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Achieving Global Justice, Security and Sustainability: Compassion as a Transformative Method

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Abstract

This paper first examines the geopolitical trends of the post-Cold War era. The main features of this period are an escalating crisis of democratic institutions, extreme economic inequality with a concomitant lack of justice and compassion, and a rising sense of disenchantment with politics. This in turn has increased the appeal of nativist populism, especially among downwardly mobile middle classes. This crisis of political economy coincides with a severe and rapidly escalating global ecological crisis. In response, the author calls for a new paradigm of international cooperation wherein principles of justice and compassion are applied as a practical method to solve the key challenges of our times in an effective and inclusive manner, arguing that business-as-usual is not a viable alternative for survival.

1. The Problem: A New World (Dis-)Order

Built in 1961, the year I was born, the Berlin Wall symbolized the geopolitical order of the post-WW2 era. The opening of Russia under Gorbachev's politics of glasnost ('openness') and the fall of the Wall in 1989 brought this Cold War era to a sudden and peaceful end. In early 1990, not long after witnessing amazing scenes of celebration in Berlin, Nelson Mandela was released from prison, and South Africa's apartheid regime was to end with the first multiracial elections held in 1994. Also in 1992, Deng Xiaoping, on his now legendary 'Inspection visit to the South,' uttered the famous words: "kai fang!" (开放), which literally mean 'open up'. These words marked a watershed in China's economic and social development and made official the country's shift to a capitalist economy.

People who cherish the hope that humanity will one day live in peace and justice took heart from these developments. It seemed a light was appearing at the end of the long tunnel that had been the 20th century, humanity's most violent century to date. Some social theorists went so far as to celebrate the end of history itself. In his essay 'The End of History and the Last Man', Francis Fukuyama proposed, with no small dose of western triumphalism,

*"What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."*¹

These observations were not just triumphalist but also lopsided. Fukuyama, it seems, had no eyes to see the dramatic developments that were unfolding in the US and UK under Reagan and Thatcher, even though the new laissez-faire liberalism that had been taking hold in the Anglosphere in the 1980s was spreading around the globe in the 90s, and has been ever since. This process has produced a ‘New World Order,’ imposing itself on developing countries as part of World Bank, ADB or IMF loan deals, and infiltrating other countries as a precondition for ‘free’ trade agreements, and spreading also by the use of military force, as in the case of Iraq.²

This new world ‘order’ signalled a fundamental departure from the model of old-fashioned, 20th-century liberal democracy. More prophetic than Fukuyama’s musings were thus the words of French theorist Jean Baudrillard, who said:

“The end of history, being itself a catastrophe, can only be fueled by catastrophe. Managing the end thus becomes synonymous with the management of catastrophe. And, quite specifically, of that catastrophe which is the slow extermination of the rest of the world.”³

Baudrillard was here describing the world’s political economy as he found it toward the end of the millennium, under the increasingly hegemonic neoliberal paradigm. Where his words proved prophetic is with respect to the ideological reimagining of the New World Order that was still to come. It turned out that the end of history was very unwelcome in some quarters, notably those quarters president Dwight Eisenhower first dubbed ‘the military industrial complex’. To their minds, a highly visible and heavily media-amplified catastrophe was urgently needed, and it was conveniently delivered, right at the beginning of the new millennium, in the form of the 9/11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre. This carefully ‘managed catastrophe’ diverted attention from, and added pace to, the steady hollowing out of old-fashioned liberal democracies around the globe, through the endemic practice of money politics and sponsored legislative change by the moneyed elite.⁴ Further, it provided the legitimisation for a military spending spree within the context of a new, endless ‘war on terror’—just the kind of conflict George Orwell had predicted in his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Why? Well, as Orwell notes,

“the essential act of war is destruction, not necessarily of human lives, but of the products of human labour... which might otherwise be used to make the masses too comfortable, and hence, too intelligent.”⁵

It was from that time on that the chickens really did come home to roost for those who had at first supported neoliberal regimes with their vote: the world’s most privileged masses, the Western middle class. They had been won over for the idea of small government with the promise of tax cuts and had also bought into the idea that it is a ‘waste’ to use public funds compassionately, in ‘nanny state’ fashion, to support ‘unworthy people’ at home, namely the poor and the sick or unemployed, except in a token fashion. Thus they cheaply divested themselves of their bad conscience at home just as they had long done in relation to unworthy others in poorer countries of the world, with the theatre of humanitarian aid

that Baudrillard caricatures so well. But the lure of middle-class welfare soon gave way to a reality of systematic stripping away of material entitlements, such as education and healthcare, from the middle class itself, far eclipsing what they had gained from tax cuts. The overall effect has been a drastic decline of the middle class in America and similarly in many western countries.⁶

9/11 also provided the excuse for a systematic elimination of political entitlements in the name of homeland security, eroding the 'civil liberties' for which the middle class had fought for centuries in its struggle against the absolutism of the feudal age. Even in a nice 'neoliberal' country like Australia, today's anti-terror legislation is such that a citizen can be arrested without a warrant, interrogated in a secret location, without access to family or lawyers, without proper legal process, and can also be stripped of their citizenship (if they are an immigrant) providing the relevant minister decides they are a terrorist. In the meantime, until their terrorist status is confirmed, like everyone else they are subject to systematic and comprehensive invasion of their privacy,⁷ especially when using electronic media or walking in public spaces under CCTV camera surveillance. In the U.S., meanwhile, similar legislation has legitimised even the extra-judicial killing of citizens deemed to be terrorists (Chomsky 2012, Maximus 2013).⁸ One might say 9/11 was the coup that secured and politically legitimised the new neoliberal patterns of economic domination that were already in place at the start of the 21st century.

The Western middle classes in fact had been becoming poorer in slow motion ever since the late 70s, as Senator Elizabeth Warren has shown for the US case in her path-breaking research (see FN 6). People had just not noticed yet because lifestyles could still be maintained by shifting to a dual-income-family model. The decline became obvious only during the 2007-8 GFC, another catastrophe, and one that the financial elite had created and subsequently managed. The management of this second catastrophe has been such as to facilitate the greatest daylight robbery in human history, or to put it more mildly, the greatest wealth transfer, away from middle class investors and the public purse, to enrich the highest echelons of the elite. This event was made possible by a trend towards financialisation in the world economy, based on financial deregulation,—a system set up to aid the accumulation of capital through seeking rent on capital, rather than through investment in productive real economy assets that could generate genuine wealth.

It is worth noting the simultaneous impoverishment of nation-states, whether gradually, by debt creation under the auspices of private reserve banks, or suddenly, by way of the publicly funded bail-outs of private banks in moments of self-inflicted crisis. This has now advanced to a point where bankers are dictating state policies not just to Third World countries but to European countries like Greece, Ireland and Portugal, enforcing privatisation of remaining state assets and a reduction of wages, pensions and social services so as to enable governments to pay back some of this mountain of debt to the bankers. This so-called politics of austerity has become emblematic of the political economy of the West since 2008, and I believe it is symptomatic of a general decline in the sovereignty of nation-states in today's post-Westphalian environment, wherein transnational capital and corporations rule.

The recent international rise of nativist populism, though it stems from the genuine grievances listed above, constitutes a weaponisation of public resentment that can be used by the ruling economic elite to demolish what remains of democratic institutions.

The rising economic inequality in the world today is so extreme that even the World Economic Forum—a club of the world’s richest and most powerful people—in its meeting in Davos in 2014, took up the theme of inequality (as did the 2015 World Social Science Forum in Durban). It was noted that, ironically, inequality is now hurting the profits of the great corporations and their financiers.⁹ The WEC acknowledges that

extreme economic inequality is out of control and getting worse. From Ghana to Germany, South Africa to Spain, the gap between rich and poor is rapidly increasing. At the World Economic Forum last year, [Oxfam released a statistic that made headlines](#): 85 rich individuals held more wealth than the poorest half of the world’s population—3.5 billion people. Now, a year later, that figure has become more extreme—80 billionaires have the same amount of wealth as the bottom half of the planet. Across rich and poor countries alike, this inequality is fueling conflict, corroding democracies and damaging growth itself.¹⁰

Thomas Piketty’s research traces the causes of this inequality to the *modus vivendi* of contemporary capitalism.¹¹ My own research on political elites in Indonesia further shows, by way of example, how the accumulation of massive private fortunes is predicated upon and reinforces a monetised system of political decision-making and media access.¹² This transforms democratic states into mere theatres of public participation.

Given that elites always have existed, it seems to me that the rise of extreme inequality under neoliberalism at this time can be described as a crisis of civilisation, similar to the dying moments of the Roman Empire according to some historians.¹³ On one hand, it reflects a failure of the new transnational elites to behave in a civilised manner, which is not helped by the fact that they lack any mandate or incentive to pursue the common good. On the other hand, there is a failure by formal political elites to impose limits on these transnational elites, which has a range of causes. One is the general loss of state sovereignty, but another prime cause is a lack of international political cooperation. This is due to the fact that the world’s most powerful states have failed to fulfil the hope of the 90s: they have not ended their puerile power struggle for hegemony over the global sandcastle. This moral failure is culminating in a “Cold War II,” now unfolding in the form of proxy wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Ukraine, and reflected also in tensions rising in the South China Sea. All this despite the fact that this time around there is no credible ideological divide between the contestants. This renewed international conflict, together with the fictional alternative held up by populist propaganda, distracts from the real issue, namely that transnational capital and corporations must be contained by law. This is possible only through global political cooperation and joint action by nation-states.

If what we face is thus in essence a crisis of political leadership, the crisis needs to be addressed as such. One classic approach would be to try and civilise the new transnational

money elite, the other to forcibly remove privileges from this elite and establish a fairer world system across all levels through political reform. In either case, this begs the same vexed question: what principle can serve as a foundation for building not an elitist New World Order but a New Earth for All?

“How can we liberate ourselves from the psychological stranglehold of an entrenched modernist culture, predicated on conspicuous consumption and fierce competition for material resources between atomised and alienated individuals?”

2. The Solution

Our current crisis of leadership is utterly unique in one important way: It is happening at a time when climate change and a host of other environmental challenges demand of humanity that it must unite or perish in an unintended and unmanageable, natural catastrophe that continues to escalate and will become irreversible by the end of this century. Our present era has come to be known as the Anthropocene, the time when humanity became the defining force influencing the planetary ecosystem on which humanity in turn utterly depends. We have gained such a generalised capacity for ‘Mutual Assured Destruction’ (MAD), we no longer require nuclear weapons for this purpose.

Ironically, this crisis is generating tremendous and unprecedented pressure for humanity to awaken. Never was it truer what physicist Leonard Euler once said: “The pull of the future is stronger than the push of the past.” We humans are now called upon to turn this crisis into an opportunity by becoming conscious creators of our collective future.

The effect on the human psyche of being forced to adopt a long-term, geological perspective in the making of current decisions is hard to fathom. It creates new normative pressures, born of a new cognisance of interconnectedness across time and space, across generations and species. This perspective puts dynamite to the fortifications of the narrow liberal individualist worldview that has been a hallmark of modernity. The danger we now face of a global environmental collapse, in essence, is the cumulative effect of the mass pursuit of individual happiness at the expense of other people and nature, which this worldview has promoted. Now we must choose: wake up or descend into political and ecological chaos?

With this ominous incentive firmly in place, how can we liberate ourselves from the psychological stranglehold of an entrenched modernist culture, predicated on conspicuous consumption and fierce competition for material resources between atomised and alienated individuals? In my opinion, the foundation for such a change will be the cultivation in public discourse and subsequent internalisation of a renewed spirit of compassion.

What I mean by compassion is not the kind of aid mentality Baudrillard rightly criticises. I would define compassion as unreserved empathy for the suffering of others, leading to immediate comprehensive action pursued relentlessly until the cause of suffering is

permanently removed, insofar as it is humanly possible to alleviate the suffering of other sentient beings, human or non-human. Compassion is not compatible with a condescending attitude that establishes a hierarchical division between the compassionate subject and the object of its compassion. Rather, it is based on recognizing the fundamental equality and interconnectedness of all living beings, so that the sublimely compassionate person is compassionate in the firm knowledge that ‘I am thou’.

“Let us all set an expectation that would-be leaders need to show a commitment to work hard to dispel fear in the face of crisis, and to seek tirelessly to instil in us all the trust and compassion needed to fulfil our shared destiny.”

Empathy is a prerequisite for compassion that does not need to be cultivated. It is a natural human tendency and the key to the evolutionary success story of the human species (for a detailed discussion, see Reuter 2017).¹⁴ Psychologist Dacher Keltner recently noted that

*the term “survival of the fittest,” often attributed to Charles Darwin, was actually coined by Herbert Spencer and Social Darwinists who wished to justify class and race superiority. [...] Darwin’s work is best described with the phrase “survival of the kindest.” Indeed [...] Darwin argued for “the greater strength of the social or maternal instincts than that of any other instinct or motive.” In another passage, he comments that “communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members, would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring”.*¹⁵

What needs to be cultivated therefore is not more empathy but more public acknowledgement that the human condition is intrinsically a social condition, a condition of mutual interdependence. As the South African CEO of Greenpeace, Kumi Naidoo, puts it

*“We have been completely led astray by big capital and an aggressive marketing industry that has convinced us that happiness comes from big houses and big cars—when in reality our facile acceptance of the gulf between the rich and the poor is a fundamental statement of our absolute spiritual poverty.”*¹⁶

In other words, our natural reflex of empathy is being blocked at a cultural level because public discourse has been telling us incessantly that we do not deserve empathy from others, that we have no right to food, health care and education, that the user must pay, and that ‘the age of entitlement is over’, to quote the ultra-right-wing former Australian prime minister Tony Abbot. Such cultural conditioning seeks to break the link between natural empathy and active compassion.

Compassion is generally built on, but also exceeds, empathy. In Buddhism, for example, compassion (*karuna*) is said to be based on a combination of empathy (*maitri*) and ‘skilful

means.’ Active compassion entails the pursuit of an intelligent, wisdom (*prajna*)-based course of action aiming to permanently address the suffering we witness in other sentient beings and in ourselves.

While adherence to prescriptive moral codes, derived from religion or secular philosophy, inspires some individuals to extraordinary acts of compassion, and while the revitalisation of traditional moral discourses may help to challenge the litany of egotism and greed fed to the public by today’s hegemonic neoliberal culture industry, this may not be enough. That is because the skilful means to solve today’s large-scale challenges at national and global levels are yet to be developed. Resting on the natural foundation of empathy, these skilful means will need to take the form of a new political organisation—based on a radical entente across all lines of control, the setting of compassionate common goals, effective T2S (transformation to sustainability) pathways, and cooperative implementation strategies. This is the essential architecture that will be needed for manifesting systemic compassion and a new capability for ‘mutual assured survival’ (MAS), now and into the future.

There needs to be an act of mutual universal reassurance, a 21st century New Deal, that is, a renewal of our trust in each other, so we can achieve human security through active compassion on a systemic level. To restore hope and find inspiration we could do worse than remind ourselves of the achievements and (missed) opportunities of the 1990s.

Freeing ourselves from the negative dialectic of the past is difficult but possible. The wonderful work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, as described by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, can provide some inspiration on this issue.¹⁷ South Africa has shown the world that violent injustice can be defeated through reconciliation, though the road is long and many challenges remain. What we need is a global systemic reform toward a compassionate and just political economy that serves the sustainable pursuit of the common welfare of the 99.9%, and not the distorted interests of a powerful egotistic minority and their coterie of hangers-on.

Today people everywhere fear their needs will not be met in a forthcoming crisis unless they now grab all they can, including what rightfully belongs to others if need be. We must give each other reassurances so as to halt this descent into fear and chaos. We need a pact on climate change mitigation beyond the 2015 Paris agreement. We need a pact on sustainable development that guarantees the implementation of the UN’s SDGs, and perhaps most urgently we need a pact on global food security.

Those who feel strong and independent today must know that compassion is not linear, but a circle; it is not a gift but an exchange. What goes around comes around. For example, given the unpredictable local effect of climate change and the impossibility of picking winners or losers in advance, we must act now to assure each other that no one shall be left behind, no matter how rough the ride may become. To achieve this, let us all set an expectation that would-be leaders need to show a commitment to work hard to dispel fear in the face of crisis, and to seek tirelessly to instil in us all the trust and compassion needed to fulfil our shared destiny.

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