

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 (#6) The Post-Modern Era
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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 is a set of four podcasts that provides a philosophy for the 21st century.

Key Concept

Today, in Podcast # 6, I will discuss the key concept that we are now living in the “Post-Modern” Era.

Introduction

As a start:

- Just when did the Modern Era end and the Post-Modern Era begin? The answer is: The year 2000 is a convenient reference point.
- What came before the Modern Era and when did it start: The answer is: The Age of Enlightenment and Discover, starting in the 1400s.
- What accounts of the end of one era and the beginning of another? The answer is: An inflection point that marks a change in core beliefs and values.

Obviously, inflection points are not something that happen over night, but most often emerge over time. But as we discussed in the last podcast, change happens faster now than it use to. What took centuries in the past can now take only decades. Let's briefly review the history of human progress to illustrate how inflection points reflect a shift in core beliefs and values.

- Church and Fate. Before the age of enlightenment and discovery, the fate of human kind was largely controlled by nature, and it was seen as the will of God: Church and Fate were the mechanisms of social control. Thus, the early explorers brought priests with them to the New World to save the souls of the natives. The church provided the justification of salvation for the conquests that followed.

- State and Science. The inflection point for the beginning of the Modern Era was the emergence of science and technology, and the shift to a belief that nature could be controlled, and with it the shift from the Church to the State as the primary mechanism of social control.
 - The first phase of the Modern Era, the 1800s, were characterized by the development of fundamental knowledge. This was the knowledge that transformed transportation, communication, agriculture, and manufacturing.
 - The second phase of the Modern Era, the 1900s, were characterized by the refinement and development of the products of science and technology which promised to elevate the quality of life – it was to be the rainbow at the end of which was a pot of gold every person.
 - The Great Society of the late sixties and early seventies was the brief moment of trying to reach this expressed purpose of the Modern Era. But, it was too late. By the year 2000 it was clear that the Modern Era had run its course. There was no pot of gold for everyone, as we now know.

The Post-Modern Era

Global and Economic. The inflection point for the Post-Modern Era, is best captured by the terms "Global" and "Economic" Democratic capitalism emerged as the political structure of destiny at the end of the Modern Era, not socialism, communism or fascism. And now, Global and Economic forces are now starting to replace the State and Science, just as the State and Science had replaced the Church and Fate, as the primary mechanism for civilization and social control in the past.

Thus, today, just as at inflection points of history in the past, we need new institutions based on new way of thinking that re-define how the issues conceptualized. Every inflection point requires enormous shifts in core beliefs and values for each of the pillars of the structure of this podcast: the economic, political, social and personal. Lets consider each of them in order as they apply to the Post-Modern Era.

➤ Political: The Escape from Regulation

With globalization, capitalism has been able to escape the boundaries of effective regulation. In many ways we face today the same issues that were faced in the late 1800s and early 1900s. But, now we have moved beyond the capacity for their resolution through the mechanism of national regulation that was available then.

- Runaway Horses. In the early stages of the Industrial Revolution workers literally ended up owing their souls to the Company Store. In the U. S., the government provided troops to support the efforts by industry to stop unionization, all in the name of "law and order." It took a major re-definition of our social beliefs and values to finally figure out that "killing yourself working in order not to starve to death" was not a human right, but a human wrong. The justification in the Modern Era was not

service to God, but to nation building as the State increasingly replaced the Church as the structure for civilization and social control. It took until well after the New Deal, and up to the Great Society, for it to become unconstitutional and illegal to exploit workers, and for us to see the obligation of the government to protect life, liberty and equality of opportunity.

- The New Laissez-faire. However, all of that is rapidly slipping away. The new Robber Barons of economic globalization are once again out-of-control. In the case of Enron, they were able to artificially create the California energy crisis in order to fraudulently inflated prices to gain personal and corporate profit. Exxon alone had a \$36 billion quarterly profit at the end of 2005. This time the role of government – similar to the early Modern Era -- has been to support globalization by deregulation and by free trade as the means to reduce the "friction" of doing business. The result has been a resurgence of corporate power to transfer greater and greater portions of wealth from the poor to the rich. The new world economy is no longer accountable to any nation state. Increasingly, in the US, corporate interest owns the political process through campaign financing, and owns the minds of Americans through consolidation of the media.
- As Friedman notes: “Companies have never had more freedom, and less friction, in the way of assigning research, low-end manufacturing, and high-end manufacturing any where in the world. What this will mean for the long-term relationship between the companies and the countries in which they are headquartered is simply unclear (p.209).”
- Who let the dogs out? The Robber Barons are once again free for the personal accumulation of wealth at the expense of individual well-being. Now, in the Post-Modern Era, the justification is not in the service of nation building, but in the service of Globalization and Economics (wealth) that are increasingly replacing the State and Knowledge as the structure for social control. Now for the second pillar of economics.

➤ Economic: The New Tools of Wealth

The new global economy has been made possible through digital technology that allows design, manufacturing, and marketing to be disassembled and reassembled at any time or place without regard to international boundaries. This is not a quantitative refinement of an old technology, like that which characterized the evolution of the Modern Era in the 1900s. Rather, it is a qualitative shift to a new foundation for the production and distribution of both goods and services. It owes no allegiance to any nation state and as a result it knows no boundaries.

As a societies becomes more complex, specializations emerge in which there is a class system with the wealth accumulating at the top, and the gut work, with minimum compensation, at the bottom. When the principal value is no longer in the product (as it used to be) but in the process (as it is becoming), then there is a significant shift in the economic

engine of wealth. There are millions of dollars in profits and wages for those who own the stocks and who manage the markets, and pennies for those who do the actual work. Globalization is taking the divisions between those at the top, and those at the bottom, of social class to new levels of disparity. Increasingly those who manage knowledge and information also manage and control the quality the life of the average person. Now for the third pillar, the social.

➤ Social: The Limits of Growth

The typical anti-globalization argument goes like this: when all goods and services are tradable, developed countries are headed for an absolute decline in their standard of living. This is due to new, cheap labor sources entering the global economy at much lower wages. As we globalize, for the average American worker, there is a race toward the bottom to be on a par with the lower wage standards of Mexico, India and China.

- Pro-growth Response. No, no, is the pro-growth response. The dip in the standard of living will not be permanent, as long as the global pie keeps growing. Every time some jobs are lost to globalization, new jobs are created and more people have more income to spend. As a result the economic pie grows larger. The pie grows larger because "wants" become "needs," which are infinite. And, with infinite wants and needs, there are infinite new businesses and new opportunities.
- New Pot of Gold? This article of faith, advanced by Friedman in support of globalization, is that: "...the sweep of history clearly shows, every time we had more trade, more communications, we had a big upswing in economic activity and standard of living (p. 231)."

There in lies the basic anti-globalization/pro-globalization debate. But, this debate misses the major points -- big-time -- on three counts as the lessons to be learned from history.

- (1) Sustainability. The first count is sustainability. It is the lesson from history that is the sole theme of Diamond's book. Every major civilization that has collapsed has done so after going through a period of growth during which it out strips the capacity to be sustained by its supporting geographic environment and ecology. The people on Easter Island used the wood faster than it could be replaced, and in the end died because they would not change and because there was no place else to go. Our world society is currently on a similar non-sustainable course. As Jared Diamond notes: "At current rates, we shall have depleted or destroyed most of the world's remaining marine fisheries, depleted clean or cheap or readily accessible reserves of oil and natural gas, and approached the photosynthetic ceiling with in a few decades... thus, because we are rapidly advancing along this non-sustainable course, the world's environmental problems will get resolved, in one way or another, with in the lifetime of the children and young adults alive today... the only question is whether they will become resolved in pleasant ways of our own choice, or in unpleasant ways not of our choice, such as warfare, genocide, starvation, disease epidemics, and the collapse of societies (p. 498)."

As a simple analogy: We need to be living on the “income” of the earth. But, rather, we are spending down its “capital.” But, this time when we go broke, there is no place to go. The very inconvenient truth is that we are living beyond our means. In the United States, the average ecological “footprint” is 24 acres of biologically productive land to sustain the consumption of each person. If everyone, through the continued growth projected as the new “pot of gold” of globalization, lived at this standard, it would take nearly six planets to sustain life as we know it (www.earthday.net). And, this figure does not take into account the additional load from the rapidly accelerating increase in the world’s population.

- (2) Global Economic Delusion. The second count on the lesson from history is the global economic delusion. Yes, at the end of the Modern Era the average standard of living had indeed increased as the flood of new goods and services made their way to the marketplace. My grandfather, born in 1881 had no car, lights, refrigeration, telephone, radio, airplane or TV when he was born. Yet, he had all of those before he died. But, relatively speaking he was worse off. The disparity between the rich and poor within our country increased, as did the discrepancy between our country and the poor countries of the world. We have enough wealth in our country that no child needs to go without food or healthcare. Yet, we do not provide these, while the pay for corporate executives, and for the wealthy who are leading the charge toward globalization, has reached billions of dollars per year. The suggestion there really is – finally -- a pot of gold for everyone at the end of globalization is a dream. In reality, there is a non-sustainable rush toward increasing consumption to yield greater and greater profits for a few, at the expense of the many.

(3) Global Political Delusions. Now, the third count is the biggest delusion of them all. It is the global political delusion described by Dyer in his book. It is the creation of the new American Empire. It is the unapologetic aspiration of Bush, and the neoconservatives now in charge in Washington, to make the US the only nation with sufficient military power to control the all of the natural resources of the world that it wants or needs, based on the conviction that globalization and free-market capitalism, as the mechanisms for achieving this, is good for everyone, even if the US has to use military force to show for the rest of the world what is “right.” The most dangerous part is the linking of this New American Empire with the religious right, to lend the justification that globalization in the form of democratic, free-market capitalism, based on infinite growth, is not only for the economic good, but is morally right. When, in fact, it is wrong on both counts. First, the planet is at the limits of growth. In the most immediate sense the huge military expense of the war machinery of Empire could have made the US energy sufficient, largely through wind power and other technologies that already exist. Secondly, in the larger political sense, it places the US on a course of attempting to secure, through force, energy resources that will trigger global resistance and global instability. The likely response is the need for even greater military power to confront the rise of anti-American hostility in the face of growing competing nationalism, and a repetition of the history of global political conflict.

This is the really big global delusion; it is made possible by individual people yielding to the smaller delusion that measuring progress under globalization is based on making more and more money for a few, rather than being measured by the quality of life for the many, which is the ultimate standard of what is sustainable on this planet within the lifetime of the children and the youth alive today.

The Personal and Human Elements

So, there you have it, the reasons why the Post-Modern Era is different from the Modern Era that preceded it. And, most important, why an examination of our core beliefs and values is essential. We have crossed an inflection point. This is the fourth pillar, the personal. We need to believe in a "New American Revolution," not an American Empire. In the original American Revolution the people overthrew the English King George and the result was the invention of democracy, which got the world through the Modern Era. Now it is time for the New American Revolution in which citizen of the US overthrow the self-appointed "King George." The result can be the re-invention of a democratic process appropriate for the Post-Modern Era. By definition, a democracy involves freedom of choice and cannot be exported through the barrel of a gun. To say: Goodbye Empire, is to say Hello to a brighter tomorrow.

Such choice points are times of opportunity. This is one of the most exciting times in human history to be alive. The choices we make will be either good or bad depending on our willingness to acknowledge that this is a new era, and to look to the future, not to the past, to find the way.

Conclusion

In sum, Thomas Friedman's book explains the economic globalization that is taking place to define the Post-Modern Era in terms of the impact of a frictionless, democratic, free-market capitalism under the sword of the United States. Gwynne Dyer, in his book, explains why that economic trajectory is political suicide for the world in terms of undermining the essential political stability required for living peacefully together in a flat world. And, Jared Diamond, in his book, explains why that same economic trajectory, clearly outlined by Thomas Friedman, is social suicide for the world in terms of undermining the environmental and societal foundation essential for the continuation of sustainable civilization on this planet.

This is not a pessimistic outlook. There are known solutions; we already know what we need to do. We do have a future, but it must be claimed by us, and there is an urgent need to start the dialogue to do so, now. I hope you will continue to stay with me on this journey. It is an exciting time the alive.