

Cul de Sac

Are we in a hopeless dead-end?

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FE Note: Usually, *Fifth Estate* essays are filled with the vision that alternatives exist to our current predicament. This article explores the possibility that humanity has already been extinguished and that there may be no hope of fashioning a different world. If that's the case, do we just cease our resistance? Comments welcome.

When many of the original people who inhabited Australia realised that their culture was being wiped out, they refused the entreaties of anthropologists and took their knowledge with them when they died.

They knew the world was being changed, that human things were being snuffed out in favour of a new, anti-human form of social organisation. To enable the survival of an empty culture, one with form, but no content, would be an absurdity, they reasoned.

Their culture would become an academic product, an ideological or political product, and a product for sale. The heroes who took their knowledge with them may not have articulated this possibility in the way I just have, but they knew it. Their intelligence far outstripped the intelligence of those kind anthropological scientists who blew in on a blood-soaked breeze.

Their intelligence was greater, but in this battle between two forms of social organisation, their power was less. They were strong enough to be still and quiet in the last breaths of their community when they could have been remembered and celebrated in the new culture as the last of the true people. They knew their words and knowledge, if spoken out loud, would be put on show, or worse would be misunderstood. In the face of circumstances that were consuming them, they 'remained tightlipped.

When I speak about the original inhabitants of Australia, I mean all people across the world who lived in pre-civilisation societies. In its most basic definition civilisation means living in cities, and the best definition of civilisation is a society organised by the power residing in cities.

Other definitions of the word civilisation, for example, one where it is defined in opposition to "savage," or "primitive," only strengthens the validity of the above definition. Civilisation has only occurred whenever city power has arisen.

The civilisation we live under today is global with one economic system. This system is capitalism; it is a perfected form of civilisation.

The formal definition of Capital (the root word of capitalism) is wealth available for use in the production of further wealth.

Wealth is all goods and services which have monetary or productive value.

Productive means producing goods and services that have exchange value.

Exchange means to hand over goods in return for the equivalent value in kind or the representation of its value.

The key phrase here is exchange value. What things in this world have exchange value? It is disconcerting when you realise that the only useful part of you is that which can be sold or made part of an economy. Have I really exchanged my time and effort, my life, for the dubious pleasure of continuing to survive?

Ah, but, we are no longer tied to an endless search for food and shelter; we can rest and relax. We have our time after work, our weekends, our retirement, It is in these moments that we can do exactly as we please and pursue our own idle pleasures; listen to music, play computer games, carve wood or go camping. Life is not as hard as it once was.

However, history tells us that most mediaeval European serfs only worked for two-thirds of the year and that pre-civilisation humans generally lived in a state of relative abundance.

When the aboriginal people of Australia met the Europeans, they had no concept of work. They did not understand when Europeans told them that if they did tasks for them they would be paid in food or other items. They could not make the connections underlying the system of economic exchange.

Why are we led to believe that the past was a place of hardship and travail? Maybe it is because there was indeed one period of history that fitted that description, but it is quite recent.

My mother and father lived through the end of this period; they saw the world change from one of genuine struggle to survive, to one where survival was assured. This period lasted from the end of mediaeval times to the years immediately after the Second World War. This is the period that encompasses The Industrial Revolution and world colonisation, and was the time during which the modern economy, capitalism, established itself and refined its operations.

People of my age grew up being told that we were getting everything on a platter, and we heard the stories of hardship from our parents. We grew up thinking that the past was hard and uncomfortable. Maybe this is why we think that progress, in general terms, is a good thing.

All societies are determined by the way people “make a living” In pre-civilisation societies that living was directly connected to the land. In modern society we all make a living by serving some function in the economy, for which we are paid money. Once we have this money we are able to buy what we need to live.

Capitalism, which has replaced all other modes of living, is an economic system that has reached so deeply into the heart of humankind that it is able to recreate itself automatically within the mind, brain and creative impulse of human beings. Our economic system is based on the large-scale brutalism which resulted in the success of the Industrial Revolution, combined with the brutalism which resulted in the successful spread of this single economic system to all parts of the world. In this massive process of revolutionising the way the world works, we have also changed as human beings.

When rural workers were forced from the land to work in the factories of Europe and North America, they were physically and emotionally shocked at the new work routines they encountered. They fought these new regimes by not coming to work. By breaking machines. They would claim spurious Holy Days as justifications for a sleep in and a day off. Such obstruction could not be allowed to continue, so life in the factories became more authoritarian and brutal.

This new regime for living spread beyond the workplace. When pre-civilisation people were used in factory situations in new empires across the globe, they simply died from the trauma of it. In Medieval Europe, ordinary people worked far less than we do now. They would be aghast at how little we know of the land, and how much of our time we spend working for faceless others. They would understand, however, why we are consumed by stress and mental illness. We are not the same people that our distant ancestors were. The survivors amongst us are harder, we glint, like steel. We have lost our sensitivity, our kindness.

In pre-civilisation times, the occupants of the land travelled and exchanged tools and artifacts across the continents and beyond. This was a kind of economy, but it in no way resembles the one under which the world lives today. The point of what was done in a pre-civilisation society was to reproduce the human community in which the people lived.

The capital of this society (and any pre-civilisation society) is the human being. It is the human being that is recreated and reproduced. In modern society we live under an economy which only reproduces humans as a bi-product.

What is recreated and reproduced now is wealth, or capital. Modern society is geared to recreate the wealth of individuals, business and corporations; while most other humans play only a part as small, interchangeable cogs in this process. Their part is equal to the materials or land used. Just like oil or land, most humans are now a commodity to be used in the re-creation of profit and wealth. Even those individuals who seem to benefit from great

wealth are only part of a process in which they have also sold themselves. Like the rest of us, they are commodities too.

Humanity has lost its animal status, and this is not a good thing. All animals adapt to their environment in order to keep that environment healthy. Non-adaptation results in strange phenomena. It can result in massive population explosions, for example among rabbits introduced into Australia, or humans who have been divorced from the land and turned into the slaves of wages.

These population explosions are signs of non-suitability; they will be accompanied by massive, periodic epidemics, famines, and constant battle.

Humans are conscious beings; they are able to treat their own lives as an object, something they can consciously change and affect. They are therefore able to imagine possible futures and strive to achieve them. Their consciousness of the possibilities of their own existence gives them a practical, individual freedom.

This freedom is determined and restricted by material circumstances. In the present day, the activity of humans is bound within the parameters set by the way the economy is organized and the way that humans must secure a means of living. The activity of humans in the present day is, therefore, not free activity.

In pre-civilisation societies humans were also restricted in their ability to pursue free activity. They made their own history, their own lives, but within a certain framework. Their activity was not free either.

The human mind is a creature of the material circumstances it finds itself in.

Since humans are conscious of their activity and life (even if they are often misguided about what is really happening) they are able to stand apart from it. Unlike animals, which are defined largely by their activities, human activity is not what defines them. It is the consciousness of their activity which defines them.

The chances they have to change their way of living, however, are not to be found in their ideas because their ideas are always bound by the parameters determined by material circumstance.

The only successful genuine revolutionary event that has been well documented is the revolution from the Medieval mode of production to the Capitalist mode of production. Capitalism was a burgeoning economic force, which was already superseding Feudalism by the time of the 1688 English Revolution, the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution which were all instances of the economic order overturning the established political regime.

These revolutions did not happen because people had ideas; they happened because of economic forces.

But we have misled ourselves about the power of ideas. We now think that ideas can change the world. But, they don't. The only thing they can do is strengthen the current economic system. Thus, plans for the new world, as drawn up by the traditional left revolutionaries will reflect current economic modes. Their revolution is more likely to be a self-managed counter-revolution than anything else.

Both types of society, modern and pre-civilization, lack that individualist freedom that is so highly valued in modern civilized society. Freedom is a concept coming out of the era of the bourgeois revolutions.

Freedom did not exist in pre-civilisation times. The modern ideals of individual freedom, or love, or friendship, have developed in a society that is based on the alienation of humans from their daily existence and from each other. They are romantic ideals conceived to alleviate the existential despair of living in a society which champions individualism over community.

What pre-civilisation societies retained was a conscious symbiosis with the land that made their existence closer to that of animals. Although the parameters of their thought were constrained by this symbiosis, they had more than us. They existed as part of something, whereas we exist in isolation from any reference points apart from those given by the economic system.

We can no longer feel and know the earth, even as it falls through our fingers. We do no longer look around us and know the trees and the hills as our real home, our real parent. The high points of human culture and sophistication, which are only to be found in pre-civilised societies, have long gone.

Every opposition we throw against the dominant social and economic organization of our lives only feeds into that structure and makes it stronger.

We are caught inside an existential loop from which there is no escape.

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