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Black swans do not fly from anywhere

Today, more than ever, we need rebels with beautiful minds, who challenge the status quo. Only due to them, black swans do not fly from anywhere.

The financial crisis, the September 11 attacks, the Holocaust, The 1986 Chernobyl disaster, industrial livestock production, 2019-20 COVID-19 pandemic are all so-called black swans - unexpected events, and therefore, their results are unpredictable. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, the author of “Black Swan” and “Antifragile: Things That Gain From Disorder”, believes these

events go beyond the domain of our usual expectations: no element of the past indicates the possibility of their occurrence, while they have a dramatic impact on reality.

As a consequence, fragile, vulnerable matters result. However, there are some advantages to the shocks that ultimately lead society to thrive and grow. This property stands behind all elements of nature. Culture or economy can be antifragile as well, as long as not overregulated, indebted, and under the ill-advised state intervention.

In the 21st century, characterized by access to knowledge, intensive intellectual, technological and industrial development, in other words: in the realities of a global village, is there even a point to talking about black swans events? Or will we be surprised by the effects of our negligence: ignoring warnings, growing indifference, lack of critical thinking and a seared conscience? During the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp, Marian Turski, a former Auschwitz prisoner, emphasized that nothing falls from the sky.

Artificial Intelligence and the Big Data

The problem with black swan events is not that we cannot predict them, but that we often ignore them. We trivialize the reciprocal impact of the supposedly distant areas and shield away from questions about technological development and its effect on a social crisis as well as the decline of ethics.

Even when definite warning signs precede the major catastrophe, we still tend to neglect the proper course of action. Since last December, we have been watching the development of COVID-19 in China but initially decided to ignore the signals and now suffer the consequences globally. We trusted that the virus from some other world far away will not affect us. We believed and disregarded to such an extent that we harassed those who warned us about the upcoming threat. This is a disheartening conclusion: disaster has to come full circle before we can or allow ourselves to see the effects of wars, nuclear weapons, hate speech, epidemics, and - looking into the future - cyberwars.

Similarly, the development of AI and the usage of the data personalization systems (Big Data) are currently in a regulatory vacuum. That creates a great room for abuse and puts us at risk of the analogical catastrophe scenario we are experiencing today with COVID-19 worldwide pandemic. A lot of companies implemented the remote work model. In many cases, it becomes a control issue. Employees complain about the huge inconvenience, which is reporting every 15 minutes of their work. At the same time, they share personal information with just a few companies in the world that, consequently, have full and most up to date data about them.

As a result, knowledge and power are in the hands of only very few people who do not suffer any consequences for legally questionable practices. The Humanites Institute has been highlighting the need for greater cooperation between business and leading technology companies for a decade. This collaboration should cover the area of legal regulation and human development (not only in the context of programming science but in general). Interestingly, that approach is often considered technophobic. The outbreak of the coronavirus proves that various scenarios are possible.

Reducing humans to just an algorithm is such a dangerous black swan. We need to remember that people are more than just products, consumption and brain. The constant shaping of our behaviours, the pace of life as well as no time for reflection make us easily manipulated and controlled. The actions of Facebook and Google-like companies create a possibility to impact the way we are thinking, generate fake news and to manipulate us.

I also indicate the value of the responsibility of each company that decides to use the technology. Technology is neither good nor bad. We mark it with the ethical tag, and this is why we are responsible for how we use it and what purpose it serves. Big Data, self-learning systems and the solutions integrating man and the machine (like biometrics) that can gain control over us are the perfect examples of that challenge.

Through their algorithms, social media led to the gamification of our relationships. Because of the way that social media algorithms work, we got used to the gamification of our online lives. It is not surprising at all that we have also transferred that model into our relationships. Social media played a significant role in the development of such phenomena as the anti-vaccination movement or anorexia among young people. They also support the impulsive consumer behaviour, so that when we buy more, we feel valuable. Would Boris Johnson come to power if it was not for social media? Would Brexit, which destabilizes the political situation, happen without them? These are other implications that are worth exploring.

There was much publicity about the impact of the Cambridge Analytica, and how the knowledge about Facebook profiles can shape our opinions. How big would the wave of populism be, if not for the fact that nowadays people are being manipulated? If corporations and governments start to gather our biometric data on the mass scale, they can get to know us better than we do. They will be able to predict our feelings and use that knowledge to sell us everything: from products to the political systems.

I draw attention to the historical document published on February 19, 2020: “White Paper on Artificial Intelligence: a European approach to excellence and trust”, under the guidance of the President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. According to the European Commission, Artificial Intelligence should be human-centred. All of the high-risk AI systems should have special regulations. The Commission points out the need to tax global

corporations, which would provide a financial basis for creating dedicated regulatory solutions.

Digitalization and DNA Programming

IQ tests were invented 100 years ago. Since then, the average IQ score in the Western world population has increased from 100 to 130 points. However, since the 90s it is dropping by 0.2 points annually. Perhaps the reason for that situation goes along the lower requirements at school: less attention to reading, less physical activity and the difficulty in processing the flood of information. What is happening in technology today, changes not only us but also our children and the next generations. This is our “anthropological dowry” with which we enter the digital world. Social networks are overloaded with relations to the extent people have never functioned before. The never-ending comparisons and winding the spiral of these comparisons exploits the weaknesses of our genetic "software". The intentional buying of our attention by commercial entities distracts us from our natural presence here and now. This is even more of a concern when we realise the latest discoveries of epigenetics. They bring evidence that experiences strengthen the epigenetic marking of genes and can have consequences for future generations, shaping both resistance and susceptibility to outside influence.

What are the possible effects? The probable scenario for humanity striving for an easy, convenient life full of pleasures, with the 4-year long “Mouse Utopia” experiment from 1986, done by John Calhoun. He tried to answer the question: what will happen if we provide the species with everything necessary for survival and remove all threats? John Calhoun created the mice equivalent of the well-developed human civilisation. Eldorado with unlimited access to food, water and nesting materials. There were no life-threatening predators, and the spread of infectious diseases was limited as much as possible.

Initially, Calhoun’s pupils were doing great. They established the mice hierarchy, they were eating, drinking, reproducing, and the population was growing. After some time, however, its population stabilized and started to shrink. Individuals began to lose interest in themselves while there was a growing population of the self-caring “singles” forgetting about their role in the herd. Older mice performed best. Despite the repeated attempts, the effect of the experiment was always the same - it led to the full extinction of the population. We can be left with the hope that we, as human beings are something more than mice...

The Epidemic of Loneliness

The following question is whether, as part of their corporate social responsibilities, the global corporations like Facebook, Google, Amazon or Alibaba will take responsibility for the next 21st-century black swan, which is the growing phenomenon of loneliness?

Thanks to technology, we are the most connected society in human history, but at the same time, we are also the most lonely. You cannot love, be friends, or touch each other by tapping on the screen, sending yourself emojis, stickers or GIFs. **Ciekaweliczby.pl based on the data from the General National Statistics Bureau**, illustrate those results with calculations based on Eurostat data. They show that almost every fourth household in Poland is a one-person household. In 2005, they accounted for 18%, while in 2018, they rose to 24% of the total number of households in Poland.

Loneliness does not only affect the elders. Besides its effects on health - weakening the immune system, increasing the risk of heart disease, and depression - it has severe social, political, and economic consequences.

The United Kingdom spends GBP 2.5 million annually to treat the health consequences of loneliness and the associated decline in productivity. Loneliness also determines the way we organize ourselves in communities and how we make social and political choices. Its causes include the pace of life and technological progress, but also remote work.

We start missing the simple needs. Two-thirds of the British people, between 35 to 45, and more than 6% of Americans, declare to feel lonely even at work. There is also a growing prevalence of depression in Poland. In 2018, when it turned out that there are more suicides than car accident victims, the Polish Supreme Audit Office became interested in this phenomenon. The development of the loneliness phenomenon was one of the leading issues on the agenda of the Economic Forum in Davos in 2019. The fact that in many Western civilizations, more than 30 % of society feels the lasting effects of loneliness drew the leader's attention.

Since 2010, the Humanites Institute has been initiating the Global Social Movement "Two Hours for the Family". It aims to raise awareness of sustainable human development and the integration of professional and personal life. Employers from 15 countries support the campaign to raise awareness about the crisis of interpersonal relationships, including family ties.

“The Useless Class”

Where else can we hear the beat of the black swan wings? “The wave of redundancies increases in the banking sector”, “Rising minimum wages will speed up the pace of automation”, “Clients are testing the first checkout-less store” - a few headlines from recent business magazines. When reflected on they close resemble that familiar flutter of past swans.

In his books, “21 Lessons for the 21st Century” and “Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow” a historian Yuval Noah Harari writes that although there will be numerous new jobs, many people may not be able to retrain to fill them up. It may result in the creation of the new “useless class”, whereby no profession will be free from the risk of automation, as machine learning and robotics will continuously develop.

Even if we could continually create new professions and retrain employees - do we have enough emotional resistance to experience endless shocks throughout our life? By 2050 a new class of people might emerge – the useless class. Its appearance is not due to a complete lack of work or effective education, but also due to the insufficient mental immunity resistance of people.

What does it mean? I refer to the 2018 World Economic Forum “The Future of Jobs Report”, and the McKinsey & Company “AI, Automation and the Future of Work” forecasts. According to them, nearly 400 million employees worldwide may lose their jobs due to automation by 2026.

More than 50% of employees will require retraining and raising their qualifications, 20% of which may be permanently unemployed. This scenario will happen unless governments, business representatives and NGOs together create relevant programs aimed at retraining employees.

You will have to ask yourself if you can live without what you do now and if you would still feel like a valuable person without it? A heavy responsibility rests with the business leaders who should prepare employees for a new reality. Blinded by the race for innovation, fashionable topics and profits, we do not see the scale of social challenges, causing that companies are more focused on eliminating plastic forks, than addressing the issue that the most endangered species today is human beings. The technological world rarely encourages thinking in favour of reducing man’s role to the impulsive consumer.

The industrial revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ended with a proletarian revolution. Today, protesters can take the streets, caused by the economic effects of the coronavirus epidemic: the real risk of failure of many businesses and the necessity of mass redundancies. I emphasize not to lose sight of the so-called unnecessary people. They will not have jobs and consequently will struggle to move on with their life. Their behaviour will be unpredictable, and for that reason, we cannot exclude revolts, also those of the political nature.

Climate crisis, leadership crisis

The climate crisis and the resulting demographic and economic changes are the meta phenomenon. The UN has been talking about this problem at its annual summits for 26 years.

Since when do we know that it is that bad? The symbolic year would be 1979, the year of the G7 Summit in Tokyo, and the debate based on the UN data about that topic. Were any radical actions taken? No, they were not. Today, we witness the consequences of the leaders, who got so myopic, that they failed to heed the warning signs.

The United Nations Population Fund estimates that by 2100 there will be 11 billion people that live on Earth, even though the population growth may be disrupted by the climate crisis. The UN predicts that two billion people will have to migrate because of the climate crisis. This can mean a war for water, food and the global security impasse.

Stephen Hawking, an English theoretical physicist, cosmologist, astrophysicist, and Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at the University of Cambridge, died in 2018. Even then, he believed that it is too late to save the world and the human race. He called Donald Trump a demagogue and warned over his scandalous attitude towards the natural environment and global warming. He considered Brexit as a catastrophe and concluded the emergence of artificial intelligence could be the best or worst event in the history of our civilization unless society finds a way to control its development.

Today, more than ever, we need rebels with beautiful minds. People who view the world from a broad perspective, and who according to Taleb, remain antifragile. We should not ignore them. Otherwise, who will ask questions the world will hear? Who will warn those who are asleep? It is they who make sure black swans do not fly below the radar.

The complexity and comprehensiveness of the world require breaking the silo approach to problem-solving. We all have an impact on the closest surrounding and the world far beyond our own. The world needs a Coherent Leadership that combines business goals and human needs. Today's leaders need to take responsibility for social transformation, and for the DNA structure, we will pass to the next generations: whether it will be reinforced or impoverished. Will coronavirus help us get back to the foundations, use our human wisdom to stop treating technology like a God, and create technology that truly takes into account the needs of homo sapiens, and not just feeding his reptilian brain?

We need courage and openness, so that man can make good use of the opportunities brought by development and new technology, instead of becoming their slave and ultimately, the weakest link. This is also a black swan that (doesn't) fly below the radar.