

Vision, Identity and Environment

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As the occasion is the bicentenary of the death of Adam Smith, I have an excuse to meander through some thoughts which, rightly or wrongly, I consider to be of great significance. For *The Wealth of Nations* represented only one section of Adam Smith's works. It was part of a comprehensive system of moral or social philosophy. So tonight, I will attempt to situate man's economic skills within the broader picture, as I see it.

THE TASK BEFORE US

When Adam Smith died, world population was under 900 million. Today, it has swollen to 5,000 million. This vast crowd, using technology invented principally since the nineteenth-century industrial revolution has severely damaged our planet.

Now, our task is to reverse that damage whilst, at the same time, allowing the development of a diversity of stable societies in which free men and women can live according to their own cultures and traditions and in harmony with their environment.

It is not my purpose here to catalogue yet again the environmental dangers. Suffice it to say that we have reached the point where the quality of the most fundamental elements is threatened: air, water, food, soil, forests, oceans and climate.

Faced with this awesome challenge, solutions are proposed which tend to fall into three broad categories.

Negative Solutions

The first is based on the idea that the principal cause of our problem is industrialization. So it is suggested we should retreat from industry and return to traditional and pre-industrial societies. This proposal is intellectually incomplete. Pre-industrial systems are not capable of supporting a world population of 5,000 million and growing fast. A vast and poverty-stricken population does not have the luxury to engage in the strategic thought necessary to protect the long term. For them, the long term is survival tomorrow.

Like the utopian egalitarian dreams of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, this avenue could lead to a new totalitarian quasi-religion which could inflict medication as horrible as the disease it is supposed to cure.

The second school of thought is more fatalistic. Roughly speaking, it believes that human population growth is a malignant tumescence and that humans cannot or will not find an answer. So it is nature which must react as she has so often in the past. The question that follows is whether nature's healing powers have been overwhelmed by man's assault or whether her immunity has remained intact. If so, she will re-establish an equilibrium through terrible plagues and other natural disasters. Humanity, if it survives, will have been reduced to an acceptable position.

A positive view

The third scenario is positive. It is based on the premise that it is difficult to turn back the clock and that man is able, under the right circumstances, to move forward with greater wisdom and to act before it is too late.

Those who agree with this view point to the new industrial revolution which is just beginning. Some call it the Quantum revolution. Undoubtedly, it is the most powerful technological change experienced by man and will have a fundamental effect on our future

-- either for good or for evil. Like all powerful tools, its effects will depend on the wisdom of those who use it.

Whereas the nineteenth-century industrial revolution was based on natural resources and cheap labour, the new industrial revolution is based on knowledge. Its origins are chronicled in George Gilder's book *Microcosm* and I will draw liberally from his work and words when describing it.

Some of the symptoms of this revolution can be found in cybernetics, superconductivity, genetic engineering, communications, robotics, and (the as yet unproven) cold fusion.

Technology and resource use

Environmentally, it will have a rapid impact. It radically changes the role of raw materials. The use of coal, steel, oil, and other materials will be sharply reduced as a share of value added in the economy. This will transform the need for industry to exploit the environment for raw materials.

Consider the microchip -- a computer inscribed on a tiny piece of processed material. It combines millions of components operating in billionths of seconds on a space the size of a wing of a fly. By overcoming the constraints of material resources, the microchip will make obsolete large accumulations of physical equipment. Less than 2% of the cost of a silicon chip is for raw materials.

Look at other examples. A few pounds of optical glass fibre made of the same elements as sand will soon carry as much information as a ton of copper. Super conductive elements could increase by compounding factors of between 5 and 100 the efficiency of every wire, receiver transmitter, electric motor, solar collector, power generator and magnetic battery.

By allowing sharp reductions in the weight of a wide array of mechanical systems, this technology could further accelerate the decline in the use of raw materials.

New knowledge could replace dangerous and dirty sources of energy. The use of coal and oil would be radically altered. The existing nuclear energy industry which is centralized, uneconomic and unsafe would be recognized as obsolete.

The effects of this revolution will not be confined to the transformation of the use of raw materials and therefore to the exploitation of the environment. It can do more. In this new age, the inventive inputs of man can launch a spiral of economic growth and productivity at steadily declining cost in each material domain: energy, natural resources and pollution.

As capital-intensive accumulations of equipment become less necessary to industry, it will encourage decentralization at every level of society and decentralization will grow as the powers of bureaucracies and of the State are weakened. Centralized states can dig iron, pump oil, mobilize manpower, manipulate currencies, tax and spend. As George Gilder so eloquently says:

"The State can expropriate the means of production. But when it does it will find mostly sand. The entrepreneurs will run for the daylight of liberty and can take their minds elsewhere.

"Today the ascendant nations and corporations are masters not of land and material resources but of ideas and technologies. Wealth comes not to the rulers of slave labour but to the liberators of creativity, not to the conquerors of land but to the emancipators of mind."

George Gilder is right. The Quantum revolution offers the opportunity to create the conditions which could help us to heal the wounds that man has inflicted on the planet. But it also supplies man with the power to destroy more thoroughly and perhaps terminally.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

In my opening remarks, I suggested that our objective should be to allow the development of a diversity of stable societies in which free men and women can live according to their own cultures and traditions. And do so in harmony with their environment.

Thus the question is how to use the immense new powers of the Quantum revolution to help us to attain that objective.

Cultural diversity allows each society to develop its own evolving model from which others can learn. Mistakes can be limited to one culture at a time and do not overwhelm everything, as would be the case with a global monoculture. The bedrock of diversity is mutual respect. And that means accepting that the beliefs of others, which may seem bizarre, might contain some wisdoms we are unable to perceive.

It has always been my conviction that cultural imperialism is more deeply harmful than territorial expansion. The Conquistadores plundered, raped, and returned to their homelands. They cause pain and injury. But the long term consequences of their actions cannot be compared to the damage caused by their successors -- the proselytizers. Often, with the best of intentions, they robbed whole nations of their language, religion, and identity. It should not be forgotten that one man's missionary is the other man's spy. When the Communists sent their proselytizers to the West to convert us to Communism, we called them spies or agents of influence. When we sent ours to Africa to convert Africans to our religions, we called them educators or missionaries.

Seldom do we recognize that when we intervene and change the cultures of others, we destabilize them because we tear them away from their traditions. Deracinated they tend to drift to urban slums and sink into a slum culture. Such people lose their capacity to live in harmony with the environment. Respect for the long term is characteristic of proud and stable communities, confident in their traditions and seeking continuity so as to pass on to their successors a form of life at least as good as the one they themselves inherited. People who lack such stability replace respect for the long term by immediate self-gratification. They are unable to be concerned by the long-term degradation of their environment.

Western cultural imperialism

Too often, the West has contributed to this process. Much of the institutional aid that we have distributed has destabilized the cultures of others. Often, it masks a desire to proselytize by fiscal means.

Let us take the United States as an example. Americans are a warm and generous people. They have demonstrated their hospitality to immigrants and refugees from around the world. Their Founding Fathers created a constitution based on individual freedom -- freedom of worship, speech and enterprise. When necessary, Americans have fought for these principles. Today the United States is more than a nation, it is a free world in which peoples of different religion and race can live side by side and work to improve the positions of their families and communities. It is America's creative vigour which is mainly responsible for the great new opportunities offered by the Quantum revolution.

But it would be a great mistake to suggest that the US has developed a culture so superior that it should be exported throughout the world. America has a dark side. Many of its major cities are suffering from social breakdown. Drugs, crime, suicide and social disorder of the worst kind are the obvious symptoms. America's enormous appetite for drugs has created a market so valuable that it has polluted its neighbours, converting them into drug suppliers dominated by drug barons. America's underclass is not just poor, it is alienated.

That such an underclass can exist in the world's richest nation demonstrates, once again, that money cannot heal fundamental social disease. Many communities with much smaller

monetary income than that of the American underclass display no symptoms of such disease and that is because they have maintained their stability according to their own traditions. Pride, self-respect, self-reliance, patriotism, stability, concern for the long term, have to grow from healthy soil. They cannot be bought with subsidies and charity.

It would be blind arrogance for America to wish to impose her culture on others. The world witnessed an example when, in 1984, the US government ceased to give certain funds to foreign nations which promoted family planning acceptable within their own cultures. Thus, overpopulated nations were given the choice of accepting the ideas of a vocal US religious minority or abandoning part of the aid accorded to them.

The US must not come to believe that because she is materially competent, she is spiritually superior. She should intervene internationally only when her national security is in danger. She should build on her noble strengths, strive to heal her great wounds and be a model from which others can learn as free and independent peoples.

Europe's foreign aid program should also be reassessed to establish whether we are helping or meddling; whether we are doing good or merely gratifying our own conscience; whether we are encouraging industrialization in a way which will lead to further social deracination and urban slums. In other words, whether we are intervening to push others to copy us, as though we hold the key to the best and only way of life.

As we look at Africa today, racked by local wars, stricken by disease, agglomerating in shanty towns, suffering increasing poverty, can we honestly believe that our proselytism has been a success or that our financial assistance has been enriching?

Good intentions are not a valid excuse to do harm -- they are only a mitigating factor.

Aid without imperialism

Let me suggest an example of aid which could be useful without damaging others. It is now generally accepted that the survival of the tropical rain forests is of global importance. Such forests are located principally in the third world and the largest is, of course, the Amazonian forest. It forms part of the territories of Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Surinam, Guyana and French Guiana. These I will describe as the "host nations".

Many proposals have been put forward to halt the destruction of the forests. But to be satisfactory, a proposal needs to respect two principal conditions:

Firstly, it should not be imperial. The developed world should not seek to impose a solution, which in any case would be resisted and become ineffective. It has not been forgotten by others that the developed countries largely sacrificed their own environment in the process of industrialization. Many in the third world interpret an attempt to stop them from exploiting their natural resources as "pulling up the ladder" and stranding them in an inferior position.

Secondly, we should recognize that the host nations own the forest; that it is a natural and vital resource; that it is needed by all; that, rightly or wrongly, they believe that they are sacrificing economic opportunities by protecting this resource; and that they should be compensated for doing so.

If we accept these premises, then we should enter into a fair market contract whereby, in return for not cutting the tropical rain forests, the host nations are paid a rent by the remainder of the world. This is not unlike the payments made to farmers, in the US and in Europe, for not harvesting certain items.

The rent would be payable annually following a normal monitoring process. Its amount would compensate the host nations for the cost of maintaining the forest and for the perceived loss of income from not exploiting them on an unsustainable basis.

Such a transaction is a normal market contract. The host nations own a natural resource which we all need, just like the oil producing nations own a natural resource which we all need. In both cases, we should pay a fair price for the benefit of the resource.

I will not go further into the financial details, except to say that the international debt issued by the host nations could form part of the currency; and that current international aid programs should be re-prioritized so that they be laser-beamed onto projects of this kind.

OUR PLACE IN THE ENVIRONMENT

Let me now turn to a subject more fundamental than man's position relative to other men. And that is man's position within the natural world.

The use to which we apply our skills will depend largely on how we see man's role and responsibilities. To understand where we are and where we might hope to go, we must look to our past.

Two views of the natural order

Primal religions, the most fundamental religious forms in the history of mankind, still account for the religious outlook of a significant proportion of the peoples of the world. They interpret man's role in a different way to that of the religions of modern Western man. Primal peoples cannot conceive of man as an individual existing by himself, unrelated to the animate or inanimate forces surrounding him. Whereas, in the Western tradition, the natural world is something to be investigated, explained and ultimately exploited, in the primal religious view the world is not alien to man. For them, the fundamental question is not "how" but "why". Men and women in primal societies must, therefore, approach the natural world with care and indeed with reverence. In the primal world, man's position vis-a-vis nature is not one of exploitation but of relationship.

The monotheistic religions have cast man in a different role. God transcends nature and man is made in the image of God. So man is set apart. The remainder of the world and all other animals therein are subordinated to him. So evolved an anthropocentric universe. There are those who argue that the emergence of a rigid and exclusive monotheism has led to a view of man and of his place in nature which threatens the primal sense of unity and reciprocity with nature. And that this could have contributed to that unbridled exploitation of nature that has created the ethical and ecological problems that confront us today.

Indeed, Buddhists believe that the problem lies in the Western dichotomy of "man and nature". They consider that the radical separation of man from nature follows from the fundamental premises of the Judeo-Christian tradition and that within such a context, nature is there to be subjected to the will and aggressive instincts of man.

The great modern materialistic religion, Marxist-Leninism, rejected spiritual beliefs and placed its trust in science and technology. For them, the only moral criterion governing any action is whether it aids or hinders the ultimate good of man. Marxism feels free to exploit nature solely in the service of man. The only break on such exploitation will be the self-interest of human society. So according to this philosophy, man -- or rather the society of men -- is paramount.

Precarious consequences

It is not surprising that with such a background, Western man should have felt protected from the consequences of his actions. After all, he had been brought up to believe that nature had been created expressly for this purpose.

If such a state of mind were to persist, then I believe that there would be little hope that man would reverse the damage already inflicted on the planet. Such hubris would

inevitably lead to self destruction and the increased power provided by the new industrial revolution would merely speed the process.

Hopeful changes among theologians

Fortunately, there are some signs of change. Some concerned Christian theologians are reassessing their religious roots within the Hebraic tradition to assert man's stewardship of nature. As a steward, man has a responsibility for nature. This nonetheless leaves man apart from nature. There is also a Christian school of thought which considers that man is part of nature because, like the animals, he is created out of the dust of the earth (*Genesis* 2:7 and 2:19). When God breathed into man the breath of life, it is said that he also breathed it into birds and animals. Yet man is also held to transcend other living beings in that he, and he alone, is created in the "image of God".

Graham Greene, who was described in an interview published in the catholic magazine *The Tablet* as "perhaps the most famous Catholic layman alive", also recently talked about change. He stated that he was:

" ... very uncomfortable with the Church's teaching on contraception. I think that contraception is vital for human life ... With overpopulation in Africa and all around the world I think that contraception and planned birth is a necessity."

Greene went on to say that it was "quite clear that the majority of bishops under Paul VI were in favour of contraception", but that this had little effect on doctrine. "Don't you find," he continued, "that the Roman Curia reminds you a little bit of the Politburo? But even the Politburo is changing."

It is difficult to disagree with Greene that change must occur, when one remembers that, if present trends are maintained, world population is forecast to reach 11,000 million at the end of the next century.

AN ISSUE TRANSCENDING POLITICS

Inevitably, it is necessary to comment on the role of the environmentalists and the Greens. They have had a most salutary influence. They have drawn attention to an urgent and overwhelming problem. They are often attacked for being too extreme, but it is difficult not to be extreme when one can see man's activity infecting the world like some horrible, pervasive and progressive disease.

So they should continue to militate and do so actively -- but not by forming a political party nor by creating a quasi-religion.

Their concerns should transcend all political parties and religions. The global environment is not a partisan matter. By treating it as though it were and associating it with a party political programme containing a host of other items, environmentalists risk alienating many who are sympathetic to their concerns but reject their partisanship.

Principles above partisanship

The Greens should seek the best way of achieving their objectives and not be tempted into an egocentric course. They should endorse politicians of whatever party who, in their view, are environmentally aware. They should condemn the others. They should participate in religious debates, each within their own different religious congregations, so as to encourage evolution from an anthropocentric doctrine to one which urges man to act responsibly and in harmony with nature.

Environmentalists come from every walk of life. They are brought together by an understanding of man's abuses. It is said that some among them, those who have formed the Green political parties, feel a kinship to socialism. If that is true, I find it hard to believe that it will be a lasting phenomenon.

Most of the members of the Green parties have grown up in relatively free and developed countries. It is in this context that they have witnessed the polluting side-effects of industrialization. They have reacted against what they experienced at first hand. But now that there is a greater freedom of information, we all know that the most heavily polluted nations of Europe are East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. The most willfully destructive of traditional communities is Rumania.

Only a few weeks ago, a Polish government economist, citing lack of sewage treatment, use of cheap coal and the death of rivers and lakes, lamented: "We have the worst environmental problem in all of Europe." In 1986, East Germany discharged some 5,000 million tons of sulphur dioxide into the air. That is more than twice as much as West Germany, which has a population four times greater.

The destructiveness of political power

I do not say this to score a petty political point nor to make a qualitative judgement on individuals who believe in or live in different political and economical systems. My point is about power. Too much power is dangerous. Centralized systems have too much power. Even with the best intentions, they can do too much harm. That is why I am distrustful of centralizing political systems, powerful bureaucracies and totalitarianism of whatever colour: red, blue or green.

Greens, more than anybody, understand the ideal of decentralization. They were among the first to recognize the destructive power of the great international bureaucracies; the ecological damage caused by government sponsored monster projects; the horror of megacities in which the family unit has disaggregated. The Greens understood that the modern, soulless, high rise cities, scattered throughout the world, would become factories for alienating individuals who, pathetically, would try to replace their scattered families by grouping into gangs. Of course, one of the causes of these cities was the fashion created by the celebrated modern architects, like Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, who believed in and built for collective and not for families. Collectivist architecture has not been a positive factor in building stable communities.

I feel confident that, in the fullness of time, environmentalists will reject socialism, that is unless socialism itself rejects the fundamental ideas on which it was founded. It is impossible for environmentalists to approve the most materialistic of philosophies which, more than any other, places man and his artifacts above all else and regards nature as a thing to be exploited by him.

No matter how brilliant the technological revolutions, no matter how useful the economic and political initiatives, there can be hope only if man can cast away his anthropocentric delusions and seek to find his place in nature, a place from which he can live in harmony with his universe.