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Those who control the past control the future

- George Orwell

The progressive myths of Genesis and Zenith

Our species evolved from brutally violent apes. As a result we are inherently violent and competitive. For our ancient ancestors life was brutish, violent, inconvenient and short. Men would compete with each other for access to food, shelter and females. Most men would die young in the fight. Women were routinely rounded up, made captive in harems, property of the local warlord, and placed under the control of his thugs. Diseases were rampant and severely deteriorated the quality of life and the lifespan of humans. Indeed, most children didn't even survive past childhood due to famine and diseases.

The economy was a disaster, money didn't exist yet, and bartering with each other was a nightmare because it was virtually impossible to find someone who would want to trade what you had with what you needed or know the actual exchange rate between objects. It was particularly inconvenient for women since most of them worked as prostitutes and were forced to tend for the sheep, goats and camels that their customers paid with, until they found somebody who would trade them for more portable jewelry. Neither were much use for saving for retirement though, as bandits would periodically rob them of their fortunes and would end up dying poor.

As history advanced technology evolved and so did the simple ancient magical beliefs of our ancestors which became complex religions. Religious elites took over the governance of civilizations from the warlords and liberated women from harems and brothels. Money was invented and quality of life improved a bit but still women had a secondary role to men, markets and technology were sequestered by religion while diseases and famine continued to decimate populations. War didn't stop, on the contrary, those elites instigated their faithful populations towards ever more violent holy wars. Religious mandates of abstinence from sexual competition wasn't enough to appease men from their natural instinct to compete. Many men turned to crime which made life notably violent even during times of peace.

Eventually Enlightenment arrived and brought us the triple blessings of two-party bicameral democracies, competitive market economies and industrialization. Finally governance was in the hands of professionals who would pass laws based

on what is objectively right and wrong, and not on the whims of religious mysticism! Finally there was a prosocial avenue for men to turn their natural competitive instincts: they could compete in a civilized manner, under the rule of law, in free market economies for the benefit of all humankind! And finally science conquered medicine and food production, and there could be food for everybody and cures for the most frightening maladies.

Angels came down from the heavens to announce that the pinnacle of human ingenuity had been achieved. Mermaids swam upstream in pre-industrial uncontaminated rivers, like stools of salmon during spawning season, and sang to the illiterate masses that they no longer were peasants but now they were citizens of shiny new nations, with unalienable rights and duties. It took only three centuries for those blessings to be shared with women and non-binary folk as well.

Some peoples are being slower to embrace the Light than others, but slowly and surely, Nirvana is eventually reaching all corners of the Earth. Since then we've been blessed with continuous technological improvements, like credit cards and other forms of virtual money but the overall arch of history is completed. For all practical purposes, History ended.

Amen.

Data shall set you free

The preceding myth summarizes the hegemonic narrative of history in contemporary western society. It is usually served without the light touches of sarcasm that spice up the version presented here. The more common dull and sober serving helps create the illusion that the myth is somehow based on science, but is not.

Unfortunately, not even the brightest scientists can travel back in time. Interpretations of data from thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands and even millions of years ago must necessarily provide a lot of wiggle room to accommodate uncertainty due to incompleteness in the datasets. However, no amount of wiggle room can accommodate at the same time the datasets that we have gathered about our ancestors, and the building blocks of the hegemonic historical narrative summarized above.

From a scientific perspective there are a few data points that seem uncontestable: our most ancient ancestors were mostly peaceful, cooperative and egalitarian. They enjoyed long and healthy lives. They didn't trade or barter within their group, they just shared equally. When they settled down in agricultural cultures the quality of their nutrition deteriorated, as did their health and lifespan. Later, when centralized, state-sponsored money appeared for the first time, it was virtual money. Cash (coins) arrived a few millennia later. At the same time as state-sponsored money appeared, also wage labor, slavery and debt crises appeared. There was also a professionalization of soldiers and an

increase of violent military conflicts. People's lives further deteriorated. With the advent of industrial food, nutrition and health deteriorated even further, although improvements in medicine mask that. For the last few millennia, as civilization, technology and the ability for massive coordination have improved, the average wealth has increased, the average energy produced per human alive has increased, the average amount of calories produced per human alive have increased. And yet, the median quality of life for humans, and for their domesticated species which provide food to them, has deteriorated. Those have been the major trends that have marked our History.

The current century may or may not provide an exception to those trends. Some argue that it will, while others expect it to be a newer version of a transient "Pax Romana", a brief "Pax Americana" which will crush as soon as the empire falters, and that might happen soon, with emerging powers like China and Russia perhaps already sensing the Empire's growing weakness.

Orwell's insight

We are story-telling animals. We need stories to string together facts. Therefore facts that don't fit in the threads of popular narratives fall through the cracks, get forgotten or are dismissed as deviations, oddities, "exceptions that confirm the rule" (has there ever been a less scientific meme?).

Orwell's great insight, condensed in his popular quote "Those who control the past control the future", is that History is a story, and a very powerful one. It is a story that tells us who we are, where we come from, which are the valid paths to tread, and which paths are mistakes. Therefore it strongly conditions which paths we will consider in the future. It severely narrows down the cone of all possible futures.

It is worth pointing out that it is perfectly possible, and indeed is often the case, for a hegemonic narrative to thrive despite an academic consensus on key elements that invalidate it. Thanks to the power of storytelling we live in a world where simultaneously we have consensus scholarly agreement on key historical and biological facts and yet, the mainstream narratives, both academic and popular, assert exactly the opposite, negating or navigating around those "inconvenient facts". Seen from this perspective is quite shocking to realize that many academics themselves believe in the overall arc of the hegemonic narratives, and they are so specialized that they are able to explain away the contradictions surfaced in their narrow field.

Clearly the hegemonic narrative is not very conducive to examine history critically and draw conclusions about mistakes that we might have made in the past. The myth encodes the idea of progress, the concept that human history is mostly linear and each stage represents an absolute improvement with respect to the previous one. This line of thinking **predisposes us to think about small reforms that we can do on the current system**, built on top of what we already have. By the same token it makes it **more difficult to observe**

that some of the foundations of our society are harmful, discard them altogether, and build something new, something revolutionarily better, not just incrementally better.

Besides impacting the actions of the collective, stories also have an enormous impact on individuals. One of the key insights of post-modernity is that **we inhabit stories** (even though one could argue that the insight came from earlier Buddhist traditions). **We see ourselves as actors playing one of the roles in the popular collective stories. The role that we choose for ourselves in those stories conditions the way we feel, and our feelings and emotions condition the way we think and act.**

A striking example of the power of collective narratives on individual behavior is the geographical difference in rates of suicide. One possible explanation that some authors have hypothesized about greater incidence of suicides among more well-off western societies than among poorer societies is that when things are going objectively well for somebody, according to society's standards, they have a good job, etc. and yet they feel bad, they don't have anything external to blame. When things are going bad for everybody, people can inhabit a story, which might feature topics such as scarcity, collective bad luck, oppression, etc. those are features that allow people to blame their misery on some external factor. But when the economy is doing well, and everybody around is posting on social media how great things are going for them, people don't find a role in the collective story that fits their unpleasant feelings. Therefore they might tend to blame themselves for not fitting in the story, and in some cases, end up suiciding. We can see those suicides in a very real sense as victims of the story of progress.

The first three books of this series make the argument that there are indeed several foundations of our current society that are harmful, and that it would be much more effective, efficient, and likely to lead to success, to replace them with new ones rather than trying to reform them, or to build mitigation mechanisms around them. In this context, success is defined as enabling humanity to flourish and build societies that are more conducive to happiness and fulfillment, and less to unnecessary pain.

Therefore it follows that **if we want to have a chance to succeed we need to build and popularize an alternative History**, one that highlights the mistakes that we have done in the past and explains how those mistakes have put us in the conundrum we face today, with socio-economic institutions that are much more likely to stress and drain people out of their resources rather than support them. **Such a narrative will serve the double purpose of opening up a horizon of revolutionary possibilities for collective improvement as well as enabling us to inhabit stories that validate our feelings of oppression and despair at the precarious state of the world.**

This fourth and last book of the series is a sketch of a proposal for such History. The good news, for those of us who see how harmful the current hegemonic memes and institutions are, is that it is very hard to defend them scientifically.

Doing so requires a degree of intellectual contortionism that violently defies Occam's Razor. On the other hand, it is **much easier to construct a History which matches the best historical data that we have, and that supports an ideology based on peace, cooperation, sharing and comunion.**

The bad news is that the **hegemonic History, despite lacking factual support, is very compelling.** Is simple and linear. It validates people's feelings of aggression that are caused by artificial scarcity. And is very optimistic and rewarding:

Many otherwise reasonable people seem to have a burning need to locate the roots of war deep in our primal past, to see self-sufficient foragers as poor, and to spread the misbegotten gospel that three or four decades was a ripe old age for a human being in pre-agricultural times. But **this vision of our past is demonstrably false.** *¿Que pasa?*

If prehistoric life was a perpetual struggle that ended in early death, if ours is a species motivated almost exclusively by self-interest, if war is an ancient, biologically embedded tendency, then one can soothingly argue, as Steven Pinker does, that things are getting better all the time—that, in his Panglossian view, “we are probably living in the most peaceful moment of our species' time on Earth.” That would be encouraging news, indeed, which is what most audiences want to hear, after all. We all want to believe things are getting better, that our species is learning, growing, and prospering. **Who refuses congratulations for having the good sense to be alive here and now?**

But just as “patriotism is the conviction that your country is superior to all others because you were born in it” (G. B. Shaw), the notion that we live in our species' “most peaceful moment” is as intellectually baseless as it is emotionally comforting. Journalist Louis Menand noted how science can fulfill a conservative, essentially political function by providing “an explanation for the way things are that does not threaten the way things are.” “Why,” he asks rhetorically, “should someone feel unhappy or engage in anti-social behavior when that person is living in the freest and most prosperous nation on Earth? It can't be the system!” What's your problem? **Everything's just fine. Life's great and getting better! Less war! Longer life! New and improved human existence!**

This Madison Avenue vision of the super-duper new and improved present is framed by an utterly fictional, blood-smeared Hobbesian past. Yet it's marketed to the public as the “clear-eyed realist” position, and those who question its founding assumptions risk being dismissed as delusional romantics still grieving over the death of Janis

Joplin and the demise of bell-bottoms. But that “realistic” argument is riddled with misunderstood data, mistaken interpretations, and misleading calculations. A dispassionate review of the relevant science clearly demonstrates that the tens of thousands of years before the advent of agriculture, while certainly not a time of uninterrupted utopian bliss, **was for the most part characterized by robust health, peace between individuals and groups, low levels of chronic stress and high levels of overall satisfaction for most of our ancestors.**

Having made this argument, have we outed ourselves as card-carrying comrades in the Delusional Utopian Movement (DUM)? Is it Rousseauian fantasy to assert that prehistory was not an unending nightmare? That human nature leans no more toward violence, selfishness, and exploitation than toward peace, generosity, and cooperation? That most of our ancient ancestors probably experienced a sense of communal belonging few of us can imagine today? That human sexuality probably evolved and functioned as a social bonding device and a pleasurable way to avoid and neutralize conflict? **Is it silly romanticism to point out that ancient humans who survived their first few years often lived as long as the richest and luckiest of us do today, even with our high-tech coronary stents, diabetes medication, and titanium hips?**

No. If you think about it, the neo-Hobbesian vision is far sunnier than ours. To have concluded, as we have, that our species has an innate capacity for love and generosity at least equal to our taste for destruction, for peaceful cooperation as much as coordinated attack, for an open, relaxed sexuality as much as for jealous, passion-smothering possessiveness ...to see that **both these worlds were open to us**, but that around ten thousand years ago a few of our ancestors wandered off the path they'd been on forever into a garden of toil, disease, and conflict where our species has been trapped ever since ... well, this is not exactly a rose-colored view of the overall trajectory of humankind. Who are the naive romantics here, anyway?

Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá - Sex at Dawn

Chapter 14 - The Longevity Lie (Short?)

We live in a society that discourages emotional work in favor of numbing comfort. Trigger warnings. Call out culture. Instead of being trained to identify discomfort as a sign of some unresolved issue in ourselves we have been trained to call out those to say uncomfortable things, to alienate each other, to construct “us”es and “them”s.

Therefore there is a very real risk of being met with resistance when explaining a version of history and human biology supported by science which, implicitly or

explicitly, suggest that radical changes in our society that would be better fitted to help human flourishing based on our actual nature, rather than a Myth. Plato already described this situation over two thousand years ago in 'The Allegory of the Cave'. At the end of that story the prisoner that has managed to escape and has seen the light, the character who represents the enlightened philosopher, is met with resistance when he returns and explains how the world really is. When he offers to liberate his peers they threaten to kill him.

Myth busting

In this book we will go through the journey of humanity and we will put special focus on events that challenge the foundational myths of the hegemonic ideology.

Myth: In order to get out of scarcity we need to increase productivity. Fact: throughout history productivity has increased manifold and yet the median person wealth has decreased. Gains on productivity have gone in part to a very small elite, but mostly to systemic waste in a system that uses wealth to perpetuate itself rather than to better people's lives.

The faulty assumption that scarcity-based economic thinking is somehow the de-facto human approach to questions of supply, demand, and distribution of wealth has misled much anthropological, philosophical, and economic thought over the past few centuries. As economist John Gowdy explains, "Rational economic behavior' is peculiar to market capitalism and is an embedded set of beliefs, not an objective universal law of nature. The myth of economic man explains the organizing principle of contemporary capitalism, nothing more or less."

Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá - Sex at Dawn

Myth: we need the State in order to avoid brutal conflict. Fact: humanity was much more peaceful before the advent of the State, and the more power the States accumulate the more likely it is for violence to flourish. Wars between members of different states, police and judicial brutality against their own residents, and the mundane threat of violence that separates food and housing from those who need it most.

Myth: domination, inequality, coercion, poverty, etc. are an unfortunate but necessary trade-off for having the complex society needed for global governance and advanced technology and medicine. Fact: since ancestral times horizontal groups of humans have collaborated in large numbers across long distances without any of those negative side-effects.

Myth: Greed and competition is our nature. Collaboration and generosity take effort and are fragile. Fact: most societies during most of human history have been based on mutual support and collaboration beyond their group and kin. Their members have found that ethos intuitive and haven't needed extensive training and workshops to maintain social order. Furthermore some scientific studies can be interpreted as humans having a stronger built-in machinery to

support collaboration than to support competition. For example, behavioral results from the famous Prisoner Dilemma experiment are hard to interpret because they are likely to be influenced more by social norms than by human biology. However, in a twist of the classic experiment, a group of female participants underwent an MRI scan during the game, and researchers observed more brain activity as a response to collaborative moves than to betrayals. This might indicate that our brains are set up to spend more effort mapping out social networks with collaborators than worrying about foes.