

PATHS TO A POSITIVE FUTURE AND PROJECTS OF HOPE – BUILDING A WORLD THAT WORKS

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I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist, for both viewpoints obscure our personal responsibility. I am a "possibilist" – for I know we have the human and material resources to create a positive future for all.

But it will require nothing less than a "wrenching transformation of society" to change course in time. The expression is Al Gore's. Anything less, he writes, is just rhetoric and an appeasement. It is possible that we might fail. To quote the German philosopher Ernst Bloch, the great moment may encounter too small a human race. Such a failure would be felt for many generations. Our descendants would remember our generation as vile, criminal monsters who destroyed the carrying capacity of the Earth for a little short-term comfort and greed.

This is hardly fair, as most people today are victims rather than beneficiaries of the ruling global order. But it is important to realise how high the stakes are, and not delude ourselves by thinking that transition to a global system, which stops damaging and starts to heal the bio-environment, can happen without struggle and conflict. Of course we must try to minimise such conflicts, but let us not pretend that they are based purely on misunderstandings.

Most people feel threatened by economic globalisation not because they are parochial and isolationist, but because they instinctively reject the values now being globally enforced. In our hearts we know that these values are false and unjustifiable. They conflict with our inner truth. While they may produce paper riches for a while, they destroy not just the "bios capital" but our human, social and institutional capital as well. You cannot have the economic goods any more without the economic "bads." You cannot build a healthy society with individuals motivated only by the values of the market.

To create a world that works, bios values must win. Conflicts and disagreements can be peacefully resolved only within a basic agreed consensus. Economic cost-benefit analysis assumed such an agreement but no sane person will subject the lives of his or her children to the outcome of cost-benefit analysis. There can ultimately be no compromise between those – mostly economists – who believe that bios, that nature, is a subject of our human economy, and those who understand that it is the other way round. Without a healthy bios there can be no human economics, civilisation or society. You cannot build a fair and healthy society in a ruined bio-environment. Neither, of course, can you preserve a healthy bio-environment in an unjust society.

Most modern scientists believe that all life has developed by blind chance, "trial and error" in a dead, mechanistic universe. Not surprisingly, they think they can do better. Genetic engineering is the latest and most dangerous example of such hubris – the ultimate "technological fix."

There is of course another scientific tradition. My grandfather, the founder of Umweltforschung – the study of the sensitive universes of living beings – used to ask: "Where in nature is the waste-bin?" In other words, where are all the semi-failures, quarter-failures etc. which would have resulted if complex life forms had developed by "trial and error." They are certainly not in the fossil records. On the contrary, the increasing ability to study the chemistry of life on the microscopic level is providing growing scientific evidence of its irreducible complexity and intelligent design. For the latest evidence, I refer you to Darwin's Black Box by Professor Michael Behe.

It is symptomatic of our age that this book – which effectively refutes much of the neo-Darwinist dogma on which our "modern" world-view is based – is hardly known or debated. But this is a crucial issue. For if we are integral parts of an intelligent, meaningful living whole, then our tampering with the wisdom of bios, about which we understand so little, is mad, criminal, sacrilegious and profoundly non-scientific.

Why then is genetic engineering pursued even against the will of the vast majority of the consumers who supposedly rule our market societies? Because it is "the" future prescribed by the ruling fundamentalists. Like nuclear power, it symbolises their normal and intellectual bankruptcy. The present world order becomes completely unworkable when its consequences are projected even a few decades into the future. So, while what we are trying to do is difficult, what they are trying to do is impossible!

The ruling ideologists like to assure us that the Club of Rome warnings about limits to economic growth were mistaken. But they are wrong. The latest US government surveys show that several important non-renewable resources will run out in a few decades, even at present rates of extraction. If the poor majority of the world's peoples received their fair share, the limits would of course become much more acute. What the Club did not foresee was the speed at which we would damage and destroy renewable bio-resources. Soil erosion, for example, has spread several times faster than the report predicted.

In a recent book, the US ecologist Bill McKibben quotes US Vice-President Al Gore lamenting that "the minimum which is environmentally and scientifically necessary today is more than the maximum which is politically feasible or even thinkable." But why would this be so? For solutions exist to practically every crisis facing us. Many of the pioneers developing these solutions have been recognised by the Right Livelihood Awards – "Alternative Nobel Prizes" – which I have founded. The Award recognises that bios issues cannot be solved in isolation from human development and justice. As you probably know, our first Award recipient in Hungary was Duna Kor, our second the Foundation for Self-Reliance set up by Andras Biro in support of the Roma.

The key problem today is that market values have been allowed to spread to areas of life where they have no place. Without our agreement or knowledge, cost-benefit analysts discount our future and put arbitrary money values on our lives. In a key study prepared for the IPCC global climate negotiations, the life of a person in a rich industrialised country was valued 15 times higher than a life in a poor country. As most victims of climate change are expected in poor countries and as most of the costs of prevention would fall on the rich countries, the purpose of such calculations is obvious; it can then be argued that it will be cheaper to "adapt" to rather than prevent global warming.

As our award recipient Vandana Shiva has pointed out, "... 'globalisation' is not a distillation of the interests of everyone on the globe, but, on the contrary, the imposition of the interests of a small minority in a few countries on everyone else." The issue is democratic transparency. It is not the market vis-a-vis the state but vis-a-vis the interests which the state serves. A functioning market also needs the state to enforce contractual obligations. The major challenge today is the growing de-politicisation, de-solidarisation, de-activation in many countries which will continue unless we can re-connect our economic and political systems with bios, with the reality of life on earth.

To destroy the health of our children, our soil, water and air in exchange for bits of paper and to believe that we thus become richer is obviously mad. I know several "experts" who believed in the nuclear strategy of the cold war and now say: "How could we ever have believed anything so crazy?" I am sure we will soon feel the same way about the belief system which, according to Al Gore, now makes "unthinkable" what is urgently necessary.

On the global level bios needs a much stronger institutional voice. An economic collapse, even a state bankruptcy, can be overcome in a generation or less – as is known from history. The consequences of a bios-collapse will still be felt after a thousand generations. Therefore, the institutions protecting bios need a right of veto over the decisions of the institutions promoting economic goals like the IF, the WTO and the World Bank.

On the national level we need elected Future Councils, with a lower voting age – 15 perhaps – in order to include those whose interests are being externalised. This council should have the right to block legislation threatening bios – any subsidies must promote and not delay the transition to sustainability.

On the regional and local levels we must allow selective de-linking from the global economy in order to preserve and create safe and sustainable livelihoods. The aim is to protect and enhance local and regional production for local and regional consumption. It is important to recognise that "bios-trade" means less trade on the whole, once the transport externalities have been taken into account.

The issue is not financial viability. The huge Hungarian factory farm of Babolna, which is dependent on chemicals and non-renewable fuels for the mass production, slaughter and transport of chicken all over the world is profitable – but at what cost to bios? The organic Hermansdorf farm near Munich, created by Karl Ludwig Schweisfurth to provide "food from the region for the region," is also profitable – but provides more nutritious food without harming bios.

The massive criticism of the Japanese for not wanting to consume, pollute and waste any more is a prime example of the ruling madness... In China economists claim that the recent flooding of the most fertile areas is good for "growth" which was stagnating because good harvests had led to low grain prices! Nine hundred million people are poorer and bios severely damaged, but economically the country is "richer" ... It should be remembered that global grain production stopped growing in 1990 and has not kept up with population growth since 1985.

We need both an efficiency and a sufficiency revolution. Our society is full of products which threaten our health and future. They need to be intelligently re-designed so that their whole life-cycle becomes bios-friendly. There are already many such examples. At the request of a Japanese company, scientists at the Hamburg Environment Institute in Germany produced a furniture cover so bios-friendly that you can actually eat it...

Market instruments, i.e. eco-taxes, promote such products. Having damaged bios, we now need to subsidise its restoration. But this is not enough. Such "best products" and "best practices" need to become mandatory as soon as they have proven themselves. Unless we also promote and educate for lifestyles of modest sufficiency world-wide – which is all bios can afford – efficiency gains will soon be eaten up by further "growth." On a finite planet, further growth has to be immaterial. Obviously this means restrictions on advertising which is promoting a bios-incompatible economic model world-wide.

International agreements need to be based on the Montreal Ozone Protocol model. They must be enforceable against non-ratifying countries and they must involve compensation to the poor for agreeing to forego the use of cheap technologies which the rich have benefited from, but which have been found to have unacceptable costs for bios. If we are to change course in time, it is important to focus on the large picture. It is a fallacy that small "realistic" steps – which are widely felt to be inadequate – are easier to implement than large steps which can inspire and mobilise.

People are more than ready. A report published on the front page of the International Herald Tribune on November 30, 1997, states that in the USA, 61% favour protecting bios, even if it costs jobs in their communities. The 1997 International Environmental Monitor Survey of 24 countries with 60% of the World's population found that a majority of 56% – with only 17% opposed – wants bios protection to be given priority over promoting economic growth. This is not surprising, as 70% felt their health had already been affected by environmental problems.

There really is no alternative to the changes I have outlined if we want to avoid bios catastrophes and violent distribution conflicts. The world's largest re-insurance company, Munich Re, warned recently that unchecked climate change will cause the collapse of global financial markets. Our economic gurus should remember the warning of Adam Smith that "the rate of profit is always highest in those countries that are going fastest to ruin."

Alan Greenspan recently commented that "much of what we took for granted in our free-market system and assumed to be human nature was not nature at all but culture." So we do have the choice to foster a different culture – one that bios can afford. In such a culture, efficiency is valued for its contribution to equity – for without global fairness bios will not survive – and competition is valued as a subset of co-operation.

One of the most hopeful recent developments is the possibility of a North-South compromise on greenhouse gas emissions. This would involve the South accepting emissions trading – under strict controls – while the North – primarily the USA – accepts the equity principle, i.e. emission rights must be globally per-capita based and not based on current income and emissions.

This so-called "contraction and convergence" scenario has now been accepted by the Non-Aligned Movement and is being seriously debated in Washington D.C., largely thanks to the work of a small British NGO, the Global Common Institute and the GLOBE network of parliamentarians.

Our Award recipient, Professor Herman Daly, the doyen of ecological and ethical economics in the USA, has described economic globalisation as a last attempt to escape the natural limits to growth by growing into the space of other countries.

One of its wealthiest beneficiaries, the late financier Sir James Goldsmith remarked that he "felt like someone who was winning in poker on the Titanic." Unlike the passengers on the fated ship we know the dangers and we have the solutions. There will be no excuse if we do not act.

Jakob von Uexkull holds an M.A. degree in politics, philosophy and economics from Christ Church College, Oxford. He is a professional philatelist and recognised authority on the postal history of Arabia. In 1980, he sold his holdings of rare postage stamps to endow the Right Livelihood Awards, which aim at complementing the Nobel Prizes by rewarding people who come up with practical answers to such challenges as the pollution of the air, soil and water, the danger of nuclear war, the abuse of basic human rights, the destitution and misery of the poor, and the overconsumption and spiritual poverty of the wealthy. The Foundation's initial endowment was US\$1 million, but additional funding from private individuals allows it to donate annual Awards, now worth US\$250,000, which are presented in the Swedish Parliament. In recognition of his initiative, the German Green Party has repeatedly nominated Jakob von Uexkull for the European Parliament elections. As a Member of the European Parliament, he served on the Political Affairs, Science, and Technology Committees. Between 1987 and 1989, he was a member of the Delegation for Relations with the Supreme Soviet, and of the Baltic Intergroup. Jakob von Uexkull co-founded The Other Economic Summit (TOES) in 1984, and founded The Estonian Renaissance Award. He is a Trustee of The New Economics Foundation, a member of the Global Commission to Fund the United Nations, and has served on the Board of Greenpeace, Germany. His publications include *Projekte der Hoffnung* and *Il Premio Nobel Alternativo*.