GOING FASTER: BUT WHERE?

BY

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We're moving faster as a result of human acquisitiveness, a condition that drives us to advance technologies and innovate. In the Western experience two technologies in particular, communication and transportation, have been the most important in the increasing pace of human mobility. Since the 15th century, their alternating ascendancy pushed the locus of human influence projection to ever greater geographic breadth. The question of where we're going presumes that there is direction associated with the velocity. There isn't. But intellectual conceit prevents us from accepting that the future is unknowable, and emotional insecurity condemns us to think about possible futures *as if* they could be logically derived from the past. Efforts to do so simply highlight irrational faith that something is determining the unfolding of the world in a coherent way in a specific direction. The future will unfold in response to short-term obstacles and needs. We're going blindly into the unknown, very fast.

Going faster: but where? A question which suggests, accurately, that we are living more rapidly; one which presumes, questionably, that there is direction associated with the velocity. But because the future is unknowable and pondering on it *as if* it could be known is mere speculation, we ought to first answer a more fundamental question: "Why?"

When considering mobility it's natural to assume a narrow definition such as the physical movement of people from place to place. But, humans do not need to physically move in order to project themselves. Knowledge, abilities, and output are mobilized and delivered around the world in many ways that preclude travel. So, for the sake of this exploration, it may be more valid to think of mobility as the projection of influence to a distance.

A "supply side" answer to the question, "Why?" might centre upon technological advances: telecommunications, computing speed, aeronautics and other transportation technologies have all ratcheted up the pace of life. The "demand side" response would likely also round up some usual suspects, including the pursuit of opportunity in the face of aggressive competition and every other result of the final glorious triumph of capitalism. Regardless, we're going faster because we choose to. We make that choice because it's how we've evolved.

Man is a venal, acquisitive being—always has been.. (Women readers rest assured that the choice of collective nouns is not meant to be exclusionary.) Capitalist economics depends on this primal characteristic. While there is much to inform socialist philosophies and developing theories about economic irrationality (behavioural economics), millennia of Western history constitutes a fairly conclusive body of evidence by which to characterize humans—at least those presently dominating more and more of the globe.

Western experience is fraught with expansionary quests. Alexander and Muhammad did it; the Romans were exceptional at it;

European explorers opened the new world because of it. When it appeared that not much more of the world was worth conquering, we took our voyages to the moon and beyond. Back on earth, a somewhat petrified real estate apportionment seems to have been reached for the moment, so the quest has turned predominantly to the ersatz territory of economic domination, where multinational corporations and global economic interests excel.

At least since Classical Antiquity political expansion for economic growth has been a constant; technology and geographic breadth the variables. Until recently, territorial expansion and economic development were relatively slow. Fundamental changes to the socio-economic structure caused by the Age of Exploration and the Industrial Revolution resulted in economic and geographic impact zones that were beyond Western commerce's immediate capability to address. Examples of expansion from the earliest times to the most recent (and thus falsely important), are consistent in one respect: whether religious or commercial, good or bad, all were forms of what we refer to as "globalisation."

The word globalisation tends to be associated with recent developments. The word's currency in the Internet age suggests a special, full involvement of the entire planet. But the participating "known world" has always been less than complete, even today. So the *concept* of globalisation comprehends expansion to, control over, and influence of the furthest reaches of prevailing imagination, be that the conquered territories, the dark continent, or the whole world.

The developmental state of two primary technologies is the key determinant of globalisation. They are transportation and communication. The alternating ascendancy of one over the other has had a dramatic influence on the world's unfolding.

Expansion and acquisition requires transportation. *Mass* transport was essential to populate a new world with cheap labour. Among the resulting benefits of the voyages of exploration was the ability to bring riches from one part of the world to another. Unfortunately, some of the most delightful and profitable were also highly perishable. *Speed* was of the essence. Naturally, ever bigger and faster vehicles resulted. The factories of the urbanizing post-Industrial Revolution world needed people. Moving common labourers to and fro for industry became as important as moving chattels for trade. Eventually the two world wars, unlike earlier continental wars when troops moved primarily on foot, demanded the conjunction of both rapid and mass transport of people across oceanic distances.

From cuniform to radio, communication has underwritten human development. It's hard to conceive of growth without it. The pace of activity is directly affected by the speed of communication. Battles happen only as fast as field marshals can receive and dispatch orders. Innovation often benefits from the cross-pollination of ideas from disparate places, which means speed of communication equals speed of innovation. Even the value and practical delivery of physical transit depends on a corresponding advanced level of communication speed, breadth, and distance.

Particularly since the fifteenth century, the alternating advances in communications and transportation technology has happened in bold relief. It would appear that for the most part communication played a supporting role to transportation.

1370s – 1700s (Transportation)
Exploration of the new world

1450s (Communication)
Gutenberg's press arrives

1814 – 1832 (Transportation)
Rail transport

1847 – 1874 (Communication)
Telegraph leads to telephony

1906 – 1935 (Transportation)
Wright brothers to commercial air transport

1945 – 1995 (Communication)
Television's ascendency

1960s – 1970s (Transportation)
The "jet" and "rocket" age starts
1980 – onward (Communication)
Personal computers lead to Internet revolution

With the Internet, however, the technology for communicating and therefore conducting commercial affairs not only caught up, it lept far ahead in the race to lay a path for full globalisation. The Internet has taken the human being into the nether world of cyberspace. Now the masses can be virtually transported to far off places be they library stacks across the country or the radio programming of another continent. Only the unfortunate durability of the physical body prevents instantaneous truly *mass* transportation. This is a problem for which communication technology has no solution: sometimes Muhammad must go to the mountain.

Not surprisingly then, physical movement is again the prevailing obstacle. What more can be done to move more people further more often? Larger and faster airplanes are a real possibility. High-orbital transport using the Space Shuttle's capabilities as a model is also an alternative. Extraordinary advances in biotechnology to "beam" people is another, albeit remote, possibility. The last option notwithstanding, the advances in moving people and other physical matter may have reached a wall. Ingenuity will win out eventually and these problems will be replaced by new ones.

The direction that the next stage of globalization will take is yet to be determined. And perhaps that is the truly significant matter. Intellectual conceit prevents us from accepting that the future is unknowable, and impels us to create scenarios about it. Emotional insecurity condemns us to think about those possible futures *as if* they could be logically derived from the past. They can't. The effort to do so simply highlights an irrational faith that there is something determining the unfolding of the world in a coherent way in a specific direction. That, however, is a matter for historians and philosophers.

So, why are we going so fast? We force ourselves to: we are victims of our own primal urges and success at developing technology to satisfy those needs. Where are we going? As always, headlong blindly into the unknown.

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