

Games of Dominos: Selection, Rejection and Belief

Keith Rankin, 28 March 2015

On Q+A last weekend I heard Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee say "Terrorist organizations will sprout up all over the place, but this one needs to be seriously nipped in the bud". And then I heard the *New York Times*' Masha Gessen say "It is impossible to underestimate how much of a threat Putin is to the western world". The first implies that a really heavy-handed military response to IS will somehow make us safer. And the second verges on implying something similar may be soon required to suppress Russian ambition.

The problem underlined by the quotes above is that the beliefs that underpin these statements may lead us into actions that substantially aggravate the problems such actions would be purportedly addressing.

It got me thinking about how we decide on a course of action, and about the principles of selection more generally. Essentially, I conclude, Darwinian natural selection, the scientific method, market forces and wilful blindness represent different aspects of the same mechanism. Essentially it's a rejection mechanism.

In Darwinian natural rejection, the course of the future is moulded by death and a lack of sex. Your genes are not passed on if you die young, or if you die in circumstances that compromise the life chances of your descendants. And your genes are not passed on if you or your kin reproduce less sustainably than others with other genes. Which genes prove more successful varies in different environments.

Group selection/rejection also applies; groups made up of too many selfish individuals perish on account of their collectively unsustainable behaviour. Groups pursuing unsustainable strategies are less likely to survive than groups behaving sustainably. The most successful groups are those that can contain unsustainable tendencies that emerge within those groups.

In the scientific method, the principal criterion for rejection is empirical disproof. Thus carbon-14 techniques to measure the age of ancient biota disprove the long-held biblical hypothesis that the earth is less than 7,000 years old. When facts get in the way of beliefs, in the scientific method hypotheses are selected because dogmatic beliefs are rejected through factual evidence.

The scientific method is a creative and speculative method. Informed conjecture about anything represents a valid hypothesis if it is conceptually capable of being rejected but has not yet been rejected.

In historical analysis the scientific method requires a counterfactual that can only be argued; never measured. Thus if we ask whether the Reserve Bank's inflation targeting monetary policies have reduced inflation rates, we cannot even begin to answer that question in the absence of a counterfactual scenario. Thus the best 'truth' should arise from the most plausible counterfactual. In the absence of contested counterfactuals, we only have faith. Indeed faith is all that underpinned anti-inflationary monetary policy.

Science is the selection mechanism that defines modernity. Yet the application of the scientific method to the 'soft sciences' has been very limited, because we have not yet got into the habit of creating contestable counterfactuals. We have no widely practised mechanism for rejecting beliefs that are most probably false.

In economics, selection takes place through markets. Again, it is really a rejection mechanism; your business does not survive if too few people buy your wares. Markets don't just exist in the worlds of goods and services. There are, for example, relationship markets, which take us back to the sexual side of Darwinian selection. And there are markets for ideas, or 'propositions' of truth. Yet market failure reigns.

In markets, a 'true' idea is an idea that people will buy. More to the point, propositions are rejected if they are not able to be sold; and this often has little to do with how well argued a proposition is. A proposition will be rejected if it cannot engender an audience. A proposition may be rejected if it is drowned out by other propositions. A proposition is less likely to be rejected if it serves the interests of an influential group of buyers, regardless of its merit in any scientific sense. There are imbalances in the distribution of selection influence, as well as in the distribution of income.

Success in markets conforms with the selection principle of consumer sovereignty. Rejection takes place when a thing or an idea is unattractive to influential buyers. However, a new idea that becomes attractive to many uninfluential buyers may prevail over an old idea that remains attractive to a small number of influential buyers of ideas. The adoption of MMP voting in New Zealand was one such example. (Indeed democracy itself is such an idea, rejected for many centuries in the skewed marketplace of ideas.)

Finally wilful blindness represents a refusal to consider any choice other than a prior belief. It means that we are prone to reject anything that does not fit our preconceptions; in particular it means we will reject such things by subconsciously choosing not to even be aware of what we are rejecting. Thus our preconceived ideas – our beliefs – survive, and ideas that deign to challenge them generally do not. And this may be true even when there is a clear and present change in the information we are confronted with.

Remember those Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction". They were so obviously a political ruse. Yet so many of us seemed to fall for it. The naïve mainstream media gave credibility to an obvious pretext for western aggression. It was our leaders who wanted to go to war, and we were so easily conned.

Then in economics there is the austerity con in Europe and elsewhere. The arguments for austerity are so obviously false; yet deep-seated beliefs prevent many from seeing the obvious. The people who suffer the least from austerity politics are among those most fearful of ideas that challenge the ethos of paid work and of individual (and political) thrift, even propositions and ideas that would benefit them. It took a great depression in the 1930s before the blindly interested minority could be persuaded to buy into those new-fangled Keynesian ideas. And even then, Keynes' proposals to save capitalists from themselves were only 'bought' (ie not rejected) because of the sheer terror of a Stalinist alternative that they could not be blind to.

In New Zealand the Left indulged in a particularly blatant case of wilful blindness in the 1980s. The Roger Douglas Treasury line was a fraudulent pretext for enrichment by the selfish for the selfish. We bought it. We didn't really believe that New Zealand pre-1984 was like Albania or Soviet-era Gdansk. But we allowed ourselves to consider uncool just about everything we had thought was good about pre-1984 New Zealand.

So what today about Gerry Brownlee and Masha Gessen?

Does Brownlee really believe that the west's martial approach to the Islamic State (IS) will somehow suppress the problem of "sprouting" terrorist organisations? The clear scientific evidence is that western counter-aggression will further fertilise the soil from which such extremism spreads. I don't even think Brownlee is that wilfully blind; rather he speaks on behalf of the wilfully blind.

And what about Masha Gessen's warning about Vladimir Putin? I've seen this new Cold War talk as well from Francis Fukuyama, an intellectual whom I have some time for. There's little doubt that Vladimir Putin is a politically ambitious man. But it does all humanity a disservice to overstate his ambition. He is a brutal and ruthless Russian nationalist seeking to create a strong Russian polity that answers to no outside force. He does not want to rule the whole world, but wishes Russia to maintain a position of strength within it. People in the west should beware of taking on overly belligerent beliefs about Russia and then acting on those beliefs, having needlessly rejected more sanguine and nuanced understandings of world politics.

In the 1960s we were subject to the Domino Theory which gave us the Vietnam War. Yet once Vietnam finally prevailed and was free (after 1980) to set its own course, we soon realised that Vietnam posed no danger to us, and that any vestigial dangers the Vietnam regime posed to its own people were short-lived. (And this despite an escalation of Cold War posturing in the early 1980s.) The Domino Theory was and is an obvious nonsense that needs to be continuously rejected. Ho Chi Minh never presented a danger to western liberal-democracy. The Vietnam War did create such a danger, however. Fortunately there were enough individually uninfluential people in the west to reject war and save liberal democracy from itself.

Let's not create new Games of Dominos. Let's reject the real dangers – inequality, deflationary miserliness and environmental havoc – and stop believing in the faux dangers of our easily-led imaginations.
