AN AGENDA FOR JUST AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
AT THE END OF LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

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Abstract

This essay discusses the impact that population has had upon the earth. It shows how the growth of population had been made possible by advances in technology and the food industry that have been directed by unmindful economic and developmental considerations. In order to reverse the destructive tendencies of our age we need to consider ideas of systems of development and human flourishing which are more mindful of our place in nature.

A TIME FOR COMING TO MINDFULNESS

Once while listening to the BBC’s “One Planet”, I heard the host Mike Williams ambush-interview a woman in charge of the UN Copenhagen global warming meeting. He asked how the meeting was going when, clearly, things were not going well. Despite the growing clarity regarding the seriousness of the situation, the world’s leaders could still not agree on a framework for global greenhouse reduction. The official was trying to give things a positive spin by saying that certain important agreements were still being reached. And in her effort to remain positive while knowing how dire the situation was, she said something extremely accurate and insightful. She said that this is one of the most significant periods in the history of our species because it is the first time that we must consciously decide how we should live and how we must proceed in building our civilizations. And I thought to myself, she must be speaking with a prophet’s tongue, because this is the most precise definition of the task of our age. This is the age when we must come to mindfulness. This is the era when humanity must take stock of how we have come to realize our being in the world with others, and it is the age of reckoning when we have to accept the fact that we have become a force of destruction and violence. It is the era of repentance when we can
realize what we have become and resolve to simply change our lives.

Since the emergence of the human person in the world, we have made a great impact on the planet. Early on, we caused the extinction of various mega fauna.\(^1\) From the beginning, human beings seem to unconsciously and inadvertently find ways to realize their being in the world in a way that changes the environment and somehow causes the undoing of other beings in our shared world.\(^2\) We are an invasive species. And this is not just true of our contemporary ways of being which undoubtedly alters the very structures of the ecosystem. It goes back to our first appearance on the scene as tool users and hunter-gatherers. Even at that stage, we already affected the world around us. We set out creating patterns of provision gathering, production, and consumption that ensured that we would be the most successful species to live in the shared biosphere. But our survival tactics affected the planet so pervasively that we altered our biosphere. This influence over our environment has amplified over the years and it has become so irrevocable that scientists are seriously considering declaring the Holocene period over for the coming of the Anthropocene—the geological age when “humans are not just spreading over the planet, but are changing the way it works”.\(^3\) Overpopulation has changed the face of the world and this is the root of the impact we are having on this planet.\(^4\)

AN UNMINDFUL FLOURISHING

There are just so many of us that scientists actually believe that the planet cannot sustain us. Yet there was no conscious decision on our part to become so populous and overtake most of the world’s habitable environments leading to the extinction of thousands of species. The main reason why there are so many of us is because, until recently, maybe even up to the last century, human life was fragile, and we needed to reproduce to ensure that there were enough people to continue the hunting and gathering or farming and even manufacturing.\(^5\) Also, with more children and larger kinship networks, people had enough social capital to support them in times of disaster and uncertainty. Another reason our species reproduce so prolifically is that it leads to more genetic variety leading to a better chance at survival.\(^6\) Instinctively, we built up the bodily and cultural apparatus to encourage reproduction.

As we developed in our capacity to populate, we also grew in our
capacity to survive. Lower mother and infant mortality, greater child survival, and longer lives led to the steady rise of human populations which led further to our encroaching into various habitats, our over consumption of various fauna and flora, and our changing the landscape to make it more habitable to us but inhospitable to other species. Our invasion of other habitats and destruction of other ways of being in the world was almost unconscious on our part. We were just adapting the best strategy to survive.

Today, we have pushed this destructiveness to a dangerous level. More than ever, we have affected the shape of the very earth and the hospitality of every biosphere to its inhabitants. Again this was accomplished unmindfully. What I mean by this is we have made choices that have affected the survival of others without considering whether we are acting fairly or unfairly, justly or destructively toward them. We have been bad neighbors without being aware of it. But this situation is changing. Today, we are realizing that we may have already surpassed the carrying capacity of the earth as early as 1999. And having come to this awareness, there is an opportunity that we can mindfully decide on the best way to move forward as a species. But are we taking the opportunity to rethinking our patterns of procreation with mindfulness? We got to this point without thinking. And we seem to be proceeding without much more thought. The history of the emergence of the modern food factory system is even more illustrative of how we have come to realize our destructive self realization without conscious decision.

In recent history we have had an abundance of food. But before this there was a boom and bust cycle of abundance and famine. The reason for the change is due to the accidental discovery, in the 1950’s, that antibiotics could produce larger livestock. This realization made it easy to increase meat production to industrial levels because additives in feed could lead to shorter maturation periods, larger, meatier livestock, and the elimination of pasturing since quick growing animals fed with vitamins, antibiotics and amino acids could grow in sheds. But the result is a food factory system that is today causing much environmental destruction. It is concerned with profits and not health, promoting consumption and not nutrition, and is intent on expanding its reach to every culture and every geographical region. It is a system that is being proven to be unsustainable but is also proving to be unstoppable. And we got here through a series of unknowing decisions.

Three million years ago, our Australopithecus ancestors were fruit
eating gatherer who occasionally scavenged meat. By 3 million to 4.2 million BC, the climate became drier, which led to the primeval forests being replaced by forest and grasslands. This was the impetus that led to meat as the core of our diet. This was because of the difficulty in filling the caloric requirements with fruit and vegetables. More and more we were driven to scavenge meat. By 3 million to 4.2 million BC, the climate became drier, which led to the primeval forests being replaced by forest and grasslands. This was the impetus that led to meat as the core of our diet. This was because of the difficulty in filling the caloric requirements with fruit and vegetables. More and more we were driven to scavenge meat. When *homo erectus* evolved, meat consumption rose to 65% of their caloric intake because they could hunt with weapons. Meat was a good addition to their diet because it meant more calories for less effort. With meat, they could migrate to Europe. They could also evolve larger brains because they needed less of a gut for plant digestion and the body could focus on building brain matter. Eventually, two thirds of *homo erectus’* diet was meat based.

By 11,000 years ago climate warming drew megafauna to habitats that were farther away from our ancestors and humans had to look to smaller, faster game as a source of food. The difficulties of hunting this game and the change of climate by 10,000 BC led to the “involuntary” development of farming which provided a more stable food supply. By then, corn and rice were staple food, and by 6,000BC livestock were kept for hide and milk. Farming was prevalent in most areas with the exception of Australia by 5,000 BC. Farming meant harder work, greater risks, and likely crop failure, but because of the steady food it provided it allowed for population growth from 5 million in 10,000 BC to 20 million in 5,000BC. From this point on, human beings experienced a cycle of population growth and decline based on food production. When food production increased with better techniques or new technology, the population grew. Eventually the population caught up and food production reached its limit so population declined. For most of human history, food production kept us alive but barely so. The key to human survival was then to look for ways to increase the productivity of all available acreage. Thus, people were driven to discover better farming and food processing techniques which consequently raised output.

When farmers could feed more people with less land, people started to live in more densely populated cities. Surplus was produced which led to food security and trade. Cities concentrated populations for better commerce, production, and specialization. This also meant the birth of a system of trade that would lead to greater inequality because it allowed certain members of society to accumulate surplus while leaving others in want. With the development of the city and the market for produce, farmers focused production on the market. They sold and produced what the
market demanded and sold produce where it was priced highest. Much of
production was concerned with supplying this new system of trade and
profit accumulation. Here, without a decision that looked beyond per-
sonal survival, farmers’ shifted their concerns to boosting output and cut-
ting cost. Grain production doubled and meat consumption skyrocketed.
Eventually more calories were being produced and populations grew, but
inevitably supply couldn’t expand because there was no new acreage
available to plant the grain that was necessary to produce the greater
meat demanded.

By the 1400’s there was a disastrous failure of production which
led to famines and shortages in Europe and Asia, and populations dropped.
There were also periods like the 1700’s when low nutrition led to signifi-
cant mental retardation and stunted growth among the populace. From
1600-1860, production gains were not enough to keep off starvation such
that life expectancy of peasants was 20. What saved Western humanity
was the discovery of free trade with distant lands but more particularly
the fertile acreage of America coupled with the advancements in food
preservation and transportation. This led to the development of the
American food production machinery. The US became the main grain
and meat producer of the world. The government ensured that by invest-
ing in research on techniques for greater productivity and on better infra-
structure and subsidies to increase productivity. The quest for efficiency
led to specialization and the factory method. This made farmers depen-
dent on a cost effective system of uniform, rationalized food production
that involved raising grain fed livestock. Raising this livestock meant
greater dependence on a complex support chain that produced more
pounds per square foot but worked only using carbon producing trans-
portation and manufacturing processes. This way, the US which has 5%
of the world's population produced 1/6 of meat and half of corn for the
world. Today, this machinery has taken over the world's food production
system.

Unfortunately, the machinery does not serve the farmer. Because
of the quest for lower prices which can only be achieved in productions
of scale, small farmers are being driven out of business. Since the only
viable enterprises are the big factory farms, a few large enterprises have
actually taken over all aspects of food production, processing, distribu-
tion, and marketing. Ultimately, the factory specialization and unification
of food production processes led to consolidation of power, such that
large food conglomerates dictate what is produced and for how much,
and inequality, such that small farmers are being deprived of opportuni-
ties to profitably produce. 21 Today, we produce food in a way that is not
healthy for us. Our food production processes are causing great poverty
and hunger for communities that have thrived in traditional forms of life,
that is causing the extinction of thousands of species a year, and is making
the world inhospitable to life. Who decided this way of our realizing our-
selves? No one group of persons. We came to this way of being because
of small decisions for profit, for convenience, for mistaken notions of
human flourishing, and, early on, for survival and development. And now,
we are paying the cost for this unmindfulness. Fortunately, ours is also
the generation that is becoming more mindful of the problems that we are
caus ing and of our destructive way of being. Consequently, we are the
generation that can and must decide to consciously persevere in our de-
structive ways or to reinvent our way of being in the world.

REPENTANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

The question is this, how do we arrive at this state of mindful-
ness? Mindfulness begins with the realization that our concretization of
self has been perverse and that we should find a way to become more
creative in our human becoming. This of course is easier said than done.
For how does one genuinely come to a realization of one’s brokenness
when more often than not we chose this broken way of being as the most
reasonable response to the world that calls us to presence? In the end,
repentance seems almost impossible unless, as the philosopher Max Scheler
says, we see ourselves from the eyes of God himself. After all, we can
only truly understand how broken we are when we see ourselves with the
eyes of the perfect love that called us forth to being. 22 But, how many of
us can arrive at such an enlightenment? If mystics are to be believed, it is
an act of grace that showers us with this awakening. We cannot ourselves
invoke it. So how does that work for a species in need of repentance? Of
course, in faith, we can believe that God can with a single thought bring
us all to such an awareness. However, this reflection is focused on the
question of how human collectives can, of their own capacities and wills,
come to realize the need to repent.

It seems that we are hard-pressed to come to a mindfulness of our
broken realization of self when our very conceptions of development and
human flourishing are determined by an aggressive dominant rationality
that has set the standards for civilization, development, and progress. What do I mean by this?

Let’s think about what characterizes a developed country. In a developed nation people have higher incomes, they consume more manufactured goods, their productivity is high, they live longer because they have advanced healthcare, they are generally more highly educated in Western ways, and they live with most modern conveniences. This is in contrast to what characterizes an underdeveloped country which is best described by Paul Hoffman:

It is a country characterized by poverty, with beggars in the cities, and villagers eking out a bare subsistence in the rural area. It is a country lacking in factories of its own, usually with inadequate supplies of power and light. It usually has insufficient roads and railroads, insufficient government services, poor communications. It has few hospitals, and few institutions of higher learning. Most of its people cannot read or write. In spite of the generally prevailing poverty of the people, it may have isolated islands of wealth, with a few persons living in luxury. Its banking system is poor; small loans have to be obtained through money lenders who are often little better than extortionists. Another striking characteristic of an underdeveloped country is that its exports to other countries usually consist almost entirely of raw materials, ores or fruits of some staple product with possible a small admixture of luxury handicrafts. Often the extraction of cultivation of these raw materials exports in the hands of foreign companies.23

The simple fact is that most people who are somehow part of the mainstream, global economic and cultural system want to belong to the developed nations because their lives will have escaped the conditions outlined above, plus they will live longer and more comfortably with less unnecessary death and suffering, stagnation and boredom. However, these benefits are not always seen as an advancement given what they cost us.

What does such a state of development demands from us? It demands, for one thing, greater individualism and less solidarity with a community— one has to rely on one’s efforts and one’s capacities in order to realize individual goals. In a modern, developed economy, one must
not rely on community and communitarian systems because they hinder efficiency. What should characterize our relationships are contractual engagements with one another. For one's survival, one must engage government agencies and private sector systems that will insure one against life's contingencies with the least disruption of one's own agenda and without forcing one to build communal relationships of reciprocity. Relationships with persons in developed cultures are defined by their utilitarian value. Most things are commodified including our relationship to nature and fellow persons, as well as our own creativity and other spirituality. Thus, things are valued only in relation to productivity, consumption, investment, profit, and growth. Everything has value only when it can be bought and sold, transformed into something that can be sold, consumed, traded, and be a source of profit and gain.

Modern forms of development demand a kind of relationship with reality that is often violent and reductive. Mainstream economy demands that we place the ego and its demands at the center of a consuming totality. To succeed in establishing ourselves in this totality we must see the world as the material to manufacture our needs, and we also see other persons as resources we use to maximize our gains. Nature is reduced to pure machinery and resource base—a standing reserve. Fellow humans are human resources and factors of production. The violence of our economies is rooted in our inability to see anything other than as a standing reserve for our own needs and nourishment. We are trained not to see anything beyond our own agenda and we cannot relate to the other as other but always as something that can and must be reduced to the same. To allow such a system to grow we must engage the world in the mode of encroachment or appropriation. Whether they are open about it or not, we appropriate other people, communities, etc. to become part of an expanding system that needs to keep expanding in order to survive. Just as Europe survived with the appropriation of the fertile lands of the Native Americans and the US survived and developed with its appropriation of former colonies, our world economy survives and develops by reducing the world’s peoples and cultures to consumers and markets.

After all of this is said, what is development? Of course the idea of development can be traced to so many modes of civilization and so many periods of human history, but contemporary conceptions of development are certainly rooted in Western modernity. One does not necessarily have a sense of development if one’s sense of time is cyclical or follows the rhythms of nature, for instance. Nature does not develop: it
flourishes, it become abundant, it changes but it does not develop. It does not move toward an end that becomes greater and better, it creates variety and flourishes with what works. But Western humanity discovered the possibility of decoupling one’s fortunes from the rhythms and movements of nature. Western man was able to define nature as a mechanism that he could tinker with and readjust according to human drives for survival and flourishing. When Western man realized that he could impose his needs upon the earth, that he could reshape his relationship to his environment according to his will, this afforded him the possibility of also recreating his self—from persons seeking the will of God, or realizing his essential self defined by the cosmos—to defining himself according to his understanding of who he is. And this realization set forth the restless movement of self-discovery and recreation, of the exploration of the possibilities being that were bounded only by what we knew and what we could do. Armed with the new science, we pushed ourselves to know more and realize other possibilities. Our will to power was armed with knowledge and technologies that could impose the human will upon the earth and others. This will coupled with mercantile ambitions led to colonization and eventually found its zenith in industrial production and the imposition of the Western market economy.

Overall, the broad business of the expansion of European capitalism to encompass large areas of the globe can be understood in terms of the expansion of one form-of-life at the expense of other long-established local forms-of-life. As the European capitalist system became ever more global in its reach the structures of the economic, social, and political system drew in and reordered a series of extant forms-of-life. In this invasive process, the indigenous patterns of economic, social, political and cultural life were radically remade. The expansion of capitalism absorbed forms-of-life and recast them in system-friendly forms.25

The first movements toward global development involved the creation and expansion of the Western market system, which was always at the expense of other cultures. They determined what kind of life was worth living and shaped the world economy to help them realize that. They determined what culture was most worth cultivating and who was savage and civilized. This created a global underclass of underdeveloped
nations. After the World Wars that weakened the European empires, this underclass of nations suddenly found themselves liberated from the determinations of the rich, developed nations. All of a sudden, there they were, independent and poor and needing to become developed like the former colonizers. Although there was the opportunity here to develop ourselves mindfully, with a greater awareness of the danger of the Western market systems, being victims of its violence, we nonetheless bought into this conception of development and human flourishing. With the birth of newly independent nations, development theory emerged because exploited nations needed to catch up with the colonial master choosing to participate in the game that caused their impoverishment in the first place. Colonization was an opportunity for breaking free and yet resulted in the deeper enslavement of the marginalized. An important opportunity for repentance was lost here.

Development theory became an apologetics for the existing industrial market systems. Up until now, development studies mainly espouses theories about how underdeveloped countries can become like developed countries. It basically analyses how nations can transform themselves from being suppliers of raw materials and cheap labor to becoming manufacturers, producers, and creators of cutting edge products that the markets will consume. The basic question seems to be, “How do these backward nations evolve into creative producers of high-tech products and commodities that the market will be willing to pay for?” In these theories of development, no one questions the assumption that development is desirable in this form. No one is asking if these theories of development are sustainable, or if it can lead to global citizens who are creative and whole. This form of development may actually be inimical to the cultures of the majority of the world's people, and it may not be possible to have this form of development with equity. Thus, we have to question present models of development before we reach a point when destructive collective self-realization becomes irreversible.

But how can we even begin to question the very frame of our daily living? Like our ancestors, we make little decisions on a daily basis which are focused on our present and middle term survival. We are framed by this conception of development and the way of self-realization it demands. On a daily basis, it is the default lens by which we make choices. And so, how do we repent our destructive self-realizations when these are determined by aggressive, imposed rationalities?

Decisions about the directions we are to take as a people and
even as a species cannot be made by individuals who tend only to react uncritically to the daily demands of living. We cannot leave it to people to shift to renewable and clean energy in time before the end of oil and the temperature rise sets in. We cannot rely on the individual efforts of profit-oriented corporations to shift to more sustainable means of livestock-raising. Neither can we rely on well-off private citizens to buy more expensive but more sustainably and justly produced food. Individuals will mostly decide according to their own survival issues according to the already dominant rationality. Thus, we need guiding bodies and structures that can direct individual actions toward building a just and sustainable future. We need institutions of mindfulness to guide our self-realization in this period of repentance. We need systems of governance to guide our collective self-realization toward a fruitful way of becoming.

Of course this statement is not made without an awareness of its danger. After all, our systems of governance—state, corporate, and civil society—have supported the very modes of development that have led us to perdition. More often than not, systems of governance exist to support and further the dominant rationality. As we have developed our destructive processes of development, our governance systems have been defined by the rationalities that were born from and frame them. Other rationalities with other conceptions of development or flourishing, some which are actually more sustainable and creative, have naturally been marginalized by the governance systems that continue to impose and develop the existing development systems. We know our governance systems to facilitate the imposition of dominant rationalities which in our time tend to aggressively impose their conceptions of human life on all other rationalities or rationalities of the other. However, these systems of governance themselves are what we need to repent our destructive self-realization. Ultimately, we need our systems of governance to guide our efforts at building a shared conception of and will for the common good that is creative and sustainable. Building governance systems, be they that of the state, the corporation, civil society, or the family, is the only way we can build together a conception of the good that will awaken us to the need for repentance and rebirth. But this is only possible if our systems of governance are inherently just and discursive. This is almost impossible to imagine, of course, given how order is maintained by governance systems usually through the marginalization of the other. However, governance institutions can choose to institute participatory and dialogical systems that will allow for the enrichment of dominant ratio-
nalities.

Instead of maintaining systems that impose aggressive and imposing conceptions of development and human flourishing, government systems can be set up so that they are the very site of ordered and systemic processes of discourse. This is especially necessary, and of course even more difficult, for the state which has the sole authority and power to determine the enforceable norms and structures of communal living. Given that the state can impose on all its citizens norms of acceptable engagement, it is necessary that these norms are determined not only by a powerful and aggressive dominant class but that these norms represent the shared conception of the good as determined by all its citizens. If the state creates fair systems of discourse between rationalities of its citizens, it will be possible for the other, mostly marginalized, rationalities to engage each other in a way that creates a shared dominant rationality enriched by all rationalities in a polis.

If governance systems can genuinely facilitate discourse between its citizens from their various rationalities, it will allow all its citizens with their potentially legitimate conceptions of the good, to challenge the dominant rationality and its narrow conception of development and human flourishing. Short of direct revelation, this is the only way we can come to genuine repentance. In the fair and just discourse of governance, we open our fixated dominant rationality to other ways of being. Only then can we genuinely reflect upon the genuine fruitfulness and creativity of our self-realization. In a creative engagement with other rationalities, the brokenness or wholeness of our rationalities can be revealed to us. And once revealed we can begin to seek other possibilities and realize better possibilities of our coming to be whole in the world with others.

This process is arduous because the good is always in play and we are in play with it. As governed communities we struggle to fix that play with our norms and laws, our systems and ways of life, but of course, genuine human flourishing, as well as the flourishing of our fellow beings in the world, demands that we keep the play in its creative motion even as we build shared structures and ways of shared becoming in the world. That is the creative tension of social becoming. We are in a constant state of constructing and deconstructing, binding and unbinding, defining, redefining and undefining our engagement with the world. We are, in short, in a state of constant repentance and rebirth. This constant play can only be facilitated by the just discourse between rationalities that shape our shared world. For all rationalities, while striving to form a shared domi-
nant rationality, must always remain in play with their others. This is a process of enrichment where the hardening of the rationality of the other is put in play by the play of discourse. The role of the state is to facilitate, even regulate, this discourse so that it is fair and just. And its other role is to make sure that this fair and just discourse comes to the best collective and formal realizations of our collective conception of and will for the good for now. After all, every shared conception of the good is a for now concretization of the most reasonable and acceptable understanding of the good given the play of the discoursing rationalities and what is known. In this way, the state can genuinely guide our collective self realization especially in this time of crisis when we cannot wait for people to face collective disaster to decide a better way to be. That is always how it has always been for us. We create a shared system of becoming, we end up spoiling the nest, causing the extinction of our main source of food, or face an unforeseen disaster, and then we are forced to decide another way of being. That is probably what will happen now. We will foul the nest, we will run out of essential resources like petroleum, water, and topsoil and we will be forced to live more reasonably. However, because of our sheer reach and influence, because of the impact of our power and population, when our way of living causes things to go bad, it may mean the end not just of life as we know it, but most forms of life. Even without the cata-strophic effect of our living, we are already causing the end of life for many species. Morally, it is our responsibility to put our foot down and say enough. We must change our lives!

We change our lives more profoundly on an individual basis, of course. But individuals can change more effectively if there are systems that support this change. These institutions can be established by good governments that truly represent our collective understanding of the good—an understanding that genuinely opens to the good because it is born of the fair play of the discoursing multi-verse of rationalities.
Endnotes


5Sachs, Common Wealth, 185.

6Dodds, Humanity’s Footprint, 118.

7Ibid., 36.

8Ibid., 33.

9Much of this section is a summary of “Chapter 1: Starving for Progress”, of Paul Roberts’ The End of Food (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009) which gives a concise understanding of how and why the global food factory system emerged.

10Roberts, End of Food, 3.

11Ibid., 5.

12Ibid.

13Ibid., 9.

14Ibid., 10.

15Ibid., 11-13.

16Ibid., 13.

17Ibid., 14.

18Ibid., 17.

19Ibid., 23.

20Ibid., 25.

21Ibid., 27.


