

HUMAN NATURE: WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT OURSELVES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by Mary E. Clark

Abstract. The Western worldview that now dominates the planet embodies beliefs about human nature that are inconsistent with our evolutionarily evolved natures. Its “logic” at best ignores and at worst creates the symptoms of the modern world, which if uncorrected predict severe crises in coming centuries: population growth, environmental destruction, economic collapse, and increasing social violence. In contrast, there are numerous communities today creating alternative solutions based on different understandings of human nature and human needs: cooperation rather than competition; meaningful social identity; and respect for and trust in the autonomous behavior of all persons. There exist optimistic future models.

Keywords: alternative solutions; bonding; future crises; human nature; social identity; Western worldview.

WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE?

Scene: The Elysian Fields. The Landlord, looking a bit tired, is seated on his Heavenly Throne. His business agent, Mr. Gabriel, is standing by, record book in one hand, trumpet in the other.

THE LANDLORD (wearily): There. Now that I have all the galaxies wheeling in their proper courses, is there anything else demanding immediate attention?

MR. GABRIEL: Well, Sir, I've been meaning to tell You about Earth. That's a tiny planet revolving around a third-rate sun out on the fringes of . . .

THE LANDLORD (testily): How can I forget it? It's more trouble than all the rest. I suppose the tenants are still running down the property?

MR. GABRIEL (consulting his record book): Yes, Sir. More gouges bulldozed in the mountain meadows. More holes napalmed in the forested carpets. More species of livestock exterminated on the fruited plains. More . . .

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THE LANDLORD (angrily): By Me, who do they think they are? Vengeance is mine, saith I. And I think it's high time I wreaked a little around here.

MR. GABRIEL (raising his trumpet): Yes, Sir. But I think you ought to know, before I blow the eviction notice, that . . .

THE LANDLORD: No need for such a drastic measure, Gabriel. I shall easily teach them the error of their ways by some single awful visitation of my wrath. I know! (He shudders) I shall pollute the waters from which they drink and bathe.

MR. GABRIEL (shaking his head): Oh, they've already done that themselves, Sir.

THE LANDLORD (surprised): They have? How odd. Well, then, I shall have to befool the very air they breathe. A small foretaste of the fumes of hell should set them straight.

MR. GABRIEL: I'm afraid, Sir, that they're very busy doing just that themselves.

THE LANDLORD (frowning): Then I shall invent new diseases with which to plague them. I seem to recall that worked well in the past.

MR. GABRIEL: Frankly, Sir, there's nothing they've become more adept at than inventing new diseases. Hardly a day goes by that . . .

THE LANDLORD (thoughtfully): It seems most unfair, but I suppose I could visit the sins of the fathers upon the children.

MR. GABRIEL: A well-established practice down there, Sir. They call it "race relations."

THE LANDLORD: Hmmm. Do you think wars and rumors of wars would do any good?

MR. GABRIEL: I don't think they'd notice, Sir.

THE LANDLORD (sternly): They go too far. Blow, Gabriel! I shall rain fire and destruction from the sky upon their cities to teach them that vengeance is mine.

MR. GABRIEL (hesitantly): Yes, Sir. But I think I should point out that they're perfectly capable of doing that themselves. Indeed, if You rain death and destruction on one of their cities, they will immediately rain it on the others, seeking vengeance on each other.

THE LANDLORD: Good Me, Gabriel! Do you realize what you're saying?

MR. GABRIEL (reluctantly): Yes, Sir. That's what I've been meaning to tell You; there's nothing we can do to them that they haven't already done to themselves.

THE LANDLORD (with a sigh of defeat): Well, Gabriel, at least we now know Who they think they are.

(Art Hoppe, ca. 1980¹)

Who *do* we think we are, indeed?! It all depends on one's reference point. Most of us think only in the perspective of the past couple of decades, but historians look back across centuries, even millennia, and biologists over millions of years. It is because of my biologist's perspective that I

suddenly find myself bursting out laughing as I am hurtling at sixty-five or seventy miles per hour through space, encased in two tons of steel. What is the purpose that drives me and my fellow large-headed cousins-of-chimpanzees in the cars around me to rush madly down the freeway of life in order to get—exactly where? Whatever does it mean, this odd behavior that we engage in so intensely?

There is, of course, an underlying self-understanding that is pretty widespread in our society. Our notions about ourselves are largely based on certain assumptions we tacitly make about evolution and natural selection, assumptions that modern biology in its popularized form seems to corroborate. It is assumed that we live in a world of scarcity where survival demands competition—and that adaptation means being smarter, cleverer, or more powerful than others. The evolution of humans is thus depicted in almost every textbook as a linear progression up the tree of life from single-celled ancestors through fishes, amphibians and reptiles to mammals, apes, and finally humans. Evolution is a ladder, and we are—or rather “man,” male man is—on top, inevitably equipped at an early stage with a weapon! (In modern humans, this often becomes a briefcase, the “weapon” of success in the competitive world of modern business; see figure 1).

Human evolution in this view is an inevitable outcome of our being smarter, cleverer, and more powerful than the ancestors we displaced! *We had to evolve*; that was the tendency that natural selection automatically produced. (It is noteworthy that the role of woman in this process of adaptation is entirely overlooked.)

These and a handful of other assumptions promoted by most sociobiologists, certain evolutionists, quite a few historians, and most political theorists, social scientists, and economists create the widely held image of humans as having been selected by Nature to be aggressive, competitive, self-interested, and hierarchical. According to their arguments, we are biologically determined to be like that. Our genes demand it. We need those

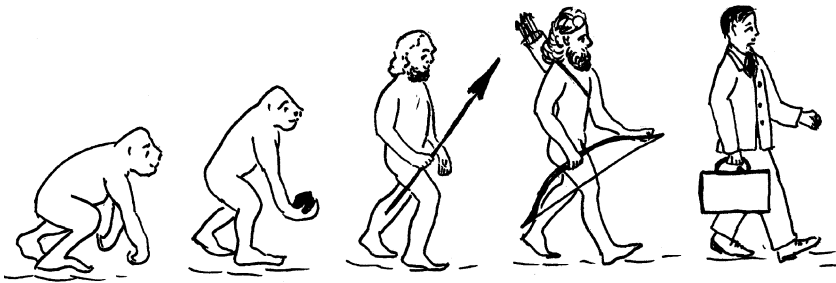


Fig. 1. The evolution of man. A typical conception of the evolution of human beings from apes. Note that only males are depicted, and they all carry weapons as soon as they walk on two legs.

traits in order to survive in a world of scarcity, a world wherein all life is engaged in a giant, never-ending competition. This is the only “efficient” way for us to be.

This, then, is the “human nature” that our society tells us we are stuck with, and if some people experience unpleasant side effects, then it is necessary to bribe or coerce them to curb their feelings. We enter into contracts; we keep accounts of who owes me what; we invent government; we hire enforcers of our rules. In short, we expend a lot of energy keeping track of each other and protecting ourselves.

WHAT KIND OF SOCIETY LOGICALLY EMERGES FROM THIS VIEW OF OURSELVES?

If we accept this view of human nature, then a whole list of conditions appears to be not only natural but indeed necessary to our continued existence as a species. Among the overt conclusions is that “efficiency” in a world of scarcity ensures survival. Being efficient means outcompeting others for access to and utilization of resources. This, in turn, means that power and aggressiveness, along with cleverness, are *the* most important human attributes. “Efficiency” also implies organization and specialization, hence the potential for a hierarchical system of management. It is no accident that “the economy” is at the apex of our social concerns in today’s world!

In addition to these overt deductions there are numerous covert inferences that permeate our social understanding. First, because “successful” behaviors are those we ascribe to males, men are automatically awarded higher status than women. (Hence we see modern professional women who often feel it necessary to wear huge shoulder pads and reduce or camouflage their hips and thighs in order to reconstruct a silhouette that is more malelike!) In a similar vein, Caucasians, being clearly “ahead” in the race for power and efficiency, are superior to other “races.” Likewise, industrial societies are “advanced,” and other “backward” societies must catch up or go extinct. And finally, recent events have “proved”—for the likes of Francis Fukuyama (1992)—that free-enterprise capitalism is the clear winner in the evolution of economic systems. The “winners” in the human evolutionary competition are thus the white, capitalist males from industrialized nations, and anyone else who wants to join the winners’ circle had better behave just like them.

WHAT DOES THIS PICTURE OF OURSELVES IMPLY FOR THE FUTURE?

Surely, no one doubts that our planet is experiencing some major problems. If we accept that we live in the world described here, and that it is

both natural and necessary for humans to act as they do, then the only way to solve our problems is to overcome them by utilizing our qualities of competitiveness, cleverness, and efficiency that have brought us to where we are *to a degree even greater than ever before!* The answer, then, is to increase efficiency, to increase output, and to bring the rest of the world “up to speed” as capitalist, industrial societies. As economist Lester Thurow (1981) once said, “When the rest of the world has our standard of living, they will be producing the extra resources necessary to have it” (p. 118).

What is implied in all this is, essentially, a “technical fix”: more research, more innovation, more engineering of both environment and people. What is ignored in all this is any questioning of what is actually causing our current problems. Is it merely a failure to apply ourselves sufficiently, or is there something wrong with our thinking? Have we in fact misunderstood *who we are?*

WHY I THINK OUR PICTURE OF HUMAN NATURE IS WRONG

The problems we face today—and in the coming two or three decades at least—are so diverse and so global that they threaten widespread social and environmental collapse. In my view, humankind has reached a turning point in its history, a period when events simply cannot continue in the same direction. Either we will rethink our assumptions about who we are and what kind of societies we need, or we will be swept up helplessly in a long sequence of social calamities and environmental catastrophes. It is my view that it is our worldview itself, our misunderstanding about ourselves, that has finally created for us this untenable future. First, I shall note why I think we are in a qualitatively different impasse than ever before, and second, I shall argue that where people *are* thinking differently about human nature, they are, *right now*, creating hopeful solutions.

A SHORT LIST OF SELECTED SYMPTOMS. At the very end of President Jimmy Carter’s administration, the Department of State and the Council on Environmental Quality and eleven other federal agencies released the *Global 2000 Report to the President* (1981). It opened with the following words: “If present trends continue, the world in 2000 will be more crowded, more polluted, less stable ecologically, and more vulnerable to disruption than the world we live in now.” Subsequent governments have ignored that report; so too have the media, the universities (except for the odd course here and there), the business world, and most of the American public. Yet its predictions are for the most part close on target. I shall list only a few key concerns and add one or two that have surfaced since that report came out.

Population Growth Is Right on Target. The world's population in 1975 was 4.1 billion; it reached 5 billion in the mid-1980s and will easily hit 6.4 billion by the year 2000. We are now adding the equivalent of another China each decade! Increases in the yield and distribution of food globally are not keeping up, so more and more people are getting less to eat than before.

Environmental Destruction Is Accelerating, Not Decelerating. Locally, the loss of forests, soil erosion, and overdrafts of groundwater continue. For the most part, increased yields of timber and crops are nonsustainable: they are achieved through application of high-energy fossil fuel subsidies or by exceeding the natural sustainable yield: we are "mining" Nature's resource base. The effects of natural events such as droughts are being compounded by human-induced global warming as well as by overgrazing, deforestation, and diversion of water systems, and also by the political and economic dislocation of peoples, which result in mass migrations.

Meantime, pollution problems are increasing as waters are poisoned or salinated, forests and lakes are decimated by acid rain, and cities from Delhi to Beijing to Mexico City have such foul air that the boulevard trees are dying. The collapse of Eastern Europe and the USSR uncovered an array of severe environmental and health pathologies due to long-standing industrial pollution.

The global problems of climate warming and depletion of stratospheric ozone are at long last being accepted as real hazards. Indeed, ozone depletion over parts of the United States in spring 1992 occurred at the rate of 1 to 2 percent per day! In southern Chile sheep are going blind due to cataracts and children are being kept indoors. Even so, the international community has been slow in effectively curbing the emissions known to be responsible.

All of these problems comprise a giant and growing debt to Nature that we humans will have to pay back. The costs of just caring for the soils and the people who are already being damaged represent a huge economic overhead that societies are just now recognizing.

Global Economic Collapse Is Growing More and More Likely. Curiously, no one seems to notice or talk about the fact that almost nowhere are debts being reduced. In the United States, personal debt, commercial debt, and the negative balance of trade debt all continue to grow. The much-heralded "balanced budget" for fiscal 1998 is a landmark but will probably not reduce the already multitrillion-dollar national debt. Third World countries continue to seek new loans to refinance old debts they cannot meet, and these are not forthcoming unless such countries "belt-tighten"—that is, reduce food subsidies and health and educational services to the poor. Thus is their burden of poverty ensured for yet another generation.

Even in that supposed paragon of industrial efficiency, Japan, as well as in other Asian countries, financial scandals regarding overleveraging of investments have recently caused a global crisis of confidence. More recently, government corruption on a massive scale has brought Indonesia, the world's fifth most populous country, to the brink of economic disaster.

Meanwhile, there is everywhere a net transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich. The per capita earnings, along with per capita food consumption, have stood still or decreased in most Third World countries. In the industrialized countries of the north, a similar transfer has been occurring of wealth from those with the lowest income to those with the highest. Though the numbers of unemployed have dropped slightly, the numbers of underemployed and of "employed homeless"—those with fulltime jobs whose income is so low they cannot afford housing—have increased.

Even those of the middle class in so-called advanced nations find their *real* incomes have virtually stood still since 1950. In fact, as Herman Daly and John Cobb show in *For the Common Good* (1989) (see figure 2), the growth in per capita gross national product (GNP) in the United States

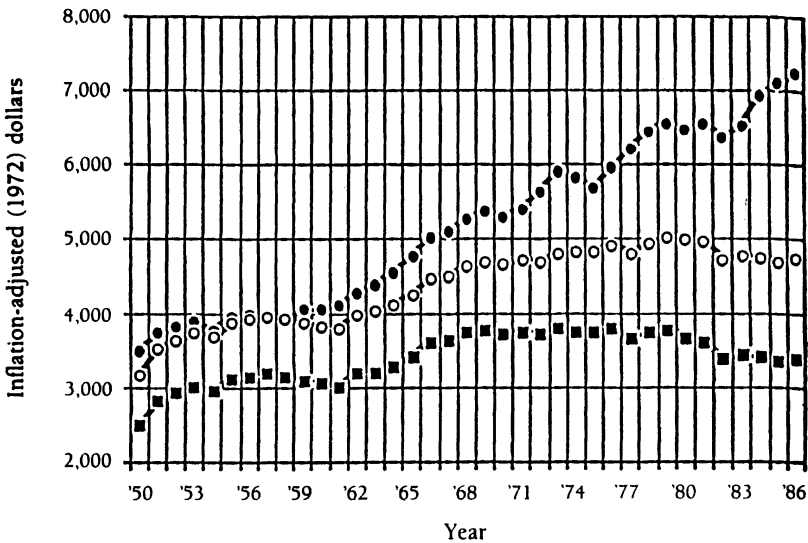


Fig. 2. Alternative measures of economic welfare in the United States, 1950 to 1986. The solid circles are per capita gross national product (GNP) as calculated by the national accounting system. The open circles are per capita GNP corrected for environmental costs that have actually been paid. The solid squares are what the per capita GNP would have been if we had paid our still outstanding debts to Nature as we went along. Daly and Cobb call the latter two curves measures of per capita Index of Sustainable Welfare—that is, the actual *benefits* we gain from our economic activity. (From Daly and Cobb 1989, 420. Used with permission.)

over the past four decades has been a myth. If we subtract things we pay for that are not benefits but *costs* (such as reclaiming eroded soils, gasoline burned in traffic jams, and health costs from pollution), our “growth” in well-being is much less than the GNP suggests. If we were to further subtract all the so-far *unpaid* environmental costs, our well-being would have stayed constant. We are working harder and harder just to stay in place! Finally, if we were to subtract the social costs—the drugs, the crime, the teen-age pregnancies, the high-school dropouts—we would find that the average well-being of Americans has in fact *declined* since shortly after World War II. It now usually takes two breadwinners per family to pay for our social and environmental mistakes. We work harder and harder to pay for the growing *overhead costs* of a dysfunctional system.

Social Unrest and Violence Has Increased Globally. This was not emphasized in the *Global 2000 Report*, yet it is clearly a part of the overall global problematique. Locally, not only in the United States but in other supposedly well-to-do nations, there is an increase in family violence, in murders and rapes, in drug abuse, in suicides, and in “communal” violence—a term for ethnic, religious, racial, nationalistic, and other sorts of intergroup violence that arise when a society comes under tension. There is much head-shaking, with cries for “law and order,” but no serious answer to the simple questions, Why? Why is all this on the rise? What drives it?

In the larger social arena, we see a rise in racial hatred and interethnic violence—Armenia, Indonesia, the former Yugoslavia, India, Sri Lanka, America. Again, one must ask, Why? Why *now*?

Finally, there are increasing struggles over resources that are shifting from mere disputes to outright physical conflict: violence in India over water rights between the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, disputes in the Near East over the water of the Jordan and over the Tigris and Euphrates, and so on. Power is now being sought not merely for itself but for access to real—and indeed scarce—resources.

WHERE ARE THE “SOLUTIONS” OCCURRING? If we look around the planet for places where people appear to be overcoming—at least locally and for the moment—these destructive forces, we discover that such peoples are functioning under a quite different set of assumptions about what constitutes “human nature” and the “good society.” Although there is not space here to go into detail about each of these, they all are characterized by beliefs in natural bonding, in social commitment, in cooperation, and in sharing and a sense of communal meaning. Examples that come to mind are the following:

Mondragon. Located in the Basque region of northern Spain, this once poor and isolated village has undergone, since World War II, an enormous metamorphosis. With the help of a Catholic priest, Father Arizmendi, who had started a trade school for boys while studying Catholic economic doctrine, the village transformed itself into a participatory, grassroots industrial economy, based on principles of democratic worker-ownership and socioeconomic justice. The details amaze the world. In Mondragon and neighboring towns, there are now more than eighty cooperative production enterprises, a bank, a research center, supermarkets, day-care, and other services all cooperatively owned and run by the people themselves. Whether or not their export-driven system will survive against global megacorporations is in question. But given their solid social structure, they ought to be able to adjust their present system to a more locally self-sufficient one if need be.²

Grameen Bank. Begun several decades ago in Bangladesh, this bank has branches that are locally run. It is entirely independent of the global financial Leviathans who slosh trillions of dollars daily around the planet on their electronic-satellite networks. The Grameen Bank functions not to “make money” for investors, depositors and stockholders but to help the community of poor people. Small loans are made to peasants, often to women struggling to raise their children, who have never before interacted with the world outside their own homes. The bank is a People’s Bank run by locals and utilizes local back-up persons to assist borrowers in the success of their small enterprises: a milk cow, a water pump, a rickshaw, a plow, or other piece of capital equipment. The success rate/pay-back rate is extremely high, greater than 95 percent, with failure generally temporary. The interest on the loans provides new cash for further loans. This nonusurious system works because it does not adhere to Western economic theory. It loans to the needy, not the affluent; it trusts rather than penalizes borrowers; and it promotes self-sufficiency rather than permanent dependency.³

The Chipko Movement. In northern India there is a rather different situation. There, local inhabitants whose living depends upon healthy forests have joined together in the Chipko movement to stop the destructive logging of those forests for one-time profits. The legal details of nonresidents’ “rights” and “ownership” of the forests have been superseded by grassroots actions of forest dwellers themselves, who receive little or no benefit from the logging but undergo permanent loss. Not only do they lose the usufruct of the forest, but they also suffer the consequent floods, landslides, and loss of water storage capacity of the soil. Comprising mainly women who “hug the trees,” using their own bodies to shield them from the sawyers, Chipko has been a highly effective, moral, nonviolent means

for otherwise powerless villagers to protect the forests that sustain them. Since 1978, this grassroots movement has spread rapidly throughout the mountainous regions of north and central India.⁴

The Swadhyaya Movement. Yet another example of community regeneration is occurring among the poorest tribal peoples of India. Begun by a Hindu philosopher affectionately known as Dada (Elder Brother), Swadhyaya is a “self-discovery” movement based on the Hindu notion that *bhakti* (devotion to God) brings about all the inner change that is necessary to empower one to live a contented and fulfilling life. But since this fulfillment comes through action as well as prayer, it generates concern for helping others. It also generates “impersonal wealth”—the giving of the product of part of one’s labor to God for distribution to the needy, or for sale, with the profits going to the community at large. The catalyst of Dada’s movement has been a small group of wealthy disciples from Bombay, who began visiting the poorest villages simply to “share themselves” with others. Gradually they became trusted, and their unspoken message of empowerment was absorbed. Ultimately, people who had lacked self-esteem and lived degraded, alcoholic, often violent lives began to change: first their belief in themselves, then their social relations, and finally their economic situation. The Swadhyaya *parivar*, or family, has grown in forty years from nineteen disciples to several million Indian followers (and other millions elsewhere), living in hundreds of villages marked by cleanliness, a modest economic security, and inner harmony.⁵

Each of these is an example of community commitment, of cooperation, of sharing of effort without expectation of personal advancement. Indeed, according to Western social theorists, *these people cannot exist!* Self-interest, we are told, is the only legitimate motivating force, and so such people must have some “secret” motive for their apparently unselfish, cooperative behavior. There must be a secret, calculating expectation of reciprocity. So deeply ingrained is the belief that self-interest is the fundamental driving force of all behavior that primatologists regularly analyze the behaviors of baboons, monkeys, and chimpanzees as though these animals were strategically weighing up the costs and benefits of every alliance:

Are the [vervet] monkeys really calculating the costs and benefits of a grooming bout or alliances and then computing the difference between them? (Cheney and Seyfarth 1990, 71)

[A] low-ranking female’s *ultimate goal* may be a relationship [with a female of higher rank] in which grooming is traded for support in alliances or tolerance at desirable food resources. (Cheney and Seyfarth 1990, 71; emphasis added)

It is difficult, however, to determine whether monkeys possess a concept of reciprocity *like our own*, because it is difficult for us, as observers, to determine precisely what costs and benefits the monkeys attach to different sorts of interaction. (Cheney and Seyfarth 1990, 97; emphasis added)

The assumption here is that all primates, including humans, are indeed born to be totally self-interested calculators of the costs and benefits of every social transaction! We constantly scheme and plan ahead: Who would make the most powerful “allies”? Who owes us and how much? Whom can we take advantage of? This assumption of overarching self-interest forms the tacit framework for the way we analyze both our political and our economic behavior. It underlies the disciplines of political science and economics. We explain our actions and interpret our behavior *based on this assumption!*

But when, as in the cases of Mondragon, Grameen Bank, Chipko, and Swadhyaya, this assumption clearly does not fit, social scientists squirm and use phrases like “enlightened” self-interest, or in evolutionary terms, “kin selection.” In the latter case, the presumption is that those we help are more likely than not to be our relatives—and hence will share some of our genes; thus, it “makes sense” (at least from our genes’ point of view!) that we should help out our kin. This ensures that some of us will survive and leave our shared “friendly” genes behind in the next generation. It is in the self-interest of those particular genes for us to behave cooperatively. What a wonderfully complex distortion—all to prove that our assumption of *necessary selfishness* is correct.

The contorted argument that insists we are, by nature, self-centered and that our behavior is naturally selfishly motivated has given rise in our quantized world to elaborate game theories to explain why we behave as we do. Readers would be amazed at the mathematical and computing abilities we humans are supposed naturally—and unconsciously—to possess. They far exceed the levels of calculus we wish a few more of our college graduates were capable of so we can remain economically competitive. This all begins to seem very silly indeed. Can we find a new, better paradigm for who we are and what motivates us? Is there a better description of what it is, basically, that this human animal needs to survive and flourish?

A NEW VISION OF WHAT WE “NEED”

I am firmly convinced (and have elsewhere argued in detail) that we humans evolved with an absolute need for *social bonding* with *meaning* (Clark 1990, 34–59). I further believe that, by our innate nature, we also require personal *autonomy* within a social context. I shall address each of these three “needs” in turn: bonding, meaning, and autonomy.

Bonding—A Primate Phenomenon. Almost all primates form permanent social groups, where individuals know and recognize each other and know the social relations within the group. This bonding supersedes dominance and competitive behaviors. Those that are most strongly

bonded to the greatest number in the group are said to “dominate”—often chastizing or protecting others and sometimes, but *not* necessarily, obtaining access to more resources. Their main role is as charismatic foci for group bonding. Only in such cohesive groups could big brains have evolved; our wholly dependent, helpless infants require more than one or even two adults to ensure their survival. Successful group living is *the* adaptation of primates!

Both males and females of primate species form such focal subgroups; those of females are usually more stable. Until recently, it was assumed (without much hard evidence) that male primates “naturally” dominate females, but careful studies, done mostly by women, have shown this is not the case, at least for olive baboons, chimpanzees, and most hunting-gathering human societies. There may be gender specialization but not gender dominance.⁶

Indeed, Margaret Power (1991, 239) suggests that *unstressed* populations of both chimpanzees and humans are egalitarian across gender and age, and all members of the group experience great individual autonomy; yet all interact closely together in positive ways for their collective benefit. (This form of egalitarian, participatory community of bonded but autonomous individuals seems to exist today in numerous extant tribal communities and is intimated in the Rousseauian and Jeffersonian ideal societies.)

But under stress, this form of loosely structured, benign society quickly becomes rigidly hierarchical and can even exhibit society-destroying competitive behavior. Power suggests that such aggressive, hierarchical, and territorial behavior under stress has a natural adaptive function in stimulating group fission; a subgroup leaves the stressed area to seek resources elsewhere. But when that opportunity is thwarted, when there are no new places to move to, internal aggression becomes socially suicidal.

RULE 1. Within-group competition and exclusionary self-interest are destructive of the whole. Since primates cannot survive outside the group, whatever disrupts group bonding leads to extinction.

Meaning—A Unique Human Need. So far as we know, we are the only species with conscious awareness of “context”—of having a *place* in the universe and of being individually *mortal*. This awareness demands a cosmology, an explanation, a sense of *social purpose*. I need to know: Who am I? and, Who is this group I live in? I need *identity*—a social location—which only the culture of my society can give me. I cannot invent, out of thin air, the purpose of my existence. Could a child, raised from birth in isolation, devoid of all human contact, invent—or imagine—God?

A corollary to our need for meaning is that any emerging historical-cultural vision that emerges which interferes with or prevents development of our *personal identity* within the context of a meaningful social

vision becomes destructive. If a society develops a social vision that denies the right of the individual to have a personally meaningful social function, that society is pathological. It will generate, on the one hand, violence and, on the other, depression, drug dependence, and suicide. These outcomes are growing in most modern industrial societies, which through emphasis on competitive individualism are denying to people the shared social meaning they need for their identity as social persons. The substitutes for this identity—nationalism, a flag, a war replete with yellow ribbons, TV idols, pop stars, sports teams, and superbowl—all fail to truly satisfy!

RULE 2. Societies where a meaningful social identity is denied to the autonomous individual ultimately fail.

Francis Fukuyama (1992) notwithstanding, modern America is heading over the same precipice as the late USSR.

Autonomy—Another Primate Phenomenon. This brings us finally to our need for autonomy. It is *not* identical with “freedom” as now understood by most Americans, especially our youth. For them, freedom is a license not too different from the license acquired at sixteen to drive and at twenty-one to drink. “Freedom” and “right” have become terms of disconnection from others. Autonomy means something else. Autonomy means the opportunity to fulfill one’s social role as creatively as possible: “I have a *commitment* to society—but I am allowed to fill it, with the utmost dedication, as I find myself best able to do.” Autonomy thus includes the notion of *responsibility*. It does not mean the right to opt out! It implies societal trust in individuals.

RULE 3. Societies that promote “individual freedom” as the highest value must succumb to alienation and disintegration. True “freedom” or “autonomy” can be exercised only within a shared cultural map.

Conclusions for the Future. At present, the global trend is toward ever more centralized, impersonal, and hierarchical societies that are increasingly subject to internal collapse from failure to meet our innate human needs for bonding, meaning, and autonomy. The argument that drives this trend is based on the calculating logic of “self-interest,” a peculiarly *Caucasian male* explanation of human nature that emerges out of a reductionist, analytical philosophy. Cognitive thinking, scheming, and strategic planning are all that matter in life. Emotions are either left over from our animal ancestors or are those rather unfortunate attributes of women. And, of course, in thinking about evolution, Western philosophers have completely overlooked the uncalculating, nurturing, bonding, caring role that all mothers must have played throughout primate evolution. What an omission!

What is mutual grooming among primates for? To remove lice? To make an alliance? Or because it simply *feels good*? Why do we humans share food? To earn an obligation from others? To make ourselves important? Or because it *feels good* to do so? Why do we sing songs together? Here I can find only one answer: *Because we enjoy it, it feels good!* I could go on and on, but I leave that to you.

My premise is that those basic behaviors we call “human” and that turn up in one society after another are not done to promote our personal survival but because we are hard-wired to want to do them. They please us; we enjoy them. They promote bonding and meaning and autonomy. And to the extent that we deny these behaviors and pursue other goals (often culturally promoted, although they in fact are second-rate substitutes for real satisfiers) we create our own social destruction.

If we hope to create a survivable world, what kinds of societies will we need? How can we meet the basic needs of our species? Briefly, we need to pay attention to the microworld—the small, personal communities in which each of us lives. These have all but disappeared—the village, the urban neighborhood, the extended family. These need regeneration; they need permanent reconstruction through real sharing and commitment. This means decentralizing: decentralizing our economic activities and our political activities. It means learning to rely again on known others for our livelihoods, which means community self-reliance and an end to total dependency on an impersonal market. It means reconstructing shared meaning within those communities—not necessarily religious meaning, but a meaning for the group that transcends mere everyday subsistence transactions. We humans need much, much more in our lives than the tit-for-tat calculus of the economists and political theorists, the social analysts, and the evolutionists.

Substitutes for these things do not work. We only get addicted to such substitutes—wealth, amusement, TV, status, alcohol, drugs, and so on—seeking more and more of them because they never truly satisfy.

If we are to continue to have societies—and very likely, we will—they will need to be reconstructed from the ground up, built of hundreds and thousands of small, autonomous communities, loosely federated into larger regions, provinces, and states. Then we shall have a far healthier planet—both socially *and* environmentally—since local peoples living on their own resource income from Nature are likely to be excellent husbanders of her bounty.

Already, there are moves toward decentralizing, toward regenerating local communities. I gave four examples. There are thousands more—many unknown outside their own boundaries. One hopes enough are underway to be in place in time to offset the accelerating collapse of our current top-heavy, unsatisfactory social arrangements. Of course, it can't

be done over night—nor should it; the chaos would be too great. But the sooner we begin, the less will be the chaos from the inevitable collapse that is coming. Whenever one set of institutions suddenly disappears, leaving a vacuum of social structure and meaning, violence and destruction and terror ensue. To avoid this, new alternatives need to be already in process, to be built upon into the future.

This, I believe, is the task for the twenty-first century—and it behooves us to start on it in the remaining year of *this* century.

NOTES

1. © *The San Francisco Chronicle*, published with the author's permission.
2. For information on Mondragon, see Lutz and Lux (1988), ch. 12, "Humanistic Enterprise: The Case of Mondragon"; see also Morrison (1991).
3. Grameen Bank is described in Fuglesang and Chandler (no date).
4. For Chipko, see Shiva (1987) and Shiva (1988).
5. For information on Swadhyaya, see Copp and Copp (1991) and Rahnema (1990).
6. See Strum (1987) and Power (1991).

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