

Reclaiming our Planet: Future Scenarios and Global Changes - Economy, Society and Environment.

THE CENTRAL MIRAGE AT THE CORE OF OUR SELF-DESTRUCTION

We have misled, In this hall and everywhere else, into believing that our concerns about the fact that we are killing our environment, destroying our forests, poisoning our oceans, will result, one day, in our salvation, through some incredible technological advance.

We are so wrong, so totally wrong.

We have created a God that will destroy its very creator. Us. the God that will end time is the demand for energy. We cannot stop the demand for more energy and power. It is the machine that will ever grow and will destroy us all. The idea that green energy, that new technologies, that cars powered by electricity can be the solution to our problems is a huge con. All the items that are produced, from the car or the plane, the microchips that are necessary for green growth consume far more in the process of production than they do in consumption throughout their lives.

In the Bhagavad Gita, the holy book of the Hindus, there is a powerful god. When the first test atomic bomb was exploded in the desert of New Mexico, Robert Oppenheimer, the lead physicist who had taught himself Sanskrit to be able to read the Vedas, quoted; “I am become death, the destroyer of time.” The demand for energy will be our God of destruction.

Currently we are facing a confluence, a coming together of the gravest threats of all. Food inflation. Energy inflation. Cost of living inflation. Collapse of the physical environment. Forests are on fire, water disappearing from our rivers and lakes. We have a run-away growth mechanism that we cannot stop. It is not that we ourselves are causing our destruction, but **that we have created systems that have become unstoppable.** The most important economic element, the very engine of our societies, is the enormous productivity of our core industries. When you produce cars, unless you can produce around 20,000 of them in anyone year, the economic value of the investment in production is such that the investor would not recoup its costs.

Why can't we stop?

Because we cannot stop the machine that we have created. Our culture of permanent and suicidal competition together with the self-generating demands for energy and consumption, is leading us on an escalator that is moving ever more rapidly and we cannot get off.

THE RISE OF GLOBALISATION

Many of us across the world, in Brazil as elsewhere, saw globalisation as the start of a new era, of a set of new principles that would spread and improve the world. That it would make more people more equal. Do you remember the triumphalism that followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall? “**The end of history**”; from now on there would be only liberal capitalist democracies.

We must not romanticise about globalisation. It started as ecological and economic imperatives, such increasing union rights and tighter regulations forcing companies in rich countries to move to places which were more desperate for jobs and where legislation was much looser. The arrival of Mrs Thatcher in the UK and President Reagan in the US, the two leaders of the free **financial**

world, signals the beginning of an anti-regulated and ultra-liberal system of economic growth. It signals the decrease of respect for the UN system. The deregulations signal a greater attack of private companies against environment protection.

In the last half a century something has been unfolding and we have hardly understood its significance. Instead of making humankind the driver of that our lives, the central engine, we have allowed a small number of people to run our lives, through the very simple tactic of abusing power, taking away our rights to determine our lives, restricting our freedoms, running away with capital. The current challenges of our world have changed from one in which we could use old fashioned controllable capitalism to achieve economic growth. The scale of what is happening is now uncontrollable; **climate change, affordable food, decent education, decent housing, the challenges of daily living are no longer the key aims of our societies.**

Globalisation has failed us. It has taken jobs away from ordinary individuals in our societies. It has created ever more fragile supply chains in industries and agriculture. It has failed to deliver protection from environmental destruction. It has created shortages of food and fertilisers and components everywhere. It has created famines in various parts of the world. It has prevented poor countries from having access to vaccines because the MNCs have controlled International Property Rights. The search for ever freer trade is poisoning our rivers and our health, encouraging cruelty towards animals, destroying the key elements of a liveable life.

Beyond capitalism

We have reached the limits to growth. Not those defined by the Club of Rome in 1970, which looked at the components of growth, the raw materials available to humanity, but defined by the systems we have created. Under the Club of Rome, we could grow forever. We are mistaken in thinking that we have free choices. Every single aspect of our lives is regulated and shaped by different forces driven by vested interests. It applies to the beverages we consume, the cigarettes we smoke and the religious believes that have conquered us.

Let us look at one simple, evident example of the global hypocrisy of the powerful people who control our lives. You will all remember Greta Thunberg, the 17-year-old girl who campaigned for the environment. In Jan 2020, just before the pandemic closed life down, some 1500 solo planes landed at Zurich airport to listen to that girl. They were all the great and the good of the world. Two years later, in Jan 2022, it became obvious that the same great mind who attended the annual lovefest of Davos in 2022 could not understand what had been happening. They only knew that business as usual is not the answer. They came out with platitudes.

The main players have become a law into themselves. They do not even control their own capital – it is not capitalism that has taken over our lives, but a loss of control, a loss of power. Monopolies have arisen everywhere, particularly, but not exclusively among the titans of the IT world, in the West and in China. **Intellectual Property** rights have deprived the poorest from access to basic medicines. But access to vaccines – many of them developed with public financial help, has meant that drug companies could make even more profits. The lack of financial rewards has meant that very nasty ailments like Zika, Ebola, Marburg's diseases, Lassa fever, Leprosy, elephantiasis, cannot be brought to the millions of people who need them, unless there is an intervention by "generous international foundations". These have benefitted from the very monopolies we have allowed to emerge. We have lost the flexibility that has always been an essential feature of humankind.

Why is it so expensive? Brazil is one of the largest producers of food in the world. You export millions and millions of tons to the world at large. Yet, 30% of the population of Brazil lives below the poverty line, where they cannot feed themselves and their families. Because we have not cultivated our soils for what we need. We are being dictated by relative costs. If you are good at producing something, you are encouraged to produce more and more and more. The result is that often local farmers cannot find markets for what they have to sell; their power has been transferred to the supermarket. From one local supermarket it has become a chain, in Brazil, in the US, in the EU. That has become the intermediary and has dictated the type of lettuce that we should have, or the type of oranges or bananas.

The business leaders want short term profits. The politicians need to be re-elected. The world needs long term care. We should compromise, but we cannot.

ECONOMICS USED FOR THE WRONG ENDS

I want to highlight a few of the elements in our economic system that have been misused and for which economists are to blame.

Firstly, it has confused growth with development. This serious error has condemned us all to be forever concerned with GDP and the increase in financial and asset wealth. It has condemned poor countries to be trapped forever in debt bondage. They need to repay the capital in order to carry on to be creditworthy to enable them to carry on growing.

Secondly, it has ignored the costs of externalities. It has concentrated on two factors of production - capital and labour. This has meant that over the years, the increasing destruction of our world has been totally ignored.

Third, it has become the handmaiden to the financial community. It has made sure that wealth becomes the primary aim of the world's activity. This has given increasing power to ever smaller groups of intermediaries and has caused the emergence of systems to become totally ungovernable.

Fourthly, it has been the primary reason not for personal independence, which is the much-proclaimed virtue of our style of governance which is democracy, to increase concentration on ourselves and not the community's welfare.

Lastly, the size at which we are operating, by the so-called rules of economies of scale, are making bigger and bigger entities inevitable. Producing less or at a smaller scale becomes virtually impossible. That results in a vicious circle that reduces the capacity of smaller units to serve their communities, to create living localities. Just a simplification of individual lives- eating less meat or smoking fewer cigarettes or not smoking at all, not buying a dress for one occasion but reusing it or lending it to someone else to use- is not enough. We need to reduce and halt the rate of industrial production.

Current mainstream economics has become the prostitute to finance, by **justifying profits and gigantism**. We have known since the 1980s (since COP 12 in Nairobi), that new techniques of manufacturing and production could not occur without there being also a gradual but increasingly damage to the environment through increased pollution. GATT and WTO have made it more difficult to limit commercial exchanges by observing and respecting environmental and health issues and concerns.

We need to address the fundamental challenge of modern-day economics. This is not to make profit the one single engine of growth, but to put humans at the centre of the systems we have created and have allowed to slip from our control. Different elements of activity - which we call economics - need to be put back into our lives.

Current economic systems also favour the role of the US dollar in the race to globalisation. It is the most widely used currency in the world, the point of reference for many transactions, such as in the commodity trades, and the result is that what the US central Bank or the US government sets becomes the main determinant factors for all economies around the world.

A PLANET ON FIRE

We are being sold the idea that there are global solutions to global problems, **but the truth is that there is just a large number of common problems that are repeated across the globe.** Each of these must be identified and addressed separately and their individual solutions will result to the changes at the much higher level. The reason why there is no way to police global environmental disasters is that the solutions to the challenges or problems are by definition local. If there is a fire in the Amazon, you cannot ask fire brigade in France to help you. If there is a fire in the ancient forests of California, caused by poor electricity lines maintenance, there is no point in sending aeroplanes with balloons filled with water to solve that particular problem. These changes are happening at the rate of minuscule steps in our world. We need to address step changes through the disappearance of some species of flowers or animals, or the decrease in the number of varieties of insects. Or one single problems after the other.

ACADEMIA

My colleagues and friends at the GREENS group at Florianopolis tell us that research saves lives. That may well be so and will offer us all a rosy future but not unless what we study and research can be applied. Then it is just hot air and politicians and academics do enough of it. There is this huge temptation to try to reach to ever higher levels of complexity, of theory, of higher academic esteem.

But academia has enabled a system in which only a well-paid education is the path to earning ever more. We forget about the ever-greater indebtedness of students and their parents. It also becomes more and more exclusive, restrictive, and divisive. The fight for global attention is now between avaricious newspaper owners and an academic elite that has allowed itself to be corrupted by tainted money, just like every part of society. **We no longer speak truth to power.**

Can we stop it? **No but we can opt out.** I do not see any options other than a careful localism that protects the interest of the individuals and not that of the private corporate bodies. The fact that English is the language we are using here, is a sign that you people of European ancestry have lost out. Those people, whose lands your ancestors took over, have lost far, far more. I would suggest to you that these are acts of power which are just as signs of domination or aggression as the power of men over women and it is happening every day.

AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE AND SURVIVAL

Occasionally we hear of communities in different parts of the world that have done what the Hamish are doing some US a states, where they retain their original ways of life and give their

young people the chance to go out for a couple of years into the real “world” and if they want to stay out, so be it. If they want to come back, good for them, they will be accepted back in their communities.

There are too many people on earth and we are not stopping from growing. We do not like to see that, to admit it, because we cannot come to terms with it. That is Malthus predicted and it is here. This is why we are fighting for survival. We cannot reach it, we cannot achieve it, because the fight for survival is not controllable by humans who do not have the structures necessary to coming to terms with this. We have abrogated our decision-making process to bodies that we think are controllable and are not. They include the private companies, whose framework allows them to create further divisions between us. But we cannot continue and hope to survive if we continue to use the same tools that have led us to this catastrophic ending. We need different tools of measurement, research, approaches of learning and teaching. The parameters of our thinking need to change.

That is the role of universities and similar bodies. We need to reclaim our lives, reclaim our planet, reclaim human dimensions. We need to use a different language, a language of cooperation in communities. We must question all the elements of our society that take power away from us. I am not a religious person. Not because I do not believe that there might be a god. There might be. If he is there, he is certainly above my capacity as a limited human to understand him or her. But my God did not intend that in this world millions should starve and much smaller number of people should profit. That men should be the elites of the churches and should forbid women to control their own bodies. And you will remember Liberation Theology; **justice will be in the next world...., where everything will all be so much better.** Religious structures are no longer to provide comfort and succour; they are power structure.

If you have your food from local farmers, you can ensure that local varieties are maintained and jobs are maintained. If you hand over to the larger units they buy where it is cheapest, you lose local jobs, you are at their mercy for prices and then they are at the mercy of other players, such as the energy firms or the water. We are then ensnared into another system. Chains make it impossible to control the quality of food, the way in which cruelty to animals is perpetrated, the ill health of the poor due to poor quality of water and lack of local clinics.

The fires that raged across Europe in the summer of 2022 showed how the various European nations find the need to work together to help one another. They talked for the first time to have a joint fleet of planes that fight the fires. It showed the advantage of tapping into human cooperation and the need to **use the collective goodwill** as opposed to competition. We have allowed banks to become only a system to enrich the richer and impoverish the poorer members of the community. Older systems, such as mutual aid or groups where people help one another, or lend to one another have been left by the wayside and are totally forgotten. We also need new systems of achievement.

So, here are some of the elements for change. Here the academic community needs to lead the links and build the bridges. I cannot go into more details, exactly because I do not believe there are blanket solutions. None of them are not items you have not thought of. If you do not want Uber, organise the local taxis to be organised and honest. Restaurants and shops need their own delivery systems. Link with minorities or marginalised people. Mothers who are unqualified should be helped to become teaching or nursing assistants. Cooperation is essential for human survival.

It seems to me that in the world that is becoming increasingly partisan, where you have to support one political party or the other even if you do not agree with the vast majority of what it says, where you have to support violently one religion against the other, we are opposing abortion. Or on the rights or wrong of it but on the amount of noise one side or the other make about it, we are doomed. The different IT systems make you click like so that they can win the war of numbers, we are unable to compromise to acceptable middle of the road positions.

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