

Ask A Genius 57 – Nations, the US, Putin, Inequality, and AI Valets
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Scott: What about nationhood at various levels of sophistication?

Rick: You're talking about the idea of nations or the actuality of nations throughout history. Over the past 300 or 400 years, it's probably been the heyday of nations, where it is tough to have nations. It is tough to have a nation when you don't know the layout of the world.

Say before the Renaissance world, you have states, but not nation-states as we understand them with 99.8%+ of the world's land belonging to a nation or a colony of a nation. It is difficult to have nations before, say, the telegraph.

But to really get a full national system, where we have – there are small exceptions – a world divided into about 200 nations, it is difficult to have the glue required to bring a nation together, which requires communication, decent borders – can't when things are too rugged and things are too conducive to people taking local power.

America has a lot of things that are pre-telegraph, which makes things slightly politically weird. The electoral college satisfies a balancing act between the slave states and the free states. Slave states with smaller populations were set this way with the house and senate system too.

Slave states were generally rural and agricultural states, and didn't want to be swayed by the popular vote and made compromises, but these compromises are based on needing a week or two for information to travel across a pretty big country. So, nations function more efficiently with the telegraph and telephones, and that kind of stuff.

Nations probably function less well into the future when extremely efficient forms of communication allow people to form alliances independently of nations. You've always had forces that work against nations. You have local geographic interests that can cause civil war.

You have organizations such as the Masons who, for hundreds of years, have been rumored to have secret agendas and alliances, but you really get forces that can reduce the importance of nationhood into the future when people can form strong alliances via communication, when everybody is plugged into the Internet – and what will grow out of the Internet.

You see strong non-national interests forming. For the past 100 years, you've had increasing corporatism. That's not necessarily a people thing. It is a corporate thing, but corporations, the world's largest corporations, tend to think of themselves as their own primary interests or are aligned with their own interests.

Often, that doesn't align with following the rules or being in any one country. Though corporations don't represent large numbers of people. We've mentioned this before, but Cory Doctorow talks about tribes built around common interests such as when people prefer to work.

You have the world divided into 24 time zones. One for each hour. In one of his books, people line up in each one of these 24 tribes depending on when they want to be awake. Someone in Philadelphia might feel more aligned with someone in London, as a tribe, because someone might feel more comfortable with their time. But nations aren't going away for the next couple 100 years. There's a writer named Amy Webb.

I haven't read her book, but I heard her on NPR. She said if you want to be a futurist and want to see what the future will hold, then you might want to back off and stop worrying about 100 years from now and start focusing on the developments happening in the now.

Nations will almost certainly become less and less important in the next 100 years. But now, in the near future, they are extremely important, which brings us back around to America versus other large powers. Thanks to cooking the election, Russia is seen as resurgent, but that's hard to know for sure because Putin is powerful.

But he runs a country with high levels of alcoholism, low standards of living, declining population at about half the population or so of the US (half of 325 million). I don't know how much actual clout they have. I'm sure their clout is growing. You have other large nations that are ineffective in the world.

Brazil has a large population, but it's a mess. You don't hear about them dominating world politics. When you're talking about effective nations, in wielding world power, you have the US, European nations as a group, though less so as the EU gets tattered, and India and China.

We've talked about what you might get from living in a nation that is a wielder of political power, more so than other nations in the world. That's complicated. I've benefitted from the US being a dominating nation because I've worked in entertainment and the world looks to the US for entertainment.

We have the world's most developed entertainment industry. I have worked in that for many years. Also, I was a good earner working for TV. Though I'm sure there are other places in the world where you can make a good living working in the entertainment industry. India has a huge entertainment industry.

China, based on their size, has a huge entertainment industry. At a superficial level, you feel cool living in a dominant nation. People don't deconstruct that very much. But if you go to Twitter and look at people with the American flag on their Twitter, there's an unquestioning alliance to this manly Rightist conception of America.

There's calling other people pussies on social media if they express any reservations on what conservatives think America is supposed to be about, but the feeling of coolness goes along with a lot of US patriotism. It is somewhat averse to questioning. We benefit in ways - that I don't entirely understand - being the dominant power with the economy.

We dominate with the US dollar being the benchmark for world economics. People talk about we're going to be a lot worse off if the US dollar is replaced more with the Yuan or the Chinese currency.

We benefit from the US being one of the world's coolest countries to move to, to live in, because we get to recruit smart people from the rest of the world. If that gets screwed up via increasing xenophobia, maybe, our technological dominance is further threatened.

Scott: You mentioned something in your Genius of the Year Award from Jason Betts. The landscape of genius is going to flatten, but that's on the assumption that people will take technology on board. Not everyone will, there are some nuances there: the technological Amish, the technologically adept, and the technologically augmented will be different segments of the global population.

Rick: An immediate analogy is income inequality. You have some people becoming much richer and others' income staying flat. We have an increasing, into the future, cognitive inequality or informational inequality, or computational resource inequality, where the technologically receptive and nimble will be able to provide themselves with the power to move through society that is much greater than people who can't make the various technological leaps.

We're at the beginning. For all of history, all living beings have done most of their computation within their heads. One dimension of success in the human world is how good your computation is, how good your thinking is; as we move into the future, an added dimension will be how good you are at augmenting your internal computation with external computation with all sorts of specialist applications. We see various applications of that. Until the 80s, the securities market, the stock market, were not dominated by math, but by people ruggedly pursuing gut feeling.

The rough-and-ready traders – then, in the 80s, physics postdocs started getting jobs on Wall Street and mathematicizing all of the vague hunches that people had in working in the stock market until then. From the 80s onward, the securities trading and analysis has become increasingly dominated by mechanical, non-human, computation.

That kind of dominance, or various flavors of dominances, will extend into more and more areas. One area, which is a dumb area, but an important one living in a congested city, is route computation. There are ways you can give yourself an advantage by travelling in different ways, or having technological assistance in navigating congestion. It means people can save themselves 5 minutes on a trip or find themselves less annoyed at the end of a trip depending on the way they travel. It is a near future thing that people will have increasingly sophisticated personal AI valets, butlers.



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