GLOBAL RISK FORUM SPECIAL EDITION

ISRM

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF WICKED PROBLEMS

BEST OF TIMES / WORST OF TIMES: AN EXPLORATION OF THE CURRENT WORLD ORDER

GRF**416**

THURSDAY 26th FEBRUARY 2026
12:00 EDT / 17:00 GMT

GRF**417**

FRIDAY 27th FEBRUARY 2026
10:00 GMT

> ***'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way'.***

The opening text from Charles Dickens 'A Tale of Two Cities', written in 1859 about the French Revolution that had taken place seventy years earlier, seems to be as relevant as this morning's news headlines. Depending on who you listen to and where you get your information from, we are either in the midst of the greatest period of health, wealth and prosperity the world has ever known, or on the edge of a cataclysmic political, social, technological and planetary systems-level collapse that will impact on every aspect of our communal existence.

On the one hand, we take it as natural that we can fly to pretty well anywhere in the world, use our mobile phones, access date and mapping, make payments, go to a coffee shop that is pretty much the same as in our local high street, buy the same newspapers, eat the same chocolate, order the same pizza, access the same medicines. Our expectation of the world is that it is seamless, accessible and available at the push of a button.

From this perspective the world is almost unified in a single operating system, it is robust, immediate and universal.

If we were to give this an overarching label, it is what Frances J Gavin, in a highly insightful essay on the Engelsberg Ideas site, called The Future of World Order[1], labelled as 'The taming of scarcity'. Whereas for most of human history the need to work to either obtain or maintain food, warmth, health and shelter took up most of our time and energy, in the current world order, those are seen (for the prosperous part of the world at least) as background issues that are taken care of almost as an expected given. The Hobbesian idea that life is intrinsically 'brutish and short', is a thing of the past.

1) The Future of World Order - Engelsberg ideas

Whilst such prosperity has led to what, for a significant part of the global population, is a life of ease, comfort and leisure, it is not cost free. Both the planet itself, through the impacts that have led directly to the ecological and climate stress that we are experiencing today, and the human and social costs that are being paid for by the portion of the global population who are not fortunate to be born in what can be described as the progressive liberal democracies, are having a highly deleterious impact on the safety, security and well-being of billions of people in an immediate and direct manner.

These are what Gavin describes as 'The problems of plenty'. Global inequality, the consequence of globalisation and capitalist economic pressures, are not by-products of those successes but are a direct outcome and counterbalance to them. As with so much of our globalized capitalist system, the benefits of the privileged are accrued on the backs of the suffering of the disenfranchised and dispossessed.

Modern life can be characterised by the failure of the global community to either acknowledge or engage with the existential challenges that we are now facing, whether that is global climate change, resource depletion, infrastructure fragility (including the space infrastructure on which we are all dependent), increasing social disorder, fundamental issues of human unhealthiest (obesity, diabetes, heart disease). Parallel to that, the emerging trends of a 'post-truth world', where misinformation and disinformation means that there is nothing we see or hear that can be taken at face value, has led to a world far from the utopian, or even middle-of-the-road acceptable, vision that the prophets of global prosperity had offered.

As Gavin express it

> ***'We live in an era of historically unimaginable wealth, knowledge about ourselves and the natural, physical world, extraordinary technological advances, and security from the natural and human threats that tormented humanity since millennia. Yet people appear deeply angry and anxious. Contemporary politics are as often fuelled by rage, fear, resentment, and humiliation as by material interest'.***

This Global Risk Forum Special Session will be an opportunity to explore these issues from multiple perspectives, bringing to the table the personal experiences and insights of our global community.

You are invited to join us, add your voice to the conversation and be part of the ISRM's on-going exploration of the issues and challenges that we are facing today.

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