

THREE DELUSIONAL IDEAS OF THE WESTERN WORLD ON NATURAL ENVIRONMENT, HUMANS, AND THEIR SOCIETIES

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Abstract

With the globalization in the late 20th century, the expansion of Western tradition enters into a new phase of its history, causing severe consequences not only for the Western industrial nation, but also for all human societies. Environmental problems, the mechanizing of our daily life, and the enormous pressure on national economic systems within the world market, are phenomena that not only affect the diversity of world cultures and societies, but also the future of our planet. This essay tries to trace back the origin of essential thought patterns of the Western world. The essay commenced by presenting ideas about key elements of human existence of some extraordinarily influential Western philosophers, which justified norms of behavior passed through successive generations and which have become subconscious constituent part of social behavior. These ideas concern the human relationship to nature, the importance of individualism, and the belief in unlimited growth of economic systems. These ideas are contrasted by anthropological examples presenting alternative attitudes of non-Western societies regarding their relationship to nature, society, and ethics.

Keywords

Anthropology. Anthropocene. Globalization. Individualism. Environmental problems. Small-scale society.

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TRÊS IDEIAS DELIRANTES DO MUNDO OCIDENTAL SOBRE O MEIO AMBIENTE NATURAL, OS SERES HUMANOS E SUAS SOCIEDADES

Resumo

Com a globalização no final do século 20, a expansão da tradição Ocidental entra numa fase nova da sua história, causando consequências severas não só para as nações industriais, mas também para todas as sociedades humanas. Problemas de meio ambiente, a mecanização da vida cotidiana, e a pressão enorme nos sistemas econômicos nacionais participando no mercado mundial são fenômenos que não só afetam a diversidade de culturas e sociedades mundiais, mas também o futuro do nosso planeta. Este ensaio tenta rastrear a origem dos padrões essenciais de pensamento do mundo ocidental. O ensaio começa com a apresentação de ideias sobre os elementos-chave da existência humana de alguns filósofos ocidentais extraordinariamente influentes, que defenderam normas de comportamentos transmitidos ao longo de gerações sucessivas e que se tornaram parte integrante e subconsciente do comportamento social. Essas ideias se referem à relação humana com a natureza, a importância do individualismo e a fé no crescimento econômico ilimitado. Essas ideias serão contrastadas por exemplos antropológicos que apresentam atitudes alternativas de sociedades não-Ocidentais, considerando as suas relações com a natureza, a sociedade, e a ética.

Palavras-chave

Antropologia. Antropoceno. Globalização. Individualismo. Problemas ambientais. Sociedades de pequena escala.

The species *Homo sapiens sapiens* has changed the face of the earth during its development and proliferation across the planet. This process has caused a situation in which nowadays no part of the earth's surface is untouched by human influence.

John Bodley (2011:422) writes, "Natural biomes such as tropical

forest, deciduous forest, coniferous forest, grassland, desert, and arctic and alpine tundra have in many cases become conspicuously ‘unnatural’.”

In 2000, Paul Crutzen and Paul Stoermer, two top-ranking environmental scientists, in an article about the current human impact on the natural environment, used the term “Anthropocene”. Their designation refers to the epoch that follows the Holocene in the geographical history of the earth, describing the omnipresent human traces on earth and the visible transformation of the planet by humans.²

What nowadays is called “Globalization”, meaning the transportation, business and communication network that encompasses the planet and connects practically every corner of the earth, has existed only since the late twentieth century, and can be seen as the newest development of the Anthropocene epoch.

If seen from the perspective of one of the world’s largest religions, namely Christianity, one could think the phenomenon is in accordance with the writings of the *Holy Bible* where we can read “Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it” (Gen.1: 28-29). Hence, possibly some people could see it as good news that we supposedly got hold of the planet and subdued its creatures (except ourselves). Actually, few people, even the most religious, see it like this. Demography teaches us that the planet is overpopulated. We add over 9,000 people every day, c. 74 million per year, and the last three centuries have non-stop growth with a tenfold increase of human population (WEEKS, 2008; BODLEY, 2011). In 2050, world population will most probably reach 11.1 billion³. Since it appears that the planet will brim over in the next 40 years, Weeks called the current unprecedented population growth “[...] the single most important set of events to occur in human history.” (WEEKS, 2008:1)

But it is not overpopulation *per se* that drives the prognoses of the scientists. Overpopulation is causing environmental and social problems that now show their effects in climate warming,

² Bodley, 2011: 421 who cites Crutzen/Stoermer’s article from 2000: *The Anthropocene* in IGBP Newsletter, No. 41: 17f.

³ United Nations, 2013: *World Population Prospects. The 2012 Revision*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. esa.un.org/wpp/Documentation/pdf/WPP2012_HIGHLIGHTS.pdf [retrieved 03/17/2015; 13:40 h MT]

deforestation, depletion of biodiversity, pollution, lack of potable water, general poverty, and political unrest in many parts of the world. Overpopulation is normally correlated to societies with a complex structure of well-defined labor division and the will and possibility to grow. What is the role of the Western tradition in this event?

I will use the term “Western world or just Western for a set of traditions which originated in Europe, and happen to be the most influential tradition on the planet currently. It is characterized by capitalist economic structures⁴, a stress on rational thinking and individualism of a certain kind. This article investigates some of the philosophical, historical, and cultural foundations of Western thought patterns, contrasted with some indigenous approaches towards a sustainable natural environment. I will not omit the fact that other important features in Western thinking exist which may be also important, or that other approaches can be used to explain human environmental behavior. However, I think the three points mentioned below are a linchpin for the explanation of Western patterns; they also allow for cross-cultural comparison, and they reveal the necessary and characteristic conditions in which Western thought functions.

When studying population growth during human history, it becomes evident that a population explosion only began with the so called Industrial Revolution, roughly 250 years ago. I argue here that the Industrial Revolution itself was only the manifestation of ideas which entered European thinking much earlier.

Three ideas are essential in shaping the greatest influences on ‘Western’ thinking:

1. The picture of human beings as different from nature;
2. A particular notion of ‘individualism’; and
3. The idea of unlimited economic growth.

⁴I am aware that Communism is also a Western ideology, but I would deny that Communism is or was a special formative or necessary element for defining current Western societies.

Lumpers and above all Splitters

The religious foundation of Western culture is Christianity, an originally Middle Eastern religion that became the official faith system of the Roman Empire, the European superpower of Antiquity. From there, it thrived through the Middle Ages, spreading to the north, obliterating all regional polytheistic religions. In the Bible quote above, God gives permission to humans to use all natural resources or creatures on earth for their own well-being. The statement implies that humans have a privileged position in the cosmos. Nature is a gift to humans, it has the function to maintain humanity. When catastrophes happened and nature obviously does not favor humanity, the incidents were explained as the wrath of God provoked by the disobedience of His sinful “children.” Although God is seen as the creator of all creatures which exist, humans have a particular privileged position, because, in contrast to animals, they are made in God’s image (Gen. 1, 26f. Gen. 5, 1-3, Gen. 9,6). This is an essential difference to Pagan religions: e.g. although Zeus or other Olympic gods are manlike, and even bred with humans, producing semi-gods, they did not claim to be the creators of the cosmos, they just had more power over some natural phenomena like lightning, storm, the oceans etc. and were generally more powerful than humans. Whereas resistance is seen as futile towards the Abrahamic God, the wrath of the Olympians could be soothed by sacrifices. They could be discussed, or the deities could even been convinced to do something in behalf of humans through the use of the right arguments⁵. The Greek and Germanic gods are depicted as manlike and have the same flaws and desires as men, whereas the Abrahamic God is seen as perfect, immaculate, and an absolute ruler over the cosmos. Since the human being is an *imago Dei*, he partakes in the divine power; and is lifted above the rest of God’s creation. Therefore, to say that humans descend from apes would be seen as an affront, although apes are also supposed to have been created by God.

The Christian position towards non-human creatures as qualitatively

⁵ E.g. see the first book of Homer’s *Iliad* where the priest Chryses convinces Apollo to punish the Greek invaders.

inferior stands in stark contradiction to the belief of most small scale and non-Western cultures in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. The Haida from the Northwest coast of North America e.g. believe that in primordial times there was no difference between humans and animals. They could even change their shape at will (COOPER, 2012: 232). Trickster deities like the Raven, Coyote or others were admired because of their smartness and were used as symbols of intelligence. Animals are seen as kin and as having souls like human beings. In Africa, many ethnic groups believe that animals and humans came from the same origin and came to earth at the same time. Some animals are sacred and can only be slaughtered or eaten on certain ceremonial occasions (MBITI, 1997:50). In Hinduism, cows are holy and cannot be slaughtered at all. Besides this, the Hindu belief in reincarnation includes the rebirth in animal bodies, which makes it difficult to distinguish human and animal souls. Another example from a large stratified society is the traditional Chinese hero Pan Gu who brought order into the cosmic chaos and gave his body to create the sun, moon, stars, sky, and the earth. He was described and depicted as an animalistic looking, hairy giant who crawled out of a cosmic egg. The difference from the Christian belief lies less in the assumption that all creatures have a ‘soul’, in the sense of a life condition, rather in the belief that animals are godlike in the same way as human beings. In Catholicism animal “souls” are entirely bound to matter, and do not survive physical death⁶.

The Renaissance was an epoch of creativity and multiple new ideas. The rediscovery of the ancient Greek and Roman cultures was accompanied by distancing from the dogmas of the church. This does not mean that the whole worldview was changed and Christianity given up, it just means that those parts were interchanged which could obstruct the progress that was seen necessary in this epoch.

One of the most influential philosophies, at the end of the Renaissance and the beginning of the Modern era, was created by René Descartes (1596-1650). His philosophy was based on the ancient Greek theories which deemed that the only possible knowledge of truth reveals itself through the

⁶ <http://www.catholic.com/quickquestions/do-animals-have-souls-like-human-beings> [retrieved 03/20/2015; 18:45 h, MT]

abstract workings of the mind, whereas the body and sensory data were just a hindrance to pure wisdom. Searching for an incontrovertible fundament for his philosophy, Descartes, in his *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (1641), used a method that puts everything possible in doubt. Beginning with pure sensory perception, which normally would seem to be a very safe foundation for knowledge, he states that it does not stand the test because we are sometimes deceived by our five senses, e.g. a straight stick half immersed in water seems to be bent, the light of the astral objects seem to be dim, the stars small, although they are huge and tremendously bright. We can also not be sure that we are dreaming since all our perceptions can be part of the dream. The same argument can be used if we are mentally ill, having delusional hallucinations without knowing that they are delusions. We would not be capable of discerning reality from fantasy. Only one thing survives the methodic Cartesian skepticism - the act of thinking, which cannot be doubted in the moment in which a creature thinks. This is expressed in the famous Latin phrase "*Cogito ergo sum*" ("I think, therefore I am"). In the moment of thinking, existence verifies itself and cannot be denied. Descartes took this as the undeniable basis of his philosophy. Since all material things are perceived through sense data and have extension in space, their truth is not guaranteed. Mind, however, has no extension, is not separable, and therefore is necessarily true and imperishable. The mind, as the divine part of humans, is immaterial and not composite, whereas the body is matter and composed in different parts and layers which necessarily must disintegrate in the flux of time.

The strict separation of body and mind has been dubbed "Cartesian Dualism". Surprisingly, Descartes also researched the human body empirically, and came to the conclusion that the body is a kind of machine. According to Descartes, the body could perform all the vital functions without being animated by the mind or the consciousness, so he deemed that animals have no mind, are totally controlled by instincts and reactions, and therefore just like machines. Although Descartes conceded in his essay *Passions of the Soul* from 1649: [...] the body made by the hands of God, is incomparably better arranged, and possesses in itself movements which

are much more admirable, than any of those which can be invented by man.⁷

What Descartes tried here, is to explain away some essential differences between biological bodies and machines. He simply ignored the fact that machines are constructed for a certain purpose and that we put parts together in a certain way so that they will work. After long use of the machine, the parts wear out, and we either replace or fix them or; if this is not possible, we scrap the machine and construct or buy a new one. The biological body also has the astounding ability to recover a high degree of its systemic functions by itself. Until now no machine has had this capability, and this is even truer for Descartes' epoch. Another difference is the ability of biological mechanisms to multiply and procreate by themselves. Last but not least, machines can be built, dismantled into their constituent parts, rebuilt, and still function normally. This is not possible for living organisms, in particular complex ones. Once chopped up into pieces, or particles, no one can reconstruct a living body.⁸ Descartes has no explanation for "admirable" working machines such as the human body or any other biological living creature. He constitutes it as an act of faith, where God is the great miraculous engineer.

Biological bodies are part of nature and environment. Descartes had a mechanistic view of nature, but humans are seen as 'above' or 'superior' to nature. In other words, Descartes agreed with the Catholic concept of animal "souls," in the sense that these "souls" are essentially bound to matter, and therefore not immortal. However, saying that animals are "machines" constructed by God gives the word "soul" an odd meaning, since it is merely understood as the principal of biological activity⁹.

"Mechanism is the theory that all phenomena can be explained by the motion of geometrical matter." (KENNY, 1968: 203). Descartes was not the first philosopher who maintained that the world around him was

⁷ Quoted in Kenny, 1968:201.

⁸ The idea however exists already as "beaming" in Science Fiction stories like *Star Trek*.

⁹ In his dialogue *Phaedo* Plato also identified "soul" as the principle of life or what brings life about. For him however this was the proof that the soul cannot die, because it would be a contradiction in terms. Consequently Plato believed that even animal souls survive the physical death. Also, Plotinus in the *Enneads* sees the soul in its lowest forms as life-principle for animals and plants (cf. Dillon, John in Plotinus *The Enneads*, 1991: xxxvii, London: Penguin Books).

mechanistic. His English coeval Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) also had a mechanistic worldview but did not explicitly include human or animal bodies as machines. Also in Antiquity, in their search for primordial, immanent and unchangeable principles (*arche/αρχή*) underlying the world's functionality and visible appearance, the ancient Greeks began observing the movement of the celestial objects in the 8th century BCE and attributed precise regularity to them. In keeping with the influential Pythagorean philosophy, the cosmos was seen as a kind of clockwork where everything worked in total harmony and mathematical perfection¹⁰.

The position of a stable and unchanging cosmos began to crumble only with the appearance of Darwinian and Lamarckian evolutionary theories in the middle of the 19th century. The recalculation of the age of earth, the discovery of fossilized bones of animals that are extinct today, and of prehistoric bones that resembled human ones, but had also fundamental differences, continuously overshadowed Christian tendencies. In particular, these discoveries and revisions frustrated a literal interpretation of the Bible, which gave the earth an age of only 6,000 to 10,000 years. Evolutionary theorists showed convincing evidence for the continuous development of humanity from non-human creatures which had survived the billions of years of earth's history, as opposed to a divine spontaneous creation that had already finished after six earth days of work. In other words, we and animals must be 'relatives'. Likewise, the idea of nature as a clockwork was crushed and transformed into a flow of ever changing events. The discovery of the earth's magnetic fields, which have changed hundreds of times in the past millions years; the continental drifts; the animals that change as they adapt to the environment; the developing resistance of infectious bacteria against antibiotics, etc.etc., all gave further evidence to the theory of eternal change. The human species now is included in the flow and change of living creatures. Great scientists in the past like the famous Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), who laid the foundation for modern biological taxonomy, still assumed that all living creatures were created at the same time and stayed unchanged. However, after the acceptance of Evolutionism, human beings are incorporated into the chain of evolution

¹⁰ Cf. Riedweg, 2008: 83f.

and must have some biological predecessors, supposedly in the form of primates. Therefore, humans and animals are now seen as one, or as relatives.

Together with the mechanism of Descartes, it is a small step to materialism, since if animals are machines, and human beings are animals, it follows that human beings are also machines. From the perspective of Materialism, the undoubtable and observable differences between human and animals can be explained in quantitative rather than qualitative characteristics. The mind is thought of as an epiphenomenon of the brain that contains memory, intelligence and imaginative capabilities. Even Descartes, who was an idealistic philosopher and gave preference to the mind, looked for places where the mind could control the body. He assumed the place where the mind dwells in the body was the pineal gland in the vertebrate brain.

The general picture of the cosmos in the physics of the 20th and 21st century also diminished the importance of order in the cosmos. The macro cosmos is seen as a place where visible order only reigns over a small part of the vast space, where ex- and implosions and uncontrolled by super powerful gamma radiation rules, where Black Holes with their immense gravity inevitably engulf every kind of matter, particles, and even light. Most of the matter that constitutes the order that we perceive and explain is unknown. The matter we know is, according to Einstein's Relativity theory, only a form of transformed energy, hence energy in the process of changing. According to the very successful quantum theory the micro cosmos is a system where quanta – packages of energy – do not obey even the most fundamental principles of human logic. The advancement in knowledge in physics is also accompanied by a new attitude of modesty concerning our claim to know the truth with certainty.

In this scenario, however, medical sciences form an exception, still clinging to the mechanistic and materialistic worldview of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Cartesian philosophy differs from orthodox Western medicine in that it is based on the concept of mind as the most important characteristic to define humanity. For orthodox medical sciences, however, the mind is but a byproduct of the body contained in the brain. Biologist

Rupert Sheldrake writes: “Hence a materialist medical system confines its attention to the physical and chemical aspects of human beings, treating them through surgery and drugs, while ignoring anything that does not fit in” (SHELDRAKE, 2012: 260).

For most anthropologists with practical field experience, the position of orthodox Western medicine is difficult to match with the facts they get from their fieldwork experiences, because they see that indigenous medicine can be very effective. This of course sometimes includes drugs and to a certain degree surgery, but also the treatment of shamans and *curandeiros* (healers), who work with different concepts of the mind–body relationship. Most of the healers in small-scale non-Western societies use concepts that we would call “religious,” because they imply soul journeys, spirits, animal helpers, energy concepts which are not based on the energy concepts of Western Physics, and other “supernatural” entities. Not surprisingly, orthodox Western medicine cannot consider these healings to be a result of the treatment. In the event that shamanic healing happened to be undeniably successful under observed conditions, it is called a “placebo effect,” meaning the actual improvement of a patient’s medical condition through a fake treatment, or a substance, surgery, or injection that is normally seen as ineffective for the conditions of the patient. Since the healing was successful, orthodox medicine delegates the explanation out of their academic field, and gives psychological reasons for the effect, mostly as auto- or other suggestions. However, how exactly a suggestion can have these effects is unknown and has no explanation in physical terms.

Medical anthropologists have shown that social and cultural factors form an important factor for healing purposes, concerning psychological as well as biological dysfunctions. The kind of relationship between healer/physician – patient, socio-economic, and political aspects plays an important role in the healing process (WILLEY and ALLEN, 2013:450). In spite of clinging to all the undeniable achievements in the history of orthodox Western medicine and its supposed superiority to all other ways of healing, it would be advisable also to recognize the social, cultural, and cognitive influences on the body and so keep the “ghost in the machine” alive.

Descartes' influence is still felt in the approach to nature as a mechanism and to biological creatures as machines. Machines are functional and made to fulfill certain tasks, helping people survive or enhance their well-being. Most people would agree in saying that machines do not have souls, and normally we do not have emotional relationships to machines.

The notion of nature as a machine also brought some consequences for the assessment of non-Western, in particular, indigenous cultures. The European expansion to Africa, Asia, and the Americas in the last 500 years let Europeans 'discover' different ethnic groups and cultures never seen before. On the basis of the experiments of the seafarers with the "savages" and their unusual behavior, the Spanish clergy of the early 16th century discussed the question whether the "savage" indigenous Americans should be classified as animals or human beings¹¹. The sequitur is clear: If Native Americans are animals, they are machines with only a minimal inferior soul that merely guarantees biological functioning, but as machines they can be used to till and subdue the land for their human ("civilized") owners. Paired and backed up with the economic drive of the Industrial Revolution and the newly discovered capitalism, these ideas propelled the Atlantic Slave Trade (c.1550-1850), continuing over a period of 300 years, leading to the biggest human migration prior to the 20th century.

If nature is machine like, do we have the right or even the obligation to use her in every way we feel it could be useful for human survival? What is the approach to the human body? Do societies really see the human body as a part of nature, considering the fact that it is the visible part of humankind, the screen on which we design our societal and cultural identity?

Individuum est ineffabile

The Latin sentence above originates from Aristotelian philosophy, and means that the nature of an individual is not definable or predicable, since an individual is a single existence, and every predication refers to common attributes. When I, for instance, use the term 'human being', I have a common set of attributes in mind, at least two or more of which

¹¹ Cf. Kohl (1986: 13)

match, e.g. capability of language, intelligence, builder of edifices, etc. An individual can have all these attributes combined; however, the individual is not defined by those, because the attributes describe what human beings have in common as a group, set, or species, not what distinguishes a single individual from other individuals. Although it is doubtful that difference makes an individual – many insects such as bees look totally alike, but we normally say it was a single bee (an individual) that stung someone – the Latin sentence above gives us a hint about the supposed indivisible quality of an individual. The individual is a unity that cannot be divided; it is a wholeness. Take parts away, and it is destroyed. Therefore it has systemic attributes: the wholeness is more than its parts, or like the metaphor, “the forest is more than a collection of trees.”

In stark contrast to many cultures, the Western tradition strongly appreciates and stresses “individualism” as a value *per se*. Why is that so? Or more precisely: What are the philosophical, cultural, and/or ideological fundaments of this preference, what is different from other cultures?

The above Aristotelian approach to ‘individual’ shows that it is not always clear what is meant with this term. Lacking definition, the word acquires an almost mysterious meaning. It can be reasoned that there is most probably more than one characterization necessary or sufficient to say something is an individual. Maybe, when comparing different cultures, we derive a different spectrum of attributes that are germane for an individual.

Let us start with the Western culture as the tradition that invented the term, places enormous emphasis on it, and holds it in highest regard.

As we have seen before, Descartes found the “undeniable” foundational principle for his philosophy in the sentence “*cogito, ergo sum*”, “I think, therefore I am.” Characteristically, the word “I” appears two times in the English translation of this short phrase¹². Undoubtedly “I” determines an individual. Descartes has reduced the truth to guaranteeing facts which could withstand all possible doubts to the points where divisibility is not possible any more. It is the individual that experiences his own existence.

¹² In Latin it is not necessary to mention the personal pronoun (“ego”). The conjugation of the infinitive “*cogitare*” (‘to think’) as “*cogito*” already shows it is me who thinks. The second in “*sum*,” first person singular of the infinitive ‘*esse*’ (‘to be’).

So, whatever other people can tell me is the case, can also be wrong - even if consensus about a fact exists in the community in which I live. The individual is put back to his/her own judgement of what is true or false, existent or not. Descartes thought he had found the answers to questions of truth in the loneliness of his mind, independent from all sensory data and opinions. Later philosophers did not agree with his argumentation, because they asserted that we are already influenced in what we call "I" when we start to think. The critics argued that the "I" is not possible without a "you" – we learn both in tandem with each other. They are inseparable¹³ - and if this is the case, there is no pure individuality. Descartes influence on modern philosophy, theory, and even on common sense however cannot be ignored. Descartes argument is epistemological, wanting to give the answer to the question "What can we know?" His response: only you self can answer the question. The individual is the guarantor of truth and existence.

Along with Descartes, other philosophers have described the importance of the individual. For Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) the individual is not the beginning of thinking, nor the guarantor for the truth. His theory is inspired by political motives, in particular the justification of the social contract theory. In his book *Leviathan*, from 1651, Hobbes describes the human being in its natural state as a brutish and wild, an egotistic creature driven by the selfish satisfaction of individual needs. Hobbes experienced the English Civil War (1642-1651), its cruelty, unpredictability, and opacity. In civil wars in general it is difficult to discern enemies from friends because they are all your people. So you cannot trust anybody. He revived the Roman pessimistic philosophy of man as "*homo homini lupus*" ("man is a wolf to man"): "The natural state of men, before they entered into society, was a mere war, and that not simply, but a war of all men against all men." (HOBBS, 1651, Ch. 13)

Further, there is practically nothing that differentiates human beings in their natural state from animals:

¹³ A problem that phenomenologist Edmund Husserl took up again in his "*Konstitution der Intersubjektivität*" in Husserl, 1992: 166-219.

Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man. [...] In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (HOBBS, 1651, Ch. 13).

Just as dangerous animals have to be tamed by the whip and a strict regime that instills fear, so too must human beings be “educated” into civilized societies. Hobbes’ “animal trainer” and solution to the problem is an absolute sovereign, a ruler with totalitarian power over his subjects. What is interesting for the discussion here is that Hobbes’ theory of the selfish individual found many supporters and always shows up when we describe situations where societies are stricken by natural or human made catastrophes. The individual is selfish and even when the individual is like a Samaritan, its acts can be interpreted as done for his/her own wellbeing or psychological advantage¹⁴. Philosophically, this causes the word “selfish” to lose its meaning, because every possible act can be called ‘selfish’ under the premise that we can deliberately foist motives on a person.

But a society that stresses competition and defines success as the

14 Recently heard in TED talk “Why Aren’t We more Compassionate” by psychologist Daniel Goleman who called it a “narcissistic hit”. TED Talks 2007: “Love, No Matter What”, Season 1, Episode 6.

overcoming of opponents is a fertile ground for individuals as loners who fight each other. Hobbes' solution to overcome the beast inside us all and tame it to let people behave in unison is not the only one, since it would also only permit one real individual -the sovereign¹⁵.

Scottish philosopher Adam Smith (1723-1790) philosophized about the nature of human beings. What is it that makes us different from animals? He came to the conclusion that humans are distinct from animals because they enter into exchange of goods. Therefore, trade and business makes us different from animals in the first place. In *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), writing about the best possible economic system, he postulated that the selfish nature of human beings is always to the best of the whole society. He deemed that, instead of requiring an omnipotent leader who forces people into order, and rules over every possible affair in his country, the government should do as little as possible to maintain a healthy competition between them. In this system of "laissez-faire", competition is healthy for society because it instigates the endeavor of producers and sellers to sell good products, or at least products that are better than those of their competitors. Hence, the individual greed or the motive to make profit leads the sellers and producers to do something for the society. In a nutshell: just create more advantage for yourself than you do the best for society. Egoism is a healthy and valuable characteristic of an individual. Competition can be seen as a kind of war, or at least a fight, but there is no reason any more to abolish competition through an omnipotent leader. To the contrary, it has to be maintained for the wealth of nations.

In *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) Smith pondered:

As every individual, therefore, endeavours as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value;

¹⁵ Inspired by Aristotle's terminology of the 'unmoved mover' ('primum movens'), used as a synonym for 'God', one could think of Hobbes' sovereign as the 'untrained trainer', a neologism for this supposed godlike figure.

every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it.

It is Smith's famous metaphorical term "invisible hand," describing a supposedly automatic mechanism that reigns over the market and bestows order on it. With this philosophy, Smith laid the ideological fundament of capitalism.

Let us resume,

- Descartes said that the only fact that we can know which exists with certainty, is the "I" that thinks, when it thinks.
- Hobbes tells us that the nature of people is evil and brutish. We are in a kind of war (a fight against each other). We cannot trust anyone, because everybody just looks to his/her own advantage. Hence, we only trust ourselves. We could also say that we are in competition for survival.
- Adam Smith informs us that, yes, we are in competition, but this is a good thing, because the competition is to the benefit of ourselves and

the society in which we live.

Synthesizing the three philosophies, we have a good idea of how individualism is seen in the Western world: -The best and safest way to survive is to be on your own, being strong, asserting yourself, prevailing in the competition of all against all.

When I teach this to the students, sometimes the question comes up, “Isn’t this the same in all societies?” Well, the answer is a clear “No!” Anthropologists have experienced otherwise in non-capitalist societies, where communality comes before self-interest.

Some time ago a story circulated on the internet. A student of mine sent it to me, because she thought it might interest me:

An anthropologist proposed a game to the kids in an African tribe. He put a basket full of fruit near a tree and told the kids that whoever got there first won the sweet fruits. When he told them to run they all took each other’s hands and ran together, then sat together enjoying the treats. When he asked them why they had run like that as one could have had all the fruits for himself they said: ‘UBUNTU, how can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?’

‘UBUNTU’ in the Xhosa culture means: ‘I am because we are’.

This was indeed interesting. Although nobody could tell me the source of the story, or the name of the anthropologist, or even if the incident ever happened, it shows very clearly a crucial difference from Western tradition. In Western countries most popular games such as football (soccer), hockey, tennis, basketball, etc. are games built on competition and winning. Nobody actually cares about the psychological state of beaten adversaries, as long as their own team won. Winning is for one or for no one.

Ubuntu is a short form standing for the Xhosa proverb: “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, meaning “a person is a person through her relationship to others” (SWANSON, 2007: 55). Dalene Swanson (2007: 55) describes how the Ubuntu philosophy experienced a revival in South Africa, in

particular through the activity and efforts of Bishop Desmond Tutu and the post-apartheid organization South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Committee. The underlying idea of Ubuntu, however, is not a particularity of South Africa. In all parts of sub-Saharan Africa, communalism is far stronger than Western individualism.

Martin J. Gannon writes: Communalism is a strong trait in African culture. Land is often held in common with relatives or an extended family. Communalism starts with the family and extends outward.

Quoting McCarthy:

[The African family] extends outward to a great distance and backward to many generations, and may even include unborn children. So, whereas Westerners generally have little family awareness beyond, say, first cousins, and to map out a family tree would be no more than amusing diversion, to an African such a mental map of his family is the focus and the center of identity. (MCCARTHY, p.14)¹⁶

It seems that non-Western societies have another way of 'individualism' one that is not necessarily connected to winning or competition. It is possible to make the objection that the solidarity and the communalism is only limited to a kinship, age, or village group, and not extendable for a bigger society, but in the Western world the competing individual has found his/her way a long time ago within a village or even a family.

Gannon describes the African feeling of community or, to use Victor Turner's expression "communitas" in the following passage:

The African sense of community extends beyond the family to the village, which is seen almost as an extended family. When Africans are asked where they are from they will typically give the names

¹⁶ Both quotes in Gannon (2004): 426.

of their villages. Even if they were born in the city, and even if their parents before them were born in the city, they will still name their parents' or grandparents' village. For example, an urban educated Burkinabé took a detour from a business trip to visit his village. He himself had been born in a city several hundred kilometers to the south but still identified himself with the village. He was deeply embarrassed and upset when he got lost in the bush looking for the village, only finding it after seeking directions. In urban settings Africans will form village communities to plan social events, to network for jobs, to help recent arrivals, and in general to retain their village identity. While this network weakens over time, it is still a very real presence in urban Africa (GANNON, 2004: 427).

Naturally, smaller communities are less anonymous than big societies. It is possible that living in big anonymous societies lets the Western kind of individualism develop: The singular person is no longer confronted by known faces with names and histories, but is confronted instead by a mass of anonymous competitors. A community in a big conglomerate such as a megacity can only develop within a circle of friends or at the work place. Therefore, the felt culture is one of a micro-culture or of a pseudo-extended family.

Hence, there is a clear difference between 'individualism' for the Western tradition and 'communalism' or 'collectivism' for African traditional societies or other non-Western groups:

Individualism implies a loose social structure with people who care for themselves and their immediate family only. Collectivism means people belong to tightly woven in-groups. African cultures, while varying from country to country (or between ethnic groups) are collectivistic (GANNON, 2004: 427).

Unlimited Economic Growth

I was tempted to call this chapter “The Myth of Unlimited Growth.” The truth is, acting as if we could have unlimited economic growth is not even a myth. A myth says something explicit, though mostly in a metaphorical or allegorical way, but it brings something to awareness. The idea that economy can grow steadily and that this process can go on and on, is not a theory or model. In effect, it is connected to Smith’s “invisible hand” in the sense that people in business just **act** as if the economy can grow infinitely without being aware of their behavior.

The classical economic theory draws upon economic growth as its basic and undoubted premise:

Economic growth is the dominant ideological feature of the contemporary commercial world. It is the primary goal of governments, businesses, and many nongovernmental organizations and is the principal justification for countless policies and actions. It is so firmly established in cultural belief and practice that its supremacy goes unchallenged, yet its real effects on humanity and the world are not well understood (BODLEY, 2011: 335).

Growth has happened, but what will happen when all markets are saturated? We are in the process of connecting all corners of the planet. Have the advocates for unlimited growth ever thought about what will happen when there will be no developing country to which they can no longer expand? The limit is the planet on which we all live, and this limit is expected to last well into the future. The planet is also limited in its natural resources. The more societies and markets grow, the more energy and natural resources are needed to sustain the standards. With a growing population, the pressure on the environment through industrial and private pollution is increasing, which in turn makes food production very difficult. Most developing countries already suffer from the effects

caused by the industrialized production of the leading industrial nations on the environment. These problems include pollution, dwindling biodiversity, overfishing, and global warming, which cause a lack of potable water, crop failures, and natural catastrophes (flooding, droughts, and increased numbers of pests and vermin).

With modern globalization (Globalization with a capital ‘G’), a phenomenon that has existed since the 90s of the 20th century, a lot of opportunity developed for the leading industrialized nations and their representatives. Outsourcing of production branches, or the use of cheap labor in developing countries are just two of the many possibilities that opened the doors for more profit. Of course, the developing countries welcome big corporations offering new employment. But the creation of new employment through international corporations also entails new structures of producing and changes work processes for the developing countries. The intensified flow of money creates new sales markets for the leading industries. The new employment of the market resulted also in little producers, mostly in the form of family businesses, being overrun by mass-produced products from abroad, that were cheaper and that were seen as more fashionable in their own society.

This means fewer individual products and more mass production. Mass production in turn implies that one could produce goods such as shoes in great numbers, and that thousands of products look identical and can be used in identical ways. This also applies to crops. On the current global market we find quantitatively more products but also less diversity. As an example, the Rural Advancement Association International compared USDA listings of seed variations in commercial US seed houses from 1903 with those in the US National Seed Storage Laboratory in 1983¹⁷. The result is shocking: hundreds of varieties just vanished in only 80 years. Just to give some examples¹⁸:

¹⁷ Charles Siebert (2011): Food Arc in: “National Geographic”, Vol. 220, No.1, July 2011 (:117)

¹⁸ Ib.

| | 1903 | Number of varieties | 1983 |
|------------|------|---------------------|------|
| Tomatoes | 408 | | 79 |
| Cucumber | 285 | | 16 |
| Sweet Corn | 307 | | 12 |
| Lettuce | 497 | | 36 |
| Cabbage | 544 | | 28 |

Growth of industrial production came with the growth of population. In order to feed a large population, an intensive or an industrial agriculture is needed. The most effective way is the use of machines and automated devices (e.g. for irrigation, tilling, selection, etc.). Products are normed for packing and shipping, and e.g. fruits, eggs, meat, seafood, etc. are in standardized sizes, colors, and weights. So, the products look, taste, and smell identical, and are used in the same way.

The high appreciation for individuality normally found in the Western world obviously does not seem to apply to the global market of consumption, and due to new and easy means of transportation, more and more people eat the same food regardless, of where they live.

The possibilities of the big economic players that opened up in times of globalization also entailed a movement of Neoliberalism. Big corporations are no longer dependent on national production. Their leadership is already mostly international. Corporations can land anywhere in the world and produce their goods where there is cheap labor or where taxes are low. Neoliberalism is associated with the claim that the government should minimally interfere in the “free” global market and hold taxes and custom requirements as low as possible. However well and liberal this sounds, money is the means of survival in the global capitalist world, and thus a powerful political instrument. Paul Bowles (2007: 173) writes:

The rise of corporate power, and the increasing inability of nation states to control their activities as corporations become “stateless”, present opponents with a frightening scenario for the twenty-first century.

The neoliberal idea is dangerous for every government that still wants to control and protect its citizens. Corporations, which have spread their operations to several countries and have a lot of financial power, can hardly be controlled by one government because so far there is no forceful international court or jurisdiction where possible ethical or other infractions by big corporations can be sanctioned.

One of the negative effects of Globalization is that it did not make the majority of the world's population richer. To the contrary, the rich have got richer and the poor have gotten poorer. From 1998 to 2007, the number of high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs) increased from 6 million individuals with a wealth accumulation of US\$21 trillion to 10 million individuals with a total wealth of US\$40 trillion. "These 10 million wealthy individuals were the prime beneficiaries of global economic growth since 1980, but if HNWIs and their families represent 50 million people, they were less than 1 percent of the global population" (BODLEY, 2011: 434).

So, when possible economic growth stops, the industrial production is in the hands of a small part of Earth's population, which neither facilitates the convenient mechanism of the "invisible hand" Adam Smith was dreaming of, nor the government's control over the super-rich.

The dream of growing without limits is shortsighted and opposite to sustainability. Besides this, it is certainly inconvenient to think about the long-term problems as long as several economic systems in the leading economic nations still work. It reminds of the Boiled Frog anecdote, which is used as a metaphor for everything dangerous that is only slowly developing:

The premise is that if a frog is placed in boiling water, it will jump out, but if it is placed in cold water that is slowly heated, it will not perceive the danger and will be cooked to death. The story is often used as a metaphor for the inability or unwillingness of people to react to threats that occur gradually, such as creeping state surveillance.¹⁹

¹⁹ Wikipedia "Boiled Frog". Quote from "Slow Boiled Frog". Snopes. [Retrieved 05/14/2015; 16:43 MST]

Besides its usefulness for the growth ideology, this metaphor can also be used to show the lack of awareness of population growth²⁰.

For the great anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski “growth” was a universal basic need of human beings. A society wants to grow, and so does an individual. However, is unlimited growth possible? In nature, growth has a definite end when the adult stage of a living creature has been reached. Human beings can act and behave differently from nature, but it is certainly deadly not to consider nature and the natural environment in which we live. In this sense, let us hope that the Western tradition will also reach its adult stage, taking responsibility for the world it has created, and working together with the rest of the global population to create a sustainable world where communality and individuality are equal values, and individual greed is just a delusion.

Conclusion

Western tradition has created an unsustainable world. The underlying ideas about nature, the individual, and the economic process originate in an eclectic philosophy. For the Industrial Revolution, the idea of nature as a kind of machine is convenient, so nature can be exploited at will, since humans are superior and essentially different from nature and other living creatures. The individual is seen as selfish and principally dangerous. All people are in a constant fight for survival with their fellow countrymen. Adam Smith in turn redefined the “war of all against all” into a “competition of all against all” and characterized it as something desirable which benefits the market and society. The “invisible hand” lets us forget about the big picture of society and market, because the system is working without thinking about it or feeling responsible for it. Profit is now the most important motive. Nature can be exploited without remorse because of its mechanical character. Growth worked for hundreds of years as an economic principle that let profits grow – its supposed usefulness is firmly anchored in the subconscious of Western business-men and women. The conflict lies in the relationship between a market that is based on economic growth and the sustainability of nature which does not

²⁰ Cf. <http://www.countercurrents.org/hamer220709.htm>

grow along with human population and industrial development.

I called the three ideas of the Western world “delusional,” because they are irrational in the sense that they are highly selective and lopsided. The blind run of unlimited growth has created environmental, population, social, and individual problems. It is to be hoped that politicians and responsible leaders can awake to awareness of our responsibility for the whole planet, before the run transforms itself into a fall.

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