

# Forums for a Future <sup>1</sup>

## Podcast # 28: Actually, It Is Not Very Complicated

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### I

We know we have some worn out concepts that are no longer working very well. That recognition is what accepting change is all about.

*Economically*, we have single-mindedly pursued the accumulation of wealth by embracing the belief that infinite growth through economic globalization is both reasonable and sustainable as the path for achieving greater universal economic equality. Thomas Freedman in promoting the necessity of “friction-free” capitalism wrote:

“The pie keeps growing because things that look like wants today are needs tomorrow... if you believe human wants and needs are infinite... then there are infinite businesses to be created, infinite businesses to be started, and independent jobs to be done, and the only limiting factor is human imagination... *The Indians and Chinese are not racing us to the bottom. They are racing us to the top...* they want higher standards of living, not sweatshops... they want to trade their motor scooters for cars... the higher they climb, the more room is created at the top -- because the more they have, the more they spend, the more diverse product markets become...” (*The World is Flat*, pages 231, 233)

*Socially*, we are making a mess out of our own future by reducing the carrying capacity of the planet while pushing the absolute limit through population growth. Jarred Diamond in a comparison of modern USA with Easter Island wrote:

“The Easter Islanders' isolation probably also explains why I have found that their collapse, more than the collapse of any other pre-industrial society, haunts my readers and students. The parallels between Easter Island and the whole modern world are chillingly obvious. Thanks to globalization, international trade, jet planes, and the Internet, all countries on Earth today share resources and affect each other, just as did Easter's dozen clans. Polynesian Easter Island was as isolated in the Pacific Ocean as the Earth is today in space. When the Easter Islanders got into difficulties, there was nowhere to which they could flee, nor to which they could turn for help; nor shall we modern Earthlings have recourse elsewhere if our troubles increase. Those are the reasons why people see the collapse of Easter Island society as a metaphor, a worst case scenario, for what may lie ahead of us in our own future.” (*Collapse*, page 119)

*Politically*, we have allowed corporations to escape essential regulation, bankrupted the nation with the Iraq War, and made the world less safe by undermining the United Nations as the only institution we have for addressing our new global realities. Gwynne Dyer in the context of the war on terror wrote:

“A world where terrorism is seen as the biggest problem is a world without big problems. But this is going to change... Global warming and other environmental problems are going to hit us very hard over the next 50 years... There will probably be major disruptions in food supply and mass movements of population in some parts of the world -- including some technologically competent parts of the world that have access to the full range of modern weapons. It will not be possible to ignore their suffering as they will possess the means of drawing it forcefully to everybody else's attention, so there had better be a system in place that enables us to spread the burden of coping with these changes.” (*Future: Tense*, page 243, 244)

What is clear is the need for reconsidering our core economic, social and political beliefs.

## II

Many are people are discouraged because these economic, social and political issues all need to be solved quickly. Yet, because they are all interrelated, the task seems too complicated to be solved at all, let alone quickly: How can we keep expanding economically to address worldwide economic inequalities, yet moved toward a simpler more sustainable life style? But, without first addressing growing economic inequalities how can we defeat worldwide political instability and terrorism? How can worldwide political cooperation be achieved when we are in a competitive global economy focused on economic growth?

But, conceptually, these challenges are not really that complicated. We know what the technical solutions are.

### First, Economically

The pursuit of unlimited growth and the creation of new wealth are not sustainable. The economic engine that drove the Modern Era is worn out. More people are too poor, both within and between countries. If we are to achieve the promise of economic globalization there needs to be greater regulation and more equitable distribution of wealth. The mechanisms for which are well understood. Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel prize-winning economist, wrote:

“I believe that globalization has the potential to bring enormous benefits to those in both the developing and the developed world. But the evidence is overwhelming that it has failed to live up to this potential... Economics has been driving globalization, especially through the lowering of communication and transportation costs. But politics has shaped it. The rules of the game have been largely set by the advanced industrial countries and particularly by special interests within those countries -- and, not surprisingly, they have shaped globalization to further their own interests. They have not sought to create a fair set of rules, let alone a set of rules that would promote the well-being of those in the poorest countries of the world.”  
(Making Globalization Work, page 4)

### Second, Socially

An unsustainable life style, by definition, eventually leads to collapse unless there is a change in what is responsible for it. For us living in the United States, we can no longer continue to organize our life style around the accumulation of “stuff.” Nor can we continue to tolerate the growing number of citizens who are without health care and who live in poverty. And, we must recognize that we, along with the rest of humanity, are in jeopardy if we do not treat the distribution of our natural resources as a common wealth. Globalization is our new reality, as Jeffery Sachs noted:

“The challenges of sustainable development -- protecting the environment, stabilizing the world's population, narrowing the gaps between rich and poor, and ending extreme poverty -- will take center stage. Global cooperation will have to come to the fore. The very idea of competing nation-states that scramble for markets, power, and resources will become passé. ... The defining challenge of the 21st century will be to face the reality that humanity shares a *common fateh on a crowded planet*. That common fate will require new forms of global cooperation, a fundamental point of blinding simplicity that many world leaders have yet to understand or embrace.” (Common Wealth, Ch.1)

### Third, Politically

In principle, we have a form of government that is by the people and for the people. But, in practice, we have relinquished our ownership of our political property to vested interests that through their wealth and power have usurped what is ours. It is our civic responsibility to ensure that the role of government is to protect the public interest against the excesses of unlimited corporate and individual authority that serve self, not public, interest. If we are to rebalance this distribution of political power, we must reclaim ownership through a rebirth of civic debate and involvement. This we must believe, as Al Gore noted:

“Not long before our nation launched the invasion of Iraq, our longest-serving senator, Robert Byrd of West Virginia, stood on the floor of the Senate and said: ‘this Chamber is, for the most part, silent -- ominously, dreadfully silent. There is no debate, no discussion, no attempt to lay out for the nation the pros and cons of this particular war. There is nothing. We stand passively mute in the United States Senate.’ ... In describing the empty chamber the way he did, Byrd invited a specific version of the same general question millions of us have been asking: why do reason, logic, and truth seem to play a sharply diminished role in the way America now makes important decisions?” (The Assault on Reason, page 1)

These three conclusions are not very complicated. What is difficult is our capacity to change the way we think.

### III

So, if these are the basic economic, social and political realities of the new future, what old core beliefs and values would we need to relinquish? What is it from the past that seems so precious that we cannot even imagine letting go of it? Specifically, what are the assumptions that are obscuring our vision from seeing our transition into the future?

### First, Wealth

We need to get over our belief that human progress is measured by the creation and accumulation of wealth. The current financial collapse has made clear that most of the personal wealth, measured by market value, was virtual, not "real." Only real wealth can be counted as a legitimate component of human progress. Real wealth takes the form of health, shelter, old age security (as in vested and portable health and retirement benefits), freedom from exploitation (as in cheap labor that transfers the fair value of individual work to dividends and excessive executive pay), and freedom from fear. The science and technology of the Modern Era have given us this potential. Robert Reich notes:

"Super capitalism has triumphed as power has shifted to consumers and investors... Yet as super capitalism has triumphed, its negative social consequences have also loomed larger. These include widening inequality as most gains from economic growth go to the very top, reduced job security, instability of or loss of community, environmental degradation, violation of human rights abroad, and a plethora of products and services pandering to our baser desires... democracy is the appropriate vehicle for responding to such social consequences... but the same competition that has fueled super capitalism has spilled over into the political process. Large companies have hired platoons of lobbyists, lawyers, experts, and public relations specialist, and devoted more and more money to electoral campaigns. The result has been to drown out voices and values of citizens.” (Supercapitalism, page 209)

## Second, Ideologies

In the US we have three dominant ideologies that are reflexively treated as the definitive definition of the American way. The first is economic, the second is social and the third is political. They are, respectively, free market capitalism, individualism, and democratic "freedom" (in the sense of extreme individual rights and limited government authority and control). It is inconceivable that free market capitalism, individualism, and democratic freedom are the best options for all people, at all times, in all places. If the economic crisis has taught us anything, it is that these three extremes are not always best in all circumstances, even for our own economic welfare. In Podcast number 18 I wrote:

“As an example, China and the United States are at opposite poles on all three dimensions. China has a regulated economy, authoritarian power, and social and cultural beliefs that place the interest of the society ahead of those of the individual. In contrast, the United States has a free-market economy, a democratic government, and social and cultural beliefs that emphasize individualism...China with its one-child policy and geographic relocation programs has been able to avert a population explosion, a national food crisis, and become a dominant force in the world economy in one generation. This enhanced the human condition for the Chinese within the constraints of their culture. Viewing this progress in China as a human rights violation, as the US has done, simply reflects a uniquely Western perspective with its emphasis on capitalism, democracy and individualism. This is the same emphasis that has paralyzed the capacity of the United States to make some of the dramatic, but essential, adjustments required for the transition into the Postmodern Era. Which better serves human progress? Is the United States model any more appropriate for the economic, political and social reality facing China at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, than the Chinese model is for the United States?” (Forums for a Future, podcast number 18)

## Third, Nationalism

The Iraq war exposed our addiction to these simplistic American ideologies. From "freedom fries" to "Iraqi Freedom" labels replaced reason and, the call to arms and the chorus of "Proud to Be an American" dismissed both international criticism and essential political debate at home. Informed citizens, not false patriotism, is the source of our national strength. As Gwynne Dyer noted:

"American nationality has always been defined in ideological terms, and pretty sweeping ones at that: the cradle of democracy, to begin with, but latterly also the head office of the perfect economic system: free-market capitalism. Letting go of these illusions is bound to be painful, and there are powerful interests in Washington and elsewhere that will fight hard to keep them alive. They may not win, but if they do, Iraq would just be the first stage of a very rough ride." (Future: Tense, page 254)

## IV

It is time to ask ourselves what new beliefs and values would give us a way to look at the future that was inviting and hopeful? I would suggest there are three simple concepts that would begin to provide us with a new sense of self-direction; a sense that we have regained control of our economic, social, political and personal destiny, and with it, a future for our self and our children.

### #1. Achieving and respecting the power of balance, not the balance of power.

In any situation in which one person, institution, or nation holds the overwhelming balance of wealth, ideology or power, the result is enforced submission, servitude and obedience. All of

these are the antithesis of what is generally regarded as human progress. When the balance of power becomes too great, the result is a decline in the over-all well being of the larger whole.

*Economically*, this means addressing the excessively large and growing disparity of wealth and income in the United States. In the words of Naomi Klein:

"In December 2006,...a UN study found that 'the richest 2% of adults in the world own more than half of global household wealth.' The shift has been starkest in the US, where CEOs made 43 times what the average worker earned in 1980, when Reagan kicked off the (free-market) crusade. By 2005, CEOs earned 411 times as much. For those executives the counter-Revolution that began in the basement of the social sciences building in the 1950s has indeed been a success, but the cost of that victory has been the widespread loss of faith in the core free-market promise -- that increased wealth will be shared...The hoarding of so much wealth by a tiny minority of the world's population was not a peaceful process... nor often, was it a legal one." (Disaster Capitalism, page 535)

*Socially*, this means redefining human progress in terms of the quality of community life as a shared responsibility. In a similar vein Jared Diamond has written:

"(The) acknowledged interdependence of all segments of Dutch society contrasts with current trends in the United States, where wealthy people increasingly seek to insulate themselves from the rest of society, aspire to create their own separate virtual polders, use their own money to buy services for themselves privately, and vote against taxes that would extend those amenities as public services to everyone else. Those private amenities include living inside gated walled communities, relying on private security guards rather than on the police, sending one's children to well funded private schools with small classes rather than to the underfunded crowded public schools, purchasing private health insurance or medical care, drinking bottled water instead of municipal water...Underlying such privatization is a misguided belief that the elite can remain unaffected by the problems of society around them: the attitude of those Greenland Norse chiefs who found that they had merely bought themselves the privilege of being the last to starve." (Collapse, page 520)

*Politically*, this means reasserting the role of government, as a civic responsibility, to protect the public interest against private and corporate self interest. In Robert Reich's description:

"Democracy and capitalism have been turned upside down...Legislation is enacted with public rationales that bear little or no relation to the real motives of corporations and their lobbyists who pushed for them and legislatures who voted for them. Regulations, subsidies, taxes, and tax breaks are justified as being in the 'public interest' but are most often the products of fierce lobbying by businesses or industries seeking competitive advantage over one another... Politicians and advocates praise companies for acting 'responsibly' or condemn them for not doing so...(but) the praise or blame is soon forgotten, and barely affects the behavior of consumers or investors. Meanwhile, the real democratic process is left to companies and industries seeking competitive advantage." (Super Capitalism, page 207 -- 208)

## #2. Establishing and enhancing knowledge as public domain, not a commodity for financial gain or political power.

Historically, knowledge has served the end of advancing human progress. Recently has it become the principal tool for the creation of wealth and power. We need to challenge this process.

*Economically*, this means placing restrictions on the power and scope of intellectual property rights and specifically not treating them as extensions of personal property rights. Joseph Stiglitz devotes a chapter of his book to intellectual property rights:

“Innovation is important; it has transformed the lives of everyone in the world. And intellectual property laws can and should play a role in stimulating innovation. However, the contention that stronger intellectual property rights always boost economic performance is not in general correct. It is an example of how special interests -- those who do benefit from stronger intellectual property rights -- use simplistic ideology to advance their causes...But intellectual property rights are fundamentally different from other kinds of property rights...By contrast, intellectual property rights actually create a monopoly. The monopoly power generates monopoly rents (excess profits), and it is these profits that are supposed to provide the incentive for engaging in research. The inefficiencies associated with monopoly power in the use of knowledge are particularly serious, because knowledge is what economists call a "public good": everybody potentially can benefit from it: there is no cost of usage.” (Making Globalization Work, pages 106 -- 107)

*Socially*, this means distributing the reach of the benefits of modern science and technology more uniformly among the citizens of the United States and globally among the less developed nations of the world. Even Thomas Friedman acknowledges that economic globalization may leave a significant proportion of the world's population behind:

“... In Africa today, as well as rural India, China, Latin America, and plenty of dark corners of the developed world, there are hundreds of millions of people who have no hope... They live in villages or rural areas that only criminals would want to invest in, regions where violence, civil war, and disease compete with one another to see which can ravage the civilian population most...(this) is a trap that 3 billion are caught in, and they may never get into the virtuous cycle of more education, more health, more capitalism, more rule of law...” (The World Is Flat, pages 176, 178, 179)

*Politically*, this means a more transparent government in which the process and the information on which decisions are made are freely and openly available. The new information technology must become the tool for participatory democracy, not for the creation of more powerful lobby groups nor secret personal files for "national security" purposes. As Al Gore has questioned:

“Why has America's public discourse become less focused and clear, less *reasoned*?...The truth is that American democracy is now in danger -- not from any one set of ideas, but from unprecedented change in the environment within which ideas either live and spread, or wither and die. I do not mean the physical environment; I mean what is called the public sphere, or the marketplace of ideas.” (The Assault on Reason, pages 2-3)

### #3. Building and strengthening world citizenship not citizenships of the world.

Economic globalization has escaped the boundaries of national regulation and has subverted national political power. The basic unit for civic responsibility is now global, as well as local. This new reality requires building and strengthening our sense of world citizenship, through a sense of global loyalty and association that is even more essential than our national identity.

*Economically*, this means addressing economic globalization to make it work for the mutual benefit of all nations. Specifically, this requires moving away from "free" trade to "fair" trade. The international trade agreements must serve the needs of the developed as well as the developing nations. Joseph Stiglitz has suggested:

“Today, there is an understanding that many of the problems with globalization are all of our own making - are a result of the way globalization has been managed.... We cannot carry on along the course we have

been on... we can restructure globalization so that those in both the developed and the developing world, the current generations and future generations, can all benefit -- though there are some special interests who will lose out, and they will resist these changes. We can have stronger economies *and* societies that put more weight on values, like culture, the environment, and life itself.” (Making Globalization Work, page 24)

*Socially*, this means working cooperatively, not unilaterally, with the other nations of the world. Specifically, in mind and spirit becoming citizens of the world as well as being national citizens. Gwynne Dyer has made clear that the world needs the participation of the United States:

“We need the United States back as a leading architect of global order, not a hyper active vigilante, and we need it back now.” (Future Tense, page 10)

*Politically*, this means building and strengthening the United Nations as the institution for brokering the emerging competing national and regional economic and social interests, modeled after its traditional peacekeeping role of providing a framework of international law as the means to avoid unilateral military actions. Jeffery Sachs concludes that:

“The world can certainly save itself, but only if we recognize accurately the dangers that humanity confronts together.... We are paralyzed in the very process of global problem solving, weighted down by cynicism, defeatism, and outdated institutions....the failures of global problem solving mean that we are failing to adopt even straightforward and sensible solutions lying right before our eyes.” (Common Wealth, Chapter 1)

## V

To say that the social, political, and economic issues for having a future are not conceptually complicated, is not to say that actually achieving solutions will be easy. Core beliefs and values are not relinquished easily, and there are powerful forces that have a vested interest in protecting the status quo.

But if we do not solve them, it is not because the issues are conceptually too complex. We know what the issues are and we have the technical capacity solve them. It will be because we lack the economic, social, and political will to become critically engaged and psychologically committed to the task. Letting go of our old core beliefs and values of wealth, ideology and nationalism is the issue.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on an audio and video podcast by Professor Renner entitled “**Forums for a Future**.” Text, audio and video copies of the material may be accessed from his website at [www.kerenner.com](http://www.kerenner.com). The direct link for subscribing to the video series from iTunes is:

<http://phobos.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewPodcast?id=289289719>

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