

This paper is one of a series of individual essays written within the conceptual constraints provided by "Forums for a Future." The collection of essays will become the individual episodes of the podcast.

'... Forums for A Future...'

Podcast (#8) The Beliefs of Power and Wealth
Edward Renner, Evaluation Research
www.kerenner.com

Prelude

Part I of the series contained a brief 2-minute promotional and a conceptual foundation for thinking about change as the convergence of economic, political, social and personal perspectives. Part II was a set of four podcasts that provided a philosophy for the 21st century. Part III contains three lessons from modern history for informing the present, and for deriving prescriptive implications for the future. Today, in Podcast # 8, I will discuss the first of these three lessons, the "Beliefs of Power and Wealth"

Key Concept

The key concept is that Beliefs are derivatives of Power and Wealth

Introduction

Power and wealth (or the lack thereof) are addictive. They can take over your mind. They provide a rationale for what you believe if you are powerful and wealthy, or what you are told to believe if you are neither powerful nor wealthy. In this podcast I am going to ask three rhetorical questions, and then give an answer to each. They are:

1. What are the things people with power and wealth are most likely to believe?
2. What do those with power and wealth want the poor and the powerless to believe about themselves?
3. Why are the beliefs of political power and economic wealth so psychologically effective at the personal level?

(1) What are the beliefs of the powerful and the wealthy?

Political power can be used to maximize economic wealth because the two go hand-in-hand. The wealthy control politics, and the political determine the rules and regulations for making and distributing wealth. All that is needed are the beliefs to justify the power and wealth, and to ensure the acceptance of them by the poor and powerless. Those specific beliefs will change whenever circumstances begin to expose the social injustice of the current beliefs for the accumulation and the distribution of power and wealth.

During the colonization of the New World, during the age of discovery and exploration, the church was the institution of social control and the fate of humankind was the will of God. Thus, Spanish, French and then the British Empire use military power to colonize indigenous peoples while extracting their wealth of gold, sugar, tea, coffee and timber, often through enforced labor, or even slavery as in the sugar, coffee and cotton plantations in the New World. But, even at that time, if a person had used a gun to take someone else's money, it was called robbery and it was considered wrong. But Christianity provided the builders of Empire with the justification they needed then, as it does now over the war in Iraq. The indigenous native "heathen" was not yet a "person;" they were a white man's burden, to be educated in the ways of civilization and to have their souls saved through the imposition of Christianity. With this simple belief, the wealth of the Third World was exported on the backs of indigenous people, who live in poverty, while their land was raped, the population decimated by disease, and what was once a sustainable way of life was replaced by foreign civic, spiritual, and commercial systems. This was possible because of the belief that colonization was not robbery of native people, but service in their own best interest. And so it was that the continents of the New World were stolen (Ronald Wright, 1992, 2005).

With the rise of the modern era, the sources of wealth and power shifted to the state with the introduction of science and technology. This gave rise to the notion of Social Darwinianism. These new sciences provided for a new secular belief system that justified the deep personal and social costs of industrialization as progress (Ronald Wright, 2004), which was justified by the powerful and wealthy as good for humankind.

It took over 10 generations of struggles to actually start to humanized the Modern Era (through such things as worker health and safety regulations, a standardized work week, minimum wage and Social Security as a few examples). But, no sooner had these corrections been made when a new form of power and wealth emerge in the form of globalization and economics, ushering in a new set of justifying beliefs. By the start of the 21st century, the belief of growth without limits had taken hold. Now, the driving force is the economic concentration of wealth, not the saving of souls, nor the building of nations through invention. The creation of wealth has become the equivalent of a moral imperative. The only way to support the standard set by the American way of life is to try to bring the rest of the world up to our level, through ever increasing levels of worldwide consumption. This is the mantra of globalization, just as Christianity and Discovery, and then nationalism and science, were before, as the belief justifying the non-ending pursuit of wealth and power by the elite.

(2) What do the powerful and wealthy want the poor and powerless to believe?

The rich and powerful want their extravagant lifestyles to be willingly supported by the poor. This is just as true today as it was hundreds, or even thousands, of years ago. Historically, this can be illustrated by the collapse of the Maya civilization. Jared Diamond describes (pages 167-177) the rise of the Maya civilization from its beginnings in approximately 1000 B.C., to its collapse in the 900s A.D. Back then, because the Kings were believed to have a familial relationship with God, they were responsible for the rituals required to bring prosperity to the people. So, the peasants supported the luxurious lifestyle of the King and his court (through corn,

venison, war and grand palaces) because of his implicit promise to bring good fortune through the blessings of God. But the Kings and nobles failed to recognize that while they were enriching themselves, their kingdom was outstripping the capacity to sustain itself. As people were forced to compete for fewer resources, starvation and fighting increased, and the civilization collapsed.

In Modern times the process is similar, although the context is different since we no longer believe that the powerful and the wealthy have their position through divine blessing. Rather, they claim to be more meritorious, and that their greater power and wealth is their just reward for their innovation and industry. As Thomas Friedman notes, the corporate elite -- such as the likes of Bill Gates -- assert that if it were not for them the world would be without their productivity that has made everyone's life better. Therefore, the poor and the powerless should forever be thankful for the bounty they have created. Yet, under globalization, these modern Kings, similar to ancient ones, have taken more and more for themselves, leaving less and less for others. One example are the Golden pension plans, and the extravagant salaries that Fortune 500s top corporate executives receive, while at the same time the companies they run have cut the pension plans and health benefits for their workers. The global corporations have had the power to force unions to accept concessions, so that jobs will not be out-sourced and workers laid-off, in order that the company, stockholders and executives can survive globalization. Yet, the pay for those 500 top corporate executives reached an all time high in 2005 of an average of over \$14 million per year, plus the pensions and other perks.

Jared Diamond, in his account of the Maya collapse, ended with the following: "...Maya Kings sought to out do each other with more and more impressive temples... reminiscent in turn of the extravagant conspicuous consumption by modern American CEOs... in the face of real big threats (i.e., environmental and civic collapse) to their society...(completing) a list of disquieting parallels.

(3) Why Are Beliefs of Political Power and Economic Wealth so Psychologically Effective at the personal level?

How are the modern Kings of globalization in the US, now often wrapped in the robes of the Christian right and super patriotism, any different than the ancient kings, with divine connections, who skimmed the top while leading their people into collapse?

One modern partial answer can be found in the ways that corporate wealth and political power uses the media to manipulate the information and knowledge to which the ordinary person has access. Corporate spin, in its open form, is relatively easy to recognize for what it is. However, when corporate wealth and political power are used to control, distort and disguise information, to serve the interests of globalization and empire, it is often invisible. But yet it is often physically harmful to the ordinary people who supposedly are their "valued" clients.

The tobacco, fast food and energy industry's are the most blatant offenders, with other globalizers not far behind. Big corporations pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to seemingly independent groups that then act as spokespersons under disguise. The viewpoints, expressed on opinion pages of newspapers, often present corporate propaganda without revealing the authors

financial ties to the companies. For examples (as reported in the St. Petersburg Times, September 10, in a front-page story):

- James Glassman a syndicated columnist denounced *Super Size Me*, a movie critical of McDonald's. But readers were not told that McDonald's was a major sponsor of his web site.
- Stephen Millroy, an analyst at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, published a piece in the *Washington Times* that argued against windfall profit taxes on the oil industry in the wake of record profits during the Iraq war, but without disclosing his financial ties to ExxonMobile.
- John Siemmens, a policy adviser at the Heartland Institute, wrote a column that described Wal-Mart as "a major force in promoting prosperity for everyone." But, readers were not told that his think tank received more than \$300,000 from the owners of Wal-Mart. [Nor, I might add, were they told of the high percentage of Wal-Mart employees who are not eligible for health care benefits and who rely on Medicaid at taxpayers expense, thus indirectly subsidizing lower prices and helping Wal-Mart force local business to fail.]

The larger psychological question is why would any ordinary person believe it is in their best interests to vote to support the economic policies of Bush and the Republican Party who are clearing the way for globalization, for example, through deregulation of the communications network and the energy industry, and through free-trade initiatives that provide for unregulated globalization?

A partial answer to this question, for those of us who live in United States, is provided in the chapter in Jared Diamond's book on the Bitterroot Valley in the State of Montana. The politically conservative, rural population of Montana does not like government interference; there is a strong belief in unrestricted individual rights. As a result there are few regulations regarding land-use and development. The area is relatively "friction-free," to borrow Thomas Friedman's term for what is asserted to be required for economic prosperity in a flat world. As a result, mining companies left behind polluted waters and contaminated land, lumber companies clear-cut, developers bought farmland for building expensive gated communities to serve as second or even third homes for part-time residents who briefly come to enjoy trout fishing and the mountain scenery. And, this is only a partial list of the ecological and social stress that results when corporations and developers are treated as if they are just like any another individual, like the local people who formed the rural communities before development. But, of course, they are not individuals dedicated to creating community; they are dedicated to creating corporate wealth. All of which combined to now make the streams unsuitable for trout fishing, while the development escalated land values making it too expensive to run a financially viable farm. Without the regulations by government to protect the social welfare – all of which are policies the permanent residents of Bitterroot Valley associated with hated left-wing and progressive politics -- there was an open invitation for power and wealth to use the local conservative political philosophy to undermine the independent, self-sufficient, conservative rural way of life they so deeply valued.

Now, let us consider the personal element. It is the fourth and equal pillar -- along with the economic, political and social. The four must necessarily form the foundation for having a future.

The Personal Element

My only point is that some of our most deeply held beliefs and values exist primarily to support and justified the current arrangements for determining the distribution of wealth and power (or the lack thereof). But now, instead of the 10 generations it took to humanize the Modern Era, we have only one, or at best two, generations to figure out what alternative beliefs are required for humanizing the Postmodern Era. It is the challenge of a single lifetime, for us the living.

There was a time and place for the fiercely independent, self-reliant, and self-sufficient people of rural Montana to maintain the quality of their life through a community of which they were all an inter-dependent and participant part. Each person's welfare was linked to every other person's welfare with whom they shared time, space and a quality of life. However, because corporations are not individuals, they are not structured around interdependent human relationships. They are structured around stockholders and securing profits. When development, mining, and other manifestations of the Modern, and now the Postmodern, Era came to rural Montana, the stubborn persistence in holding on to those old core beliefs came to undermine the very values the beliefs were intended to sustain and protect. This is the end point of the beliefs promoted by those who hold both power and wealth when those who do not tacitly accept the beliefs.

As a final illustration, in the St. Petersburg/Clearwater area of Florida where I live, the retirement community and the tourism industry, which serve seasonal and part-time residents, have constructed massive beachfront condominiums and resorts, many of them gated. As a result, land prices and real estate values have escalated well beyond what is affordable on the wages earned by the ordinary people who are the servers, maids, teachers, policemen, salesclerks, gardeners, and all the other workers who make the system work. These people can no longer afford to live anywhere near where they work. The powerful and wealthy are destroying the capacity of the area to sustain itself, while those who do the real work are less and less able to provide for their own basic needs of health, food and shelter in the face of a rising flood of surrounding wealth. The developers, and the wealthy community they serve, use their resources and public visibility to control the local political process to make this transition increasingly "friction free." The origins of this growing disparity between the power and wealth of these elite, and those who provide for them, are now national and global; it is no longer simply a local issue.

This is the personal/psychological element. We have to get it right this time, because the Postmodern Era, based on the Gospel of Wealth (the merging of Fundamental Christianity with capitalism into a global economic force) reaches into the four corners of the planet. There is no place else to go whether you live in places like rural Montana or the suburban Gulf Coast.

Notes

Ronald Wright. *A Short History of Progress*. HarperCollins Canada, 2004.

Ronald Wright. *Stolen Continents*. Houghton Mifflin, 1992, 2005.

Bill Adair. Corporate spin can come in disguise. *St. Petersburg Times*, Sept. 10, 2006.