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World Society

Things that may interest you

- Between 1980 and 2016 the world's richest 1% reaped 27% of the world's income while the bottom 50% of humanity collected 12%. Aside from the socio-economic inequalities involved, it is doubtful that human contentment was proportioned similarly.
- If global warming takes place as currently understood, 275m people in urban areas might need to move because of flood risk. That's equivalent to half of Europe moving.
- When the world's population starts sinking there will be more old than young people. Sounds obvious, but think about it: there's a certain poignant sadness to it.
- Corporate tax dodging costs poorer countries \$100bn every year, enough to educate 124m unschooled children and prevent the deaths of 6m children with improved healthcare.
- The two least corrupt countries, Denmark and New Zealand, are only 90% clean. Such countries have the most press freedom and judicial independence. The more corruption, the more inequality. Corruption is a value-lost tax at 5% of global GDP, or \$2.6tn per year.

As world population has grown, society has become strangely lonelier, more individualised. This Western-originated cultural pattern, related to capitalism, has now gone global. Customary social bonds have been stretched apart by events, circumstances, migration, shifting patterns and changing values. In many parts this is already the case and in other areas it is still developing, bringing

new freedoms, burdens, possibilities, problems and relationship structures.

The sheer quantity of relationships has proliferated. Relationships range between far too many and far too few, for different people, at different times and in different contexts. Relationships are more numerous, single-purpose, transitory, conditional and unreliable than those that



Hebron, Palestine

formerly were bonded by blood, community or shared history. The more that crowds have proliferated, the more we've had to stand on our own two feet. Social isolation is increasing: in OECD countries, 6% of the population, men more than women, report rarely or never spending social time with others.

Population growth brings immense sociological changes, complexification and diversification. Humanity is in the midst of a remarkable meeting-up too, through travel, migration, urbanisation, online networking, trade and tourism. Localities, ethnicities and social subgroups are now far more connected, rubbing up against each other, with opportunities for interaction never met on such a scale before – this started with railways, then telecoms and now, with distance-busting internet, it has reached a new stage. So two big trends, one isolating and one connecting, are at work at the same time, irreversibly changing the character of societies everywhere.

Economic development brings changed relationship priorities and loosened social cohesion. In traditional societies, family and community generally come first, then the individual. In modern parts of the world, the individual comes first, then family, then

community. The glue of human trust and allegiance binding society is eroding, and a new equilibrium is yet to take shape.

When an economy rises, society declines, and when an economy declines, society rises. In good times, people busy themselves with jobs, business, acquisition and enjoyment, with less time for family and community life. Yet in economic downturns a sense of mutuality and shared fate can grow stronger, with family and community growing in importance as social survival mechanisms.

Very often, migrants move to affluent countries to earn income to remit home to their kin: in 2015 remittances amounted to \$582bn. In the richer yet socially poorer affluent world, inward migrants, though much argued over, bring social enrichment and diversity while, in source countries, there can be a loss of many good people, weakening their societies and creaming off their more brainy and enterprising members. This reinforces the fundamentals of global inequality. Precisely this inequality – not just economic, but inequality of safety, rights, freedoms, opportunity and social protections – drives the increasing migration of today. Though developed countries feel they bring beneficence and development to the world, on balance they profit more from the developing, majority world than it gains from them. Globally, migration is thus a balancing factor.

Economic growth has been the world's priority, at times approaching cult proportions. The world is run like a shareholder-driven corporation, not a public-interest foundation. This supports those gaining from it but it is problematic for nature and for the world's majorities. Governments, officially mediators between business and people, between self-interest and national interest, all the same tilt toward business and economic growth. At a time when social values worldwide are shifting from raw economic toward human and environmental priorities, this is problematic.

Growth has brought many out of poverty and improved many people's lot, but at a social and environmental cost. To correct this, aspirations need to shift from *more and more* to *enough* and our lives need to simplify. Economic priorities have a socially destructive side and, unless greater focus is given to strengthening society, humanity risks becoming less governable, more inequitable, restive, dissonant and competitive, ultimately undermining economic growth itself.

Social fragmentation

Attitudes to family loyalty, marriage and customary social duties are shifting, and this distances younger people from their elders. Older and disabled people, increasing in number, oblige younger, economically productive people to support growing numbers of dependents. This exacerbates generation gaps, attitudinal and emotional stresses and disconnects, which are growing at a time when societies need to be pulling together.

Relationship gaps are widening, marriage is declining, families and communities are disintegrating, though a new reintegration has also started up with looser families, bonded less by blood or law and more by circumstance, more variegated in family membership and roles and also less stable. Birth rates are mostly falling but, while demographically this is helpful, it increases emotional vacuums. While it makes for a more flexible labour force and movable population, humans are not pawns. It charges a price since growing numbers of people live alone or feel isolated.

In richer countries the old and disabled rely on pensions, savings, assets, benefits and care services more than on communities and families. But in many poorer countries, modern medicine, while extending lives, can add to family and community burdens, impacting particularly on women obliged to look after dependent parents, and not necessarily with the support of former traditional community support structures. In Africa, orphans are common; in

Asia, children's parents move away from their families to work; and in big cities parents lose their children to screens, the street, gangs and schooling. There's a lot of social distancing going on.

"Before things changed, I went to the neighbours for help. Now I ring a helpline." This, from a former East German, highlights how economic growth and social splintering lead toward professionalisation of care, education, social and mental health services, and this further erodes personal and community relationships. Dependents become disengaged, passive support recipients. Large extended families, for millennia an efficient living format, are diminishing. Yet the need for family and tribe has not gone away.

Social trust is in a process of deconstruction and reformulation. Signs are visible in today's touchy sensitivities over safety, terrorism, online and sexual abuse, shootings, violence, immigration, gender and identity politics. The thresholds of socially acceptable behaviour are shifting, with new standards being hammered out through a sort of aversion therapy in which a multiplicity of social nightmares are emerging to test our limits. We have fallen into a collective reactivity, vulnerability and anxiety: who are *we* and who are *they*? How much should we trust strangers, even neighbours? How much should we protect ourselves? Trust is one of today's big inflammatory issues.

Yet online social networking has created new contact between dispersed diasporas, minorities, special interest groups, singles, silver surfers and young people everywhere. Online tribes and networks broaden horizons while also creating a contrary echo-chamber effect where people seek validation within their own peer-groups. But internet inadequately replaces the loyalties, support and sanctions of traditional communities which, while imperfect, at least offered a container of knowns, shared experience and common values to give people a feeling of belonging.

Amidst this fermentation more appears to be dying than being reborn. But this depends on how we see things. We are gradually becoming planetarised, with tribes, communities and families reformulating themselves – the world is transitional, and this will take a few generations. The process started long ago and has a long way to go. Environmental challenges will also catalyse deep and wide societal changes in coming times, since adaptation will require concerted, cooperative effort. The privatised materialism that has separated people in recent decades could by necessity morph into increased sharing, pooling and cooperation – a way of maintaining reasonable material standards while wasting and using less. A systems redesign is on the agenda.

The big question is how humanity will reformulate itself in its new context of squeezed global cohabitation. Three main mechanisms are visible. The first is a shift from below, driven by generational change, individual initiatives, social movements and the NGO sector – such undercurrents are visible amongst Millennials, women, pressure groups and in movements for change. The second involves authoritarian, top-down social engineering of a kind that is also visible today – with Big Data, surveillance, automation and technocracy setting the rules. The third involves the catalytic effect of crisis, hardship and breakdown on society, forcing issues forward and obliging constructive response. Perhaps some combination of all three is likely.

Social change

Social change operates differently in different contexts. Maslow suggested that needs become motivators for change only when unsatisfied. He outlined five need levels: food, water and shelter; safe and secure homes and neighbourhoods; family and community belonging and support; success, progress and respect; and realisation of our fuller potential and altruistic urges. Salaried, stable, middle-class people can aspire toward rights, tolerance and

fulfilment, while people who do not know where the next meal comes from can at best aspire toward a basic sufficiency and security that middle class people take for granted.

So different societies see their next development stage very differently. One effect of globalisation is that millions of people are becoming more aspirational, less happy to accept their customary lot. Their concerns become a development motivator and then, if a society is clamped in a framework of outdated norms, rules and institutions, pressure mounts for change. Modern revolutions start with apolitical agitation amongst mostly younger people for jobs, opportunity and reasonable social rights, coming up against resistance and quickly developing into pressure on ruling regimes.

In times of change the reservoir of social potential, particularly amongst young people and women, bubbles up. When conditions are right, this undertow can achieve critical mass, causing normally docile people to come out, expressing their feelings in action or protest. Ranging from local movements promoting ideas or innovation to big political uprisings, it gets worse when power structures are unmoving, resisting loss of power or privilege.

Social change demands a big investment of energy and risk by leading individuals or social groups in order to overcome resistance, and it doesn't always work. What makes a change lift off or fail remains a mystery to this day, except perhaps in retrospect. When resistance comes from authorities or elites, it is mainly a matter of whether popular movements can overcome it, but when it comes from ordinary people (such as with today's big pending question of electromagnetic radiation from mobile phones and wi-fi), things are far more complicated, and a thorough cultural shift is needed. Shifts of culture take time, sometimes involving painful social divisions, even civil war.

Change breaks through when a minority's concerns sufficiently engage the wider public's perceived hierarchy of needs, turning a

remote idea into a sufficiently charged issue to move a mountain of apathy, habit or resistance. But full social change only truly becomes embedded when its core ideas are passed down and normalised by the generation following. Alterations can be made to laws, practices and structures, but real change happens when transmitted across generations, through education, or family and community transmission.

Exile on Main Street

Migration from country to city is a key aspect of global change. Today, thirty Indians move from country to city *every minute*. With urbanisation comes high population densities, social complexity, creaking infrastructure, unaffordable or improperly-serviced housing, pollution, noise, slums and crowds. This can take a generation for inward migrants to adjust to, and there's no going back.

Nearly all global population growth takes place in cities. People living in big cities topped half of humankind around 2008 and by 2050 it will be around 70%. Rural populations are expected to *sink* by 600m by then: humanity is crowding together, partly by choice and partly as a result of land rights

struggles, climate change, rural decline and poverty. But urban life doesn't always fulfil people's needs for services, healthcare, education, work and stimulus, available mainly to those with money, contacts or luck. Modernity exaggerates disparities between



Tuareg children, Mali.
Photo: Anim Touareg al-Housseini

urbanites and small-town or rural folk beset with relative poverty, deterioration and social conservatism, creating a two-nation divide. A global schism has grown between those with cars and smartphones and those without.

One of the cruel side-effects of rapid development in the global South is that it is selective – it creams off those with the ability, education and determination to urbanise and modernise from those who get left behind, and it most benefits the privileged. The rapid economic growth of developing countries masks a problem: net growth is not equitably spread, offering high rewards to some and few rewards to many. Those blessed with advantage feel less obligated than before to help those in need and left behind, feeling increasingly disconnected from their wider families or communities.

Such schisms undermine pluralism and civil cohesion. Exaggerated inequality, corruption, crime, injustice and eroded social and workers' rights eat away at social trust. The rich and affluent, earning largely from capital and profit, grow remote from the majority earning their living through work. Working people themselves are increasingly at odds with each other – class systems have changed. There are the rich, then the shrinking *salariat*, with regular work, salaries, pensions, holidays and benefits, and the *precariat*, with insecure work, no perks or benefits, many of them migrants or disadvantaged, or women, young or older people, many of these in jobs below their capacity or educational level, and treated as supplicants. The greatest growth in numbers is amongst the rich and the precariat. Security is melting away.

The precariat divides three ways: *atavists*, or older, former skilled workers whose jobs have gone, with rustbelt backgrounds and often voting for populist politicians; *insecurists*, or migrants, short-contract workers, benefits claimants, rural people and others with few fallbacks and little political clout, whom leftist parties often fail to represent; and *progressives*, young, educated, global freelancers,

startup entrepreneurs, activists and lifestylers, who are politically active outside the normal political party channels. Members of the salariat and the precariat have differing issues but both still share a sense of declining traction and influence in a fast-changing world.

Hyperfermentation

Frustration with inequality, oligarchic impenetrability and systemic inertia squeezes deeper historic tensions closer to the surface. Bottled up, longstanding feelings of powerlessness, injustice or frustration can erupt when evocative trigger events occur in the public domain. Sometimes dramas then acted out are corrective and sometimes they lead to chaos or to clamp-downs, yet they express deep and complex emergent dynamics. In coming decades these dramas' potency will be both a blessing because they can heal wounds and improve things, and a danger because they can be distracting and damaging. Much depends on the response of authorities: one of the main triggers of uprisings is authorities' repressive reactivity. Change could happen more smoothly.

Coming decades will see further social stresses – not the class wars or liberation struggles of the past but more multifaceted and contradictory dynamics. This rising fermentation can be interpreted as a fast-track, rather painful burn-up of historic demons, clearing the way for something new and different. But it can also be destructive, cruel and nihilistic. Humanity has agency: *we hang together* or *we hang separately*. And the world is approaching a moral choice point on this question.

Something else is also going on underneath. Modernity has catalysed a psycho-spiritual shift, emerging in the 1960s and embodied today in Millennials' values – a shift toward whole-systems thinking and a spiritedness not easily contained within established political, religious and cultural beliefs. The idea of *one world, one humanity* has moved surreptitiously closer over the decades. This isn't a straight and simple process – it threatens

regimes and oligarchies and they resist – but over time there is net movement that way. There is validity in both sides of this tug of war, since one of humanity's key virtues is its variegatedness: if we merged into a sameness, much would be lost. But variety does not mean indulgence in distinction, discrimination, rivalry, hate or conflict.

If a majority consensus comes to perceive and believe the same thing, it becomes an accepted given and things change. Recent research has suggested that if only 10% of the population clearly asserts a perception whose time has come, a shift of consensus and a wider social change can often occur. Whatever is true, around mid-century humanity could be tested in its capacity to rise above its differences during a poignant moment of global intensity and choice. We might be obliged collectively to compute that our primary self-interest lies in mutual, shared interest. The embedded cynicism of our age tends to rule out such eventualities, but then, this is an age of black swans.

Hearts and minds

Complicated trends are at work. There is a generational divide, a gender rebalancing, a struggle to redefine social and tribal identities, a complexification and reshuffling of social subgroups, a reviving localism and regionalism, a new tribalism and a new global consumer culture. Pulling in different directions, these are all very human responses to life in a changing world. This shifting might lead either to social fracturing or a new sense of pluralistic social coherence.

Immense creativity and progressive forces are in play, ranging from small, local initiatives, social movements and inventions to enormous technological and systemic changes. Inertia and resistance amongst older people collides with an impetus for change amongst younger people. In the majority world, many younger people justifiably seek justice, peace, wellbeing, good

governance and social cohesion as they struggle to create a new reality for themselves. Humanity is straining at the leash, unsure where to head but neither wishing to stand still, nor to accept ‘more of the same’.

Economics will always be important, but future growth will be reckoned increasingly in ethical, social, cultural and ecological terms. The full psycho-social and environmental costs of everything need our attention because the price of not doing so will escalate. As global crises intensify, engagement, equity and fairness will become critical factors – otherwise disaffection, pessimism and indifference could wax large, bringing serious consequences. Societies will succeed or fail in the way they cater for their deficiencies, vulnerabilities and weaker people. Without a semblance of commonality of purpose and effort, our capacity to face big challenges could be sorely constrained.

Human society pulls in a variety of directions and the endgame is unclear: we are in mid-process and a ‘battle for the hearts and minds of humanity’ is in full swing. By 2050 the situation might have clarified somewhat. The world will be at least as transitional as today, if not more so, but the principles of where we are heading might have come a little clearer. Some parts of the world and some social sectors will advance ahead of others, as is the case today, but a whole-systems approach, not sectoral self-interest, is needed.

Cultural leadership will have shifted from West to East and North to South. We will either see a world more integrated and unified, even if under strain, or a world in jeopardy, strife and danger. The people who determine this will not be Americans and Europeans. The future lies in the hands of those who, formerly, were their colonial subjects. That is, *the majority*.

Interesting links

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