

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

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

Part 6: Review and Transition
Podcast (#17) The Conceptual Foundation Reviewed

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Prelude

I am Ed Renner. Welcome to my Podcast, "Forums for a Future." Forums for a Future is based on a university honors course I taught at the University of South Florida in 2007-2008. Three textbooks provide background reading for the individual episodes. They are:

- Thomas Friedman's The World is Flat
- Jarred Diamond's Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed
- Gwynne Dyer's Future: Tense. The Coming World Order

The syllabus for the podcast series, text copies of all of the individual podcasts, and directions for subscribing to the series, either directly or through iTunes, are available on my web site at: kerenner.com, that is: www.k-e-r-e-n-n-e-r.com.

The first 16 episodes are in audio format. They provide an academic conceptual foundation for the series. After having taken nearly a one-year break to teach "Forums for the Future," I am now ready to continue the series, but this time in both audio and video formats. As a way to get started on the continuation, I have created a three-part transition. Episodes 17, 18 and 19 provide a brief introduction of the conceptual foundation for those new to the series, and a quick review for the original subscribers. Starting with Podcast #20, the continuation of the podcast is an open-ended series of positive approaches for addressing the many specific contemporary economic, social and political issues that challenge our capacity for making the necessary changes for having a future in the 21st Century.

The Conceptual Foundation

Today's podcast, #17, is a review of the conceptual foundation, summarizing the material in audio Podcasts numbers 1 through 10. The conceptual foundation is based on four key concepts: 1) Using "constructs" as a cognitive tool for coping with change, (2) Recognizing the challenges imposed by inflection points, 3) Realizing the Modern Era is now over, and 4) Identifying the essential lessons from history for living in the 21st Century.

#1. A Cognitive Tool for Coping with Change.

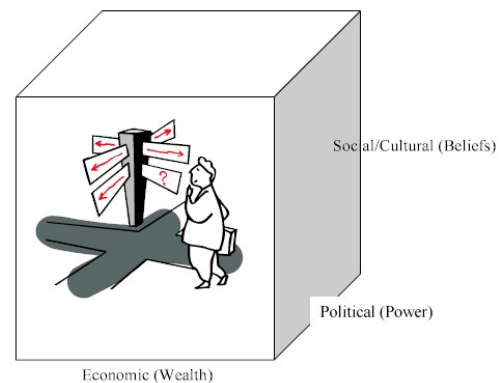
A “construct” is simply a category a person uses for capturing in their own mind the external things they see or hear. Constructs enable us to labeling, remember and think about these events and situations. For example, we may consider another person as more or less honest, or we may describe an item as relatively expensive or inexpensive. Constructs are the cognitive tool we use for capturing and interpreting the flow of the world around us, and for using that understanding for making decisions about what we will do.

a) *There are two types of Constructs: there are personal/private constructs, and there are non-personal/public constructs.*

- **Personal/private construct** are the set of conceptual categories each person uses to interpret and understand the people and events that that makeup their own daily experiences. They are personal and private because every one develops their own set of constructs based on their own unique experiences. Thus, two people may interpret the same situation in different ways. Personal constructs give each individual their unique identity and their own sense of self. They are the basis for how we understand ourselves and what gives each of us our sense of coherent self-direction.



- In contrast, **non-personal/public constructs** are openly shared and debated distinctions for describing and understanding public events and situations. They are the subject of academic scholarship, and they form the foundation for economic policy, political ideology, and the social structures and arrangements we create through government to shepherd our collective civic life. These institutional constructs define how economic wealth, political power, and social beliefs constrain our existence.



b) *Where constructs come from*

- Our parents,
- our culture,
- our experiences,
- our faith,
- other people (social comparison), and from
- philosophy, science and literature.

c) *Constructs have formal characteristics.*

- They are organized hierarchically, thus some play a central role in our life, while others are peripheral and play an incidental role.

- They reflect the shared experiences of a group or culture, which distinguishes us from other groups and cultures that have different shared experience.
- They are not static, but rather are subject to verification of conditions under which they are or are not useful.

d) Constructs play a pivotal role in our capacity to adapt to, or to resist, change.

In the realm of non-personal scientific constructs, the displacement of old constructs with new ones is often taken for granted. Indeed, this is the process of scientific progress. The accomplishments of science and technology are made possible through the human cognitive capacity to develop better and more sophisticated constructs for explaining the natural world. In the social sciences, the similar capacity to create more effective personal and social constructs is the definition of human progress. The age of enlightenment, and the emergence of democracy in the modern world, were made possible by creating more sophisticated ways of thinking about the human experience.

Similar to scientific constructs, circumstances change over time and there is a need for people to make adjustment to their personal constructs.

However, change does not always come easy, no matter whether the constructs are non-personal or personal. The human paradox is that the more fundamental the required change is, the more difficult it is to change what we think. Our core beliefs and values are resistant to change because they are the foundation on which other beliefs and value rest. For example, at the personal level, it maybe far easier for a mother to change her constructs about a curfew time for her daughter than it is to change her beliefs, as a mother, about how her daughter should behave. Just as at the non-personal level, it is far easier for a scholar to accept the need for a slight change in her theory than it is to accept the need for an entirely new theory based on totally different assumptions. In both cases the new construct invalidates a part of the person's sense of themselves.

#2. Recognizing the Challenge Imposed by Inflection Points

Inflection points are those moments when old constructs have been seriously challenged, to the point that it is now necessary to "believe" something fundamentally different -- to see the world through an entirely different lens. Sometimes inflection points are due to a single brief dramatic event. An example, at the personal level, might be a near fatal automobile accident causing a major reassessment of an individual's personal priorities. Historically, events such as 9/11 can be moments that force a new way of thinking, although, typically, historical and scientific inflection points occurs over a period of time. For example, accepting the reality that the Earth was not the center of the universe had repercussions that eventually changed the economic, social and political structures of the world, and, as such, was an inflection "point" in human progress, although took centuries for its full effect to unfold.

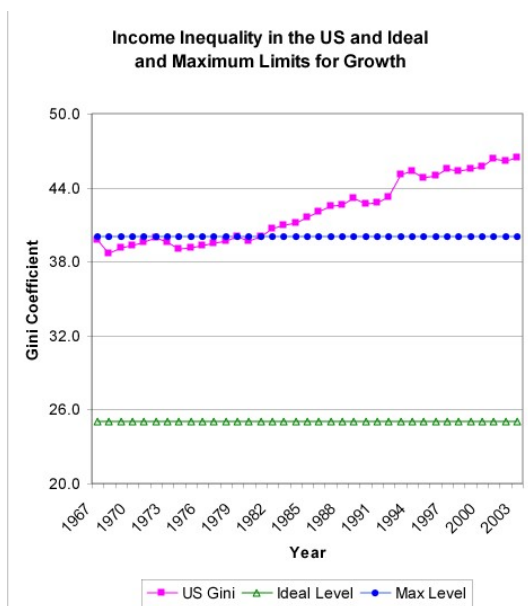
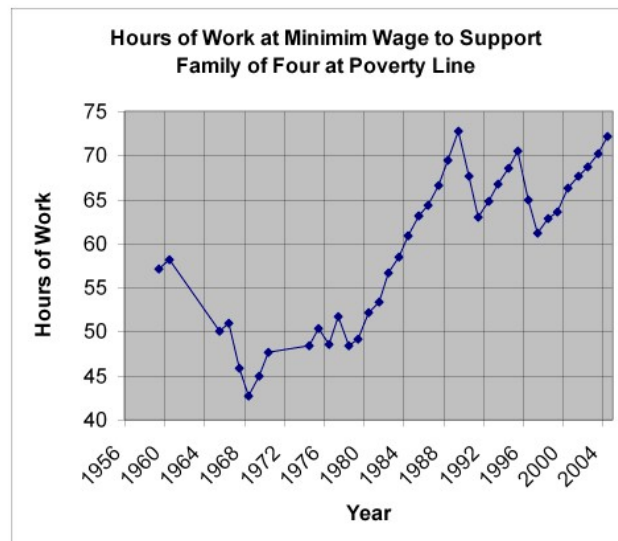
Inflection points are a challenge because, on the one hand, they present the opportunity to advance human progress; but, on the other hand, they require courage to abandon the security of the status quo.

#3. Realizing the Modern Era Is Now Over

The recognition that the Earth was not the center of the universe marked the beginning of the Modern Era. Before then, in the Pre-Modern Era, human kind believed that their fate was in the hands of God and therefore the church was accepted as the primary institution for ensuring human wellbeing. All personal, economic, social and political arrangements followed from this core construct as a fundamental belief. This historical inflection “point,” as are most historical inflection "points" was a transition that took centuries to fully take hold.

The Modern Era was marked by the transition from *fate* and *church* as the defining worldview to a new worldview of *science and technology* and the *nation state*. Human progress was not to be found in the hands of God, but rather through the instrumental hands of human ingenuity, and the facilitating institution was not the church, but rather the nation state. Science and technology were to produce the food and tools required for human kind to live a safe and abundant life, but now under the security of the nation state. The elevation of humankind to a safe and secure life was the promised pot of gold to be found at the end of the rainbow of science and technology.

The advent of 21st-century marked the end of the Modern Era. The “Great Society” that ended in 1968 was as close as we were ever going to come to finding that pot of gold -- the promise of science and technology and of the Modern Era. As an illustration, in 1968 workers in the US got as close to the poverty line as they were ever going to get by working 40 hours per week at minimum



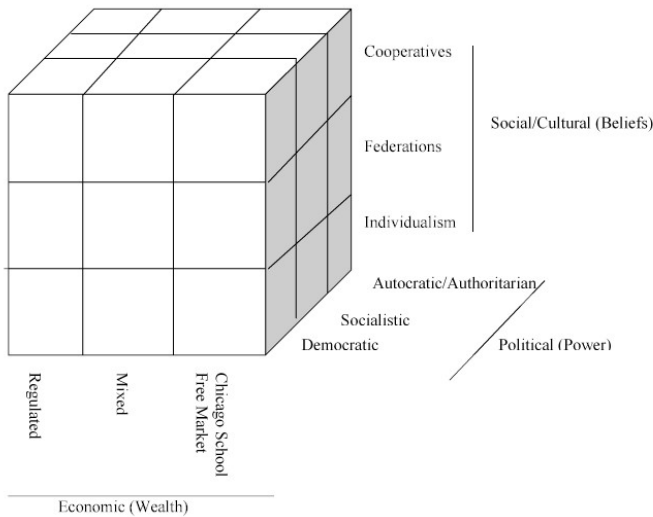
wage. Ever since then, there has been a growing disparity of income between the rich and the poor.

The promise of the Modern Era was that the miracles of science and technology were to be the end result of creating processes and products that would enhanced the human condition; but in the new Post-Modern Era we have just entered, science and technology are no longer the “fruits” for the satisfaction of human needs, but rather they have become the means to achieve economic growth through an ever-expanding list of human desires and an ever increasing rate of

consumption. In short the role of science and technology in 21st-century has become detached from serving human progress to become the engine for the creation of wealth, and the facilitating structure has shifted from the nation state to the global planet.

#4. Identifying the Essential Lessons from History for Living in the 21st Century

The non-personal, theoretical constructs that are required to understand our new external circumstances are those having to do with our economic, political and social structures. Traditionally, each of these has been treated as an independent area of scholarship, each with their own constructs: the political with power, the economic with wealth, and the social with beliefs and values. Specifically, in the Modern Era:

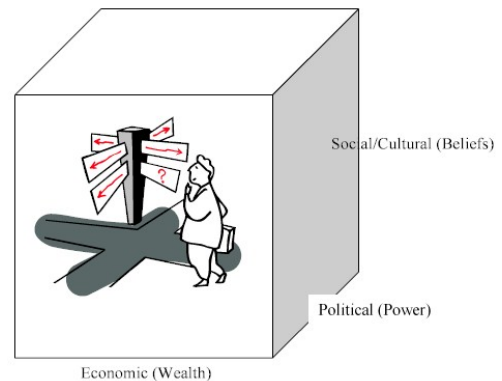


- The political dimension has been divided into categories ranging from democratic through socialian to authoritarian.
- The economic dimension has been divided into categories ranging from the regulation of Keynesian economics through mixed economies to free-market capitalism.
- The social dimension has been divided into categories ranging from extreme individualism to a

social order dedicated to the well-being of the society, rather than to the self-interest of individuals.

The human task has been to manage the combination of these three separate categories of constructs into a coherent economic-political-social system, capable of peacefully and fairly reconciling wealth, power and beliefs. This dilemma is captured by the graphic of a person confined within a box of our current economic, political, and social constructs, which define our accepted contemporary “truths,” as did the belief the earth was the center of the universe at one time in the past.

In audio podcast numbers 8, 9, and 10 I advance proposition that there are not separate economic, political and social lessons to be learned from history from which we can seek generalizations for understanding the present and for deriving prescriptions for the future. But rather, that the three dimensions are inextricably entwined, so that anyone of the three can be understood only in terms of the other two.



In short, that power, wealth and belief are part and parcel of each other. Escaping conceptual confinement from the box which has define the Modern Era, requires creating new constructs appropriate for a new era. The re-conceptualization that is required is to view the economic, political and social as a set of simultaneous equations, not as three independent sets of constructs. Since wealth, power and beliefs each need to be defined in terms of the other two, what is required for the Post-Modern Era is a single set of principles (constructs) that are applicable to all three dimensions, not three separate sets of constructs.

In the next podcast I will describe these principles and how the re-conceptualization of wealth, power and beliefs as a unified concept allows us to escape the impossible task of creating a coherent economic-political-social system from three independent dimensions that cannot be rationally reconciled with each other in the current global context of the 21st Century.