, for instance—are analogous to the responsibilities of homeowners: to perform periodic repairs and maintenance, making sure essential systems—electricity, water, plumbing—remain functional.
IF EVERYTHING IS EVOLVING—PEOPLE AND HOUSES, NATIONS AND COMPANIES, FLIGHTLESS BIRDS AND MORE FLIGHTLESS BIRDS—WHERE WILL WE GO NEXT?

We tend to think of our world map as relatively stable, with borders as fixed things, like mountains and oceans; in reality, it’s more layered than linear. Like the stratified homes described above, our world has its foundational elements: the dirt beneath our feet and sky above our heads, not to mention our human bodies. Layered upon this base are the structures we build: streets and sidewalks and bridges and buildings.

Then there are the conceptual layers we inscribe atop the physical ones: our states, our nation-states. There is no physical difference between the grass on the New York side of the Palisades Park and that on the New Jersey side, for instance. The border’s just a dotted line on a map. But these conceptual differences help us make sense of our world. Layered borders are a set of mental organizers that we all buy into—a shared illusion—so we know where resources should be allocated and who’s responsible for this distribution.

If everything is evolving—people and houses, nations and companies, flightless birds and more flightless birds—where will we go next? Do we know what seemingly foundational element—flight, perhaps, or freedom—could disappear tomorrow?

THE NET-STATE LAYER

In 2020, we face a new set of environmental conditions to which we are, by necessity, adapting. Unlike evolutionary adaptation in nature, this particular process is quick and almost visible.
Our environment today is awash in technological devices. This includes actual products: smartphones, such as the iPhone, and voice-enabled home assistants, like Amazon Alexa. But technology has also surfaced as a kind of narrative device, a thing to be worshipped, an entity with agency that is able to coordinate a series of plot twists in our lives. Technology changes the conditions of our world in unexpected ways, at the personal, societal, and geopolitical levels.

And so, atop the nation-state layer, we now have a new one: “net states.” These are the behemoth tech companies, the ones that not only govern our digital lives, but increasingly take on the work of government itself. They shape our digital experiences, but they also control more and more IRL affairs, including many that were formerly managed at the nation-state layer: diplomacy, defense, physical public infrastructure, and citizen services.

From Microsoft appointing an ambassador-level official to the United Nations to Amazon making facial-recognition software for police, from Google engaging in counterterrorism to Apple battling the FBI, net states are no longer content to make gadgets and tech toys. They’re shaping the world.

And we—as citizens, regardless of our nation-state—are discovering that, as we adapt to the world that net states create, we are able to selectively create our reality. We can choose what we see and whom we see to a degree never before possible.

We are, on the one hand, gaining power. As the power of net states increases, so too does our power to build our own realities. With their tools, we world-build. We inhabit digital-enabled dominions. And our tiny individual worlds Venn-diagram with other people’s tiny individual worlds to the point of creating recognizable patterns: a tribe, a culture, a country. We coalesce into groupings that transcend our physical social spaces.

And as we layer other realities onto the base reality of our physical space—a country, a city, a neighborhood—we begin to inhabit realities of shared beliefs with the people of our choosing, regardless of where our bodies reside in the physical world.

The problem is, if we share beliefs with some humans, that leaves a whole lot of other humans with whom we do not share beliefs. Those outside our ideological grouping are less easy to understand and are thus, at times, scary. Threatening, even. Hence the rise of polarization; the rise of us versus them; the decline of shared values.
This produces unstable democracy, our political edifice slowly crumbling like rocks sliding down a cliff face. It seems, if we are left to continue down this road unchecked, only a matter of time before the edifice shears off in sheets, sinking into the sea—in an extinction-inducing event akin to the Aldabran floods.

SAVING THE PEOPLE FROM THE PEOPLE

In 1979, psychologists Don Kelley and Daryl Connor mapped out what they called “the emotional cycle of change.” In any new situation, they posit, we start from a place of uninformed optimism: we’re hopeful, in short, and don’t know enough to feel otherwise. This optimism is followed by informed pessimism: in other words, we learn enough and doubt sets in. This leads to the third and hardest phase in emotional change: what Kelley and Connor call the “valley of despair.” We get to a point where we learn just how hard this current situation will be—and, at this point, many people quit. They move on to a new situation where they can be happily and dumbly hopeful again.

But if we push through the valley of despair, we can start to see light again. This time, we arrive at an informed optimism. Only then can we achieve some kind of completion; a sense of having achieved our goal.

IF IT IS WITHIN OUR POWER TO CHOOSE OUR OWN REALITY, IT IS ALSO WITHIN OUR POWER TO CHOOSE A DIFFERENT ONE.

Creating bespoke technology-molded worlds feels both familiar and comfortable (this is the informed part) and then icky and sad (this is the despair part). The theory of emotional change explains well why doomscrolling on Twitter feels both emotionally draining and compelling—it’s like watching a dumpster fire. Watching other people despair and suffer online is both horrible and fascinating. We may want to look away, but we are too curious to do so. And with enough exposure, we are somehow dulled to the intensity of the spectacle. Indeed, with sufficient exposure to other people’s suffering, this suffering—and the people who experience it—become that much more distant from our own experience, all the more “other.”
If we continue along these lines, we may evolve like Miéville’s people and the Aldabran birds: losing our awareness of the other and losing humanity’s most defining characteristic. But we don’t have to. If we can push through the urge to hive off and segregate ourselves from the broader reality—if we can instead intentionally put ourselves into spaces, online and IRL, where we can see not just our people, but people—then we can push through the despair layer of technological separatism into a higher layer of informed hope. If it is within our power to choose our own reality, it is also within our power to choose a different one—an informed view that embraces not just our people, but the people.

So, there’s hope. For all our differences and the environmental forces that drive us deeper into them, we are, at our core, the same. We’re the people. We are the many versions of us and the many versions of them.

And if we all share the same urge to world-build ourselves into cocoons of yes-men and experiential familiarity, then the act of world-building itself becomes what binds us. The urges that polarize us end up uniting us, for the multiplicity of realities we envision may be as varied as we 7 billion humans are. But that drive—the urge to organize the world into binaries, into us versus them—is a universal and distinctly human adaptation to the net-state layer, with its filter bubbles and its algorithmic push toward selective mingling.

The novelist Anaïs Nin wrote, “We don’t see things as they are. We see them as we are.” That is humanity’s most fundamental characteristic and also its greatest power, like the white-throated rail’s ability to fly. Humans can see, still. We just have to choose to see realities outside our own.

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