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Geography, Technology, and "Smart" Thinking*

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Review

On a global and theoretical level, growth and prosperity among cultures and civilizations can be explained by environment, or by the limits of geographical isolation. Given a make-believe world in which every individual has identical genetic potential, there would still be large differences in education, skills, and related occupations and productivity among people because of environmental and demographic differences that over centuries shape human behavior and attitudes.

For Thomas Sowell [1], the conservative economist, nothing so much conflicts with desire for equality as geography; it is the physical setting-reflected by large bodies of water, deserts, mountains, jungles, forests, etc.-in which civilizations, nations, races, and ethnic groups have evolved and produced different cultures. Put simply in *Conquest and Cultures*, the people of the Himalayas have not had equal opportunity to acquire seafaring skills, and the Eskimos did not have equal opportunity to learn how to farm or grow oranges. Too often the influence of geography is assessed in terms of natural resources that directly influence national wealth. But geography also influences cultural differences and cognitive thinking, by either expanding or limiting the universe of ideas and inventions available to different people.

In this connection, Richard Nisbett [2] argues in The Geography of Thought that geographical isolation can lead to either positive or negative outcomes, and can explain differences in behavior and attitudes over accumulated generations. Beyond Nisbett, the accidents of geography (and history), where you were born and when you were born, immensely influence innovation, opportunity and human capital. Put in simple terms, had Warren Buffet or Bill Gates been born 500 years ago, they may have likely died on the battlefield, given their physical stature and the European inclination toward war. Had Alex Rodriguez been born 100 years ago, the likelihood is he would have been a factory worker or laborer.

*Adapted from Allan C. Ornstein, *Excellence vs. Equality: Can Society Achieve Both Goals*? New York, Routledge Publishers 2016.

When geography isolates people, say by mountains, a desert, or a small island, the people have limited contact with the outside world and, subsequently, their technological and innovative advancement is limited. While the rest of the world trades skills, ideas, and values from a larger cultural pool, isolated people are limited by their own resources and what knowledge they have developed by themselves. Very few advances come from isolated cultures, and those that do are usually modified and improved by people that have learned to assimilate and adopt new ideas from other cultures. Until 9/11, we have had the advantage of geographical isolation and protection. The isolation did not hinder our progress because of the large influx of immigrants from around the world who not only brought their meager possessions to our shores but also their ideas, values, and aspirations.

For two thousand years, before the invention of railroads, trucks, and airplanes, water was the key for traveling and exploring. Up to the 1850s, it was faster and cheaper to travel by water from San Francisco to China than overland to Chicago. The Europeans, since the Viking era, understood that geographical isolation could be overcome by the sea or ocean, and, given their capitalistic and conquering zeal and attitudes of superiority, they went out and traded with, and also colonized, other people and other cultures. Subsequently, they made industrial and technological advances by adopting and modifying the idea of other civilizations.

England, France, Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands were tiny countries, compared to China and India, but the Europeans traveled the navigable waterways of their continent as well as the Atlantic and Indian Ocean. They came in contact with many countries and civilizations, including South America, Africa, Egypt, Turkey, India, China, Japan, etc.- and thus gained from their knowledge. But the older and isolated civilizations did not draw knowledge or ideas from the Europeans or from each other and eventually those great civilizations (which were once more advanced, but isolated) were overtaken and conquered by the smaller countries that had expanded their knowledge base.

Once Japan broke from its isolation, and its traditional culture mixed with new ideas, it became one of today's economic powers, and a comparable process is now shaping China and India. Similarly the rise of the United States-in particular our skills, technology, innovations and economic advances-is based on the history of immigrants, people coming from all parts of the world, melting together, and exchanging knowledge and ideas. It

is this constant flow of different people from different parts of the globe that helps create an American entrepreneurial spirit and sense of innovation and creativity not enjoyed in more static, less dynamic countries.

The first generation of immigrants may not score high on standardized reading tests, because of language differences, but their intellectual resources, hard work, and sweat have spearheaded much of our industrial machinery and muscle in the twentieth century and much of our high-tech/information in the twenty-first century. They represent a constant stream of innovation and invention-the keystone to the American economic engine. That said, the founders of Google, Yahoo, Intel, EBay, YouTube, Twitter, Sun micro systems and Tesla Motors were immigrants, born in foreign countries. Immigrants continue to make up a high proportion to the American economy and inventive spirit.

In the final analysis, geography and history dictate who we are as people and what opportunities we have as individuals. Most Americans can trace their blood and roots elsewhere, where there were minimal opportunities and mobility, minimal equalitarianism and rewards for individual performance. As for my own history, and on a more personal level, I feel the presence of Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who saw himself and his ancestors "persecuted, spat on, and slandered for centuries in Europe." It culminated in his homeland, Mother Russia, with the death of tens of thousands in Belostock (the most violent pogrom) and hundreds of thousands at Babi Yar (a mass murder and mass grave). "Like one long soundless scream... I'm every old man executed here, as I am every child murdered." So few people seem to care, so few people remember, so few people even know about Yevtushenko or Belostock and Babi Yar.

The history of mankind is a history of plunder, rape and random slaughter - civilizations we think of as "civilized" are no exception. Had my ancestors not immigrated from Russia in 1905 and Czechoslovakia in the early 1930s, I would be nothing - and my children and their children would not exist. How many of us can locate Rwanda or Congo on the map? Does anyone among us know where Auschwitz and Dachau were located? Who can recall or ever knew the name of the pilot (Paul Tibbets) who dropped the A-bomb on Hiroshima - what his thoughts were as he approached the target, or after the carnage and cloud of dust? The U.S. is not innocent, but this is the best that humankind can offer. Here there is a chance, some opportunity and rewards for excellence and some equality to prevail for common people - for the ancestors of peasants, serfs, indentured servants, and slaves to rise from rags to riches. Here the gross inequalities of opportunity are erased, at least partially erased, compared to limited opportunities available in other societies.

Reaffirming the best and brightest

We live in a society where few educated people in the Western world would dare admit at a cocktail party they never read Dante's Inferno, Cervantes's Don Quixote or at least one or two plays by Shakespeare. We also live in an age where many of us are unable to explain the difference between an atom or molecule and a galaxy or solar system. Most distressing, we live in a "dumbed down" society, illustrated by the National Education Association reports in 2007 that "the proportion of 17-year olds who read nothing (unless required to do for school) more than doubled between 1984 and 2004."

At the turn of the 20th century, the best and brightest were located in the "civilized" world and the dull and low achieving populace was found in the 'uncivilized' world. These terms were frequently used by well-known imperialists such as President Teddy Roosevelt and Admiral Alfred Mahan in the US and Winston Churchill, historian Arnold Toynbee and novelist Joseph Kipling in England to distinguish between industrialized and non-industrialized nations, militarized and non-militarized nations, white and colored nations (except Japan largely due to the outcome of the 1905 Russo- Japanese War) and rich and poor nations. The uncivilized world was considered inferior, uneducated, and politically unstable; economically static and backward places to colonize by the civilized world. The outcome was degradation, depredation and underdevelopment for two thirds of the world, especially in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. This was keenly illustrated by decades of economic decline and low living standards in what was sometimes called the *nonwestern world*. In fact, during the British rule over Indian soil, the nation which once accounted for 25 percent of the world's industrial output in 1750 produced merely 2 percent by 1900.

CP Snow [3] coined the term "two cultures," some 50 years ago, to illustrate the two worlds of western society-consisting of humanities and literary scholars as one group and scientists as the second group. Both worlds were characterized by a "gulf of mutual incomprehension," each with their own data bases and research methods. His analysis of both groups were not subtle or vague. Like his English predecessor Herbert Spencer, Snow put his faith in science and believed scientists represented the future while the former group of intellects "wished the future did not exist."

Although literary scholars had produced great works, they were morally flawed: Fredrick Nietsche and Richard Wagner believed in the superman race. Ezra Pound and William Butler Yeats were closet fascists. All of them, in their own way, contributed to the rise of Hitler and brought us that much closer to the Holocaust. Snow believed that science could improve society and shape the thoughts of future generations. He maintained that only the scientist can save the world through invention and innovation-and by doing so, according to this author, the scientist could reduce the wealth gap between rich and poor nations and subsequently reduce instability around the world.

Snow recommended that the Western world send scientists and technicians to the undeveloped parts of the world to help

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industrialize those nations and improve the standard of living of their people. Only by erasing the gap between rich and poor nations, between the scientific and unscientific world, could the West be assured of international stability and their way of life. Otherwise, the world of guns, drugs and lawlessness, if I may update Snow, could eventually bring down the West. When people live in absolute poverty, as do one third to half the world (depending on our definition), grievances fester and violence is close at hand. Likewise, instability flourishes; given increased globalization, everyone is at risk – the entire world population - in one form or another.

Some 1.5 billion people marginally exist on less than $2 a day and another 2 to 3 billion people earn between $2 and 3.50 a day. According to Allan Ornstein [4], in Wealth vs. Work the bottom half of the world's population owned 1 percent of the globe's wealth; while the U.S. (with 4 percent) of the world's population produced 25 percent of the world's resources. The typical person of the world whose wealth was at the 50th percentile had assets worth $2,200, while the average American had a net worth of $144,000. This kind of inequality tends to increase resentment toward the U.S. and adds to a wide set of threats that we must face. Indeed, we have sufficient first-hand knowledge that more than half the world resents our arrogance, hubris and role as global cop-and would like to bring us down one or two notches. Our critics ask: who gave us the right to continuously intervene in foreign countries and tell people how to live and how to conduct their domestic affairs? Who gave us the right to insist that people in other parts of the world adapt our beliefs and way of life?

Of course, Snow never imagined that the West, especially the United States, would become more dependent on Asian-rim scientist and engineers, and other foreign-born talented students. Today, they help prop up our economy and maintain our technological edge-and the subsequent flow of wealth and jobs. How could Snow imagine this tilt in the earth, from West to the East, given that English speaking and Teutonic people during his life were still considered masters of the world with a mission to establish order (and "civilize" the masses) where chaos reigned?

Charles Murray [5] introduces a different twist to the record of human history and why Western nations have advanced more rapidly than other civilizations. Murray was coauthor of *The Bell Curve* in 1994, [6] which relied on statistical data to make a case for innate and inherited intelligences as the crucial factor for success in society and the reason why different racial and ethnic groups think differently (some are more verbal, mathematical, or abstract). In his new book ten years later, called *Human Accomplishment*, he ranks geniuses throughout the ages (the last three thousand years). He identifies 4,002 influential scientists and artists, using a method which he claims allows him to rank individuals from numerous fields and different cultures.

Murray concludes that Western culture has contributed most to the arts and sciences. What the human condition is today and what human species have accomplished is largely due to people who hail from Western Europe in a half-dozen centuries. Sure to fire up the critics, as he did with his earlier book, he makes it clear that white males have been more creative and innovative than minorities and women. Whereas many people consider science and religion to be opposition, he argues that cultures girded by Christianity have been more productive than cultures bolstered by other religions.

Among the top-ranked, most creative, innovative and influential people, according to Murray [5], are Galileo, Darwin, and Einstein in science and Aristotle, Plato, and Confucius in philosophy. Michelangelo is the greatest artist and Shakespeare is the greatest writer. Murray marvels that his conclusions coincide with current opinion. Pompous thinking comes easy to Murray, if I may editorialize. He asserts the people must be right because his research gives them (not him) *face validity*. Murray cares little about opinion, or whether history or philosophy agrees with his conclusions, because his analysis is based on *quantifiable* methods and the opinions of others are based on *qualitative* thought.

Allow me a short aside. If one was a betting man and had been asked to choose in the medieval period which part of the world would dominate the others in knowledge and the arts for much of the coming millenniums, a person who was culturally neutral would most likely have put their money on the Islam world-not Western Europe. For centuries the leading scientist, mathematicians, and intellectuals came from this part of the world, and it was the Islamic world that created the first global market, linking Europe with Asia through trade. How Europe and America rose to preeminence after the Middle Ages is for many historians and philosophers a puzzle. Some say it had something to do with the birth of the Renaissance; others refer to the Enlightenment and Age of Reason. William McNeill [7], professor of history at the University of Chicago, credits Europe's ascent to its warlike prowess, navigational skills, and resistance to disease.

Rodney Stark [8], a Catholic historian, argues in The Victory of Reason that the rise of the West is linked to the spread of Christianity, with its emphasis on preserving manuscripts and embracing the intellect and reason in advancing the faith. Whereas other religions looked to the past for spiritual guidance, Christianity looked to the future in the coming of the Messiah and thus was more progressive. In Thomistic Roman Catholic theology, faith and reason are complimentary and support each other.

The suggestion that Christianity is built on reason and is based on a progressive interpretation of the scriptures and/or open to competing views is considered a fairy tale by secularists. But Murray also associates the West's rise to global dominance with Christianity, as well as its people having a respect for science, technology, and invention. For the last five or six centuries, the West has cornered the market in knowledge and the arts because of its intellect and open mind and because its thoughts have had a

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relation to reality-not faith or Zen-and rejected a rigid ideologue. He also argues (as others have) that Christian doctrine allied itself to Greek and Roman art and philosophy. But it is hard not to sense Murray's patrician and elitist background, as his interpretation of the world order is linked to Social Darwinism: Certain people are smarter than others and thus will rise to the top of the ladder and certain societies are more adaptive than others and thus will grow and prosper more than others, while their counterparts falter or decline.

And now for the bad news! Murray warns that the West has peaked. It has lost its vitality and benchmark for history's highest achievers. A champion of excellence, he asserts: "In another few hundred years," we will be explaining why "some completely different part of the world became the locus of great human accomplishment." Sadly, I don't think we will have to wait that long-not if the international test scores in science and math achievement that compare U.S. students to their industrialized counterparts in Europe and Asia are any barometer of the future and not if the fact that China and India each graduate four to one more scientists and engineers than United States is an indicator of tomorrow's innovation and invention.

Here it is important to add that while the U.S. is still in a leadership position, and the number-one economic engine, there are other points of view, creative ideas, and patterns of intellectual excellence emerging in other industrialized and developing countries. The U.S. does not have a monopoly on innovation or entrepreneurship. There is a new level of humility that Western society will have to learn as the twenty-first century unfolds.

The next book on the "best and brightest" is bound to profile an increasing number of scientists, engineers, and knowledge producers from the non-Western world, with hundreds of hard to pronounce names from China and India, and even from Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia. Unless some idiosyncratic quirk occurs, America and its European cousins will lose inventive and innovative ground to the East, based on the world's increased production in scientists and engineers is now coming from Asia and becoming assimilated into state-capitalist run enterprises. Once Chinese students were organizing demonstrations for democracy, but now they are seeking economic opportunities and ways for getting rich. Now Chinese scientist and engineers are becoming assimilated into state-capitalist run enterprises. Mao is no longer the main chant: it's money, money, money. Once there was an "over concentration of government power without checks and balances." Now the wind is blowing in a different direction, and Beijing is slowly allowing progressive reform and improving labor conditions and wages.

At the home front, according to a 2012 PEW report The Rise of Asian Americans [9], Asian students comprise 5 percent of the public school enrollments, K-12, but represent 9.4 percent of the gifted and talented population. On state-wise tests in 2008, Asians had its highest percentage of "proficient" scores in math: 88 percent in grade 4, 86 percent in grade 8 and 81 percent in high school. They outperformed white students in 29 out of 34 states in math tests at the advanced level, representing a median of 46 percent compared to whites at 36 percent. A significant gap existed between Asian/White students and Black/Hispanic students across all grade levels which has serious implications because the enrollment percent of the latter group should reach 50% by 2025. Similarly, V Wadhwa [10] senior vice president of Timex in India, points out that the percentage of Asian immigrant-founded companies in the computer industry and semiconductors industry in the U.S. by 2005 was more than triple the percentage of European immigrants; 63% vs. 20% and 55% vs. 15% respectively.

A changing world: globalization and technology

As the twenty first century evolves, the world is changing rapidly, more so now and in the future than it has changed in the past. In fact, for thousands of years, progress was basically static and susceptible to centuries of plunder, medieval agricultural methods and Malthus' theories of starvation. Change now takes two forms: improvement of things that we know already work such as a smaller smart phone with more gigabytes, a more efficient automobile that uses less fuel, or new winter gear that is lighter and better insulated than the shirt or coat we are presently wearing. This type of change is easy to explain and understand since we know what it looks like and we either use it or have benchmarks and metrics to analyze and judge progress. It's like going from point a to point b in a chess game or from 1 to 2 as with steps on a ladder. Progress can be measured; the past product can be easily compared with the new product.

Change can also involve something completely new, that no one has ever seen or done. For example, think of the phone connected to an electric wire and then a wireless smart phone replaces it; or think of a gasoline-fueled car replaced by an electric battery car (in terms of fuel efficiency and reduced carbon imprint). In both cases, a game changing or revolutionary product has been introduced to the market, leading to major progress. These types of changes are harder to imagine and require thinking and doing something no one has previously done. It often involves a major leap -- what I call moving from point a (previously known) to point x (previously unknown) or 1 to x.

In the first case, when we talk about improvement, it is much easier to copy and the Japanese in the 1950s and 1960s and the Chinese now have been adroit in copying American products and mass producing them because of cheaper labor costs. The second case is harder to copy, but once the product is reverse engineered it can be copied. In both cases, technology and large sums of capital are used to improve the way things are done.

Although it can be argued that the age of technology is rooted in the Industrial Revolution and invention of the steam engine, the current period of technology, along with rapid change, started

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in the 1950s with the coming of the knowledge and information society and swiftly accelerated in the 1990s with the rise of the Internet. However, when we think of progress today, we must include not only technology, but also globalization. This trend started in the post World-War II era, first in the United States as the major world exporter and then with other industrialized countries in Europe, Japan and South Korea. It rapidly increased in the 1990s with the rise of emerging nations such as China, India, Indonesia, and Brazil.

Both globalization and technology, the age we currently live in, have created new sources of wealth for people with appropriate entrepreneurial and technical skills. In a highly significant book, *Zero to One*, written by Peter Thiel [11] in 2014, the billionaire and inventor of PayPal maintains that globalization and technology connote different rates of progress. Technology and not globalization is the key to transformative acts of creativity and growth. Globalization leads to slow and steady progress and helps close the gap between the industrialized world and emerging nations. But technology has the potential to revolutionize and reshape the world; it can lead to breakthroughs currently unknown today. Without globalization, growth and productivity will be limited and political instability will increase. But without technology, society stagnates and human extinction becomes a possibility through nuclear disaster, biological contagions and/or climate change.

The world must either adapt, a Darwinist approach to life, or face the possibility of Armageddon. "If nothing about society changes for the next 100 years, the future is over 100 years away," Thiel warns. New gadgets or increased competition, as reflected in globalization, will not suffice. Major technological improvements are required which "can make the 21st century more peaceful and prosperous than the 20th."

Beyond the scope of Zero to One, if a nation cannot adapt to change, namely globalization and technology, it will likely face decades of economic decline along with the underutilization of its talented and skilled populace. In turn, this will lead to the export of a nation's STEM populace to other places in the world, adding to further the decline of that nation.

Americans are not used to declining living standards because growth in the twentieth century was the norm for industrialized nations, at least so long as they were not at war. Globalization grew rapidly among industrialized nations after World War II. The U.S. was at its economic height, king of the mountain top, the chief exporter in the world; hence, the American workforce (along with unions) prospered, compared with few parallels in history. In the last twenty five years, however, globalization led to large trade adjustments with the rise of China and other emerging nations. Many Americans were simply not ready for the new global standard built around cheap labor and products that often ignored high standards of workmanship.

As emerging nations grow in influence, the American workforce (along with unions) have found themselves handicapped and unable to compete because manufacturers seek cheap labor and have several places to go - China, India, Vietnam, Mexico, etc. In this climate, skilled factory workers are not necessarily rewarded; they are exploited. You would think that intellectual piracy, government fines of multinational corporations (totaling in the hundreds of millions) designed to limit competition on foreign soil, and the great firewall that restricts Internet and high tech companies like Google and Facebook in China (and elsewhere) would slow down corporations from expanding outside the U.S. and Europe, but new markets (billions of potential customers) and short term profits drive the industrialization of emerging nations. Announcements about globalization slowing down and going in reverse (back to the U.S.) is hard to prove, and more like a trickle or a raindrop on a summer day. Companies like Apple, Cisco, and G.E. talk about new jobs in America, but at the same time move their corporate office outside the U.S. to save taxes and open new plants in emerging countries as they hunt for new markets. Any new manufacturing in the U.S. and other industrialized nations will be capital intensive and require sophisticated tech knowledge which rely on STEM skill sets and few factory workers or the need for unionized workers.

Take note that unions help offset the growing power of corporations; they act as a counter balance or equalizing force for working people and ordinary people against the powerful voice of big business. As unions diminish in power and influence, an increasing number of Americans find they work in an *unorganized economy* with fewer job rights and constrained working conditions. In the meantime, with increasing globalization, large multinational corporations have amassed more power to define the conditions of employment. One would think there is a point where cheap labor and minimal benefits lead to other firms raiding the work force of culprit U.S. companies. There is some validity to this argument, but a vast amount of working people in the U.S. are already living at poverty or near poverty levels. Taxpayers wind up supplementing Walmart workers. In places like China and India, the result is upward pressure on prices of products, as well as the search for cheaper labor markets in Laos, Cambodia, Nepal, and Bangladesh.

On the other hand, technological charge demands special talent in math, science and engineering, as illustrated by the new "rock stars" flocking to Silicon Valley along the Californian coast, as well as in other parts of the U.S. such as the "Golden Triangle," Boston- Cambridge, Dayton, Madison, Salt Lake City, Seattle, Tacoma, and Washington D.C. - Arlington areas - what I call 'technological pockets." Hence, a new form of talent and reward system is emerging in the U.S. and other major cities of the world from Bangalore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Seoul and Tokyo in the East to Berlin, Helsinki, Stockholm, Stuttgart and Tel Aviv in the West. Technology is attracting some of the world's

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best and brightest with new skill sets in computers, creativity, and collaboration that the older generation of workers (35+ years) are unfamiliar with and therefore unable to compete. In this new technological age, employees with faded jeans, bright red sneakers and hoodies are becoming millionaires and others who understand and can apply computer and digital skills are fast becoming the new middle managers of large corporations and institutions.

Many of these new rock stars can be classified former as "nerds" and "geeks"; kids who were ostracized by their "cooler" classmates in high school and bullied in junior high school. Now mainstream America accepts and respects them, and it's the nerds and geeks who are now in demand and spearheading tech society. In fact, mainstream America has to catch up to the skill sets of the nerds and geeks. Not to embrace the newest technology, one that the geeky culture uses in its social networks and video games, suggests to be out at the mainstream. Although intelligence is widely distributed among all classes and groups, there seems to be an oversupply of smart techies among the nerds and geeks who did not always have the opportunity to exhibit their ability when they were in school. Comfort with being labeled a nerd or geek appears to be characteristic among millennials (18-34 years).

Those who are unable to function in this technological world are handicapped in the new white collar world. Concrete thinkers and low-achieving students, and that encompasses about half the bell curve, will most likely be relegated to blue collar and low-paying service jobs. Only those with a special talent or gift; hitting a baseball 400 feet like Barry Bonds or Mike McGuire, singing like Jay Z or Carrie Underwood, or dancing like Madonna will be able to avoid this employment trap. Companies that are able to hire, develop and retain stem workers have an advantage. Although unemployment among college-educated workers remains relatively high, companies claim they are unable to find the right people with the right skills for their vacancies. The challenge for the future is to find, hire, and motivate talented people that can function in a culture of innovation and invention, or put in simple terms - *How Google Works*, a new book, coauthored by the chairman Eric Schmidt [12].

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