

Appropriate Civilisation versus the New Despotism

Jeremy Leggett takes a personal look at what needs to be done to avoid a potentially dangerous and depressing clash of philosophies





In this struggle between believers in the possibility of a better civilisation, one rooted in increasing human co-operation and harmony, and demagogues apparently able realistically to plot the polar opposite, a kind of global civil war seems to have broken out in the last nine to 12 months

Suddenly, believers in the possibility of a better civilisation, one rooted in increasing human co-operation and harmony, find ourselves in a world where demagogues appear able realistically to plot the polar opposite. In this struggle between two vastly different world views, a kind of global civil war seems to have broken out in the last nine to 12 months.

I invite the reader to consider my seven chosen themes as dials, each of which will need to be turned up near to full positive in the next decade. They are labelled Climate Action, Energy Transition, Technology for Good, Truth, Equality, Reform of Capitalism and Common Security.

This list is not comprehensive in capturing the struggle between what I call “Appropriate Civilisation” and “New Despotism”. But I contend that if most of these particular dials are turned down anywhere near to full negative, demagogues will have found their road to a new despotism and we can expect a future based on unbreakable police states.

Let me summarise my sense of the global setting of each of the seven dials in turn:

Climate Action
Turning this dial up requires being on course for the Paris Agreement target of under 2° of global warming

Without this, an increasingly runaway global thermostat is likely to wash away all civilisations – appropriate, despotic or otherwise – as it slowly renders the planet uninhabitable. Recognising this imperative, or some version of it, all nations renewed their pledges to the Paris goal at the Marrakech climate summit in December 2016. They called their collective action “irreversible”.

Key states, cities, companies, financial

institutions, faiths and communities lined up in support. For example, California has targets stronger than many nations. More than a thousand cities are committed to 100% renewable power. So are more than 80 of the world’s biggest companies, in Google’s case as soon as this year. More than 600 financial institutions worth more than \$5 trillion are pulling their capital out of fossil fuels.

I set the global score on the climate dial as slightly positive. It would be more positive had the scientific news from the climate itself not been so bad in 2016.

Energy Transition
Turning this dial up requires being on course for a clean energy future both in order to address climate change and to escape the multiple ways that fossil fuels urge humankind towards societal problems, including mass killers such as air pollution, terrorism and war

The good news here is that a global energy transition from fossil fuels to clean energy is unfolding before our eyes and not just because of serious intent on climate action. Solar and wind power will be the cheapest options in most countries within just a few years – and in some sectors and countries already are. Cheap batteries will soon be storing their electricity on a massive scale. Electric vehicles are on course to knock an entire category of oil use, diesel, out of the markets within 10 years. They all bring a catalogue of social benefits with them, including health, freedom from expensive imports and consequent reduction in international tensions.

Accordingly, I set the dial on energy as distinctly positive

\$5tr

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1k

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Analysis of both the UK Brexit vote and the US Presidential election shows how pervasive the problem of fake news has become. As *Wired* put it, in 2016 “the Mainstream Media melted down as fake news festered”. By August fake news about the US election was increasingly outperforming the top stories at the 19 major US news outlets



Technology for Good

Turning this dial up will require artificial intelligence and robotics to be applied with appreciable net benefits for society as a whole

The development of AI (artificial intelligence) and robotics is evolving even faster than clean energy. On one hand, profound social benefits are in prospect. Medical diagnosis is a good example. Machine-learning computers using global databases are providing life-saving diagnoses that elude human medical experts. They are also making it less difficult to hold criminals to account. And control of electricity demand by AI in data centres is achieving remarkable emissions cuts in what is a large global point source of carbon dioxide. Such examples are plentiful.

But on the other hand tech leaders are openly worrying about the effect of exponential AI and robotics on jobs. In Japan, the government is looking to robotics to boost the national economy and robots already outnumber humans in the kitchen of one Japanese restaurant. In the UK, banks are preparing to roll out robot tellers aiming to improve customer service via machine-learned empathic responses. In the US, *Wired*, the magazine of choice for many in the digital world, concludes that “the AI threat isn’t skynet. It’s the end of the middle class”.

Concern over job losses is fuelling a significant component of the anger expressed by the populist right. Meanwhile, the potential downsides of AI and robotics when it comes to authoritarian regimes do not need much imagining. In the wrong hands, uncontrolled, they can quickly amount to the perfect infrastructure for police states.

All this being the case, the net global score for the technology dial should probably be set slightly negative. This assessment excludes the role AI plays in the next theme. Including that would drive the score much higher

Truth

Turning this dial up will require technology to be used for improving the processes of liberal democracy, including the quality and verifiability of information and its transparency

The rise of populism has been much assisted by the explosion in 2016 and 2017 of so-called “fake news”, fairly describable as systemic lying in the mass media. Famous examples of the falsehoods pushed on populations include Pope Francis supporting Donald Trump and the UK Brexiteers’ insistence, contradicted by the UK Statistics Authority among others, that Britons “send £350 million to the EU every week that could be spent instead on the NHS”.

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This is all happening today. Tomorrow? Silicon Valley guru Peter Diamandis warns that within four years – by the time of the next US election – AI will be 10 times more powerful and will be applied to 50 billion devices and a trillion sensors. All this manipulation will be unfolding in a world becoming inexorably more permissive of mass surveillance.

So much of this drama focuses on the creations of Silicon Valley, where company founders and employees have tended to favour the Democrats over the Republicans. What is the response there?

The pushback has begun, but it hardly amounts to a resistance consistent with the scale of the problem.

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook founder, is aware of the problem. In a 5,700-word Facebook post,



1%

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50bn

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he has endeavoured to chart a responsive course for his creation. It was met with scepticism. Nikki Usher, professor of new media and technology at George Washington University in the US, concluded: "He might be in denial because a lot of the rest of us are".

Some readers may think I am overstating demagoguery in modern politics. But people in the heart of the "establishment" share my view, including Martin Wolf, Chief Economics Editor at the *Financial Times* and George Soros.

All this considered, the global score for the truth dial must surely be set at net severe negative. Already far worse is eminently conceivable, in relatively short order, unless resistance can be marshalled effectively

Equality

Turning this dial up will require significant narrowing of the income gap, within both the developed and developing worlds

Many analyses of the rise of the new demagogues show that anger over a widening income gap strongly influences those prepared to vote for them. In the US the figures are shocking. Between 1970 and 2014, average income grew 77% but almost all of these gains went to the top 1% of earners.

Elsewhere, elites have also allowed disproportionate self-enrichment to run rife. Globally, the eight richest people own the same wealth as the poorest 50% and the richest 1% own more than the other 99%. Every year at the World Economic Forum, attendees openly worry about the unsustainability of these figures and the social divisiveness they create. Yet each year they do precious little about it.

Efforts to reduce inequality have seen some limited success at the bottom of the wealth league table. The percentage of people in extreme poverty – those earning under \$1.90 a day – is falling in all regions of the world. But it must fall far faster if the World Bank is to hit its target of eliminating extreme poverty by 2030.

The global score for the inequality dial must be set at a clear net negative





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The virtual absence of legal redress for financial malfeasance, even in the case of companies and executives with hands caught jammed in the till, has undoubtedly contributed to the rise of the populist right

Reform of Capitalism

Turning this dial up will require much more attention to market failures

The need for significant reform of capitalism has been widely acknowledged since the financial crisis of 2008. The absence of it has been the subject of disquiet even in the conservative press. *The Daily Mail*, a popular UK newspaper, ran a headline in June 2012 exhorting: “Put Bankers in the Dock”.

The virtual absence of legal redress for financial malfeasance, even in the case of companies and executives with hands caught jammed in the till, has undoubtedly contributed to the rise of the populist right.

The global score for the reform dial must accordingly be set at clear net negative

Common Security

We live in a world where superpowers are fighting wars by proxy

Pointers to the pervasiveness of this new form of conflict come to the fore from time to time. In January 2016 hackers shut down the Ukrainian power grid. Kiev accused Russian Special Forces. The malware involved had previously infected power suppliers in the US and Europe though without shutting down supply. It is widely suspected that malware sits waiting to be triggered throughout infrastructure in the superpowers.

Given the fragility of the US electricity grid infrastructure this should be a particular concern. The three US grids are aged, with large power transformers on average 40 years old. The US suffers more blackouts than any other developed nation. Centcom Commander General Lloyd Austin has said of the grids’ susceptibility to attack: “It’s not a question of if; it’s a question of when”.

The CIA, NSA and FBI have all concluded that Russia tried to influence the US presidential election in an effort to get Trump elected.

For their part the Russians also have to fear American capabilities. An attack on Russian bank Sberbank in late 2014, for example, hints at the vulnerability of Russian capital markets. It spooked depositors into withdrawing \$20bn in one week.

Other states would appear to be playing the same kinds of games. Saudi Arabia has blamed Iran for serious cyber attacks on its aviation authority and on four other unnamed bodies.

Dangerously destabilising as these proxy conflicts are, the potential for cyberattack on the world’s nuclear weapons, and their aged software support, hardly bears thinking about. The reduction in global warhead inventory from around 70,000 in the mid-1980s to some 15,000 today has been a somewhat positive feature of the years since the “Cold War”. Yet both Putin and Trump have recently said they want to “strengthen” their nuclear weapons stockpiles.

The global score for the conflict dial must be set at a manifest net negative

A longer version of this article is available online <http://www.jeremyleggett.net/2017/02/appropriate-civilization-versus-new-despotism-state-of-play-on-20th-february-2017-one-month-into-the-trump-presidency/>

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