

Dreams of Utopia and the Zombie Apocalypse

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Edward O. Wilson's book *Social Conquest of Earth* poses the questions: "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?"¹ To these questions, he offers an initial answer that is both provocative and ironic: "We have created Star Wars civilization, with Stone Age emotions, medieval institutions and godlike technology. We thrash about. We are terribly confused by the mere fact of our existence and a danger to ourselves and to the rest of life."²

While not optimistic, Wilson's viewpoint is fundamentally evolutionary and finds its source of inspiration among ants and bees that possess the rather rare quality of what Wilson refers to as "eusocial behavior."³ Ants exist in a multi-generational community and demonstrate cooperation, division of labor, cooperative care for the young and altruism to the point of self-sacrifice. This behavior ensured the survival of the larger group and enabled such species to evolve and survive throughout the world for over one hundred million years. However, out of one million insect species, only two percent exhibit this quality. Wilson is careful not to conflate ants with humans, but observes a confluence of patterns worthy of investigation.

Our species' recent arrival to the evolutionary labyrinth reveals humankind to be one of only a handful of mammals that exhibit "social intelligence,"⁴ interestingly, no other candidates exist among our closest relatives of apes, monkeys or chimpanzees. In fact, our branch of the evolutionary tree goes back only three million years. Only one hundred and forty thousand years ago, we evolved into *Homo Erectus* and lived upright on the savannahs of Africa. Subsequently, we evolved into *Homo Sapiens* that burst across the global landscape as recently as forty thousand years ago. Eventually, we populated almost every corner of the planet during the subsequent twenty-five thousand years. However, all other threads of *Homo Erectus* have since gone extinct.

This remarkable legacy of genetic transformation was enabled by a synthesis of biological and social co-evolution and adaptational living in a supportive environment where the human species became unique amongst the millions of other creatures on the planet. Humans harnessed fire, developed language, formed complex social relationships and exploited the power of curiosity, creativity and abstract thought that would physically alter the material world.⁵ I propose this to be the first example of a Zombie Apocalypse,⁶ a term used here as a subtextual analogy for the unmitigated power of biological, social and cultural co-evolution propelled by forces of natural selection in a continuing cycle of creation and destruction that informs humanity's will to survive. Additionally, there is recognition of the fragility of civilization and depending on the prevailing social construct, how individuals can become perpetrators and/or victims of mass movements bent on conquest and domination.

So what about those ants?

Wilson offers the weaver ant of tropical South America as an example of remarkably complex social behavior.⁷ Worker ants cut fresh vegetation and carry large sections back to the nest where smaller workers cut the pieces up into fragments. Then other workers chew the fragments into pulp that is used to grow gardens of fungus. Other members of the nest manage the eggs and serve the queen who lives upward of seven years and lays many millions of eggs in her lifetime. Still others serve as sentinels, architects, builders, scavengers, undertakers and warriors.

When food is scarce, nomadic army ants march in a column of tens of millions strong and move like a great river to bring food back to the nest, or to move on to a more fertile location. Ants inhabit virtually every space on the planet where there could be a source for food. The world's entire biomass of ants would be about equal when compared to the total biomass of humans on earth.

I recall the story of *Leiningen Versus the Ants*⁸ where the protagonist battled to save his plantation from the hoard of soldier ants rampaging through the Brazilian jungle consuming everything in its path. This apocalyptic, but fictional tale of the

power of nature, particularly the prospect of flesh eating ants, put fear into my heart as a child. Later in life, I encountered a nest of European fire ants while I worked in a friend's garden in Florida. I noticed a few small, red ants crawling around and easily brushed them off my arm. What I did not notice was the swarm that crawled under my pants. Suddenly, and all at once, thousands of ants bit into my leg. The pain was immediate and agonizing. In spite of my frantic dance and the removal of my clothes, the attack continued. It took the force of a garden hose to free me of the ants. I am still amazed by the fact that their coordinated, simultaneous attack was so purposeful, disciplined and almost unstoppable. People have been known to die from such an attack. The B. C. Government Invasive Species Working Group has reported the presence of the European fire ant in several locations of the Lower Mainland and Victoria as recently as 2010 and they could possibly expand their range as far north as Prince Rupert⁹ as it is within their temperature range for survival. This was my first personal encounter symptomatic of a Zombie Apocalypse.

The fundamental urge of survival is ubiquitous. However, for the social species, Wilson underlines repeating patterns of territorial expansion and colonization like a series of tidal waves moving through space and time. Much has happened after the breakout of humanity from Africa, forty thousand years ago. An estimated reproductive cycle of twenty-five years translates into 1600 generations of human evolutionary development from then until now. The practice of agriculture caused a pivotal change in human civilization when nomadic tribes began to settle in permanent villages about ten thousand years ago, four-hundred generations into the past. Since then, thousands of years of conquest and the rise and fall of many empires has resulted in vast changes in human culture and relationships.¹⁰ The Zombie Apocalypse continues its march around the world into the present, accompanied by a legacy of byzantine complexity and exponential population growth whose footprint has altered the ecology of the planet to fulfill its needs. Perhaps, such behavior is not too far removed from the world of ants

As if the human species were brand new, Wilson second question asks:

What Are We?" We are now more than seven billion in number. In as much as we can excavate the ruins of past civilizations, track our Mitochondrial DNA back to our ancestral roots, and revel in great art and music of past epochs, we still try to articulate exactly what we are from these clues. Philosophy, Science and Religion are comprehensive disciplines that try to define our human beingness as both Spiritual and Corporeal. We still reach back to Greek and Chinese antiquity for inspiration. Our brightest minds dedicate vast amounts of ink to parse the nuances of the human condition, the meaning of life, the declaration of both the existence and death of God and then proudly pronounce the end of diseases, ideology, or history. But our imagination and curiosity drives us to continue our terrestrial and cosmic search of the unknown and the unknowable infinite universe in a conspiracy to rob nature of her secrets. Considering this state of emotional angst, confusion, conflict and general lack of agreement of common purpose, it seems to be the height of folly to try and intuit "Where We Are Going" as a species.

Is humankind still evolving, and if so, in what ways? The quick answer is yes. However, evolution is not so much in the biological category because of relative slow cycles of human reproduction, but rather in the social/cultural evolutionary realm that is now technologically driven, and rapidly propelling our species into uncharted territory. This speed of change challenges our ability to adapt and perhaps out paces our dreams, which are neither clinical musings of Freud nor nocturnal messages from the gods, but a collective socio-cultural fusion of memory, desire and purpose expressed in its historical context.

Discourse that attempts to imagine the future is not new. In 1516, Thomas More published a small book entitled *Utopia*¹¹ as an effort to resolve problems of human society. More was inspired by the 1504 expeditions of Amerigo Vespucci to the recently discovered New World. The Americas were presented as a virginal landscape, full of opportunity and the place where More imagined the location of a new and perfect society, Utopia. It did not end well for Thomas More. He was executed a few years later by Henry VIII. The word Utopia translates from Greek as "No place."¹²

In as much as the idea of Utopia has inspired numerous efforts of philosophy, fiction and even nation building throughout history, none have managed to fully reify Utopia's highest ideals in a working society for very long. However, it seems fitting that the creation of cyberspace is the latest candidate to embody an etherealized community as a Virtual Utopia, free of all limitations and able to fulfill our wildest dreams that could be everywhere and nowhere for everyone and no one, at the same timeless, space-less environment.

Douglas Rushkoff proposes in his book *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus*¹³ that humankind is at the threshold of an exciting opportunity to re-invent patterns of behavior and economy that will facilitate a future with sustainable existence where we finally become a more balanced "social species." The Internet was initially imagined with utopian aspiration as an "Information Commons" such as Wikipedia with universal access to a data-base that would allow infinite expansion, education, economic opportunity and virtual immortality. In spite of some success of these goals, we have colonized cyberspace with a facsimile of our primal social and cultural intelligence complete with all its noble and baser instincts, whose effects impact the material world in both positive and negative ways. The extraordinary success of Google, Facebook, Amazon and their ilk have created islands of prosperity amidst the rubble of industrial culture that builds an invisible, but effective digital wall of social, cultural, and economic unintended consequences that can and must be recognized and resolved. Once again, Pandora's Box springs open and unleashes the Furies into the world, and only hope remains inside.

Now we are on the cusp of a new renaissance of human potential. In only one generation, the Internet has grown to serve almost four billion people. The U.S. government affirmed a vision of unencumbered economic potential for the digital future by passing The Internet Tax Freedom Act into law. Google and its acolytes are recognized for their enormous economic and social power and influence to the degree that they have established a Digital Ambassador in Denmark, whose mission is to consult and advise in the application and protocols of information

technologies in all aspects of government and industry. This unprecedented accommodation of a non-governmental, non-elected entity as a voice of influence speaks to the power, and perhaps trepidation, with which these corporate giants and their shareholders must be regarded. Cyberspace has taken over from outer space as a more feasible final frontier of civilization. Speaking allegorically as if to anticipate the Google Bus, Ken Kesey quipped in Tom Wolfe's 1968 book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*: "You're either on the bus or off the bus. If you're on the bus, and you get left behind, then you'll find it again. If you're off the bus in the first place-then it won't make a damn."¹⁴

Aspirations for a digital utopia reveal a predatory manifestation of a monopolistic business model based on market speculation. This speculation exploits an upgrade culture based on built-in obsolescence that manifests as an addiction to receding goal posts of technological and economic possibilities. To counter such concerns, Roshkoff alludes to the medieval marketplace of sellers and buyers where there is no middle man to siphon off profit. Crowdfunding, Craig's List and other on-line shopping opportunities are successful models that also circumvent brick and mortar institutions. This peer-to-peer relationship in the digital world could be supported by the adoption of blockchain technology and a digital currency that moves away from exclusive monetary control by banks to a more equitable barter-based idea of exchange.¹⁵ The way society will function has yet to be fully realized, because the rate of change has far outpaced our capacity to deal with artificial intelligence and automation that has resulted in a massive worker displacement. Humanity wrongly presumes that rates of socio/cultural evolution are universal and can keep pace with the effects of technology perpetrated by the most advanced societies. Casualties of this process are simply left behind.

However, the summation of the digital universe in the hands of corporate and national interests that harvest information for the purpose of profit, conditioning and control of populations to follow is a road map for the latest incarnation of the Zombie Apocalypse. Reality, a fragile vessel of consciousness, is a matter of agreement. As

such, it is not so much the potential of a digital virus in cyberspace, but rather business as usual that can influence opinion through incremental distortion and a confused representation of society.

This distortion and confusion can occur, in part, by the sheer volume of raw information presented without context, or out of context, through the degradation of historical discernment or the negation of the social contract. More importantly, in the material world, the hyper-drive effect of an ever-expanding economic productivity and impact of the human footprint will reach the limits of what the planet's resources and ecosystem can support. This situation is currently evidenced by climate change and the high rate of species extinction.

If this is where we are going, what are the alternatives? "Without the land, we are nothing."¹⁶ Guujaaw, president of the Haida Nation spoke these words at a 1985 blockade to protest clear cut logging of old growth forests on ancestral lands of the remote islands of Haida Gwaii (an archipelago on the North coast of British Columbia, Canada), a place continually inhabited by the Haida for over 13,000 years. In 1787, British surveyor George Dixon renamed the islands the Queen Charlotte Islands after the wife of King George III and, subsequently the name graced official Admiralty charts. Due to the "doctrine of discovery,"¹⁷ the British Crown assumed ownership of the lands and the "discovered" peoples who would only be allowed to occupy, but never own their ancestral lands. However, no treaty was ever signed with the Haida, whose population and rich culture was decimated by small pox. But in 2009, after years of lobbying by the Haida, both Canadian federal and provincial levels of government agreed to officially change the Queen Charlotte name back to Haida Gwaii, a move that also highlighted the resurgence of the Haida Nation nearly brought to extinction by its colonial masters and also affirmed their connection to the land. In this instance, colonialist powers apologized.

I mention this bit of history to illustrate how far cultural/social evolution and adaptation has shifted our perceptions of what we are and where we are going, as a matter of perspective. For the Haida, the islands they cherish are no Utopia. Their

heartfelt bonded sensibility is centered on an actual place and locus of identity. The Haida people embody a rich history of thousands of years of memory that they articulate and affirm through their art, language, culture, and determination to remain stewards of the land. They aspire to maintain economic and cultural control of their fate and territory.

The Haida are an example of a living memory that symbolizes the historical colonial pattern of conquest and appropriation. However, this example is not meant to surround the discourse in a cloak of nostalgia, nor revert to tribalism as a solution to cope with rapid change. Rather, it is an effort to define a parallel and exclusive universe of perceptions that describe a boundary between an authentic historical, but persistent culture, and a culture of appearances that represent the dynamic socio-cultural, economic and political fusion of our current age. The authentic culture and the culture of appearances are two distinct expectations that represent how each group experienced and coped with their unique worlds of past, present and an anticipated future.

Similar elements reside within these two aspirational solitudes. The idea of a Promised Land is buried deep in the Judeo-Christian consciousness that informs much of our western identity and social-cultural evolution. Perhaps, this also points to our capacity to dream as a way to build confidence in order to face an uncertain future. The ebb and flow of migrations over millennia that fracture any sense of place, as well as current sensibilities of cultural fragmentation, imply that we have not yet arrived at a final sense of place, and still wander in the wilderness with forgotten memories and unsatisfied dreams. No matter how hard we strive, our species remains hostage to our evolutionary biology and fabric of genetic heritage, like the salmon that must return to spawn in the same stream of their birth. Perhaps, the Haida found their promised land early in their history and are determined to remain in their place as they work to reify their dreams.

A digital promised land now occupies our social imagination. This promised land embraces rapidly changing technological solutions that imbeds an

automated disruptive influence into our consciousness as a catalyst of change that demands continuous adaptations that are not responsive to biological, or natural evolutionary forces. Such conditions imposed on society are ubiquitous and demand to either adapt, or abandon traditions and jump on the postmodern bus, or be left behind. Furthermore, to examine the essence of where we are going is to discover a homogenized society that exists as a vast echo chamber inside a hall of mirrors supported and promoted by institutions with agendas of technocratic complexity that lack the capacity and the will to sufficiently address the human condition. This postmodern rhetorical nihilistic promise implies that we have seen the totality of existence all before, yet without a clear vision of any future on the horizon. Postmodernism evolves into post-humanism as our faith for salvation is placed in the hands of technology we hope will save us from human nature.

I am reminded of the mythic tale of the Tower of Babel in which all humankind worked together to challenge the supremacy of God by building a great tower up to heaven, an endeavor that failed due to Divine intervention. It seems that we have now successfully achieved this goal and replaced the godhead with extraordinary technologies. Now we must assume the grave responsibility of trying to manage our future guided by the hubris of self-serving authority, without the facility of omniscient command, suggesting further progression of the Zombie Apocalypse.

So what of the future, are we there yet? Evolution reminds us there are no guarantees how life will unfold, for good or ill. What we do know from the above discussion is the remarkable power and influence of the fusion of biological, social and cultural co-evolution, specifically with eusocial species. In as much as ants have survived for over one hundred million years, dominating the insect world as well as surviving efforts of human eradication, they provide a rather daunting yardstick for human longevity. The human capacity for imagination, free will or democratic values that underlie contemporary discourse are qualities not shared by ants, but may exemplify our greatest asset or perhaps our fatal flaw. Yet to realize the future, we as a species must face what we are and confront our culture-centric power as well as

the fragility of our place in the cosmos. Colonizing Mars or traveling to some other solar system to expand the reach of human civilization may excite our imagination by carrying on past traditions of exploration of a select few, but the harsh reality is that we are stuck on planet earth with its billions of people and must face our legacies of conquest. Our capacity for mythmaking and abstract thought that express our deepest fears, existential insight and highest aspirations, echo through our history like beacons for social/ cultural development, much of which remains relevant today, if only we would listen. Perhaps each generation must discover such insights for themselves. However the complexity of increasingly technologically based urban centric existence conspires to isolate our sensibilities from the natural world and its biological imperatives. We already inhabit a 'promised land' that is a land of great promise and must be nurtured rather than consumed if it is to flourish. Let us continue to dream of a better world, perhaps a Utopia, while avoiding a mindless Zombie Apocalypse and like Voltaire's character Candide: "... we must cultivate our garden."¹⁸

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