

P.M.

The golden globes of the planetary commons

The situation is already excellent and will get better.

Of course there are minor problems, but they can all be easily solved.

The future is bright. We'll run out of oil just about at the moment, when we ought to reduce CO2 emission any way– within the next ten years. We'll have to give up our cars, just as we're getting tired of suburbia sprawl misery and want to return to that thrilling pedestrian urban life. The global economy will collapse just in time to return to a simpler life style that will be accessible to all the 6 billion inhabitants of the planet. The Internet will be ready for non-monetary exchange at a moment when the money circuits will have imploded. The clash of civilizations will just about be over when we have established a truly global civilization. The evil twins of neoliberalism and neoconservatism will have neutralized each other in a deadly embrace. The nations will decay in about the same rate as we organize in handier territories (the size of Belgium, or Pennsylvania), that can be democratically managed. Everything will fall in place – there's no need for revolutions, pushy militancy, demos, meetings. We can lie back and watch it happen. The only thing we must do is not to hinder this development and to let it happen freely.

Of course everything will be different – but some fresh excitement is overdue. We're adaptable, we love to cope. We never needed all the stuff that surrounds us now – we just bought it out of boredom. We can do without; we are a proud race of do-it-yourselfers, of instant-organizers and no-nonsense managers. Of course we will still be those lazy, sly, unreliable bums we've always been – but there won't be much work to do anymore. The era of doing will be over. All the rats will have won, the race is over. Champagne for everybody!

In the mean time, there are still some tight-assed maniacs who want to run the planet according to some debilitating scheme devised 250 years ago by a puritan Scot (named Adam Smith). The big betrayal of “economic” exchange was forced upon the unbelieving planet by the west with only too visible (plus armed) hands. Between the Rome of the 1st century, China of the 11th, India in the 17th and Europe in the 18th there were practically no differences of income. In 1750 (when Adam set out) the European pro-capita income was barely 30% higher than the ones in India, China or Africa. In 1870 it was eleven times higher, in 1995 fifty times. The world would probably have been able to defend itself against this disruptive intrusion – but the betrayal of basic human decency was so massive that nobody could grasp it. How could the maximization of profit per se be a motive of human activity? The idea goes against reason itself. And in fact, the replacement of the setting of goals by rational humans in open discussion by an “invisible hand” means the willful abdication of reason itself, the absolute and obtuse evil. It seems like a collective human sacrifice to an unknown and unknowable god. (Saint Calculus - the god of accounting?) Nobody could believe that anybody could seriously undertake such an operation. The surprise was complete, as well as the victory, the result disastrous.

Credo quia absurdum. The unbelievable absurdity is what made capitalism's victory possible. (The arrival of the ridiculous white men, the clowns, in Africa and how they triumphed, is aptly described in Achebe's *Things fall apart*.) Capitalism's triumph is not the triumph of western civilization, though. There could have been something like western civilization, if the capitalist diversion hadn't happened. If the transition in the 15th century had been one towards a renewed commons and not towards the reaction of the combined nobilities/clergies/bourgeoisies of Europe.

The ideas were there and also considerable political forces: peasants, artisans, artists, some clerics, and the early proletarianizes of the mining and textile industries. Inventions were made: windmills, canals, sailing ships, printing, the telescope etc. Everything was ready for a big gift from Western Europe to the world. Instead of a big gift, there was the big rape.

But there's always a second chance: now.

I'm a fan of Maggie Thatcher's saying “that there is no such thing as *society*” – she was right; there are only social institutions. Without well-defined institutions society is like a body without bones (which, of course, it has become under the corrosive action of capitalism). I'm also an admirer of her successor, Tony Blair, who declared “that class war is over” – implying, of course, that we finally won it. Was about time. There is also no such thing as *the commons* – there are only its regulations. A commons without rules is the road to that “tragedy of the commons” that all the champions of the “ownership society are warning us against. Without new social institutions that can guarantee such rules of use, a gaudy “declaration of

the commons” would in fact just generate one big feeding frenzy and then it would collapse. The commons is not something natural and self-regulating, not comparable to ecotopes like the jungle, the prairie or the oceans. When you are a species of 6.5 billion wily bastards you have to be very careful about how you regulate access and rights of usage of it. A lot of communication, information, and bargaining and democratic decision-making are needed to keep the commons going. Actually generosity and trust are the poisons that kill democratic accountability (Beria was right). Even after hundreds or thousands of years of systems of domination and privatization there are still a few examples of successful management of the commons (e.g. the Swiss alp corporations; cf. Diamond¹). Now, if the commons means such a lot of trouble, why not stay with capitalism, whose market system regulates itself so effortlessly? Because it *doesn't* regulate itself, it's ruining the planet faster than any other economic regime we know. For example it cannot take in account future consumers who can't “vote with their dollars” now. It externalizes most of its costs or dumps them on “society” (welfare should not be necessary in a pure capitalist system). So there is no way around our using reason, knowledge, democratic communication, even science, to determine, what we want to produce, how much, under which conditions.⁵ Markets have turned out to be the most wasteful, manipulative and socially exclusive (How do you “vote” if you make only \$1 or \$3 a day? Okay: you still have the glorious “choice” of boycotting consumer society.) system of finding out “what people want.” Of course, the alternative, rational democratic planning, has never (or only patchily) been tested. (Socialist planned – better: *command* - economies always were oligarchic, therefore corrupt, and duly collapsed.) Some aspects of it can be seen in the management of public sectors, that can be - like in Switzerland - very efficient, because it is more or less democratic (but you have to go voting every two months on a street extension here and the garbage tariffs there – it's a bloody nuisance). Propositions to privatize public power or water companies have regularly been voted down.

To make things even more complicated, the global commons has become quite comprehensive – it's not just about land. It includes all the fossil fuels, water, minerals, the oceans, “nature,” the accumulated infrastructures, but also such immaterial things as scientific and technological knowledge, professional training, civic education and epistemology. Now, one might argue: why should the achievements of *our* civilization be part of the commons? After all it was *our* intelligence and the work of generations of *our* workers, which created science, built railroads, schools, power plants etc. *We* invented the light bulb, the computer, found penicillin, and discovered DNA etc. *We* didn't prevent the Chinese from building the steam machine. *We* never told the Arabs to sit in their tents and *not* to invent the combustion engine. And why weren't all those African tribes curious to know about evolution, the atom or the calculus? All human beings are equally intelligent, curious, and skilled with their hands...

As Jared Diamond points out,⁶ certain circumstances put the development of science and modern technology into the western part of Asia. It could not begin everywhere and at the same time and the conditions happened to be the best in Western Europe. Of course there had been scientific thinking in many parts of the world, China, the Islamic world, India – and a lot of inventions had been made before, but the scientific revolution really took off in the fifteenth century in Europe. There are geographical reasons like topological diversity (which made Europe difficult to control for centralized empires), its pole-position to “discover” America, challenges by the climate (affording different lifestyles and great adaptability in a small area), biological facts (horses, anti-bodies). But the final push was actually negative and partly accidental: the despair of the ruling classes at the end of the middle ages, when the peasants, craftsmen, artists and some clerics tried to rearticulate the commons (that had been lost at the latest after the Roman invasion). After the plague, the European aristocracy and clergy was about to lose control over the productivity of rural and urban classes as well. The answer was the industrialization of class war: guns, ships, and territorial militarized states. Seizing the potential of technological advances developed by the rebellious peasants and burghers the reactionary alliance was capable of slaughtering the new movement. And from there it went on: witch-hunts, “religious wars,” peasant wars etc.⁷ The ruling alliance could not sustain this new technological class war with the resources of its own territories, even exploiting peasants and workers to the maximum: hence the recourse to colonies. This first wave of out-sourcing work made it possible to pay for the time necessary to create the whole intellectual-scientific complex that would deliver the new weapons to ride the wave of proletarian resistance and productivity: universities, royal and other academies, scientific societies, coffee houses, “bourgeois culture.” To give one paradigmatic example: to have the leisure to write his seething satires Voltaire relied on his income from speculation in the Caribbean sugar business – which, of course, was mainly based on slave labor. You can say: our enlightenment was based on time lent to us by slaves. Up to now the time we have to create shareware and have chats on the Internet is borrowed from those workers in the “emerging market economies” that earn 50 cents an hour. What I want to say is this: our scientific and technological advances have been a joint venture of most of the past or present inhabitants of the planet. The start-up capital was robbed from the communities in the colonized world. The ingredients for the emerging modern civilization came from all over the world. The advances belong to everybody – also to us, of course (it cannot be denied that generations of workers were exploited in the west as well). There is no “western civilization,” but just *the* civilization that happened to emerge in the west (seen from where?). Any attempt to invent a new global apartheid based on “cultural differences,” devising “other civilizations” (that then – of course – would clash) is just a strategy of exclusion, of impoverishment, of trying to withhold the resources that belong to all the participants of this adventure. Computer science is typically Samoan. Democracy

couldn't be more Chinese. And what about those Inuit—theories about nine-dimensional superstrings?

So, unfortunately, science took off in the west as a weapon in class struggle. And it still shows. But advances are still advances and most of them could be put to good use for the common welfare. Some will have to be discarded (like most cars, nuclear power).

As everything else the organigram of the impending global commons will not be an invention of especially clever social engineers, but merely an emerging structure, something that is already here, has been around for ages, and just has to be found and picked up. Following Occam's advice, the social forms would be of a minimal number. What we find are, as far as I can see, just five organizational social modules, which can articulate a functioning commons.

1 – synergetic neighborhoods (villages, city-blocks etc.) of about 500 individuals, providing lodging, food (via a partnership in the country - 90 ha under European conditions), media, social spaces, free guest rooms etc. These synergems (or bolos,⁹ as I called them in an older text) can be as culturally diverse as we wish, but must be open, democratic and respecting ecological limits (1000 W per capita). They're echoes of those premodern village communities that were dismantled by capitalism.

2- democratic communal areas (small towns, city boroughs: politems) of ten to twenty synergems (or tega, in bolo'bolo). This is the area of public services, smaller regional industries (organized as common enterprises of synergems), local politics (an echo of the Greek polis), “good governance.”

3 – agrourban regions (metropolitem) of hundreds of thousands or millions of inhabitants, depending on historical conditions: New York City or Zurich. These regions provide such vital metropolitan services as operas, universities, museums, luxury shops, world-class restaurants, stadiums etc. The region (up to 200 km circumference) contains most of the agricultural partners mentioned under 1.

4 – autonomous territories of roughly 40'000 km², and 10 million inhabitants (in the case of NY, this would coincide with the metropolitem). This is the area of public services for transportation, emergency aid, regional industries (breweries, building materials, energy, water etc.). The AT can combine on subcontinents for train systems, high tech industries, pharmaceutical industry etc. The ATs make those big nations, that cause so much trouble, redundant.

5 – one planetary organization to manage what's left: mainly the distribution of resources, problems between territories, emergency aid, global transportation networks, scientific research etc.

The road to the commons (and there can only be one, for all the different resources are interrelated) seems difficult, even unthinkable, at the moment. Why should those that had been exploited for hundreds of years not sit tight on their resources (e.g. oil) and at least try to get some of the ones that they helped create in exchange? Mutual distrust seems in fact more than justified. We cannot expect that those who still have the worst deal will make the first step. The **Big Offer** must come from those 500m visa-card-holders, which use 80% of the planet's resources and never compensated the others for 400 years of colonial and subsequent exploitation. Even those regions that still have something to sell to global capital would be much better off, if they got their fair share of everything. A “new caliphate” based on oil would at best be a poor sub-commons.

However pouring money into the “poor countries,” as proposed by Jeffrey Sachs⁸ cannot be the road to the commons. Such a sudden monetarization would ruin the remaining subsistence economies and mostly benefit the ruling oligarchies. Without a regeneration of democratic institutions everywhere, this transfer would never reach the people. Real “good governance” – if we want to use this magic word – must certainly be achieved as well in the rich countries as in the poor ones. So what we need is a comprehensive program of political, technical and social measures, best managed from people to people, from virtual synergem to virtual synergem (Community Supported Community). There can be no “help” for the others, if we are not able to help ourselves. The restructuring of suburbia must proceed step in step with the rebuilding of infrastructures in ex-colonial areas and the transfer of the needed resources. It will take some time and must be done carefully. Private or public emergency aid will be necessary in the meantime and must be supported by all means. We might be OK. In the long run, but only if we're not dead in the short one.

If you think through this concept of the global commons into all its ramifications and that it ought to be worldwide to work, you realize that it implies a revolution, or at least a new war of independence, this time not from England but from petroleum (remember the Phoenix SUV-party, that started it?). Now, I'm not the revolutionary type and I think, we might get around big upheavals with little steps, some reforms, maybe even elections. Why shouldn't Hillary Clinton (one of the most underestimated politicians of these times) run on a “It takes a synergem”-platform and become the first synergetic president, implementing a one trillion program to restructure the US?

On the other hand, experience teaches us that waiting for the politics is not such a good idea, better start something yourself in the meantime. What I propose is the **golden ball bar**. A synergem – or its modest forerunner, a cooperative housing project – needs meeting places, such like a bar or a café, where you can have a chat between the laundry room and the food depot (where the farmers unload your

vegetables). Founding a project of 500 people out of nothing is quite hard, but why not start with its bar? – that could be easier. What I mean with a golden ball bar is a small place (30 m² is enough) which you rent as a group and where people of the neighborhood and visitors can have a drink and a chat and where you start organizing synergisms or approximations of them. As a sign you hang a golden ball (size of basketball or bigger, it doesn't have to be solid gold) in front of it or put it on a pole, so that everybody can see it. In some neighborhoods there might already exist such meeting places, even commercial ones, or stores, so then you strike a deal with them, rent out a corner and put up your ball. In many cities little neighborhood bars or cafés already have the function to get the locals together: pubs in England, *il bar* in Italy etc. Probably the nicest and smallest neighborhood bars can be found in the old town of Barcelona. Now a golden ball bar has also this function, but not only. The existing places are under a certain commercial pressure – if you don't buy a drink, you get the owner in difficulties. Furthermore they tend to be places for regulars and locals and not so friendly to outsiders. With the golden ball you advertise that visitors are welcome, that it is an open place, that you'll find people interested in social initiatives (but not exclusively). In a way the golden ball bars are a free franchise comparable to the Starbucks cafés, that – in the absence of a non-commercial alternative – fulfill some of these social functions (hence their success). Your golden ball bar will be one of those 11 million potential worldwide synergism-bars (one on every block, in every town), where you can sit down, talk to the locals and have a drink (doesn't have to be a gin and tonic) and a little something (a snack, like the meze of the Greeks or Lebanese). They could also be the seeds of that universal hospitality (*sila*), without which a new commons won't be possible. And of course, once we're there, all those balls will be of solid gold... (could there be a better investment?)

The main message that is needed at the moment is the one of the **Big Offer** – a declaration of the willingness to go down to a nominal standard of living (GNP-wise) of a country like Morocco, worldwide (i.e. somewhere around \$4000 per capita per year). This doesn't mean that we all should live like the Moroccans currently have to – resources can be used more efficiently, there are scientific advances in the field of ecological technology, social cooperation can guarantee an enjoyable life without the clutter that's surrounding us today. If you go down to 20% of the current global energy-use and share the remaining amount with everybody – that'll be about the level. (A lot of people are already below this level today, and without the technological advances.) The process of conversion and transfer cannot be conceived as one of linear shrinking. It might even be necessary to expand industrial production and increase the use of resources temporarily to produce the new technological basis for a sustainable lifestyle. This is the price we'll have to pay for today's shortsighted economic investment policy: they should have stopped producing SUVs decades ago.

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Notes

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4. Sennett Richard, *Respect in a World of Inequality*, Norton, 2003
5. Kay, John, *The Truth About Markets*, Penguin, 2004; Stiglitz, Joseph, *Globalization and its discontents*, Penguin, 2002; Friedman, Thomas L., *The World Is Flat*, Farrar, Straus & Giroud, 2005
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