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The Future is Not What it Used To Be

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When asked how one goes bankrupt, Michael, a character in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* responds, "Gradually and then suddenly."

That's how everything important changes too. The data accumulates gradually until an organizational structure can no longer ignore the fact that it does not fit a structure built in the past in a different context.

When that happens inside the "closed world" of societal structures, we call it "paradigm change." Our belief systems, which are the organizational structures of our psyches or the collective psyche of an entire society or culture, are like umbrellas protecting us from the contradictory data that rains down on us. The umbrella has a tear through which the water drips but we don't notice it at first. Gradually the tear widens until we are soaking wet, standing there holding the tattered umbrella over our heads and telling ourselves that we're dry. Long after everyone else, only when we start shivering and sneezing, do we finally realize that we're all wet.

The restructuring of global society is a similar process. It has been happening gradually for a long time, driven above all by transforming technologies, in particular technologies of communication and information, and the evidence that the restructuring has already taken place is abundant. But to see it, you have to look toward the edge, where the new center always first appears. The edge, in fact, is the new center, but we have to have eyes to see what is happening there and how it will migrate inward and form the core of a new "consensus reality."

By the time the edge arrives at the center and everybody agrees they have always believed it all along, a new truth is on the edge. In other words, by the time everybody believes or knows the same thing, by the time a society shares a "consensus reality" it no longer sees because everyone believes it, then it has become a lie.

The boundaries around nation states emerged in the past few centuries as appropriate ways to structure the economic, social, and political realities of an increasingly complex world. Smaller units within nation states were absorbed or annexed or assimilated. That new context for human society changed the content of people's lives. When the structures had become relatively stable, we no longer saw them; we saw only the content of our lives without seeing how the context had ordered it.

If we were to have asked someone in England in the seventeenth century to identify the center of society, they might have gone to the Bank of England in the City of London and said, "Here, here is the center." But someone with more vision might have pointed to the edges where colonies like the United States were already gathering momentum to become the new center. "There," they might have said, "out there on the edges, is the new center."

In the same way, when the first pictures of earth as a single globe were seen all over the world for the first time, it was called a defining moment, one in which we all simultaneously grasped a new

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unity about ourselves. In fact, the point of reference of that picture, which we have called "space" as if it is empty and extra, that edge of perception from which the globe could be seen in its entirety, was invisibly marking a new center – up there, or out there, in "space." In the next century, the center will shift from the earth to distributed colonized worlds and artificial environments in and possibly out of the solar system as well.

We never see the point of view from which a new vision is presented. But that point of view defines what's next.

To identify a complex reality, then, such as the "global community" which has long been evolving, requires that we provide coordinates for our points of reference. We must label them in space and time, we must note from where and when we are looking and making our descriptive statements.

We live on temporal islands; we do not all inhabit the same points of view. From some points of view, closer to the edges, global community has not only already happened, there is not only more than abundant evidence for it having happened, it is already on its way to becoming something else.

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Here's an example that illuminates the fluid nature of the structures we are trying to nail down as if there are solid objects.

During the Korean banking crisis, the United States government intervened to support Samsung, a large multi-national enterprise based in South Korea. Micron Technology was one of the few American companies that competed directly with Samsung in the manufacture of a particular kind of computer chip. They wrote a letter of protest to the United States Department of the Treasury. A senior lawyer there told me of their consternation at being asked how they could use tax dollars from an American company to support their primary foreign competitor.

The only answer that made sense was that the self-interest of the United States was better served by maintaining a stable global economy than by advocating for the narrower interests of an American company.

In light of what I noted above, boundaries emerging around structures we call "nation states" as appropriate markers for the complexity of economic and political activity at a particular level of hierarchical organization within the dynamic of a changing global economy was rendering that structure obsolete.

A company like Micron, if it was to compete, learned that it must take upon itself some of the protection and regulation it had previously trusted a national government to provide. We have witnessed this phenomenon in the growth of multi-nationals and then trans-nationals, public companies like GE or private ones like Bechtel, that engage in their own diplomacy and intelligence and counter-intelligence and have their own security forces.

Transforming technologies as they alter our ways of thinking and perceiving always outstrip protections afforded by the structures generated by prior technologies. A corollary to the Micron example is the reformulation of intelligence, counter-intelligence and espionage as activities sanctioned not by the nation state as in prior times but by the technology itself.

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Spies are in effect people who are allowed to break the rules. The right to break the rules which makes spies objects of both admiration and fear was conferred by a nation state on behalf of maintaining itself as a structure inside which others must keep the rules.

Distributed computer networks as they evolved through the seventies and eighties gave power formerly reserved for spies to what came to be called "computer hackers." The primary question posed by distributed networks, according to a friend who works for the National Security Agency, is: How do we live in a world without walls? How do we free the mind?

He was asking, in effect, how do we think and act in a world already defined by transforming technologies?

To many people in the hump of the societal bell curve, that intelligence agent is asking the question from the future. The agent, however, from his own point of view, is very much in the present. This is why there are really no futurists, there are only people describing the present(s) in which they live. But if another has not yet arrived at that present, it will sound to them like the future.

Trans-national or supra-national entities (including intelligence agencies which network with one another globally to fight network wars that recognize no borders) now interpenetrate one another in indeterminate ways. We don't know what to call them yet. The names of emergent realities require original thinkers to give them names. That happens gradually as multinationals morph into trans-nationals which morph into....?

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The symbiotic relationship between human societies and their transforming technologies means that we are always playing leapfrog with ourselves. We are always bootstrapping ourselves by our technologies into more complex organizational structures appropriate to the speed of the flow of information within them. All organizations like all organisms can be defined as structures of information and energy which is why, when we create new technological possibilities, we always inaugurate a process of redefining ourselves as well.

From within the prior structures (at the tail of the bell curve crawling through time like a hunched-up rodent), we can never see it coming, because the old paradigm can not contain the new one. From that point of view, the flipping of old structures into new is always sudden. Perhaps this is what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead meant when he said, "The major advances in civilization are processes that all but wreck the societies in which they occur."

I do not believe it was coincidental that the OPEC oil crisis in 1973 stimulated the emergence of scenario planning as a preferred way to think about the future.

Shell Oil, in particular, was blindsided by the crisis and asked, what might we have done differently, what would have enabled us to see what was about to happen?

Scenario planning evolved as a response to that question.

In fact, scenario planning was nothing new. Military planning has long included war gaming which attempted to think of every eventuality that might take place so that nothing that subsequently

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happened was a surprise for which the military was unprepared. But scenario planning applied the depth and detail of the process to normative business planning processes, and that was new.

It was not uncommon prior to our era to engage in “management by objective,” a more linear way of thinking about the future. MBO presumes that one can identify and define a future state, that one can identify with equal clarity one’s present state, and that one can define the stages of the process by which one can move intentionally from the present state to the future state.

Scenario planning, on the other hand, presumes that the future may be any of a number of possible states and that planning means (1) including a diverse multi-disciplinary team to imagine and define the characteristics of three or four of the most likely scenarios, (2) building in frequent feedback loops to monitor which futures are in fact emerging from current conditions and therefore (3) taking responsibility for creating the most desirable future scenario, to the degree that conditions allow.

I say that the emergence of scenario planning was not coincidental because the “closed world” inside the psychic space defined by the evolution of cybernetics and computer power had been evolving since the Second World War. We lived increasingly inside that closed world, a simulation mediated by increasingly networked computers (which are symbol-manipulating machines) and gradually the way information was managed inside that space became our way of thinking about ourselves, the universe, everything.

Scenario planning with its structure of branching if-this-then-that possibilities echoes the way computers organize basic logical processes. Simple linear processes like MBO were no longer congruent with how we thought about ourselves and the world. The OPEC oil crisis “suddenly” revealed that the proper way to construct the future as a possibility was the way computing processes had been “gradually” teaching us to think.

This discussion suggests that there is no such thing as a “future.” The future is a social construction of reality, the name we give to how we hold ourselves or understand ourselves as possibilities for action here and now. Those possibilities will be defined by our horizons and our horizons are in turn defined by the breadth of our understanding of complex societal changes and the range of our vision so that we can see the inevitable implications of those changes for identity, security, commerce, political structures, everything.

Our identities as individuals and societies are defined by boundaries. Structures of security, properties like privacy or intellectual property rights, even loyalties to organizational structures large and small, are all functions of clear boundaries. As a result of transforming technologies, however, boundaries are anything but clear.

Our passage from the paradigm that was to the paradigm that is becoming must always traverse a zone of annihilation in which everything we have thought ourselves to be is called into question. From the points of view of more than one possible future, this has already happened and is happening now. The structures of the future are pulling us toward themselves while the prior structures are transformed. When galaxies collide, the gravity of one galaxy, the strongest galaxy, claims and recontextualizes the stars of the other. Nothing is lost but everything looks different.

In order to see the futures that already exist, we must build in an openness to heresy, an agnosticism toward cherished truths which will be revealed to be palliatives, comforting bromides, never as eternally true as we thought. During such passages, insanity, like wisdom, is contextual. The fire of transforming technological processes is now creating and has already created the forms



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and structures that will include and transcend what has come before. The future, for some, is already past.

George Bernard Shaw said, "All great truth begins as blasphemy." So let those with ears to hear, hear, and with eyes to see, see.

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