

Why Are Things Crumbling Around Us...and Could Easily Get Worse?

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"There are no nations. There are no peoples. There are no Russians. There are no Arabs. There are no Third Worlds. There is no West. There is only one holistic system of systems. One vast and immane, interwoven, interacting, multi-varied, multi-national dominion of dollars." Clip from the movie "Network" (American satirical film, 1976)

"Each candidate behaved well in the hope of being judged worthy of election. However, this system was disastrous when the city had become corrupt. For then it was not the most virtuous but the most powerful who stood for election, and the weak, even if virtuous, were too frightened to run for office." Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), Italian writer, statesman and political thinker, Florentine patriot, author of 'The Prince', 1512

"The survivors of a generation that has been of military age during a bout of war will be shy, for the rest of their lives, of bringing a repetition of this tragic experience either upon themselves or upon their children, and . . . therefore the psychological resistance of any move towards the breaking of a peace . . . is likely to be prohibitively strong until a new generation . . . has had time to grow up and to come into power . On the same showing, a bout of war, once precipitated, is likely to persist until the peace-bred generation that has light-heartedly run into war has been replaced, in its turn, by a war-worn generation." Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975), British historian, (A Study of History, Vol. 9, Oxford University Press, London, 1954)

I- I believe that we live presently in what I would call a semi-civilized world; and I would like to demonstrate it.

We live indeed in a troubled period. When we look around us and see what is happening, we really feel that everything is collapsing.

In a recent article, for example, it was said: "Indifference to the importance of ethics and the common good is the Holy Grail of modern finance."

In fact, I do not think it is only in financial matters that we are regressing morally, but in many other areas.

There is a risk, in my view, that this twenty-first century will be more like the nineteenth and be the opposite of the second half of the twentieth century, during which humanity made considerable progress regarding international law and individual and collective rights—including the right of education for all—the triumph of the democratic way of government over all others and a better distribution of the collective wealth.

Conversely, if we were to continue on the current trend, the twenty-first century would be a world in which militarized empires and financial empires impose their laws, where other types of empire would impose their backward and totalitarian religious doctrines, where a self-centered individualism would erode the social fabric based on empathy and solidarity, and where wealth and power in society would be unduly concentrated. And, if I may cite Lord Acton, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely", this will also mean a more corrupt world.

Indeed, in many fields, we see that the priority given to human beings—the only moral agents, it must be emphasized—is being neglected and has even become secondary to other priorities that fall within a narrow ideology and are far from being moral. The consequence is that the public interest, the common good, is increasingly being sacrificed in favor of ideological interests and economic interests, when it's not to systems that crush rather than free the people.

In short, I believe that at the beginning of this twenty-first century we are in the midst of a moral and intellectual regression, as we gradually move away from the social and economic progress that was made during the twentieth century, and all that for a return to the jungle of the nineteenth century, when immoral and lawless empires controlled the planet and crushed peoples at will.

In some areas, notably regarding religion, there seems to be a wish to return to the darkness that existed before the eighteenth century, the century of the Enlightenment, that paved the way for the immense human progress the world has made since.

II- I see five main causes for this moral regression—if not an actual decline or even decadence—in the march for human progress.

I summarize:

What I see is

- First, a poor model of economic development.
- Second. Our democracies, under the impact of technology, give more power to money and to those who control it.
- Third, the weakening of nation states.
- Fourth. As a result of modern communication technology, homo sapiens is becoming homo digitalis.
- Finally, a fifth cause of the current decline is an old, religion-based moral code.

a - What about the current economic model based on globalization, especially financial globalization, with hardly any restraints? For some thirty years now—and I blame some doctrinaire and apologist operators partly for this drift and also the influence of some economists who were too doctrinaire—we have adopted an economic development model in which people seem to count less and less and money counts more and more. The current economic model based on stateless capital is, in my opinion untenable, because it is a source of repeated crises that are nearly impossible to solve.

- So, a bad business model to revisit.

b - Secondly, our political models, some dating back several centuries, are also outdated and counter-productive; they have changed little and have even worsened in the last thirty

years. Indeed, their major shortcomings are now reinforced by the technology of communications. They give real power in our societies not to individuals, but to the occult forces of money whose privileges seem to have no limit.

– So, we are saddled with a bad political model that is in need of reform.

c – Thirdly, the weakening of nation states combined with the current explosion of world population, if not properly managed (we must prepare to have eight to ten billion world population in a few decades), may precipitate the world toward the lowest common denominator both socially and economically.

As a consequence of the bad economic model to which I refer, rather than privileging free trade in goods and services to raise standards of living (for my part I have always been a supporter of free trade), we have instead abolished for all practical purposes the borders of nation states for the benefit of faceless and stateless multinational corporations.

In some quarters, we have confused the idea of free trade in goods and services according to the comparative advantages of each country with the idea that such comparative advantages do not count and that a country could abandon its industrial and technological advantages with impunity, with no risk to its standard of living. – This is simply false.

Countries that abandon their economic comparative advantages get poorer, even if some corporations and some banks can benefit from the situation. This is the big difference between the common good and special interests. Today, in many countries, it is special interests that dominate the public interest or the common good.

We have even put aside the idea of adopting an industrial strategy to increase productivity, wages and employment, in the mistaken belief that markets-free-for-all markets it must be said, working perfectly and self-regulating-would lead to the greatest common good if left alone. This is a view that does not square well with reality. The scandal regarding the manipulation of the short term interest rate called the LIBOR (the London Interbank Offered Rate) by a few large banks in London is a perfect illustration. When we look around, what we see is that the countries that are currently doing the best economically, such as China or Brazil, are the very ones that have adopted a pro-active industrial strategy in the context of free trade.

When companies can roam the globe in search of the lowest production cost and an almost complete absence of taxation, in practice this means they search for the lowest wages and the lowest tax rates and regulations. In 2011, in the United States for example, the entire corporate world paid 11 percent in federal and state taxes on profits, while the poorest twenty percent of Americans contributed 17 percent tax of their income. In the current system, the tax burden is being shifted more and more from corporations and the owners of capital toward individual taxpayers, often among the poorest.

A recent study indicates how the super-rich of this world avoid paying their fair taxation share. It is estimated that as much as \$32,000 billion of their wealth is stashed away in tax havens. The same thing can be said for large international corporations. As long as these corporations do not repatriate the profits they make abroad, those profits may end up not being taxed at all.

For instance, this brings me to say that the U.S. doesn't have a deficit problem. It has a tax collection problem, and that's because it has a political corruption problem.

There is no doubt that the combination of economic globalization and political corruption has shifted the tax burden in a very regressive way from corporations and owners of capital to individuals in general, and towards the poor in particular.

And, when a badly designed immigration policy is implemented as well, the demographic, social and economic balance in countries with high living standards is upset, and the result is magnified. We then witness a true economic disarmament of the states that translates into structural budget deficits and an exploding and uncontrollable public debt. We observe this currently in Europe and in the United States. Both are regions where economic stagnation seems to be permanently installed and where western civilization is the most threatened and even endangered.

The economic model of excessive globalization is actually a return to the situation that prevailed in the nineteenth century, under the gold standard. This model is generating major economic and social inequalities in many countries. In fact, it is a model that is fundamentally hostile to the middle class, i.e. to the great majority of people, and which concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a fraction of the population (the famous 1%!) It is a source of income stagnation for most individuals.

Studies show, in fact, that intergenerational social mobility and equal opportunities in industrialized countries of America and Europe fall when economic and social inequalities grow, as it is the case presently.

Ultimately, this will translate into a loss of democracy, because there can be no true democracy in a country where the middle class is atrophied or absent and where a regime of systemic inequalities prevails.

Therefore, I come to the conclusion that the all-out economic globalization that is currently being imposed on countries is a failure. This is a bad economic model because it transfers the real power in our societies from elected officials to large corporations and to owners of capital. They in turn use it to corrupt the political system and to create financial crises like the one the world has been experiencing since 2008.

I would like to quote French economist Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850) who summarized a situation like the one we are saddled with in this way: "When plunder becomes a way of life for a group of men living together in society, they create for themselves, in the course of time, a legal system that authorizes it and a moral code that glorifies it."

There is no better example of this wise maxim than the U.S. Supreme Court's decision two years ago (January 19, 2010) decreeing that financial and industrial corporations are not only legal entities that have been granted privileges, but that they are in fact "human beings" with full human rights, some even more important than those endowed to humans. The Court stated that such artificial entities could spend uncontrolled and unlimited amounts of money, actually billions of dollars, and this anonymously, to influence U.S. elections at all levels.

Every ordinary American's voting rights were suddenly sharply devalued. As a consequence, nobody can say that the government of the United States is "the government of the people, by the people and for the people," as President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed in 1863 (in his Gettysburg Address).

Political power in the United States has de facto been transferred to corporations and to owners of capital. Remember, this is the same U.S. Supreme Court that put George W. Bush in power in 2000, even if the Republican candidate received a half million fewer votes than Democratic candidate Al Gore, with the disastrous consequences that we all know.

Here in Canada, we have become prisoners of the old British electoral model that gives power to candidates who receive a plurality of votes, but not necessarily a majority of votes. This means that when people divide their support among a half-dozen political parties, one particular party can take power and govern as if it had a majority, sometimes with less than forty percent of the popular vote.

On May 2, 2011, for example, the Conservative party of Stephen Harper formed a “majority” government while receiving only 39 percent of popular support, and this moreover after having relied on dishonest dirty tricks. Since then, that party has governed as if it had obtained 100 percent of the votes. In reality, the polls currently give the Harper government little more than one third of popular support. Nevertheless, on July 1st of this year, Harper even went so far as to order the playing of the British anthem “God Save the Queen” before playing the Canadian national anthem on official occasions, thus insulting not only the vast majority of Quebecers but probably also a majority of Canadians.

Despite the glaring flaws of such an electoral system, Canadian politicians seem to revel in it, and there is no reform in sight. A voting system with runoff elections, such as in France, would be logical, but our politicians pretend to ignore the problem. Therefore, I say that democracy is in trouble in Canada. In fact, it is in trouble everywhere. In some respect, democracy is fast becoming an anachronism, destined to be replaced by oligarchies and plutocracies.

I would add that the rise of militarized empires, and the decline in respect for international law that we have witnessed for some time, open the door to a return of imperial wars or to wars of hegemony. Such imperial wars seem to be concentrated at the beginning of each century.

Indeed, British historian Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975) identified the existence of one hundred year cycles of imperial war and peace over the last five centuries (“A Study of History”).

The Kosovo war of 1999 took place without the approval of the United Nations and with only the uncertain legal backing of NATO. Since that precedent, an imperial war outside of the current international legal framework is certainly possible.

In fact I would venture to say that if the Republican candidate Mitt Romney were to be elected to the U.S. presidency in November, (certainly a possibility), his repeated promises to go to war against Iran and his obsequious attitude toward Israel could easily lead to a global war, involving not only the United States and Iran, but also Europe, Russia and China. (Remember that when the conditions were ripe, it took but a single shot to trigger the 1st World War in 1914!) – Indeed, with a devout and ruthless Mormon as head of the U.S., the table would be set for a world war involving the three Abrahamic religions, Christian, Islamic and Judaic. I do not predict that. I am only afraid that it could happen.

World Wars of Hegemony

1494-1516: World War (France)
1580-1609: World War (Spain)
1688-1714: World War (France)
1792-1815: World War (France)
1914-1945: World War (Germany)
1999-2015(?): World War (!) (United States)

d – As a fourth cause of the current moral morass, I identify a more technological cause, that is to say the emergence among the younger generations of a homo digitalis, who is certainly connected by technology, but by a technology that isolates and which can eventually dehumanize the individual in confining him to a virtual space where human warmth and human interactions are greatly reduced. This new human is plugged in digitally and awash in information—and also in propaganda—but is also, paradoxically, more isolated, more fragmented, more homogenized, more individualistic, more competitive, less cooperative, more selfish, narcissistic and more fundamentally perhaps, more conservative in many respects.

Some studies and tests done in the U.S. show that American college students are showing about 40 percent less empathy for others than did students of 20 or 30 years ago.¹ In other words, social consciousness in future leaders of tomorrow is down. This bodes ill for the future.

We can certainly ask the question: Is technology—which is developing faster than the moral sense—creating sociopaths², that is human beings who have barely a modicum of compassion for others?

We already know, from experience, that psychopaths³—that is to say, people who have no remorse for their crimes, no empathy or sympathy for others—may occasionally climb to the highest spheres of political power. These are in fact people who show a particular mental structure in MRI tests. They represent about one percent of the population.⁴

If the population of the future is itself becoming antisocial, it is not only moral regression that lies ahead. A regression in the entire social and economic scale of values could occur. Another example where technology advances faster than the moral sense is the use of unmanned Predator drones, controlled from far away (in fact, the control centers are in the United States), to kill so-called “enemy” people in remote lands. To his discredit, the current Democratic president, Barack Obama, (a Nobel Peace prize winner!), has authorized an explosion of such remote controlled bombings, especially in Pakistan, but also in other countries.

– We must therefore get prepared: Future warfare is bound to become increasingly a derivative of video games.

e – I come finally to the fifth cause, in my opinion, of the current decline and decay, and this cause is specifically moral. It is of course connected to the first four causes.

We live, indeed, under the influence of a bad moral code of religious origin, that unfortunately creates systematic divisions between human beings and which justifies, and even encourages, conflicts between human beings by sticking to some intransigent dogmatism.

We must be concerned, if not horrified, by the rise of obscurantism, of anti-scientific sentiment, of the myth of creationism and of religiosity in general in some powerful countries, especially in our own neighbor, the United States. Under these conditions, the rise of imperialist and militarist sentiment in that country should be a great concern to the world.

IV- General Conclusion

How to tackle all these problems?

I have a general conclusion and some more specific conclusions.

My most general conclusion is that the world needs now a moral revolution. I am under no illusions that this kind of fundamental change might occur soon; it could perhaps necessitate that the situation escalate to a point that change becomes inevitable. This could only happen after a major cataclysm.

My specific conclusions are more practical.

Regarding the economy and politics, for example, the remedies are obvious enough: we must stop digging and undertake real fundamental reforms.

First, we must stop managing the entire economy according to the interests of bankers and speculators. The problem is that these big interests corrupt politicians and control the media so that nothing gets done, except that things get worse. Also, secondly, it is essential to restore power to the people and to reduce or eliminate the influence of money in politics. In other words, we must do the exact opposite of what the U.S. Supreme Court says should be done.

The same thing can be said about our archaic voting system. At the very least we should copy the French political model and have run-off elections, to prevent political adventurers from gaining almost absolute power with a minority of popular support.

In regard to the moral character of individuals, studies show that there are only twenty percent of people who are spontaneously empathetic. Therefore, as the Chinese philosopher Hsün Tzu (c.310—c.220 BC) once said “The nature of man is evil; his goodness is only acquired by training,” the teaching of moral rules of life in society seems to be an unavoidable necessity.

Regarding the climate of permanent war in which we live presently, I just wish that the cycle of one hundred years of hegemonic world wars, identified by Toynbee and others, won't apply to our century and that war-crazy psychopaths will not succeed. Otherwise, the disaster that could hit humanity would be unparalleled.

I finally conclude that our civilization is still very primitive. Indeed, humanity has a long way to go, because we're still in the infancy of a genuine civilization.

1. See Sara Konrath's research (University of Michigan: Institute for Social Research), based on 72 different studies of students in American colleges, done between 1979 and 2009.
2. Sociopathy is an antisocial personality disorder is a mental health condition in which a person has a long-term pattern of manipulating, exploiting, or violating the rights of others. This behavior is often criminal. (See Blais and al., “Personality and personality disorders”, in Stern and al., eds. Massachusetts General Hospital Comprehensive Clinical Psychiatry. 1st

ed. Mosby Elsevier, 2008, chap 39.

3. Psychopathy is a mental disorder in which an individual manifests amoral and antisocial behavior, lack of ability to love or establish meaningful personal relationships, extreme egocentricity, failure to learn from experience, etc. (See Skeem and al., "Psychopathic Personality: Bridging the Gap Between Scientific Evidence and Public Policy", in Psychological Science in the Public Interest (December 15, 2011), 12 (3): 95-162.

4. See Robert Hare and Paul Babiak, "Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work", 2007. According to Dr. Hare, it is in politics and in business that one finds the largest concentration of psychopathic personalities. See also "Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us" by Robert D. Hare, 1999.

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