

theirview

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## Two fantasies—one Indian, one British

Brexit will cast a thick fog over the relationship, adding to the mutual incomprehension that has grown in recent years

At some point during the life of the next British parliament—assuming the wafer-thin Conservative majority does not collapse—India's economy will grow larger than that of Britain. This has been a relatively short interlude in the grand scheme of things. British output drew level with India later than you probably think, in 1890, just one year after Jawaharlal Nehru was born, and five years after the founding of the Congress party. The crossover will mark more than just the continued tilting of the global economic and political scales from West to East. It will carry shades of a rejoinder to history, a perceived return to a more natural order of things, and a vindication of India's former prime minister I.K. Gujral's notorious remark that Britain was "a third-rate power nursing delusions of the grandeur of its past".

In truth, the UK-India relationship staggers under the too vast orb of history. I am bemused by many Indian perceptions of Britain, which draw selectively from right-wing historians like Andrew Roberts, who periodically make inane pronouncements about Indian ingratitude for empire. Indians argue that Britain is in hock to Pakistan, while praising France as a dependable ally. Yet, France exported around \$1 billion more in arms to Islamabad than did Britain over the quarter century from 1990 to 2015, according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Over that same period, Britain exported \$2.6 billion worth of arms to India, over twice as much as France. Many persist in Gujral's contemptuous view of British power, despite the fact that the country continues to spend almost \$10 billion more on

defence than France, indeed more than any great power in Asia except China, and despite the International Monetary Fund's forecasts that the UK will outgrow both Germany and France both this and next year, in spite of the grievous self-inflicted wound of Brexit. Critics may write these claims off as patriotic bleating, but they are intended as no more than a gentle corrective.

On the other side, Brexit has drawn out an equally tendentious streak in the British Right, characterized by the impulse to return to the prelapsarian days before the European project, through the means of a rejuvenated Commonwealth or the even fuzziest notion of an Anglosphere. Having swept to electoral victory on a torrent of lies, the "Brexiters" show no grasp of the dramatic changes in UK-Asia trading patterns since the post-war decades, India's increasing alienation from the institutions and animating spirit of the Commonwealth, and the uncertainty that will persist for years until the terms of British access to the European single market become clear. These fantasies have no real understanding of India and its business environment, seeing the

country only as a screen on which to project half-baked economic visions.

A particular irony was this week's flap around immigration, with India's ministry of external affairs warning Britain that "mobility of people is closely linked to free flow of finance, goods and services". This, of course, is the very principle that is driving British Prime Minister Theresa May towards a so-called "hard Brexit", under the self-imposed pressure of shutting down the free movement of European labour and assuaging the anti-immigrant move. It was always clear from the languorous European Union (EU)-India free trade negotiations, as well as previous Indian deals with South Korea and Singapore, that India placed a high priority on liberalization in the so-called Mode 4 of the General Agreement on Trade in Services, which covers the temporary movement of service providers from one country to another. Yet, having presided over a steady fall in Indian student numbers as home minister, May decided, with impeccable timing, to tighten work visa rules further just as she flew into New Delhi.

In fairness, May herself has noted that nine of 10 Indians who applied for visa in the year to June were accepted. Data also shows that work visas granted to Indian nationals climbed steadily from 2012-14, where they stood at their highest levels in a decade. And in the long term, it is entirely possible that sharp reductions in EU migration into Britain will create political space for larger, especially high skilled, flows from Asia. The problem is that those who fuelled the toxic environment around immigration during the EU referendum, many of whom sit in May's cabinet, are hardly the most credible bearers of this mes-

sage.

In general, a sense of perspective is required. The UK-India relationship is objectively healthy, as evidenced by the broad and substantive joint statement released on Monday. That statement emphasized the countries' shared interest in a "rules-based international system" adapted to the 21st century. It also included tacit rebukes to Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea and Pakistan on terrorism. It covered a range of cultural, educational, scientific and financial initiatives that would be the envy of many bilateral relationships. Brexit will cast a thick fog over the shape of the future economic relationship, adding to the sense of mutual incomprehension that, I think, has grown in recent years. But it would be foolish to discount the opportunities that will persist, especially if British leaders can transcend our culture wars, avoid a drastic breach with the European single market, and retain a strategic—not just mercantilist, or transactional—view of India.

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## Is the history of the 1930s repeating itself?

With capitalism in crisis, and both the Centre and the Left in retreat, human tragedy of indeterminate magnitude is likely

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Across the developed world, the hold of traditional centrist parties seems to be slipping away with the rise of extreme right-wing nationalist parties and leaders. There is the AfD in Germany, the Front National in France, the Independence Party in England, the Freedom Party in Austria, Syriza in Greece, the Dutch Party for Freedom, and Donald Trump in America. Developing countries, where fascist ideologies are not demonized as genocidal, have seen a similar surge—in Turkey, the Philippines, Egypt; the two biggest emerging markets, China and India, have taken a right-wing jingoist turn. These developments mimic the eclipse of globalizing forces and the rise of right-wing movements in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Is history being repeated?

Revolutionary Europe spawned the political 'Right, Centre and Left'. The space on the Left was in time occupied by socialists and communists. Beginning with the sans-culottes during the French Revolution, the ranks of the Left were soon swelled by the new working class following the Industrial Revolution. Right-wing movements mobilized the petty bourgeoisie, comprising declining small producers and the new white-collar class. A decisive right-wing turn in the 1930s catalyzed the Spanish Civil War, World War II and the Holocaust, following which the current Left-Centre consensus was forged in the West.

Both left-wing and right-wing extremism culminated in totalitarian regimes, Bolshevism and fascism, facilitated by mass mobilization through civil society. Modern civil society emerged with the breakdown of traditional ordering devices such as the patriarchal joint family and feudalism, giving way to centralized bureaucracies, trade unions, political parties, clubs, and mass media such as newspapers, magazines and gazettes. Atomized individuals could now be directly influenced and mobilized through civil society.

The rise of a new middle class lay behind the success of both liberalism and fascism. The former grew deep roots in Western civil society at a time of growing opportunities, in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. Nazism and fascism were both products of shrinking economic opportunities during the protracted Great Depression of the 1930s. Their contemporary avatars feed on growing inequality, stagnant real wages, falling labour participation rates and stalled growth in the wake of the global financial crisis. Islamist terrorism, itself the product of a lack of economic opportunities in large swathes of the Middle East, the immigrant surge, along with globalizing forces, is compounding the fear of losing one's job and way of life in the West.

Mainstream political parties seem unable to address these popular concerns. Free trade and the middle class, the bedrocks of market capitalism and liberalism, are under threat as they were during the Great Depression. Muslims and immigrants are becoming straw men, just like the Jews in the 1930s. Instant mass mobilization through social media in the 21st century not only parallels the rise of civil society and mass media in the 20th century, but also enables marginal groups to mainstream old, declining prejudices.

Karl Marx quipped that historical events occur as it were twice. But they do so as a farce the second time around. Despite striking parallels to the Great Depression era, there are crucial differences.

First, the crisis in Western countries in the 1930s was cyclical. The demographic profile was young, productivity was growing robustly, post-war reconstruction fuelled demand, all of which made for a strong economic recovery and resurgence of liberalism. The current crisis seems structural, of a middle and labouring class in decline. The roots of right-wing extremism in developing countries lie in a rising middle class, more reminiscent of the 1930s.

Second, the civil war in Syria has several parallels with the Spanish Civil War that dragged in extant powers, culminating with World War II. China and India, the two major global players with the biggest capacity to put boots on ground, are however not involved. Also, with no major power able to challenge the US in conventional war, the latter is now conducted through quasi- and non-state actors that destabilize nation states and terrorize civil society.

The hegemony of liberalism was far from secure in Germany,



JOHN LOCHER/AP

Italy and Japan in the 1930s. The Junkers in Germany and Southern landowners in Italy exercised significant state control, and Japan was an imperial power. The state was strong, civil society weak. Traditional elites were swept away with the war. Germany, Japan and Italy joined the Western Left-Centre mainstream of liberal civil societies. Eastern Europe and large swathes of the developing world followed, but liberalism is far from secure here.

Fourth, while liberalism was the chief bulwark against fascism in civil society, the organized Left countered right-wing mobilization on the streets. Its support surged as the working class was economically distressed alongside the middle class. Both Nazis and Fascists touted socialist credentials, redirecting them towards aggressive nationalism. Their victory owed much to political blunders of the Social Democratic Party in Germany and the Confederazione Generale del Lavoro in Italy. Today, the organized Left is a much weaker force. Left-centrist parties have failed to address the concerns of their traditional working class base, a part of which has moved to right-wing parties that blame immigrants for job losses.

Fifth, totalitarian states of the 1930s preyed on their own citizens. While liberal regimes protected citizens through the ballot box, they nevertheless cohabited with the Empire and continue to prop up repressive regimes overseas. The brunt of current right-wing extremism is likely to be felt by the large number of immigrants with no voting rights, from the developing, and particularly Muslim, world, fleeing right-wing regimes in their own countries. The escalating violence by vigilantes against innocent people is likely to be perpetrated by nationalist right-wing militias, rather than the state. Classic fascist regimes are more likely in developing countries where both liberalism and civil society are weak.

History is unlikely to be repeated in the same manner, but with capitalism in crisis, and both Centre and organized Left in retreat, human tragedy of indeterminate magnitude is likely. Whether the post-war liberal order will survive the right-wing onslaught is moot.

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myview

## Designing for the non-conscious

BEHAVIOUR BY BRAIN  
BIJU DOMINIC

The greatest discovery so far about human behaviour is that more than 99.9% of brain processes occur at the non-conscious level. In addition to the huge capacity of the non-conscious, there is ample evidence that it is 5 to 10 times faster in processing as compared to the conscious. That this non-conscious drives almost all our decisions has met with a mixed response.

There are many who are sceptical about this discovery. They are like the "flat earth theorists" who were alarmed with the discovery that the earth is round. However, there is a small minority which has realized the potential of this new discovery much before others. This small minority on the brink of a paradigm shift has already gained significant competitive advantage.

The knowledge that the non-conscious drives behaviour can create a huge impact across various fields: redrawing policy decisions, corporate strategies, directing innovation and design, redefining morality—in short, everywhere that human behaviour plays a role.

Let's take an example of road safety.

The message in the rear-view mirror of your automobile, "the objects in the mirror are closer than they appear", is a perfect example of what is wrong with traditional communication strategy—the assumption that a direct communication to the conscious would automatically lead to the desired behavioural change. The automobile maker, having displayed this message on the rear-view mirror, can tick the check-box and be satisfied regardless of whether this actually helps the driver avoid accidents. But despite this overt communication, the driver's brain cannot but see the objects in the mirror as farther away and cannot respond appropriately.

In various sectors, from improving financial inclusion to inculcating healthy habits to improving tax collection, the world of policymaking is strewn with rear-view mirror equivalents of communication. We are simply communicating the desired response rather than eliciting those responses through design. These perfect messages targeted at the conscious, rational self yield suboptimal results.

The inefficiency of the traditional com-

munication has been the bane that policy-makers and corporate strategists have had to endure for long. The solution is to leverage the fast, efficient non-conscious processes of the human brain to influence behaviour.

How do we communicate to the non-conscious? In the last few years, several studies have shown that it is possible to communicate at a threshold below human consciousness. While academic studies have shown effects of subliminal messaging in controlled lab environments, I have not come across too many successful real-world examples of this type of communication.

In the last few years, the new paradigm that has emerged is "designing for the non-conscious". Such designs are not sub-

liminal. Instead, they are apparent to the target audience and change behaviour, but the target audience cannot link their changed behaviour to the design itself.

Here is an example of how non-conscious design was used to manage the problem of open defecation. Studies have shown that one of the reasons why people continue to defecate in the open in spite of having a toilet at home was that the routine seemed longer in a closed, dark toilet than in the open. However, they were not able to articulate the reason for this feeling. Looking through the lens of cognitive neuroscience, one realizes that this exaggerated perception of time is a result of the darkness inside a typical non-electrified rural household toilet. It is this understanding of how the brain perceives pas-

sage of time in dark spaces (some of these inferences are evolutionary in nature, while others are culturally hardwired) that leads to the non-conscious design solution—a small translucent rectangular opening on the door of the toilet. This design intervention serves to correct the perception of passage of time. Having corrected this perception, the user is more predisposed to defecating in the toilet. While he would have surely noticed this change, he cannot articulate the reason behind his behaviour change. This is non-conscious design in action.

Similar non-conscious designs have been developed to induce drivers to drive safely on the road, to make people more honest while filling up tax forms, to increase on-time payments, to reduce mis-selling by insurance sales personnel, to mitigate the problem of girl-trafficking, to improve airline ancillary sales, to improve adherence to Parkinson's medication and many more.

These interventions have turned out to be far more powerful than communication targeted at the conscious, rational self. But this approach to behaviour

change communication raises an obvious question. Do I, the government, or anyone else, have the right to change one's behaviour without one's conscious awareness? How do we create an ethical framework to ensure that non-conscious designs do not lead to undesirable manipulations?

I have no doubt that this new understanding of human behaviour is a very powerful tool to influence human behaviour. This knowledge in the wrong hands can lead to undesirable outcomes. It is also true that anything new, more so paradigm shifting ideas, brings with it the fear of the unknown. But one thing we should avoid is the panic reaction of the Luddites. Let's not throw the baby out with the bath water.

The world has a lot to gain by tapping into the biological reality of the non-conscious.

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