

PERSISTENCE AND POSSIBILITIES: BETWEEN THE ARCHAIC AND A PLANETARY CIVILISATION

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THE PERSISTENCE OF THE ARCHAIC

Humankind marks this year as the 2,015th circumnavigation of Earth around the Sun, a social convention starkly stunted in comparison to the 13.8 billion years since the Big Bang and the 4.6 billion years since our home planet coalesced from galactic dust. The myopia of our anthropocentric perspective clouds our appreciation of where we are located in the long temporal yesterday.

The persistence of the archaic manifests in another socially-determined and politically-maintained convention. Earth currently hosts 7.2 billion people organised into 193 political units called nation-states.¹ These entities are recognised internationally as sovereign entities because they are deemed to possess a permanent population, a defined territory, a government and the capacity to enter into diplomatic relations with the other countries. Co-recognition has roots in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which installed a system of political order premised on the territorial integrity of states within continental Europe. This regime was transposed upon the rest of the world through subsequent eras of imperialism and colonialism. This configuration would also inform the struggles for national self-determination in the late 20th and early

21st centuries,² thereby establishing the contours of the current conjuncture.

Taken together, these two idiosyncrasies - short-termism and nationalism - provide a vantage point for addressing the question of the politicisation of international development cooperation and its impact on civil society. From this panorama, this contribution to the 2015 State of Civil Society Report offers a materialist account of the historical co-evolution of human society, the political economy and the state. In particular, international development cooperation can be seen as the result of the co-evolution of contemporary world systems, and is thus politicised. The concluding section of this contribution assesses the impacts of this politicisation on civil society, and offers alternative pathways to better futures for the peoples of the planet.

SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY CONJUNCTURE

From Earth's elemental beginnings, geo-physical structuring created a complex planetary system with great cycles of water and other chemicals, eventually giving birth to astonishingly diverse and complex life forms. We have catalogued over 1.3 million species of life, a figure which increases with the discovery of nearly 15,000 new species each year, but remains far short of the statistical estimate of perhaps 8.7 million

(Mora et al 2011).³ The Living Planet Index reports that human activity since 1970 has caused a 52% decline in 10,000 representative populations of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish (WWF 2014).

Of course, it has been long known that human beings form a sub-group within a larger kingdom of animals, and that we share the planet with at least five other kingdoms (bacteria, chromista, fungi, plantae and protozoa). Since separating from other great apes approximately seven million years ago, it is estimated that the human species has co-evolved mainly through genetic adaptations, intra-species cooperation, inter-species competition and revolutionary social transitions over a span of two hundred millennia. Still, our relationship with the wider biodiversity remains largely anthropocentric.

Earth comprises eight main biogeographic realms, within which are located at least 14 major biomes and 867 ecoregions, "relatively large units of land containing a distinct assemblage of natural communities and species, with boundaries that approximate the original extent of natural communities prior to major land-use change" (Olson et al 2001: 933-934). In addition, a new kind of geophysical space has been added, called anthropogenic biomes. These are also known as 'anthromes' or 'human biomes', and serve to describe the terrestrial biosphere in its contemporary, human-altered form, using global ecosystem units defined by global patterns of sustained direct human interaction with ecosystems (Ellis and Ramankutty 2008).

While the emergence of the human species correlated with our natural adaptation to biogeographic realms,

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our subsequent evolution was heavily influenced by social adaptation to environments shaped by our own hand through Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Urban and Industrial Epochs. The Neolithic Revolution transformed hunter-gatherer cultures into societies based on settled agriculture. This transition, like other epochal transitions, was rooted in changes in the material base and social institutions of society. In all instances, new regimes emerged from the development of the forces of production, reflecting evolving technology and social organisation.

This cumulative history has led to the current juncture, where the enhanced scale and wherewithal of the human project has generated massive environmental degradation, atmospheric emissions and water pollution. We are now witnessing mass extinctions, ecosystem destruction and climate change.⁴ While the human story has been one of great cultural variation, we now share a common heritage of violence and risk. Moreover, as the resilience of planetary systems erodes, the danger of abrupt and irreversible changes, with unpredictable consequences for the habitability of Earth, becomes real. This situation is compounded by the continued extraction of non-renewable resources and the dominance of unsustainable consumption patterns. Taken together, these factors have led scientists to define our current epoch as the Anthropocene, in which the human species has become the dominant geological force. The precise inception date of this epoch remains unclear, but the debate includes an origins narrative in the Industrial Revolution and the establishment of the current capitalist mode of production.

The requirements of reproducing capitalism now shape and influence the direction of human development. According to Immanuel Wallerstein (2011), the driving underlying objective of capitalists in a capitalist system is the endless accumulation of capital, wherever and however this accumulation may be achieved. The preceding four centuries has witnessed expanding capitalist relations of production across the globe, through the unleashing of various strategies, including the integration between banks and industry, the export of capital, the exacerbation of inter-imperialist conflict, a reduced life cycle for fixed capital, accelerated technological innovation, the permanent military economy, the growth of multinational corporations and the expansion of credit, with resultant global indebtedness.

According to Lebowitz (2015), capitalism is also a system that “... tends to destroy the original sources of wealth (human beings and nature) and that has an inherent tendency to generate crises.” Foster et al (2010) have expanded on the critique of contemporary capitalism to argue that the source of our present ecological crisis lies in the paradox of wealth in capitalist society, which expands individual riches at the expense of public wealth, including the wealth of nature. In the process, a huge ecological rift is driven between human beings and nature, undermining the conditions of sustainable existence: a rift in the metabolic relation between humanity and nature that is irreparable within capitalist society, since it is fundamentally integral to the objects of capitalist accumulation.

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its relentless and ultimately self-destructive drive for profit. Improvements in the material living conditions of humanity have resulted from the extension of the provision of various infrastructures, including water supply, housing, electricity, transport connections and a wide range of essential products and cultural activities. This is, however, not universalised, and has increasingly become dependent on international linkages in global commodity chains of production, distribution and consumption for their provision and maintenance. As noted by Imhoff (2015: 5), “the irony is that we already produce enough calories to support 10 billion people. Not all of that output reaches those who need it most. Nearly one-third is wasted along supply chains. Another one-third is fed to cattle. Five per cent is converted to biofuels.”

In a seminal review of the most mature and advanced capitalist country of the world, Gilens and Page (2014) found that “... economic elites and organised groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence.” This diagnosis is aligned with Mészáros’ (2015: 296) determination that we have entered a new period of epochal transformation in which capital’s “all-engulfing catastrophic centrifugality,” as evidenced in the current planetary-wide destructive tendencies, and this is leading to severe contradictions in the command structure of the state, which can no longer exist entirely within the nation-state structure. The lack of any global alternative is resulting in a more plutocratic, unstable and dangerous state system.

A PLANETARY CIVILISATION BEYOND CAPITALISM?

The cumulative impact of human activities on the planet’s ecosystems and its biodiversity presents an existential threat to continued human survival. The response of nation-states has been far from adequate. They adopt policy frameworks that seek economic stimulation or fiscal austerity, with environmental sustainability a subsidiary but growing concern, without unpacking the contradiction between the inherent capitalist requirement for infinite growth and the imperative to live within the resource and ecological boundaries of a finite planet. It is the structural relationship between people and planet that requires a revolutionary transformation. Such a transformational agenda demands the humble acknowledgement by our species that we share the planet and that our current political borders are historical and cultural arrangements, and thus are time-bound and mutable. These borders, no matter how violently enforced, offers little respite from the impacts of climate change and our further trespass beyond safe planetary boundaries (Rockström et al 2009), or a sound basis for collectively and democratically governing our one world.

To redress 21st century risks, and to nurture its possibilities, our archaic institutions need a root and branch upgrade. The very word ‘international’

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presumes the validity of dividing human society according to political boundaries defined historically. Murray Bookchin (1989) had warned that the “...assumption that what currently exists must necessarily exist is the acid that corrodes all visionary thinking.”

Development cooperation, by fulfilling its function of maintaining the political economy of capitalism, has always been politicised. While efforts are made to nudge the system to better align with equity and sustainability principles, the time is long overdue for civil society organisations (CSOs) to see that a decisive rupture in the political economy will be necessary for a ‘Great Transition’ to a truly planetary level of civilisation (Raskin et al 2002).

Reclaiming our future as global citizens requires civil society mobilisation against the depredations, violence and alienation of contemporary capitalism. This larger vision and politics demands a corresponding enlargement of the perspectives, priorities and programmes of CSOs. They need to move from being part of the juggernaut, or mere gadflies on it, to becoming agents of deep change. As civil society explores solidarity and cooperation, and works to break free of the constraints of traditional funding sources, it can become a powerful laboratory for the larger project of establishing a post-capitalist culture and relations of production for a just, egalitarian and sustainable global society.

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1 Two territories (Palestine and the Vatican) are accorded the status of 'non-Member Observer States' at the United Nations, whilst the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic remains hostage to Morocco's illegal occupation. The full list of recognised nation-states is maintained at: www.un.org/en/members.

2 The Republic of South Africa was

liberated from internal colonialism in 1994 and the Republic of Timor-Leste became independent in 2002. The Republic of South Sudan is the newest member of the United Nations and was established in 2011.

3 Standard error of 1.3 million.

4 'Climate change' means a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that

alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods (Article 1(2), UN Framework Convention on Climate Change).