

EVERYDAY

*If you must believe everything you read
Don't just read what you already believe*

QUESTIONING DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

*Eternally vigilant
We question everything
But that which we do not recognize
Is fundamental*

ORTHODOXY

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EVERYDAY ORTHODOXY

Preface

What I attempt to do in this commentary is to point out a number of everyday assumptions that have worked their way into contemporary Canadian and other Western societies. These assumptions concern the organization and structure of society, the nature of governing ourselves, and the responsibility of economic and social well-being. These fundamental assumptions are typically not even recognized as such, and these are the ones that have taken on the force of an orthodoxy. Some, like questioning the nature of capitalism in our society, are further relegated to the margins as taboo subjects.

I have concentrated on the organization of society, business, and politics, for these are the topics I have spent the most time observing and thinking about. Much of what I comment on, I used to consider to be either obvious or logically derived from good common sense. Unfortunately, as I have continued my studies of these questions, I have come to conclude that much of what I have to say is not normally considered in policy or political discussions. These questions are either deliberately or unconsciously ignored, mainly I feel, because they tend to undermine an everyday orthodoxy.

*children
should be
seen and not
heard*

I first attempt to understand the nature of questioning important topics regarding societal organization. I focus on why we don't question as much as we should, including the methods, barriers, forums, and pitfalls when questioning.

I then examine a series of issues starting with a discussion of the economy, which is the basic framework of much of our societal interaction, and thus a leading candidate for questioning. Next I focus on corporate goals and the efforts to restructure corporations which have produced a JOBLESS RECOVERY. I explore further the global economy and its relationship to the idea that money has no morality, that human standards have not been built into our economic system.

This leads me to challenge the notion of PROGRESS, a tired and distorted concept which has been used, at

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least temporarily, to cover up many real problems. I then propose that Progress has been the main tool to justify the implementation of the GLOBAL ECONOMY.

Progress is closely allied with our notion that science and technology are inherently good, my next topic. This includes our reluctance to question, which has let science and business have a free hand in defining our society. I then look at the takeover of our societal culture by the goals of corporate organizations, and the ways this ties into our notions of art. Lastly, I examine the latest assault on our ability to question, POLITICAL CORRECTNESS and its result – questions we just won't ask.

These topics are, I believe, all tied together by our tendency to examine issues on the surface, ignoring interrelatedness, especially when it crosses traditional knowledge or professional boundaries. Our segregation of issues leads us to unhelpful levels of respect for the specialized authorities. We rarely get at the root of problems because we are so constrained within the boundaries of our compartmentalized complexities.

This book is not primarily about how well or badly our politicians, our economy or our society are doing. It is about the ways we go about judging these things (or rather, not judging them). I have tried to show how deeply ingrained ways of judging the world around us have lead us to accept the status quo, without really understanding what or why that is. It is the fundamental structures of economics, culture, and society that govern the way we do things, and these are the focus of my attention. Throughout I try to give examples that illustrate my points, to show how these fundamental structures govern everyday life.

*lies,
damn lies,
and statistics* This is not an academic treatise. As I don't aim to *prove* anything here, I have avoided the usual apparatus of scholarly work. If you are hostile to my observations and arguments, an extensive list of references and supporting material is not going to convince you anyway. I have also avoided using statistics, which are often used to cloud debate and more disturbingly to mislead. This

P R E F A C E

leaves me open to the challenge that I'm not an expert, naïve, or worse a crackpot who doesn't know what he's talking about. Well, you can be the judge of that. Since my premise is the belief that there are many more people capable of engaging in meaningful exploration of important public issues, I must also believe that these people are able to determine for themselves the merits of my arguments.

I don't claim to be exhaustive or even thorough. My goal is to prod people into thinking in new perspectives and to consider questioning their basic assumptions.

I can put it no better than Václav Havel:

So anyone who claims that I am a dreamer who expects to transform hell into heaven is wrong. I have few illusions. But I feel a responsibility to work towards the things I consider good and right.¹

¹ Václav Havel, *Summer Meditations*, pg. 17

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I

Represented Democracy



The Nature of Questioning

Do we really believe in democracy? Are we willing to share the burden that it implies? We have notions about democracy that rest upon the foundation of an informed citizenry and political leaders working toward the common good. The idea is that in a democracy the people are governing themselves, and even though they delegate their power, are responsible for maintaining the system through vigilant oversight.

for the people Are we living up to this lofty ideal? Is it possible in today's mass society, dominated by economics and technology? The root of the impulse for questioning society comes from the belief that the citizen matters, and that society should be organized for the benefit of the people. But is that what we experience in our own lives? Is our system designed for our benefit or for some other?

We hear much about the discontentment of the people with their political leaders and their governments. If anything, this expression of discontentment shows that people really do want to be involved, that what they feel is a lack of control over the things that really govern their lives. What doesn't seem to work anymore is the traditional political system of electing democratic repre-

sentatives to express the collective concerns, and to take collective action. What we get is a seesaw of policy as we exchange one political banner for another. What we do not see, are actions that fundamentally solve our problems. What we see is a veneer of action on top of a base that is rarely questioned, and almost never changes.

The Idea of Questioning

*my North
America
includes
Mexico*

We in North America² really don't question the way things are run. I don't mean at the level of what candidate or party to support, but rather, questioning how our society is organized, who has organized it, who it is meant to serve and whether it has to be that way. This isn't particularly strange, as people think that they can't do anything about these things and trying would only lead to frustration as none is within their control.

We think we do our bit by casting our ballot, our genuflection at the altar of democracy, expecting to elect our next quadrennial dictatorship. But this system isn't working, and we need to understand why. Party loyalties have dissolved, distrust of politicians is rampant, and a loss of faith in political institutions is evident. Unfortunately, we don't have the tools to challenge or even recognize fundamentals, we aren't taught these things.

*general
interest
groups*

The loss of faith in government means our primary means of exerting our influence has lost credibility. But given our current system, we have no other way of organizing collectively, as a whole. True, we can join what are derogatively known as special interest groups in an attempt to have our say. But this takes a level of energy and involvement that most of us are not willing to sustain. And it artificially breaks our interests into easily deflected and distorted pieces.

So most people go about their daily lives not even realizing that there is a choice, that choices have been

² I'm using the term North America here in the typical way, meaning the U.S. and Canada.

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THE NATURE OF QUESTIONING

made for them. Every once in a while we are presented with choices that appear to be basic (such as whether the Senate should be elected), but never with the fundamental questions regarding the organization and operation of our society and economy. Indeed, we are even discouraged from studying these things.

Even the 1995 Québec referendum was conducted on the vague plane of sovereignty and ethnic pride, not on specifics of political, social, and economic structures, or even policy.

What's to Question?

***doers and
followers***

There is a pattern in our society of the way we go about things, how things are run. There are people who do and people who follow, people who question and people who accept. Unfortunately, most of the followers and acceptors are doing so because they think they must. They haven't thought through and agreed, they just acquiesce. This is true in many areas in society. In politics we can easily see this happening, but as we shall see, it's also true of business, science and art.

***conspiracy of
resignation***

By accepting things the way they are, without question, we participate in a grand conspiracy of resignation and subtle pessimism. This attitude is self-reinforcing, it feeds on its own feeling of lack of control. The more individuals think that they have no way of affecting the fundamentals of their society, the more most people think that, the more it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

People don't challenge basic social, economic, scientific or artistic dogma because they feel they cannot, ought not or must not. Or because they think that even after exposing the flimsy basis of most of these fundamentals, still, nothing will change.

We Can't Question

***uncommon
sense***

It's not as if ordinary people are incapable of questioning and analysis. After all, these qualities are often

displayed when applied to *unimportant* fields like sports, where people are often quite studied in their opinions and open about expressing them. This same common sense, logic, knowledge and analysis could be applied to debate on public policy (we even saw some of this during the 1992 referendum) but people tend to feel excluded from most public policy debates.

These *debates* are generally defined and controlled by the formal political process, which aims to stifle independent study of the issues, reserving these important questions to its exclusive (and usually private) domain. Most important decisions in government are taken by the cabinet and in private. Some less crucial decisions are taken in caucus, also held in private, where more widely varying views are supposed to be represented. The fact that cabinet and caucus debate is considered confidential is a good clue that government doesn't want to share the decision making process.

But we are deluding ourselves when we think that these forums are where the fundamental decisions are made. Most of these decisions, as we shall see, are decided outside the political domain in the worlds of business and science. Here questions of public policy and societal well-being rarely surface. These areas are relatively unconstrained by government, indeed it is often governments that feel constrained by them. The prevailing dogma has us believe that government shouldn't exert control, that there is something natural about them that resists any attempt at control. Since the fundamental basis of business and science goes unrecognized by society, it is left to the experts to pronounce on the ways of the world.

Questioning Questioners

Under these circumstances, our natural tendency to defer to authority and to the professionals takes over. What brings about this tendency to shy away from questioning? Is our society responsible?

***learned
acquiescence*** We are taught early on in our schools not to question anything important. In primary school, we are actively

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discouraged from questioning or having our own opinion on anything of substance.³ Questioning the knowledge of the teacher, even innocently, is considered heresy. Persistent questioners are treated as smart alecks and trouble makers who need to be taught to respect their elders. This unwanted attention from teachers leads to ostracism by their peers.

This having been drilled into us in the primary grades, we are quite accepting of almost anything put before us in secondary school, when our critical skills are supposed to be forming. What appears to be lethargy and lack of caring has actually been a product of lessons well learned in earlier grades. Later in university, it comes to many as a shock that we are expected to defend our opinions, often when through previous training, we don't have any.

Early jobs highlight our lack of experience and reinforce our reluctance to question, as the natural instinct of self-preservation takes hold. Longer employment experience breeds a sense of futility, after years of accepting incoherent and illogical decisions.

What we tend to do then is to withdraw our critical faculties into a sphere that barely surrounds our intimate concerns. Any attack on this sphere brings about a spirited and intelligent response, exhibiting a fine sense of morality and justice. Outside this sphere we loose steam, finding it difficult to expend energy on concerns that appear to be beyond our influence.

This apparent lack of control isn't just an unfortunate consequence of living in a mass society. Rather, it is a result of the systems that we have created and maintain as the basis for our democratic free market society. And most systems have an inherent mechanism for self-perpetuation, in as unchanged a form as possible.

³ The back to basics movement in education, perhaps unwittingly, plays into this objective.

Deterring Questions

If people do persist in asking question, the political, business, and scientific authorities then aim to control important debates, lest they stray outside the boundaries of acceptable change. They do this by a number of fundamentally shallow but, unfortunately, successful techniques.

**how the
mighty have
fallen**

The most successful political means of diverting attention from basic questions is to offer up juicy scandals of no fundamental importance. Thus we see endless coverage of the latest ethics breach, sex scandal, or high profile waste. Quantities of news coverage can be commandeered by petty misdeeds like a political junket, a patronage appointment, or a budget leak. Coverage of 'how the mighty have fallen' will always win out over any important subject.

Coverage of the GATT world trade deal can easily be shunted aside by a Jag Bhaduria résumé scandal.

The O.J. Simpson trial took over the media, especially television. Ironically, what was intended as just the spectacle of a celebrity trial may actually lead to questions about the effectiveness of the criminal and legal systems.

Business decisions can be well disguised by endless speculative coverage of either unpredictable or unimportant events. Regular, dramatic stories on the stock markets, interest and exchange rates, and trade disputes are good cover for many more important acts.

The U.S. savings and loan debacle was proceeding while attention was diverted to Donald Trump or whether the New Coke was a strategic mistake.

**Cholesterol
free
Caffeine
reduced
Genetically
engineered**

Developments in science and technology can be equally ignored by throwing attention on contradictory studies or more juicy but freak developments.

Cholesterol and coffee have to be the most studied topics in medicine today, yet no conclusions can be safely drawn. Meanwhile, genetic engineering hardly makes the news.

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Apart from avoiding the topic altogether, it is best to frame the debate in a manner that will assure the desired answer. This is certainly much easier to do than to deal with the uncontrolled result, or to suppress questioning blatantly.

Since the questions that concern fundamental societal structure are in the domain of the *élites*, it is usually quite easy for them to dominate the *debate* through one of a standard set of techniques: controlling the definitions, false dichotomy, burden of proof, specialization, and the old stand-by complexity.

Definitions Constrain Our Thoughts

The definitions used in a question have a fundamental effect on the outcome. Whoever controls the definitions controls the debate, which takes place only within the context of the terms used to define it.

Terms like *free market* and *human resources* absolutely control the range of any discussion regarding capitalism. If *by definition* the market is free, then what debate will take place about the nature of that freedom or even whether we want such a market. Frequent usage of the term human resources has paved the way for the equally dehumanizing euphemisms *downsizing*, *rightsizing* and *jobless recovery* which are an overt but also effective way of controlling the definitions. Who could argue with rightsizing? A jobless recovery is still a recovery isn't it?

The media are complicit in enforcing these definitions. What makes for lively and powerful copy and also for concise coverage, happens to serve the interests of those who aim to control the definitions. The artificial definitions thus become media short hand for describing complex events. Unfortunately the media rarely bother to elaborate on this short hand, leaving the public with empty or misleading phrases.

When all reporters have to say is *Somali warlord*, *Nicaraguan freedom fighter*, *Peacemaker missile*, *pro-life* or

***Peacemaker
missile***

pro-choice, their reporting is hardly going to probe very deeply into these intricate topics. These names are far from neutral labels given to describe events and the people involved. These terms aren't just fabricated by harried reporters and editors, but rather are carefully crafted by politicians and other interest groups, often using the full resources of the public relations industry, and it's no coincidence that the media find them so attractive.

Repetition of these terms through daily coverage only reinforces the artificial parameters of the event. Debate regarding the event is thus quite naturally and efficiently constrained within the confines of these artificial terms.

We are now quite aware that this is an accurate description of events during election campaigns, through celebrated *behind the scenes* chronologies, and media round table discussions. Why do we not recognize and compensate for the fact that this is also normal behaviour for media coverage of everyday events?

**who controls
definitions?**

Who defines things like globalization and free trade? In recent years the proponents of the *free market* have had a monopoly on defining the debate and excluding alternative definitions.

**Left vs. Right
liberal and
conservative**

One of the biggest problems in the ways we think about politics and economics is the categorization of people into the two opposing camps of left and right. The related terms conservative and liberal are freely re-defined to suite the arguments and attitudes of the day. Those out of step with their chosen ideology are given identifying labels such as *Red Tory* or *Waffle Movement*. People who have beliefs that do not consistently fall within one of the two groups are identified as pragmatists, as if this were a bad thing. Ideological impurity is considered a stain on one's character.

Once the labels have been assigned the proponents must pick sides on every issue and must stick to their predefined ideologies. Our political parties are set up to defend these artificially constrained ideologies and are not permitted to stray into the territory of the oth-

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ers. When one party implements the idea of another, instead of praise and rejoicing, the party is accused of stealing the idea, a flip-flop, or electioneering.

The artificial purity also applies in reverse. Failure of the ideological prescription in one instance is considered reason enough to discount all future credibility. Because of the desire to stick to the ideology, policies cannot be properly tailored to circumstances that are neither ideal nor pure.

False Dichotomy

either-orism

The ideological division leads predictably to another technique for winning the argument, that is to deploy either-or choices. Once the false dichotomy is set up, the argument has been cleverly steered away from meaningful debate and examination. Policies become take it or leave it choices.

We see this every day in *discussions* about free trade and globalization. Either we're for free trade, or we're in favour of erecting a wall around our country and living in an impoverished and isolated backwater. Either we're prepared to accept globalization as a fact, or we've decided to bury our heads in the sand. Either we're for free market capitalism or we're hopeless idealists who haven't discerned the true nature of the world.

The anti-debt zealots would have us believe that it's either their hack and slash debt reduction prescription or national ruin.

This ability to pose important questions as if they were simple two sided affairs is crucial to the style of debate we have assumed. Our system is defined with proposer and opposer in mind. The format of a formal debate is a perfect example of this tendency to simplistic characterization. That all substantive questions have shades and nuances that should exclude bipolar examination should be self-evident. But our way of questioning is so ingrained that we are perfectly willing

to engage in cut and dried options. It's the big picture, the ideology that counts and the focus is rarely on the fine details.

When politicians break free from ideological either-orism we are shocked by their candour. We suspect they have lost their direction. It's as if partisanship requires we only study the surface of questions, perhaps for fear of admitting that all the answers are not at hand.

The Burden of Proof

prove it

One easy way to divert the outcome of a debate is to shift the burden of proof to the opposition. Arguments in your favour need no justification and are accepted at face value. Opposing arguments must be meticulously researched, documented, and defended, and are attacked by any means.

The Yes and No forces in the 1995 Québec sovereignty referendum struggled to shift the burden of proof to the other side.

The fact that there is a burden of proof is not always recognized. We can easily see this burden in criminal law where it is spelled out explicitly. It's not so easy to acknowledge that it exists in almost all debate and policy discussion, in business, science, the arts as well as politics.

Who shoulders the burden of proof when discussing whether capitalism is a good way to organize our economy, whether genetic engineering should be pursued, whether abstract art is important, or whether multiculturalism is a good policy?

Media coverage of orthodox opinion is lax and lingering. Any challenge to accepted views is difficult to substantiate in anything as shallow as television or structured as newspapers. Unorthodox views require elaboration and defence, as well as substantial evidence.

In many cases the reverse onus is even enshrined in law to protect the status quo. An obvious example is

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the need to prove that a chemical or process is harmful before its use is discontinued. In fact almost any established practice has a built in burden of proof defence, one that will erode only over time.

Specialization of Knowledge

Questioning is also constrained by confining knowledge and debate into specialized compartments. Crossing the well defined lines separating the specialties is discouraged.

***Renaissance
Man***

Society has embraced the concept of the specialist, in science, medicine, business, law, education, art. Everywhere curiously, but politics.⁴ This notion is so ingrained that those that display multiple talents are lauded as *Renaissance Man* or eclectic, or derided as a dilettante.

The specialist is almost exclusively concerned with their particular specialty. Collections of specialists are formed, they meet, discuss amongst themselves, debate. They produce arcane journals meant only for each other. These groups concentrate inwardly and offer little concern for subjects outside the narrow definition of the specialty, which are usually relegated to the concern of yet another specialty. The most obvious example are scientists and technologists, who tend to ignore the effects of their research and development on society, relegating such study to the lowly sociologists and politicians, and long after the fact to the historians.

***the big
picture***

As specialists learn more and more about less and less we are left with few people who can see the big picture, who can analyze events as they wash over the artificial specialty boundaries. Broad understanding is downplayed, deep understanding is rewarded. Those that attempt a broad analysis are in for a rough ride.

Crossing the specialty boundary requires special attention to facts and arguments. While the *debate* ranges

⁴ The only profession where you can be put in charge of a field without having either knowledge or inclination.

within the accepted parameters, there is little need for documentation or proof. Reinforcing arguments are accepted as fact without question. As soon as an outsider enters the domain of the specialist however, minute error in detail or lack of reference to authorities are considered reasons for rejection and disdain. The amateur is dismissed out of hand. The burden of proof is always on the heretic.

***special
interest
groups***

Specialists have taken over almost everywhere, reinforcing the belief that this is the proper or only way to organize society. This tendency has now become the norm, the natural way to exert influence. It is thus understandable that public interest and lobby groups are really just organizations of specialists. These people consider a cause in-depth and then push for government or industry action to further that cause, usually to the exclusion of all others. These days, to specialize is the only recognized way to play a role in society.

Specialists can be offered as expert witnesses in court and in political forums where their special knowledge cannot be challenged by the mere laity.

Questioning is suppressed by excluding outside opinion and analysis and by reserving important information within the clique. Jargon and self-defined systems of proof are also effective shields. Complexity is the specialist's friend.

Complexity

Complexity has always been a tool of orthodoxy. Debate can be steered away from many topics merely by claiming that the subject is too complex for the ordinary person. A recent example of this is the issue of controlling genetic engineering or reproductive technologies.

Remember Kim Campbell's statement that an election campaign was not the time to engage in the complex question of the structure of our social programs.

Complexity, real or imagined, confers status on those

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that have mastered the impenetrable. This provides a substantial incentive to perpetuate and even manufacture complexity. Particularly appalling examples abound in the computer industry.

The graphical, mouse-based user interface was derided by much of the computer industry when it was first introduced. Only after it became clear that the public would no longer accept the alternative was the concept embraced.

***Of the Law
By the Law
For the Law***

Complexity can also be artificially introduced to steer examination away from a topic. The law has been created and maintained with artificial complexity in a way that deliberately excludes the lay person from participating in a meaningful way. Laws are written in incomprehensible language, deliberately so, to exclude the nonprofessional from penetrating the golden egg. Laws are created by lawyers, for lawyers. They are kept complicated enough that any citizen would think twice before embarking on a self-directed course through any but the most trivial legal matters.

***The People
v
The Legal
Profession***

Yet it is certainly within the powers of the legislatures to pass a law (in whatever gobbledygook currently necessary) that says 'all laws passed from now on will be written in plain language, be interpreted in the obvious manner, and interpretation will be guided by the expressed intent of the legislators'. Not within the parameters of my temporal existence (*trans.* Not in my lifetime).

External debate on most topics in business and science is regularly stifled by the claims of complexity. It is within the financial and prestige interests of most specialists to erect the complexity barricades. Even if the complexity is artificial or illusory it can serve the purpose of deterring examination and intrusion.

That Is The Question

What are the routes for questioning? The two forums usually considered for questioning are politics and the media. Unfortunately, neither can be counted on for enlightened debate. In large part, this is because of the way we go about analyzing problems and proposing solutions.

Logic Defines Form

Our pattern of questioning has been constrained by our system of logic. The binary true or false is the basis of our way of thinking. Right or wrong, our side or their side, enemy or ally, winners and losers, these are all manifestations of our use of logic. It's how we analyze problems, there are two sides because there is a right and a there is a wrong.

adversarial system

This rigid framework for analysis has produced the adversarial system now operating in our courts and political institutions. We have opposing counsel who battle, not for the truth or for justice, but to win. We have government and opposition, who do everything to show their side right and the other wrong.

Curiously, Scottish criminal law allows three verdicts, guilty, not guilty, and not proven.

When the pendulum swings it's not from one side through the middle to the other, but from one side, skip the middle, to the other. Why does this happen? We seem reluctant to consider alternatives for fear of being seen to cross to the *other* side. We are predisposed to consider either this answer or that, seemingly incapable of contemplating any *mélange* of the two.

The choice we are given in education reform is either child centred learning or back to basics.

Our use of logic has also led us to preclude more than one right answer. Our legal and political systems are the most slavish adherents to this form. We search not for *an* answer, but *the* answer to our problem. Hav-

REPRESENTED DEMOCRACY
THE NATURE OF QUESTIONING

ing only one right answer leads to senseless partisan bickering, and much more destructive than constructive opposition.

Political Points

*representative's
democracy* The most obvious forum for questioning, and also quite unlikely to produce satisfactory answers, is our system of representative democracy. In this system we are told that our Member of Parliament is meant to represent our views in government. If we want more active participation, we are told to join a party, to be part of the process of formulating and guiding party policy. This policy debate is undertaken with the idea that its results will be reflected in government action. This might be a good system if MPs actually did represent us, if party policy really was carried into government action, and if anything that MPs did really much mattered.

*debate as a
game* The current lack of respect for legislators is due in large part to the games they play in their endless quest for partisan points and temporary advantage. Currently, almost no actual legislative debate guides the formation of the laws, for they are drafted and cast in stone long before reaching the legislature. The debates we do see are merely a series of vacuous monologues to keep up the charade that legislators really earn their keep.

*Royal
Omission* On issues of true significance, and especially embarrassment, we are thrown the bone of a royal commission, to report some years from now, after spending huge sums of money. This is done of course, in the hope that by the time the commission has reported, the public will have forgotten about the issue and the report can be safely stored in the archives with the others. Ironically, the commissions often produce reports that deal creatively and substantively with the questions, but as that is not their true purpose, these results are usually discarded.

Public cynicism about politics is well justified. Supposedly new style politicians running in the current game proclaim their goal of changing the rules of politics, but regularly fall back on the old ways.

***the Reformed
Party***

The Reform Party censured one of its members for speaking publicly about his leader's expense account. After a special private caucus meeting to defuse the issue, several members spoke about their new belief in caucus solidarity and privacy.

An effect of the structure of our partisan political system is that questions tend to be debated only within its context. We are forced to take sides, to choose answers composed of ideas that conform to one and only one of the ideologies. We must lay blame. We must stick to our turf. Good ideas are only good if they conform to partisan purposes.

Because most of the debate takes place in private, the public is left wondering about the reasons for policy decisions. The parties, interested in furthering their fortunes, play manipulative games with the truth using the media as both willing and duped accomplices.

Media Mangling

***the medium
has
no message***

Another avenue for questioning should be the media, yet here we often see a demonstration of the most sycophantic behaviour imaginable. Panels of media created celebrities have conversations where the information content and insight are almost nonexistent. Often they are merely mutual admiration societies where the most basic information is dressed up and passed off as inside knowledge. Wild speculation is rampant and no more informed.

Journalists intent on maintaining inside access to politicians and the political process learn to limit the range of enquiry to a narrow partisan context. These media personalities owe their fame to their ability to get the *inside* information and will do nothing that might jeopardize that access. On top of that, many enjoy their access to the inner circles and bask in the importance it must confer upon themselves.

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the scoop is a ratings gimmick dressed up as the public interest

The scoop, or exclusive, is a game of no benefit to the debate, yet it is pursued as if being first was the point. Media personalities gain credibility in proportion to their ability to be first, not on the quality of their coverage. In fact, by excluding other coverage of events, the public is badly served.

the photo op has replaced the news conference

Further trivializing the news, the photo opportunity has largely replaced the news conference in terms of media importance. As most news conferences now only serve to produce capsulized news, the photo op conveniently offers the necessary pictures to be accompanied by an empty voice-over or commentary, without the problem of possibly probing questions.

Trends are invented and publicized, soon becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. Incomplete, inaccurate, and incorrect information becomes enshrined as fact by merely disseminating it within the mass media. Reported enough times by different outlets, inaccuracies and untruths take on a life of their own. All this reporting becomes *evidence* of the truth of the assertions. Distortions, omissions and falsehoods soon become the facts as they are archived in the journals of record.

unconventional wisdom

Voices outside the mainstream are excluded except to provide the requisite shrill factor. These voices can be easily made to sound ridiculous when juxtaposed with the sonorous platitudes of orthodox opinion. The time and space restrictions of our media don't allow thoughtful arguments to be presented that challenge the conventional wisdom. The journalists also relish their new found status as commentators rather than just reporters. They are hardly likely to invite interested parties to replace themselves, especially if those parties are in disagreement.

Television craves images and its appetite prefers to exclude the unphotogenic. News has become a parade of the unusual and the bizarre, giving the impression that this is the norm.

Television interviews are frequently premised on a

charade of liveness. One camera interviews with the requisite phony shots of the questioner are standard practice. Interviewees are often in remote locations trying to stare into a camera and pretend they are looking at the interviewers. Groups of subjects are even placed in the same room, with multiple cameras and different artificial backgrounds to make them appear to be in several exotic locals. Translation delays are omitted while the interviewer feigns understanding, the facial expressions of both reacting parties being synchronized to the wrong audio. And all this is conducted in the context of the news, the supposedly reality based programming.

**sound
blights**

Attaining credibility in public debate is now predicated on the ability to look good on this television. Snappy quotes must be delivered into good sound bites or all substance is ignored.

Traps When Questioning

When we do attempt to question, we tend to engage in unproductive behaviour. This can be so because of certain dubious assumptions we make about the nature of the topic. These assumptions concern the nature of the behaviour of the actors and the parameters of the discussion. They cloud our analysis of the subject and restrict our range of enquiry.

Reducing People to Roles

***I consume,
therefore I am***

Nothing in our debates on public policy is more insidious than the casual categorization of people into various roles – consumer, employee, voter, taxpayer, parent. It is a device used by the lazy to allow shallow analysis to go unchallenged. Unfortunately, we tend to accept these narrow role interests quite freely, and find ourselves trapped within them.

The taxpayer doesn't want us to spend this money, the voter insists on it, the consumer believes it distorts the mar-

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ket and raises prices, and the employee thinks it's an unfair subsidy to others.

Statements like *when consumers start spending again* might as well be phrased as *when unemployed workers start spending again*.

We are represented in these apparently exclusive roles by lobby groups that claim to defend our interests. Groups representing taxpayers' rights, civil liberties, consumer associations, gender and ethnic associations, unions, and even political parties can only seem to advocate within the confines of one of our roles, and often end up favouring decisions that go against our general interest.

A standard method of analyzing a problem is to break it into components each of a more manageable nature. But when this is done with public policy problems the pieces are often never again considered as a whole. We then get solutions tailored for some of our role interests that ignore our general condition. If the war on inflation brings us unemployment are we better off?

The artificial constraining of interest that these roles imply distorts public policy tremendously. These role definitions are all simplistic categorizations of the many-faceted and intertwining interests of real people in real economies. Considering people only as role interests leads to facile solutions that often do more harm than good.

Reducing Systems to Models

Equally simplistic assumptions are made when considering systems. Questions are often skewed by the models that people apply to describe them. These models are usually designed to simplify the problem of studying systems of fundamental complexity. Unfortunately, the simplifying assumptions can render the results of our analysis irrelevant to the original question.

The most flawed and ineffectual models I know of

are those that purport to capture the behaviour of the economy. These macro and micro-economic models are based on so many simplifying assumptions and false premises as to render them almost worthless. Yet they are relied upon again and again as strategic forecasting tools, and worse, as filters for our policy prescriptions. Time and again the models don't even predict what they were intended to, let alone rationally analyzing the system as a whole.

In science, and especially the science concerning the very small or very large, models are often put in place as a substitute for real understanding. For most of these questions we have no fundamental grasp of the system. Think of the brain and the mind, or climate and the ecosystem. Scientists usually have the courtesy to describe these models in the terms of *theory*, which at least leaves open the possibility of being proven wrong.

Users of these models purport to understand, when they are really only grasping at the surface of highly complex issues.

Rosy Assumptions

***what's good
for GM is
good for the
country***

A classic problem when examining systems is to assume that the behaviour of the actors is moral (for example, corporations). This often leads to the assumption that the parties are working for our benefit.

Is our economic system designed for the benefit of society or is our social system structured for the benefit of the economy?

We also tend to assume that the protagonists know what they are doing, are doing it deliberately, and that the system is under their control, or that they even understand it. All these can lead you to consider actions that will prove counter-productive.

We are also apt to assume that a system is predictable, stable, and controllable. Or that it has actually been designed instead of being a jumble of uncoordinated decision making. Or worse, that an un-

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coordinated system hasn't been designed.

Financial markets are loosely structured, uncoordinated, subject to rumour, and highly unpredictable, yet our whole economic system is based upon their proper functioning. But it can be argued that this system has been designed that way.

**work within
the system**

Assuming that a system is structured correctly and that debate within that system can be productive can often be a fundamental flaw. This is the classic desire to work for change within the system, one that often proves fruitless.

The Positive Imperative

If you can't say anything nice then don't say anything at all. If you have no constructive criticism then don't criticize. If you're not part of the solution then you're part of the problem. You're not a team player if you point out problems. There are no problems, only opportunities.

These statements characterize the current common attitude toward those who dare to question how things are run. The underlying point is that to be legitimate in questioning you must have answers. It is not good enough to recognize a problem and point it out, you must propose a solution. We thus enforce a positive image of society by suppressing consideration of problems without pat solutions.

When was the last time you heard a politician raise a question without proposing a tidy solution? Which one gets elected?

The Ontario Conservatives were elected in 1995 having promised easily grasped solutions to the perceived problems. This contrasted to the N.D.P. government which refused to offer easy solutions, and the Liberals who offered copious detailed answers.

**can do
attitude**

It appears that facile solutions emphasizing the positive are often more attractive than more realistic expressions of uncertainty. The *can do* attitude is what

prevails in our society. This also shows in the *look on the bright side* response, especially of Americans.

For days after the Oklahoma City bombing, the death and destruction were downplayed in favour of the heroic efforts of the rescuers and the massive hunt for the perpetrators.

Unfortunately, solutions are not always readily at hand, are not always within the ability of the questioner. If we suppress questioning because we don't have the answers then we won't even recognize the need. Society looses when questions are not asked because the answer is not apparent.

Hypothetical Avoidance

Our society has an almost infinite capacity to avoid questions that are deemed to be hypothetical, in other words, not currently a problem. Politicians especially are loath to answer hypothetical questions for fear of leaving a trail of pronouncements that can be used as partisan ammunition at a later date.

But prior to the fact is often the only time that issues can be properly planned for, with effective compensating actions that are ready to deal with the potential fallout of decisions. Too often such planning is regarded as nay saying or pessimism. Prior consideration also has the potential of affecting the decision itself when possible consequences can be discussed.

Jean Chrétien's government refused to discuss the hypothetical question of Québec separation. Apparently, they were unprepared for a narrow No vote as well.

The all sweetness and light attitude of most decisions is itself a hypothetical proposition, it's just that we're so used to being positive that we don't recognize it as such.

Curiously, hypothetical events can be the driving force behind policy. In these cases though, the hypothetical is cast as the inevitable consequence of the previous policy.

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The ominous warnings about a debt crisis are offered not as a hypothetical outcome but as a certain consequence.

The See All, Know All Attitude

When questioning in modern society, people often pretend that they are aware of all the issues and ramifications. People won't point out their own knowledge gaps.

***ignorance
reduces
credibility***

Ignorance reduces credibility in our society. We find it socially awkward to admit to not knowing something. We have come to equate ignorance with stupidity, an attitude that has been fostered in our schooling. We are so loath to showing our ignorance that we learn useful techniques that hide it. In conversation we will feign recognition, in debate we deftly steer the topic around our gaps in learning. We avoid public questioning in areas where we have little knowledge, for fear of exposing our ignorance.

In social situations this tendency is likely harmless, just one of the social niceties to avoid embarrassing situations. Society really loses though, when we don't acknowledge the limits of policy and planning, or when we try to squelch consideration of outcomes we have not taken into account.

In speeches, debate and policy pronouncements, the impression of dealing fully with a question can be given by simply excluding consideration of certain aspects out of the competence or interest of the speaker. Political success is measured by the degree to which this fools the audience into thinking that everything has been taken into consideration. Unfortunately, societal success would be indicated by just the opposite.

**Instant Authority and
Never Change Your Mind**

People in public debate have usually been chosen because they are authorities, and authorities know everything. They must have opinions on everything and they

must produce these opinions on command. Admitting that you haven't thought about some topic, or that you aren't aware of some event just won't do. It can prove politically fatal.

let me think One thing we really don't tolerate in our debate is changing your mind. This is seen as weakness rather than an ability to reason. Even worse would be to show the process of thinking, even to take into account the other arguments and points. Besides, our adversarial system of debate just wouldn't function if people were changing sides.

Most economic decisions are conducted as if people knew exactly what the outcome was going to be. From business investments to government fiscal and monetary policy we see countless examples of instant pronouncements and unwillingness to alter reasoning.

Our leaders aren't allowed to change their minds either. This would induce lack of confidence by partisan supporters who expect consistency as well as ideological purity.

So our society drives people to pretend they know everything, to pronounce upon things immediately and with assurance, to be solutions driven, to avoid speculation on or advance consideration of potential events, and to remain firm in all beliefs. This doesn't sound like a healthy recipe for a democratic state.

It Doesn't Just Happen

We have to decide whether we are willing to just let things happen, that is, let them happen the way other people arrange it. Because things don't just happen. But to be able to decide, we have to be able to analyze events, recognizing what is a root cause and what is an effect. This is not easy, as society piles layers of

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shallow and false analysis upon events before we are expected to take them in.

How do we cut through the barriers around issues? First we have to approach subjects with as little ideology as possible, and to admit and take into account what we cannot exclude. We then have to understand the motivations behind the actions of the players, because why people do things can be a powerful predictor of their actions.

Our tendency is to believe the accepted truths of disciplines about which we have little knowledge. This is no accident, we are meant to trust the authorities. The problem is there is often less knowledge and understanding within a field than the façade they project. All disciplines, groups, associations and systems are prone to everyday orthodoxies. As citizens we must attempt to determine whether they are based upon a solid foundation of comprehension, or whether they are just a convenient way of stifling questioning into uncomfortable gaps in knowledge.

We need to be aware of what forces shape our society if we expect to be able to understand and influence it's course, or just to comfortably navigate our way through. In this age of apparently jumbled international integration, both economic and social, we need to consider the basic influences that shape events.

We are part of an age where the economy defines the way our lives are conducted. The structure of this economy is shaped by the market, by important financial players, and by key decisions made in the political realm. We are also part of an age where technology defines how we conduct our lives and how we think about what happens around us. Technology is also driving the economy and shaping social structures.

If culture and art are the things that make our lives more than just an existence inside the economy, we need to understand how these are interworking. Economics and technology are shaping our culture, and this

EVERYDAY ORTHODOXY

culture is the basis of our society and the foundation for our values.

When examining these topics, we have to understand the scope of our questioning, especially the boundaries we may not realize are in place to steer us toward more orthodox thinking. It's not that we have to advocate radical change, but that we should be aware of how our economic, political and social systems operate so that we at least intelligently assent to the status quo.

*It doesn't just happen
We are parties to this charade
Lamenting foregone possibilities
Avoiding unexplored paths
Society makes us willing
Technology leads the way
While others make and do things
We make do with what we'll have*

So let's begin by looking at the system grandiosely called the economy, the structure that governs the means by which we live.

II

Whose Economy is This, Anyway?



Purpose and Structure of the Economy

You might think that in a democracy an economy is a means to provide a decent way of life for the people. Unfortunately, there seems to be plenty of evidence against this view. In a capitalist democracy (an oxymoron perhaps?) it would appear to be a means of increasing the material wealth of those who own and run the corporations. Here the economy is often viewed as an autonomous system with only coincidental effect on the people. So what is the purpose of our economy? What is the structure of our economy and the economies of the West, and why have they been structured as they have been?

It seems, given the overarching role the economy plays in our lives, that we should have a good understanding of its functioning and purpose if we are to be able to properly analyze events. But public understanding of the workings of the economy is hampered by several factors. First off, practically nothing is taught in school about the structure of the economy. Even less about the reasons and goals of the structure. But thanks to popular culture projected by the media,

***The Gospel
according to
St. Adam,
St. John or
St. Milton***

we have been indoctrinated with quite a bit about material desire and playing our role of consumers. What economic discussion we are regularly exposed to consists mostly of stale ideological bickering. We read and see opinions only from either the pure *laissez-faire* school, or from the *no intervention is bad intervention* camp. We are thus presented with the ridiculous extremes, as if those were the only choices. It's meant to entertain rather than to inform. If we probe, we're told that it's all too complicated to worry ourselves about.

Those charged with special insight about economic realities, the financial professionals, rarely speak their truths outside the arcane business press. If they did, the public would be quite surprised by the actual basis of economic workings. They don't know what's going to happen, they predict based on the past, their experience, and the models of the system. And they're often wrong, wildly wrong. The theoretical specialists, the economists, are for the most part off exploring their theory worlds for more impractical advice.

Economic Bafflegab

***Good for
Nothing
Predictor***

Economists lead us to believe that an economy is a means to produce *economic activity* as defined by the almighty Gross National Product.⁵ But the GNP is not itself a good. It is an economist's means of measuring the performance of a national economy. The GNP only measures the activity of things as valued by money. It has nothing to say about the happiness of the people. It has nothing to say about the distribution of wealth within the society. It has nothing to say about any activity not involved with the exchange of money.

Economists exhibit an inability to prove anything about the economy, economic policy, and the function-

⁵Oh, any economic activity will do. In fact, if everyone went around doing the housework for their neighbours, and were paid for it, we would have a substantial increase in GNP with clearly no increase in standard of living (lots of new taxes as well).

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ing of society. If economists really knew what they were talking about, why are we so consistently making such a mess of our economies, even using their own definitions? Why are there times of boom and bust entirely unpredicted and unexplained by these economists? Why are there so many opposing economic opinions?

Economists are striving to understand and ultimately predict the economy. Unfortunately for them, the economy appears to be so fundamentally complex that their efforts at understanding through simplification result in reducing the meaning out of the questions.

***economic
chaos***

The scientists have jumped into this question with their pet theory of *Chaos*, which shows that a small change in a very complex system can have dramatic and unpredictable results. They claim that the economy is one such system, and that our attempts to direct its progress are doomed to having little success toward our goals. With this theory in hand, economic conservatives will attempt to justify the hands-off approach that they propose. The economic liberals will likely find justification for their belief that governments should smooth the harsh effects. The problem with using the Chaos theory to explain the economy is that, unlike another Chaos candidate, the weather, we have no understanding of what we'll get if we do nothing.

Does the Economy Operate in a Vacuum?

***political
economist***

There was a time when economists were known as political economists, in recognition of the fact that the economy is inextricably linked to politics (and in turn to ideology). These people recognized that economic choices were linked to political choices, that economies didn't exist or work within a vacuum. But the association with politics was demeaning and admitted a degree of uncertainty and choice, so there was a struggle of the economists to break this link, to deny the intertwining of the two fields. This was led by those that truly think that economics is a science, that econometrics is the way to a better understanding of these ques-

***the dismal
science***

tions.

On the other side of the split we got political *scien-*
tists, who like to think that the political behaviour of
people can be predicted like the movement of chess
pieces. Or perhaps manipulated like chess pieces, given
the penchant for polling that has become the norm.

The major problem with economics is that it has lost
hold of the basis of the whole system, people.
Economists work under the assumption that the be-
haviour of people, the actors in the economic drama,
can be described by formulae and models. By abstract-
ing out the role of people, economists have sanitized
their deliberations. No messy human consequences to
deal with, no destroyed lives, just utility curves, ex-
change rates, and structural unemployment levels.

Unfortunately to use these models, the economists
have to make oversimplifying assumptions about the
nature of economic interaction. These simplifications
are responsible in large part for the draconian economic
actions that are taken in the people's name. Like the
fight against inflation.

Inflation

Throughout the 1980's we had the juggernaut of the
war on inflation. During the 1970's the West experi-
enced an unprecedented (for them) increase in prices
that, we were told again and again, would destroy our
economic system. Thus was born the Western obses-
sion with inflation to the exclusion of all other policy
objectives.

The Sin

But what exactly brought about this terrible infla-
tionary period. The standard explanation is the shock
of the OPEC oil price increases, but this alone can't ex-
plain it all. Could it be the orgy of consumerism carried
out since the Second World War and praised as the

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birthright of democracies? This materialism was induced and maintained by an efficient system of indoctrination, centred around television and defined by advertising. Artificial demand was created and incessantly reinforced for a ludicrous array of goods.

I still think the trash compactor holds the distinction of most ridiculous household product. The electric can opener and toothbrush are runners up.

***keeping up
with the
Jones***

Cheap credit was foisted on a gullible public, ready to cash in on prosperity. The public, responding like good sheep, spent themselves silly. Shopping became a defining social activity. Horror of horrors, artificial demand, supported by unsustainable credit produced INFLATION. Don't worry, we'll be rescued from ourselves in a moment.

***CPI is also
a cause of
inflation***

But first, I would also argue that in part the measurement of inflation, as reported in statistics like the Consumer Price Index, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Economists say that inflation is caused in part by the *expectation* of a rise in prices. Wage demands reflect the expectation that earnings will not keep up with price increases. This is brought about, in large part, because the public was trained to think that the CPI was an absolute reflection of price increases as they affected each person. Indeed, the CPI (among many flaws) is based on some hypothetical average person (household) that consumes a fixed basket of goods, and whose purchasing preferences do not allow for substitution of one good for another now more expensive one. In other words, people would never willingly stop buying something because the price went up.

Interestingly, when the inflation rate dropped (deflation) because of the drastic lowering of cigarette taxes, the economists were quick to point out that not everyone would experience this, only those who smoked. The pensioners would however, because their pensions are linked to the CPI.

Thus since prices are reported to be going up we

would naturally demand higher wages to compensate, which causes the prices to go up, and the ugly spiral of inflation starts.

Penance

Fortunately, the central bankers of the West decided that enough was enough. They, not being controlled as the politicians are by the fickle voting public, would eliminate inflation for our sakes. And they did just that. Unfortunately, in the process they caused the worst economic malaise the West has seen since the Great Depression. And the rest is, well, the present. We in the prosperous and now inflation-free West currently enjoy unemployment, food banks, homelessness, hopelessness, and disparity of income at near record levels. Bravo.

But wait, the story doesn't end there. We were told that we had to suffer the medicine of high interest rates to ensure that inflation was held low, and that rates would fall when inflation was licked. But now we've also seen rising rates to combat a falling dollar, caused we are told by higher rates elsewhere and a lack of confidence in our economy, and especially in our government's ability to manage the deficit and debt, which were themselves inflated by the high interest rates.

***a soft landing
for whom?***

The American Federal Reserve has such fear of inflation that it has deliberately dampened economic activity with higher interest rates. The stated policy goal was to engineer a *soft landing*, where growth is suppressed in hopes of preventing rekindled inflation. The flip side is that growth suppression brings with it lower employment, so a soft landing for the sake of inflation means a hard landing for thousands of workers.

The global economy has made the old simple interest rates vs. inflation tradeoff into a much less predictable game.

The U.S. simultaneously dampens and stimulates the economy. It increases interest rates (lowering growth) to ward off signs of inflation, while joining trade organizations and

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reducing middle class taxes which will boost growth.

So why have we endured this fight, that has so devastated other parts of our economy and society in the process? Without inflation, the thinking goes, economic decision making becomes more predictable, leading inevitably to better results. Voilà.

Magic Prosperity

It's odd that our political and business leaders profess a belief in magic, free market magic that is. Perhaps it's not that they believe it, but that we're supposed to believe it.

Abracadabra

***magic of the
free market***

Nothing could be more damaging to our society than the idea that the *magic of the free market* will provide the optimal solutions to all our complex problems. Indeed, the exponents of this theory claim that *by definition* the free market provides optimal allocation of resources and effort⁶ and produces optimal results. At least in the long run. Also known as *market efficiency*, the idea is that a free market must provide the best mechanism for regulating economic activity, and its resulting distribution of wealth must reflect the relative worth of the individuals involved.

But this whole economy is based on uncoordinated self-interest producing the magical result. People are only supposed to consider their own circumstances when making decisions. Companies are supposed to act only in their bottom line financial interests, disregarding any effects their decisions may have on any individuals. Indeed, by including non-bottom line criteria

⁶ You may notice that I distinguish between resources and effort (labour). Most business language is now describing human effort as human resources, a term intended to reinforce a lack of distinction between these two fundamentally different factors of production.

in decision making, individuals and corporations are acting to subvert the market efficiency mechanisms, which of course cannot be done.

**unnatural
rate of
unemployment**

As governments have focused on engineering a technical soft landing, we have paid no attention to the fact that the economic professionals have been steadily increasing their definition of the *natural rate of unemployment*. This rate is supposedly natural because that is best the magical free market can provide. Our economic policy has worked its way towards a state where inflation is low, growth is high, but unemployment also remains high. Record profit does not imply employment.

But this is taking the whole question as if the economy were a separate entity, to be considered outside the questions of how the people live. The orthodox view cannot accept that the decisions we make regarding social welfare can also be appropriate input to the magic formula. The magic result doesn't have to be the theoretical maximum money output of the system. The magic can still operate without being a free for all.

The Western Advantage

Unfortunately, the way our economies are organized our prosperity in the market also depends on inherent advantages and disadvantages. The relatively cheap labour and increasingly important lax environmental standards of the Third World allow us to leverage our wealth in a way that we can't with comparably developed economies. Comfortable middle class citizens are all too willing to ignore this exploitation of the poor and undereducated, both within their countries and outside.

**unnatural
advantages**

I suspect that our political and economic leaders assume that we have natural advantages in education and sophistication that will keep us at our high level of prosperity. When this myth starts to erode from pressure from places like India and China, they will surely modify their slavish belief in unrestrained trade. It is then we will see how solid is their belief in the tenets of the free market.

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Our ability to utilize our relative advantages is based on the ability of corporations to produce and trade as they please. They need to be able to move production of textiles and trees, agriculture and autoparts to wherever is cheapest. We of course will be left with the high-skill, high-wage, high-tech jobs because of our natural superiority.

The export of jobs will leave an underclass that can't find employment in the new economy. The resulting drain on those that have jobs will lead to a reduction in support for programs that ease the pain.

***trickle down
economics***

There was no better description of the way the economy really operates than the Regan-era phrase *trickle down economics*. What trickles down is prosperity, but as the term implies, it's a trickle, one that tends to dry up.

Rigged Freedom

There is of course nothing free about the way the market is run. Through rules, legal and social, the market is manipulated to provide the best results for the only actors that matter in the drama, the corporations. The government in a free market society is expected to maintain the freedom with great effort. The law is mainly a tool to regulate behaviour in the market. There are laws to enforce contracts, to provide protection to property, to regulate bankruptcy. The government is also expected to provide education and training and to maintain civil order. Government provides a monetary system, and a raft of rules regarding corporate governance and practices to facilitate a stable and efficient system of commerce.

market failure

This elaborate governmental infrastructure is there to correct for *market failures*. This is when the market is incapable of arranging certain things, like basic education of workers, for its own benefit, so our governments must give it a helping hand. This is the only way our governments are supposed to intervene, otherwise they

are accused of *government interference*.

Free is just a badge of honour that has been successfully attached to *market* so as to create the illusion of freedom. In fact, much of our governmental system is there to provide for commercial interests, even at the expense of the direct interests of the citizens. In exchange for giving up political control of the economy we're free to buy what we like, work where we like, live where we like, do what we like. At least as our supply of money permits.

**for the benefit
of the people** Corporations are even legally defined as *people*, so in this sense, you could say that the system is for the benefit of the people. Remember, this free market magic is not about producing prosperity but rather efficiency.

Efficiency of What?

**humans,
a renewable
resource**

How do we define this goal of efficiency? It is to allocate *scarce* resources in a manner that will make the best use of them, that is, will produce the most profit from the least input. But input of what? Capital of course, this is capitalism! Human effort is included in the equation only as it is measured by the scale of wages and that definition of relative worth of work. As such, the system encourages the use of the least amount of labour, just like our minimization of capital and materials. Is it any wonder that unemployment is a persistent problem?

Value is Money

Anything not measured in monetary terms cannot be included in the definition of efficiency, and thus cannot be part of the consideration of economic policy in a free market system. This thinking is what's behind ideas that the way to solve problems like the environmental crisis is to factor in the environmental *cost* into the market equation.

carbon tax *Proposals for a carbon tax, a tax based on the level of con-*

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sumption of fossil fuels, are attempts at factoring in the environmental cost of burning these fuels.

There are even extreme arguments as well that there is no environmental crisis because the market has done its bit for efficiency and cannot be wrong.

Assuming we recognize a problem, the way to solve it is of course to let the market work its magic by making the undesirable result, in this example the environmental degradation, a cost of production. Abracadabra, no more problem. The problem we have is to put a price on the undesirable results. This is a social problem and if we fix too high a price we are warned, we will stifle production and therefore prosperity. Social problems don't really belong in the market calculation, but our weak non-capitalist tendency to consider human well-being has led us to this result.

***cost of human
suffering***

Policies like minimum wages, unemployment insurance and welfare are all distortions of the absolute reign of the free market and are attacked as such. Released from these constraints, the argument goes, and business would make much better decisions about the allocation of resources for production. But these policies are the very price that society has put on human suffering, and thus are exactly like the price we are told to put on the environment. When we are chastised for these distortions we should realize that our goal is not maximum economic output.

These policies are society's way of factoring in the human opportunity costs. They can be considered on two levels, one the lost wealth to society of unproductive or burdensome citizens, and the other more human and intangible cost of suffering and lost hope.

Need is a Relative Term

Why are we working so frantically to increase efficiency? What's our goal? It's to provide for our needs, and once done, to provide for our wants (our leisure). This as we can now see, is an endless cycle. As we be-

come more efficient at producing the basics, we can devote resources to producing discretionary items. As these items become more prevalent they take on the characteristic of need. This then requires a new round of efficiency so we can produce the new basics more easily.

In so called developing countries, need can be very basic indeed. Things like food, shelter, clothing, and primary medicine are what is needed most. So efficiency in these economies means a decent, yet basic, standard of living. As the developing countries reach the plateau of developed nations, they too have entered the quest for material luxury that seems to have an insatiable appetite.

*luxury
becomes
necessity*

Items that were once luxury goods become needs. What North American doesn't consider a refrigerator, a telephone, a television, even a car as a basic need? How about a VCR, stereo, or dishwasher, going to movies or restaurants, or going away on vacation? When our wants are converted into needs, we are obliged to work harder to satisfy them. At the same time, the average family now requires two incomes to support the same standard of living that one supported only decades ago. Efficiency means the same work no longer produces the same wage.

Eventually, efficiency becomes a goal in itself, which leads us to bizarre results entirely disconnected from real life. This is symbolized in the worst way by the money games that we play.

Confidence Games

The 1980's orgy of money games finally collapsed because it was based on the notion of profit based on no underlying real world structures. Money is a fiction we have all been taught to believe. It merely represents value, and only does so as long as there is confidence that it can be exchanged for real goods and services.

The paper profits from leveraged buyouts, junk

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bonds, arbitrage, programmed trading, futures and options markets, real estate speculation, and foreign exchange manipulation, could only be sustained until the music stopped and the physical chairs had to be counted. It was all an elaborate game of confidence, albeit on the rather grand scale of national and international economies.

Never mind that real lives were destroyed in the process, that communities were wrenched. If a company was worth more money as the sum of its parts, scattering jobs to the winds was a simple side effect.

*the Real
economy*

It has become perfectly acceptable to make money by manipulating money, not investing in production or providing services. The connection of money to real life becomes a game on paper. The fact that these money games manipulate and distort the real economy is considered, if at all, as an unfortunate side effect. This term *the real economy* is telling. As now used by business analysts, it recognizes that the financial economy is often divorced from the economy as experienced by people.

Foreign Exchanges

Manipulation of foreign exchange rates has become a major activity for business and government alike. The theoretical purpose of floating foreign exchange rates is to provide a natural balancing mechanism for the other aspects of international commerce – trade and investment flows. The magic hand of the market is supposed to be the regulator, with exchange rates acting as the escape valve for any unbalanced economic activity. Thus when there is an excess of exports over imports, the exchange rate should, in theory, rise to offset the unbalanced trade flow.

The naïve would expect that the price of something in a country's currency would equal the price at home in our currency multiplied by the exchange rate. As any foreign traveller can attest, this is often not the case, not

***purchasing
power
disparity***

even close. This is the little used notion of purchasing power parity, where a given amount of effort would allow you to buy a given good anywhere. Remember, money is a fiction that only purports to represent labour to be exchanged for goods at a different time or place. Foreign exchange rates don't attempt to balance out on the micro (or real life) level, just at the wishy-washy level of national economies.

In practice, the foreign exchange process is treated as just another money game to be manipulated by foreign exchange traders. These people make money in two ways. First by skimming off the top a percentage of the transaction value, with no risk. Second, traders speculate on the value of currencies in the future, often manipulating the rates in the process.

EEC governments watched basically helplessly as their European exchange rate system was rocked by speculators in the early '90s.

In early 1995 the North American currencies all suffered at the hands of currency speculation as the Mark and Yen became the speculators bet.

The resulting currency speculation is a game of chicken where governments are always the loser. Economic doctrine and a regulatory vacuum forces them to prop up the currency under attack while speculators gain huge profits. Governments are currently powerless to moderate the exchange rate game, as they have deliberately left the currency trading system unfettered. It's not that they couldn't act, just that the current doctrine of free markets hinders them. It will be interesting to see if governments can renounce the economic orthodoxy long enough to act for the benefit of the world's economy.

A proposal by a Nobel winning economist argues that even a minor tax on currency exchange would make currency speculation much less attractive, thus leading to more stable exchange rates.

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Large governments themselves can also use exchange rates as a strategic weapon. Don't like another country's trade surplus, just engineer a rise in the value of their currency. Of course governments regularly manipulate their own exchange rates through their central banks, under the guise of inflation. So this natural equilibrium has been undermined until it became just another money game.

Debt Doubt

*hitting the
debt wall*

Now confidence about our nation's ability to repay its debt is the latest game. Under the threat of credit rating downgrades and lack of foreign bond investors, our governments are madly cutting back in an effort to maintain confidence in our ability to repay.

The deficit and debt have meant paralysis for our governments during a terrible economic recession. Decisions were made because of the debt that exacerbated the recession, further weakening government finances, raising the debt, bringing further predictions of doom. Fear of an international currency or debt crisis has ruled. Dire warnings of IMF intervention, like in delinquent third-world countries, are heard.

Comparisons to New Zealand's debt fate are repeated while honorary third world membership is bestowed.

*military
helicopters
vs. welfare*

Governments now routinely make stark choices previously avoided thanks to what was assumed to be a never ending path of expanding government resources. The true picture of government tradeoffs is now coming into focus. How governments make these choices is now being driven by debt fears. Reducing government has become the fashion as taxpayers threaten to revolt.

That much of the debt was accumulated thanks to deliberately high interest rates meant to curb the fear of inflation is largely agreed. The policy of high interest rates for low inflation had the known tradeoff of low growth, high unemployment and higher debt. It may

even have been a deliberate tactic to force spending cuts later, in an effort to serve a belief in less government. What is odd is that none of this matters when discussing deficit reduction. We have a myopic focus on social spending as the culprit in the deficit game. Like those slight-of-hand games.

In fact, the whole economy is one big game of confidence. Consumer confidence, business confidence, investor confidence, these terms aren't simple catch phrases, they are the essence of the system.

The Not So Invisible Hand

*I'm alright
Jack
capitalism*

Laissez-faire capitalism, the idol of the Right, does not as it might appear, mean a free for all. It means producing an environment that fosters business growth, and getting out of the way regarding any societal consequences. The evangelists who preach this doctrine don't really believe it though, they believe in a baser variant. Practised by many Western nations, and particularly the United States, it is a form I would call *I'm alright Jack* capitalism. That is, what's good for us is good capitalism, and what's good for you but bad for us is not.

This is the classic desire to control the definitions, and has succeeded quite well. Capitalism is what the Americans, the *defenders of freedom and democracy*, define it as. Alternative definitions and implementations are all represented as experiments with socialism or communism, representing a loss of freedom, and are thus doomed to failure. And if they aren't, they can be helped along that path with a little trade intervention.

Whose Trade is Good Trade?

This *what's good for us* attitude is seen in U.S. trade policy as well. While arguing in international negotiations that they are adamant free traders, they are party to an incredible web of trade manipulating policies. Usually these policies are dressed up as *supporting the*

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***the
importance
of being
earnest***

American family farm, or protecting national security, but when other countries try to do the same they are slapped down by U.S. sanctions.

The U.S. threatened unilateral sanctions on Japanese luxury car imports unless Japan opened its auto dealership system. The Japanese were ready to go before the new World Trade Organization, but the Americans found it in their interests to ignore this official trade mechanism.

The American government argues simultaneously for the elimination through GATT of import restrictions on their goods (for example agriculture) while they are subsidizing them; the abolishment of export restrictions on our goods (energy) through the FTA and NAFTA; the imposition of export restrictions on our goods (softwood lumber); and restricting imports of our goods (too numerous to mention).

Using U.S. definitions, all California produce should be regarded as unfairly subsidized, due to their water subsidy to farmers.

***Congress
made me
do it***

There is no consistency in their position because they want the best for themselves and are willing to argue disingenuously for whatever policy will produce it. They can always argue the now standard *Congress made me do it* excuse, and everyone will nod their heads in resigned understanding. Of course all countries do this, trying to gain the advantage in the game of the fake free traders.

Trade for Our Sake

The American attitude that government intervention, and especially government ownership, is bad, is a basic policy now of international trade. It has been administered most effectively by the IMF with a helping hand by the GATT. In exchange for international economic help, Third World countries have been forced to privatize government industries and open their markets to imports and exports.

**government
is bad**

The policy is based on the idea that governments can't be trusted to allow free markets to operate and thus shouldn't be allowed to own businesses or to control trade. That government intervention might be the preferred way to serve a society in particular areas is considered unacceptable, because this would prevent U.S. companies from providing those services, and making the profit.

The American view is twofold. First, that any state ownership is a loss of opportunity for U.S. private economic interests, and second, that any successful state enterprise is by definition an unfair subsidy. These two doctrines are used effectively to curb the idea that state management can be a better way to organize for society's benefit.

Attempts to control imports or exports considered vital to the local interests are similarly disallowed by the international financial institutions. There can be no good or service that can't be either imported and exported.

Measures to encourage the export of processed rather than raw materials have met stiff opposition from the U.S. and international trade and financial organizations.

And if others persist in using state intervention, the U.S. can whip up a fury of fear, uncertainty and doubt, causing capital to flee from the economy.

So now we know that government intervention is bad and will not be tolerated in the world trading system. Government cooperation with business is an unfair trading practice because the Americans don't do it. Of course they do, they just don't call it that.

Their Industrial Policy

The American government has regularly engaged in planning its economy and in intervening to produce certain results. We may believe that they don't, thanks to the steady propaganda flow from politicians and the media. They insist that government is bad and has

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therefore been kept out of economic planning. The New Deal may just have been the last time they *admitted* to having a plan to infuse the economy.

*industrial
strategy or

Military
Industrial
Complex

psychological
ailment?*

The biggest manipulation of the U.S. economy was and is done through military expenditures. That they are unable to admit that this was an industrial strategy is amazing. Whole sectors of the current economy were propped up during their unprofitable phases by defence funding, that is, were subsidized by the government. And this is not just the weapons industry, these include the nuclear, aerospace and computer industries as well. Without direct and steady government intervention, the computer industry would still be undeveloped.

This is a massive regional development policy as well. Military bases and weapons contracts are scattered around the country in a deliberate attempt to engineer prosperity in the regions. Ironically, this turns out to be the biggest obstacle to defence budget cut-backs, since most congressional districts have a military base or a supplier to protect. The end of the cold war has meant regional economic devastation.

Now the government is acting more openly, in the HDTV arena and in the convergence of the telephone, computer and television industries. The government is officially trying to *promote competition*, code words for ensuring that U.S. industry is on the forefront of this technological revolution. Never let it be said the U.S. government believes in the strict free hand of the market.

Whose Economy is This?

We have no choice but to globalize. This is now accepted as fact. Yet evidence of this necessity is rarely offered.

One of today's business mantras is that our economy must be quickly and completely integrated into the global economy to ensure our standard of living. Why

is this so, and was it an accident or a natural result of our human development? Do the people have any say in how their society should evolve?

The Elephant and the Mouse

In a sense Canada has been under the influence of these same globalization forces since its colonization. First it was beholden to the French, then the British. Now it is under the thumb of the Americans.

There can be no truly independent Canadian economic policy simply because of the extreme similarity of our economic system with that of the U.S. The sheer dominance of the U.S, both economically and emotionally is even more true now under the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA. We're playing by their rules, and not surprisingly, their rules favour their way of doing things.

The fights over book publishing and film distribution are prime examples of clashing views of the world that we are bound to lose.

The traditional economic levers available to governments are severely constrained for our policy makers. Our interest rates, regardless of our inflation rate, basically cannot fall far below American rates or it will cause a run on our dollar and debt financing problems. Our taxes, especially corporate ones, cannot be significantly higher without risking massive corporate abandonment. The same is true of wage rates. Our social programs can only be so generous without risking similar cost comparisons with the U.S.

Whither the Nation State?

It has frequently been opined that globalization represents the death of the nation state, as corporations operating internationally become more important to citizens than their countries. Borders would become unimportant when citizens realize that national governments exert little influence on their lives.

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But people are the one factor of production that can't and won't move freely, and blithe corporate willingness to abandon employees will ensure citizens' loyalty is not transferred to the employer.

The nation state is a vessel for identity, shared values and for culture. And corporate culture is a flimsy substitute for ethnic culture. Corporate loyalty will not replace national loyalty. States exist to protect and promote a particular kind of society and culture. People, given the choice, don't trade their ways of doing things for the nebulous benefits of free trade. Our governments though, have currently chosen to throw our lot in with others, in the process abandoning many of their traditional levers to direct and assist our society.

There is much evidence of a national backlash in the European Union, as it tries to standardize practices that are deeply ingrained in culture.

**marketing
trade**

What is the purpose of this international economic organization? Should it be to promote the greater good of all, even at the expense of the wealthy? Should it be to promote a free for all, a frenzy of competition, the outcome of which is bound to be prosperity? This latter statement is a pretty good description of the arguments put forward for the global economy, and what has come to be known as global free trade.

We seem to be locked into a debate about our economy between economic nationalists and neo-conservatives. The nationalists insist that anything related to free trade spells doom for our country, the conservatives think that any constraint on *free market* capitalism will lead us to third world status – or worse, socialism. Unfortunately, this debate is doomed to ideological bickering and bravado, because our economists can't really prove anything worth debating, about our society and especially about global economic organization. Our politicians are no better though. They tout free trade as if it were a result of divine intervention. Indeed, Canada-U.S. free trade was aptly described by

leap of faith its proponents in 1988 as a *leap of faith*.

The truth is, no one knows. Globalization is one massive experiment with our economies. No model, no ideology can possibly claim to predict the outcome of this gamble.

Most political leaders are faced with the prospect of joining the group or being left behind. The scheme has been devised so there is little middle ground. The hope is that the trend of increased standard of living will be accelerated or at least sustained by combining into one big economy. In the process the old economies are being abandoned. The old securities must be withdrawn, the old compacts broken.

We must remember though as we rush to join the EEC or NAFTA, APEC and GATT that capitalism often produces bad results. Not everyone is a winner.

It Doesn't Just Happen

The economic system we toil in is not the result of divine intervention. It is also not the completely natural product of human nature that others would have us believe. Our economic system is highly structured, with many rules that attempt to prevent or promote certain outcomes. Once we realize this, we are poised to begin the process of analysis and debate that should take place around this fundamental societal mechanism.

Once we realize that most of the economic practitioners are out for their own gain, are emphatically not looking after society's goals, then we will begin to take responsibility for our own fate. These professionals include economists, lawyers, financial traders, bankers, regulators and politicians. Each has their own reasons for acting as they do, but rarely do these include societal well-being, in the non-ideological sense.

Economists are trapped within their models of theo-

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retical purity and practical improbability. Lawyers are bound by their own system of advocacy, unable to pursue the common good. Financial traders have every incentive to subvert the system to their own gain, distorting what natural mechanisms might exist. Bankers seek stability, as orderly exploitation is just as lucrative as cooperative endeavour. Regulators strive to perpetuate the system as it is, while politicians seek to remake it in their own image.

The economic system has been created by and for these kinds of people. They can be expected to defend it vigorously. They do not view the economy as the means by which society provides for its members. Instead the economy is viewed as distinct from society and attempts to meddle in its operation are harshly denounced. It's not a grand conspiracy, at least not a conscious one. It's how these people think, no active collusion is required.

Economic news and business analysts act as if politics is just getting in the way of business. They hate political uncertainty and wish it would just go away. It's a view that society should be arranged for the benefit of these economic actors, and that politics has no business interfering with business. So, should we organize our society with business interests foremost in mind? Is that what our economy is all about?

Society as part of the economy rather than encompassing it. Two radically different views, that produce often opposing diagnoses of problem and cure.

EVERYDAY ORTHODOXY

III

In Capitalist Paradise Everyone Would Starve



Corporate Goals, Restructuring and The Jobless Recovery

Corporations are society's formal unit of cooperation. They are given special legal standing to encourage risk taking and the creation of wealth. The most important concession is limited liability, which allows owners to shield their other wealth from responsibility for corporate obligations such as debt and lawsuits. In return, they must follow certain rules to make them accountable.

Yet there is a common notion of a greater public or societal purpose of these organizations. Some think it is to provide people with jobs to support their families, or to support the community through philanthropy, or to produce products and services that benefit society. People tend to think of corporations as having morals and ethics, and a sense of responsibility just like they do. Is this a well founded belief? What are we to ex-

pect of the behaviour of corporations?

Profit, Profit and Profit

***Dignity and
worth
These are not
factors
In the
equation of
profit***

To understand anything about the workings of corporations, and thus our economy, we must first state their goal, and that is to maximize profit. No more, no less. There is some debate about the time frame for measuring the maximization of profit. The American system stresses quarterly and yearly measurements, the Japanese puts the emphasis on a longer term.

Profit Predicts Action

When companies were required to file quarterly reports with the American Securities and Exchange Commission, it had a direct and lasting effect on the way those companies run their everyday business. Now, a company is judged every three months on its revenue, expenses, and profit, with immediate reflection in the value of its stock. This has caused many companies to focus almost exclusively on their short term profitability, often at the expense of their long term viability.

The rest of the system has been designed to fulfil this goal. For maximized profits, we are told we need to minimize the use of labour, capital and materials. Economics 101 this is. Unfortunately, most of what goes on as planning and strategy of corporations doesn't graduate beyond this basic economic dogma.

***fiduciary
irresponsibility***

Corporations are required by law to maximize shareholder value. Fiduciary responsibility it's called, but *passing the buck* would be just as appropriate. This convenient legal obligation absolves companies from considering anything to do with the way they treat their employees, the communities where they do business, the environment, or anything not measured as expenses.

Corporations aren't picky about what they produce either. The utility of a product is measured solely by the amount of money that can be coerced from the public, through advertising and culturally induced buying

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***culturally
induced
buying
frenzies***

frenzies. Yet another hand lotion can be touted with just as much zeal as a breakthrough cure for disease. Since the goal is profit, effort and talent are expended in proportion to earning potential, not societal significance.

And who better to run this world of profit than those least interested in, or oblivious to the welfare of other people. We should expect that these people are only out to look after themselves. They are not above taking other people's credit, are ruthless and pushy, and adamantly non-idealistic. They are convinced that they are in this position because they are better people, and thus deserve the disproportionately rich rewards they bestow upon themselves. These are the best types to strictly further the goals of the commercial organizations, which do not include any non-monetary considerations.

Non-monetary considerations include minimizing the impact on the environment, supporting the community and culture, and employing people. Trifling matters for others to consider.

Productivity in Practice

***productivity
product
activity***

Our companies are designed to use the smallest number of people at the lowest wages to produce the largest number of goods at the fastest rate. This is called productivity. The reason to measure productivity is to increase it, that is, to reduce the number of people, increase the number of goods, and to speed up the whole process.

***command
mis-
management***

The big push to increase productivity came with the introduction of the assembly line. This was the result of the increasing specialization of labour that had been going on for a long time. Productivity would be maximized by giving individual workers the least varied task, and require no thinking. Because the workers weren't thinking, an elaborate hierarchy of command management was constructed. Managers did no *real*

work, they were there to keep the workers in line.

So people, in this corporate equation, represent a factor of production that needs to be minimized.

What is the purpose of corporations in this system? Is it to employ people, produce things, or make money? Clearly employing people is only a side effect. What company wouldn't trade all its people for a rack of machines that could do the same task⁷. Producing things is also not the prime goal, but can be seen as a necessary evil. I would bet that most companies would use a money tree, employing no people and produce nothing if they could.

a money tree

This may in fact be where our economies are headed. With the goal being production at the lowest cost, and people being one of the biggest costs in the equation, every effort will be made to eliminate people from the system. This is what we have seen for years in manufacturing, and what we have recently seen for office work. What do all these people do then?

The large displacement of people from a traditional sector of employment isn't new, and has been more or less readily absorbed in the past. Displaced farm workers moved to manufacturing after the mechanization of the farm. Displaced manufacturing workers moved to the office or the service sector after the automation of the factory. Where are the displaced office workers going to go after the automation of the office? The technology gurus will have you believe that they will, like in the past, be readily absorbed in the newly buoyant sectors of the economy. And that this will likely mean a great surge in the number of self-employed people. That most people are not equipped or inclined to self-employment hasn't occurred to the promoters of technology.

As work shifts from one sector to another thanks to automation, it becomes clear that work is not a goal of

⁷ This of course is a description of automation now taking place in manufacturing operations, such as automobile plants, and services such as catalogue ordering and banking.

*IN CAPITALIST PARADISE EVERYONE WOULD STARVE
CORPORATE GOALS, RESTRUCTURING AND THE JOBLESS RECOVERY*

***In Capitalist
Paradise
everyone
would starve
for lack of
income***

our economic system. In capitalist paradise with infinite productivity and zero labour costs, everyone would starve for lack of income. And lack of income is what you get after restructuring.

Restructuring

rationalization It is now rather fashionable for companies to shed large portions of their work forces. Called restructuring, downsizing, right-sizing, delayering or my favourite, rationalization⁸, it is so completely in vogue that even profitable companies are into the act. It has been easy to justify these actions in the name of global competitiveness, but what is really going on here?

Why Restructure?

***global
competition*** What does massive restructuring really imply? Doesn't it mean that the corporate gurus and managers have failed, doesn't drastic change mean that these companies have been badly run? In their defence we hear that the relentless forces of the global economy demand drastic measures. But this is their system, they are in charge and they had it structured this way. How can they be so unprepared for the results?

We are told that all it takes is a good dose of bad tasting medicine to cure the ills of a company. But the medicine is rarely taken in the ranks of those responsible for the problems.

But we're falling into the trap again of thinking that corporate goals include employing people, treating them well and being loyal to them. Bzzzzz, wrong! This is not the goal, it's a side effect, a necessary evil. Being rational corporate entities, some of them anyway, the goal is to preserve the corporation at the highest possible profit level, thus ensuring maximum shareholder value. Of course feathering a few managerial nests

⁸ What, were they irrational before?

along the way is simply an incentive for proper behaviour.

The goal of today's corporate restructuring is to maintain the viability of the corporation in the global marketplace. Trendy prescriptions include shifting production to lower wage, tax, and regulated jurisdictions, amalgamation of production allowed by new trade agreements, diversifying into more profitable areas, and conversely, retrenching from previously calamitous diversification.

Restructuring 101

Corporate axe men⁹ are brought in to brighten the bottom line (and coincidentally to line their pockets), usually with the result of mass layoffs and plunging moral. Typical *rationalization* plans include early retirement incentives and enriched voluntary severance packages. The result often means the loss of not only the most experienced workers, but also those with the most initiative and those that care the most about the way the business is run. These are the people the company can least afford to lose. Is the problem really too many employees?

Another popular technique is to shift production to lower cost jurisdictions around the world. This has the surface appeal of reducing labour costs, but as many companies have discovered, the raw wage and benefit rates are not the only factor when measuring worker productivity. Jurisdiction shopping also has the potential of reducing environmental compliance costs. It's always handy when you can pollute in someone else's backyard.

**Inverted pyramid
corporate
hierar-
chy** Another prescription taken during the restructuring craze involves management reorganization. The old command management hierarchy style was supposed to give way to the inverted pyramid structure. In this system, the manager is a facilitator for the line employees who actually produce things, higher level managers fa-

⁹ They're almost always men.

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cilitate for the managers below (or those above in the inversion). Unfortunately, as reasonable and practical as this sounds, it is about as likely to be implemented as finding a real inverted pyramid. A nice intellectual exercise, but it's not going to happen in the real world of corporate ladder climbing and credit stealing.

Total Quality Management

Other corporate management trends like Total Quality Management (TQM) and the recent Business Process Reengineering are embraced and discarded with disheartening regularity. TQM programs sprang up in all sorts of companies with no real intention of examining or fixing the problems. Employees were handed slogan cards and were expected to believe the rhetoric of *putting the customer first, quality is most important*, and who could forget *employees are our strength*? As soon as contrary evidence emerged, the programs were discredited and wasted away.

The basic problem in these exercises is the fundamental tension between the goal of the corporation, profit, and the needs and desires of the employees, the cogs. As long as management style treats employees as just necessary raw material, slogans and organizational charts will have little positive effect.

Employers also need to understand that not all motivation is monetary. Genuine recognition by employers of a job well done can be a considerable motivation for employees. People need to feel they are doing a good job and are recognized for it, even without cash rewards. False or politically motivated praise, or recognition only tied to direct involvement with high profile successes can be counterproductive. Equally demotivating is the nonrecognition by management of those not doing a good job.

That companies are fundamentally structured to meet the needs of their shareholders rather than their employees or society shouldn't come as a surprise, it's called *Capitalism* after all, not *Socialism*.

Problems Big and Small

Contracting out, corporate partnership, and strategic alliances are all symptoms of the fact that large corporations don't work well. Instead of mergers and acquisitions, companies are turning outward in an attempt to maintain agility and focus.

***hardening of
the attitudes***

There is a tendency to hardening of the attitudes in large corporations because of the perception that size confers status. Problems manifest themselves in typical ways. The establishment of fiefdoms which assert authority over ideas and production result in the *not invented here* syndrome. Ideas from outside are automatically suspicious since the organization has already recognized inherent expertise through jurisdictional division.

***Not-Invented-
Here
syndrome***

Bureaucracy that maintains itself, and budget games with year end capital boondoggles are also common symptoms. Managers of these enterprises are constantly struggling to reign in the desire for bigger is better within the divisions. Sheer size also makes it difficult to share goals. A sense of frustration and helplessness is usually present.

U.S. telephone giant AT&T voluntarily split into three separate companies, in the hope that smaller units would mean greater focus and agility.

Large corporations have also been caught off balance as they find that their former competitors, mortal enemies in the battle for industry dominance, have become their suppliers, customers, and partners too. This new state of apparently conflicting roles is hard to shoehorn into the traditional competition model.

***virtual
corporation***

The latest idea for saving big companies is the *virtual corporation*. The theory goes that there doesn't need to be a permanent group of people at all, they can all be hired on contract as needed. In this way expertise can be purchased when needed and surplus employees disappear without a fuss when contracts expire. There are serious questions about the availability of skilled peo-

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ple without the traditional corporate training grounds, the lack of a collegial atmosphere, and whether most people could cope with the uncertainty of contract employment.

Most big company strategies for reform hinge on the assumption that smaller organizations work better. But it's the human interaction that's the problem, and in this respect smaller companies just suffer from different maladies.

***entrepreneur's
disease***

Small companies suffer from what I call entrepreneur's disease, or thinking that because you built the company you know everything. The owners, having built the business from the ground up feel that they are capable of running every aspect of the business as it grows. The problem comes when they refuse to relinquish control or defer to expertise. With the entrepreneurial drive also comes the bigger is better syndrome, and its predictable results of overexpansion.

All this right-sizing, downsizing, restructuring, delayering, and drive for efficiency has led to massive de-employment. What happens to all these formerly employed people?

Recovery of What?

Thanks to our friends the economists, we have definitions of terms like recession and recovery which, not surprisingly, have nothing to say about the humans involved. These economic terms are strictly concerned with the quantity and velocity of money. So it should come as no surprise that the term *jobless recovery* simply describes a recovery where an increase in employment doesn't follow along as the usual side effect of all that money sloshing about.

The Jobless Recovery

I do find the casual use of the phrase the jobless recovery to be most ironic. To the unemployed it must

**69¢ tuna and
Kraft dinner**

seem like a cruel joke. Not only are they not likely to find jobs in the near future, but the continued cutbacks in government assistance due to the perceived debt problems make the prospects of day to day living quite bleak.

This was all quite a predictable result of the Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. The government of the day promised a comprehensive retraining and worker adjustment program to compensate for the inevitable fallout from the consolidation of American production after the tariff walls were eliminated. Apparently this was just another illusory election promise to calm the legitimate fears of those about to be displaced.

The result has been increased unemployment with large numbers of workers shifting from temporary unemployment insurance to longer term provincial welfare rolls. Combined with the reduced income and sales taxes, the welfare payments have depleted already sparse government coffers. This has put pressure on the willingness to fund the very education and training programs that are supposed to pull us out of this mess.

The Ontario Tories were brought back to power in 1995 in large part because they advocated workfare - where welfare recipients would have to work for their benefits (in what used to be derided by Tories as make-work schemes).

**the jobless
economy**

It is now dawning on people that the jobless recovery may actually be a harbinger of a jobless economy, where large numbers of people are permanently unemployed. Since the economy is not geared to produce employment, but rather wealth which is not well distributed, what looks like a sluggish recovery may actually be our future.

Economic Reactivity

So what are we recovering? Profits and economic activity that's what. Jobs? Well, no, but you can't expect us to do anything about that, it would only reverse the fragile recovery or push up the deficit. The economic conservatives proclaim that the recession is over

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***it's the
consumers'
fault***

(technically speaking of course - remember the GNP?) and has been for quite a while, that it wasn't all that bad in comparisons that they have done, and that any economic stimulus now to provide jobs would only lead to that duo of bogey-men, the return of inflation and an increase in the debt.

We have also heard the consumer being blamed for the sluggish recovery from the recession. Production and exports are up. If only consumer spending would pick up like in the past, our economy would be humming along once again. On what planet do these economic analysts live? These *consumers* are of course the same people as our *unemployed* and those worried about becoming unemployed (just about everyone else but the analysts apparently). Consumer spending will pick up when the expectation of unemployment decreases, something that will not be brought about by the craze for shedding jobs that our global competition apparently demands.

So what has the jobless recovery done to our social policy and our ability to fund our social systems?

Social Restructuring

The jobless recovery and public debt have made the restructuring of social programs fashionable again. Long a controversial topic during the Regan-Thatcher-Mulroney years, there is now near unanimous agreement that we can no longer afford our *generous* social programs and that we must better target them to those in *real need*.

Change in social programs now means a reduction in benefits and an increase in stigma associated with collecting those benefits. People must learn to fend for themselves, to stop lazing around on their welfare cheques and go out and get a job, pull their weight in society. Of course, we've just been having an orgy of job shedding, but that doesn't matter.

The social restructuring craze is all about saving money. Governments are now realizing that with fewer taxpayers they have less money to transfer through social programs. Fewer personal taxpayers (more unemployed), and less corporate tax (jurisdiction shopping), both as a consequence of globalization.

The focus is on cutting government spending, reducing deficits and debt, reducing the size of government. Only indirectly will we hear about the goals of our social programs, and how best to provide the benefits of this collective wealth.

For the Sake Of?

It's interesting to note that when the discussion is about cutting and targeting social programs, it usually focuses on the social aspects of the programs in light of the current fiscal constraints – people don't deserve what they get. When the discussion is about poor economic (business) performance and unemployment, we find the issues tend to be related to how we (the state) can better educate and train the *workers*, to make better use of our *human capital*¹⁰, to in turn make businesses more competitive in the global economy – businesses have not failed to train and employ workers, society has. Of course, all these factors are intertwined, but this conflicts with the business is business, social Darwinism attitude.

The restructuring is tackling many questions that have rarely been examined in the full context in which they function. Sadly, this has not been prompted by altruistic feelings of social responsibility, but rather by predictions of impending doom brought on by public debt and the global economy.

The social restructuring is thus being done in the context of global competitiveness and maximum use of human capital. During the debate, it is often difficult to determine which is the goal and which is the means.

¹⁰ This loathsome phrase conjures up ideas of people being accumulated, traded and spent.

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Is business a means to produce a good standard of living for people or are people meant to facilitate business activity?

**human
infrastructure**

In the context of most current discussions, the goal seems to be to provide a better human infrastructure upon which our businesses will build global competitiveness.

Robert Reich, Clinton's U.S. Labour Secretary likes to stress that the only advantages that a country can rely upon are a well educated people and a well maintained infrastructure.

Little attention is paid to the social responsibility aspects. At least that's the way it's going regarding education, income assistance, and targeting of programs.

Government Inc.

Many now advocate that our society and government should be run like corporations. They believe that the means of a corporation, the way things get done, automatically translate to the provision of public services. Wouldn't it be simple if this were so. But as we have seen, the goal of corporations is profit, and trends like the current focus on customer service are subordinate to making money

So how do we fit the ways of a corporation, whose goal is profit, to our government, whose mandate is presumably societal well-being? Our governmental goal shouldn't be the greatest monetary return.

The Harris government is intent on getting the fundamentals right (cut welfare, reduce spending and taxes, privatize, eliminate subsidy - generally reduce government) - and damn the opposition. It doesn't occur to them that their version of the fundamentals may no longer be operative.

forbearance

Governments are urged to stand back from regulating new economic sectors. Termed *forbearance*, it means that our common interests normally articulated through government are better served by precluding any government

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action. At least this is the prescription given to us by business leaders.

The C.R.T.C. has taken up the forbearance call in its drive to impose competition. It may end up sacrificing Canadian culture at the altar of competition, with the new information technologies.

Governments are also busy shedding any operation that can conceivably be run by the private sector. It seems that governments should be run like corporations until they show the potential to make a profit, from which they might finance other social programs. As soon as profit enters the picture the government is supposed to jettison the enterprise, because as we know, all profit is reserved for the private sector. Governments are roundly criticized for imposing deadening taxes to finance their operations, but as soon as they come up with a voluntary financing mechanism they are supposed to abandon it.

Finance Minister Paul Martin says that anything in government that can be run privately should be.

So governments are to be left with what has proven to be unprofitable for the private sector. Like education and training.

Education Versus Training

Witness the debate surrounding our system of education and training. It is centred around the need to produce workers who will be employed so as not to drain the finite public resources available for income support.

But trained for what? We assume that we know what to train the people to do and that there will be jobs for these retrained workers. But this is just wishful thinking. Jobs don't magically appear because there is a source of skilled labour. If anything, people will be more upset when they have been trained and still can't find a good job. They will have bought into the dream that acquiring knowledge and skills brings prosperity. This may have seemed like an inevitable consequence in

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the past, but as we have seen, the past has recently been a bad predictor for the present.

People are the least flexible component of production. Their education takes years, and if done improperly is painful to correct later on. The demand for specialization only accentuates the risks. People are also inclined to be rooted in place and people. This would seem to favour the flexibility of education over the specifics of training.

But education is often seen as elitist and harshly attacked as such. This presumes that the masses are really rather dumb, instead of just undereducated. Also that we shouldn't be striving for educational attainment. Again, this is the attitude that ensures resignation and complacency when it comes to questioning the way we run our society.

The debate surrounding the reform of education rages around back to basics and standardized testing. The controversies over child centred learning versus back to basics and whole language versus phonics are about the mechanics of education rather than the goals. Debate about the number, size, and power of school boards is more politically than educationally oriented – here saving money is paramount. What the goal of education is, is only obliquely touched upon. Are we supposed to produce people that are good citizens or good workers. This is fundamental, yet we rarely speak directly to this point.

*learning to
do
learning to
learn*

Teaching people to question has rarely been a goal. By focusing on training – learning to do, rather than on education – learning to learn, we are assuming we can predict the path of the economy. Haven't we realized that this is a hopeless task? An emphasis on the ability to acquire and apply knowledge would seem like a better way to equip our people with the skills to prosper in our new, and as ever unpredictable economy.

Unemployment Assurance

Unemployment insurance was designed as a means to tide people over temporary joblessness. But unemployment is no longer just a temporary setback that we can insure ourselves against. It is now a long term condition that we are told the government cannot afford to compensate us for.

The current trend in reform of unemployment insurance and welfare is to push people through training programs that will give them jobs. But what are the prospects for such a program when all indications are that there will be high levels of unemployment for many years to come?

The unemployment insurance system has also been skewed over many years into a general income assistance and regional compensation program and thus has been overwhelmed financially and has lost credibility. Special provisions for economically depressed areas providing rich benefits for minimal work, training programs funded out of the insurance scheme, maternity and now even paternity provisions have been grafted onto the original insurance idea.

*veneer of
compassion*

Again, the driving factor in tinkering with unemployment insurance is to save the government money. Governments are thus cutting benefits and carefully putting a veneer of compassion in place of the real thing. Hey, there are always food banks, shelters, and private charity.

Healthy, Economically

The loudest debate regarding social restructuring concerns the attempts to cut back on health care spending. As usual, the focus is saving government money, rather than on how to best promote health in the country. There is quite a bit of turf defending going on as well. And proposals regarding prevention are nowhere to be seen.

User fees are all about generating revenue and deterring costs, by making the patients think twice about

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using the health care system. Yet it is the doctors not the patients who are firmly in control of the system. Patients don't check themselves into hospital, don't order tests, prescribe drugs, or perform operations. The doctors decide all this, but have somehow made the public think that it is the patients who run the show and who must be controlled.

Proposals for a two-tiered health care system (publicly financed basic care, private payment for the rest) are little concerned with patient care, but rather the quest for either extra income or V.I.P. service. Introducing competition for profit into the health system defeats the purpose of universal health insurance, by giving an incentive to avoid sick people.

By focusing on cutting services to save money, the whole restructuring may backfire in reduced public health and its direct effect on the economy.

Targeting Universality

What the debate regarding universal versus targeted social programs is really about is the premise for social cooperation. Are we basically altruistic or self-serving?

***altruism or
self-interest***

Although a desire to ease the stigma attached to social programs may be an argument in favour of universality, the proponents of universal schemes desperately argue that middle and upper income taxpayers will quickly lose their willingness to fund programs that don't benefit themselves. Thus the basic motivation is seen as self-benefit. The targeted camp believes that we shouldn't waste our limited public resources on giving benefits to those who clearly don't need it. These people are, perhaps unwittingly, counting on the altruism of their fellow taxpayers for continued support.

The heated debate about two-tiered medicine is animated by a belief that the lower public tier would become eroded by the withdrawal of support from the beneficiaries of the upper tier (both doctors and patients).

The universality debate goes right to the heart of society. Before we can hope to come up with appropriate reform we must decide how much support we are willing to give one another and the conditions to attach. We have to decide if we view social programs as an economic or social benefit, that is, whether we provide them primarily to keep the economy going – government compensating for market failure, or to keep the social fabric strong – government as a collective support for the people.

It Doesn't Just Happen

We have built a system where the economy dominates society and corporations dominate the economy. Because of this we invest companies with our expectations of how our society should be run and how people should be treated. But companies are not up to the task, since they have incorporated into them only goals of profit for shareholders.

If we continue to structure and run our economy the way we have, we should stop kidding ourselves that everything will just naturally work out. Without intervention by society, the distribution of wealth will only become more uneven. That is the nature of our economic system.

The recent history of western society has been a struggle to order the economy so that people are not forgotten in the whirlwind of activity. Whenever corporate actions have gone too far, or society has changed too much, companies are then required to follow the morals of the society (though this is couched in terms of standards, programs, and regulations rather than morals). Thus has been the history of child labour laws, the minimum wage, health and safety standards, environmental laws, equal employment requirements, and severance provisions. Whenever markets have failed to

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provide for the people, government has had to step in. And so we got public pensions, welfare, unemployment insurance, and health insurance.

The common factor in all these laws and programs is people. Our corporate system may be great at generating economic activity, but it is not great at sharing the wealth or preventing exploitation.

The fact that society had to legislate these standards and provide these benefits indicates that most businesses were unwilling to voluntarily follow or provide them. But why? It's because corporations are not moral agents, and society doesn't require them to be so. This is a deliberate way of organizing economic activity, one that we must recognize as the basis for our society. We do not expect businesses to behave morally, we hope they do, but we do not require it.

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IV

The Global Village Has Ghettos and Slums



Money Has No Morality in The Global Economy

A sense of ethics and morality is crucial to a well functioning society. Providing a moral foundation for society used to be the responsibility of organized religion. More recently, we have placed the burden of defining moral behaviour onto the individual. A personal morality though, must withstand the daily pressures of popular culture and our economically driven society.

The modern integration into larger and larger political and economic clubs has tended to undermine our efforts to maintain moral standards. The larger the organization, the further away from personal morality and responsibility we become. The responsibility is ceded to the larger organization. Today we find ourselves integrating into the global economy, only beginning to realize that there is no organization willing to take on this burden of responsibility.

The Façade of Money

We use money without giving it a second thought. Its worth is tacked on everything around us. It provides a convenient medium of exchange not weighed down by concerns of equity or fairness. We earn it, save it, borrow it, spend it, lend it, covet it. But what is it?

Money represents value, deferred payment in goods and services. It is also an abstraction of worth. We use a numeric figure to denote the relative worth of people in an organization, and in society. At least it's supposed to represent the economic worth of people, so that someone making twice as much money as another is twice as worthy to the economy.

As usual with the economy, there are all sorts of distortions and imbalances that are introduced and become enshrined over long periods of time. With money value, the relationship between quantity of money possessed and worth to the economy, and certainly to society, is tenuous at best.

By dealing with value abstractly using money, we can avoid having to make conscious decisions regarding the appropriateness of its origin, and of its use. It also makes it easy to admire the accumulation of money, and to equate money and societal worth. People are supposed to be important and worthy of respect because they possess lots of money, and conversely, those that don't are often treated with contempt. By measuring people using money, we eliminate consideration of the qualitative aspects of their worth.

Money is a good and essential medium of exchange for the economy, it's just a lousy indicator of people. If anything, the use of money encourages a downplaying of the human aspects of our economy and society. When the economy's performance is measured by money it is conveniently decoupled from consideration of the well-being of the society.

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A-morality Pay

One of the unsettling things you learn after having worked for a while in a large company is the general absence of morality. More amoral than immoral. This is true not only for the public or external effects of the company, but also in many cases for its internal operations.

Back in the times before money was the definition of the economy (yes, there was such a time), people were apt to consider others in their daily struggle for material and spiritual sustenance. Partly this was the moral thing to do, and partly it was borne out of mutual reliance. People could observe the effects of the way they treated others, their interaction was direct and personal, and consideration of the other's condition was immediate.

When money became the medium of exchange of labour and goods, some of this morality was lost in the resulting depersonalization of the transaction. The consequences of people's actions were no longer observable, as the effects on others became indirect. Consideration of cause and effect became difficult.

***small tends
to be moral***

Even in this day when money is the undisputed regulator of events, morality is likely to play an important role in small business, as day to day direct encounters with others and their situations is inevitable. This is also true of small communities, where the effects of support for local enterprise is directly felt.

It's easy to see the effect of shopping in the neighbouring town, much less so for the cross-border shoppers from Toronto.

***large tends
to be amoral***

But personal morality is lost in large organizations. Morality in general does not produce quantifiable profits, and is therefore not a factor in the decisions made by large organizations. The often heard statement 'that's what pays your salary' is used as an excuse to suppress questioning that may stray into consideration

***that's what
pays your
salary***

of morality, or even common sense. We act as if by accepting a salary, employees have traded their moral rights and obligations along with their labour.

When people own and run businesses directly, their morality tends to pervade the organization. Now that corporate ownership is widely exercised through the intermediary of the stock market, where owners may never even see their company, the personal morality of the owners is largely irrelevant.

The growing power of pension mutual funds is no beacon for moral decision making either. Often regarded as the new source of corporate governing wisdom, their legislated fiduciary responsibility means these fund managers have to consider value alone, excluding non-monetary factors from influencing their decisions. Mutual funds in general present another level of abstraction, where the owners are usually unaware of their specific holdings. So we take our amorality pay and shovel it into amoral mutual funds.

Reconnecting Money to Society

*amoral profits
fund social
programs*

This lack of morality-based decision making has been compensated for to a great extent by effective governmental and societal constraints on the operations of companies. Taxes, are a fundamental compensating factor, essentially skimming off some of the amoral profit to be used for the public good. Labour, human rights, and more recently environmental laws are other compensating tactics, designed to inject consideration of the employees, the public, and the environment into the corporate decision making systems.

In an economic system where the markets determine the behaviour of the economic actors, government taxes and regulation are used as a way of reintroducing morality as a factor in society. The markets are explicitly designed not to consider morality, so the governments try to. Unfortunately, with globalization now dominating the economic agenda, these tactics of governments are now threatened by the mobility of companies. Most attempts to satisfy the societal morality are

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***money has
no loyalty***

based on the redistribution of money and the prohibition of behaviour. With the easy ability of companies to move to different jurisdictions goes much of this ability to reconsider morality.

With the increasing deregulation of capital flows, we have seen that money has no loyalty either. What are called multi-national corporations should more rightly be regarded as a-national corporations. These corporations, aided by pliant governments, have begun to move factors of production around the globe with little regard for their nominal country of origin. In the quest for profits, they seek the advantages of low wages, taxes, employment and environmental standards, which become major criteria used for locating production. What they leave behind is of no concern.

The Money is the Message

It should be easy enough to extend the compensating tactics of national governments to the international realm. International taxation and regulation could be just as effective in injecting societal goals and morality into the global marketplace. Except that isn't what's happening. The international economic system has been designed to prevent this.

Trading Our Morality

Through various trade initiatives since the Second World War the world's economies have begun to operate more like a global economy. But this hasn't turned out to be the much vaunted global village, but rather more like a global city, complete with ghettos and slums.

Our beliefs about the worth of people, of basic human dignity and the ideal that everyone should have opportunity, only operate well within the confines of our shared community. Once outside this realm we are unlikely to apply our values to the situation of others

we will never know. It is no longer our concern. But whose then?

***the global
society
doesn't exist***

In our globalizing society, who is responsible for the effects of our dealings with the outside world? This is not a simple question and is basically being ignored by our business and political leaders. Within a community of shared values, the community itself ensures that their dealings are moral. In what is casually referred to as the global society, there is no real sense of shared values and responsibility. This society doesn't really exist, it is merely the illusion of coherence you get when people appear to think and act alike. So far, the idea of the global citizen is empty, without something as powerful as nationality or ethnicity to bind the people to one another. Without this, there is neither the will nor the means to self-police our actions as they affect others in distant places.

***global
citizenship is
meaningless***

Companies are shipping toxic waste to third world sites to avoid strict environmental safeguards.

***the global
marketplace
operates now***

The global marketplace is developing within a framework of laissez-faire capitalism, to an extent that doesn't really exist in any of the participating states. The regulation of international trade has been devised to provide the least possible interference from governments. Much less so than internal regulation. Except where clear notions of national security exist, governments are expected not to intervene in trade matters (and certainly not their citizens). International trade has taken on a quasi-independent status, almost beyond the scope of regulation in the normal sense. The only regulation to which it submits is that which furthers its cause, reinforces its power, broadens its reach.

So regulation of international trade for the sake of people, or the environment or other indirect matters is circumscribed. This has been put in place by our governments in cooperation, to facilitate the broadest possible trading system. Our governments have taken themselves out of the picture, limited their jurisdiction to intervene on behalf of the people. Who is left then to

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fend for the morality of our collective and external actions?

The Downward Spiral

Because our corporations are operated on the single premise of shareholder value, the use of money in our economy has become detached from the requirements of our society. What have our leaders done to compensate?

*good
corporate
citizens*

We hear that our governments want to attract the *good corporate citizens* to their jurisdiction. But what does this mean, especially in the light of our integration into the global economy? We have local companies that employ more workers and pay more taxes outside the country than they do within. They also distribute large proportions of their dividends to foreign investors.

We have companies that pull up stakes and move their jobs elsewhere, with no thought about the community. Companies try to give their actions a patina of respectability by arguing that all taxes are a 'killer of jobs', that they are trying to employ people and the government is thwarting them.

One argument goes that companies don't really pay taxes, the consumers of their products do, in the form of higher prices. This is an interesting argument. Why is it not extended to include all spending by companies? Companies after all pass through all their costs to either the consumer through prices or the government through tax deductions (in today's highly liquid capital environment, short of going bankrupt, they can't pass the costs through to their shareholders). Yes those palatial offices, generous pensions, and manipulative advertisements are all paid for by you and me. In effect we pay to be convinced to buy their products.

What incentives do we give companies to invest or continue operation in our area, and what are we expecting them to do when the incentives run out? Governments, often within the same state, outbid each other

**getting out of
the way of
business**

with subsidy concessions to prospective businesses, including forgone taxes, lax regulations, and outright grants. All this is on the assumption that the business will employ people in that area, giving the government a return on its investment through personal taxes and reduced income support payments. By engaging in this sort of competition, governments as a whole trade away their moral responsibility, giving overall control back to the amoral corporations. They essentially bid down the moral price of business with a reverse auction. What we are left with is lowest common morality.

**lowest
common
morality**

Not only are our governments willing to abandon responsibility for our corporations international activities, they have ignored questionable individual behaviour as well. Why is it perfectly legitimate for our citizens to flout our laws and standards by seeking lower standards in another jurisdiction, while continuing to benefit from our advantages?

It is considered normal and legitimate to register boats in Panama or Liberia to avoid safety and labour standards, to move profits to the Bahamas to avoid tax, to hide money in Switzerland to avoid scrutiny, or to shift production around the globe in search of lax environmental and labour standards.

Using the excuse of international trade, our governments withdraw from responsibility for our actions abroad, and from regulating other's actions back home.

Biggest is the Only Goal

An iron doctrine of our capitalism is, bigger is better, growth is imperative, biggest is the goal, and there is no such thing as enough.

Companies must expand to survive, and now combine to be able to compete in the global economy. Competition is no longer mandatory within a country, as fears about global economic forces lead politicians to cheer *our* internal mega-companies to combine to defeat

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***bigger is
better***

the dreaded global competition.

The bigger is better desire is what animates business. Market share must be increased. More must be produced and sold. This same desire results in a definition of economic performance that stresses increased output as the overarching goal (remember the GNP).

Once again, the problem with largeness is that individual and local perspectives are submerged under the overall goal of the mega-organization. Unless specific measures are taken to ensure that these concerns are taken into account, they will be overwhelmed by the dictates of global competition.

Small Means Business

In the desire to become bigger, many businesses fail because they have overexpanded, that is, got bigger too fast. They find they can't scale up the success as simply as cloning what they have. And some businesses are successful precisely because they are small. Expansion kills the original reason for success, which may relate to personal attention or unique character.

***as
businesses
grow jobs
decline***

We hear over and over that small businesses are the engine of growth, especially job growth. This is what leads governments to give favourable tax rates and regulatory environments to smaller companies. As the businesses grow, acquire and merge, the societal goals of employment start to be compromised.

As businesses expand, the needs of individual employees and local communities become relatively less important. Production starts to be moved to other locations. Economies of scale are applied and workers are shed. Since the drive is for efficiency, to remain competitive with the rest of the world, keeping people employed is not a business concern. The social policy concern of giving people meaningful lives through employment is not taken into account.

Any yet, most small businesses benefit little or not at all from free trade agreements and globalization. Nor

do they thrive during a local recession. The drive for globalization not only caused a shedding of jobs from large businesses forced to compete, it also produced a subsequent dampening effect on smaller businesses, leading to further economic trouble.

The Loss of Being Large

economies of scale

There are many implications of producing in the large versus the small. Economists regularly refer to *economies of scale* which simply means that a producer can benefit from several advantages of producing on a larger scale. Traditionally this includes volume purchase discounts for production inputs and spreading fixed production costs such as equipment and payroll over more units of output. More recently, the opening of global markets has made it advantageous for large businesses that can maintain a presence around the world.

By scaling up production, the need to reduce the component cost becomes an imperative, as is the need to reduce the number and variation of components. All variation in inputs implies complexity in production and increased cost, and thus lower profit.

Take electronics as an example. A large producer of say, radios, has an incentive to reduce components to a minimum and to limit their variations. Eliminating one component from the design, can add up to millions in profit. Reducing component variation leads to faster production, and also to higher profits. In this example, the electronics manufacturer has probably produced a better radio, one that will need fewer repairs. But in many areas bigger means worse, lower quality, less effective.

maximizing your share of the pie

The input cost for a large producer is more closely guarded than for small producers. If I bake a pie and sell it, the difference in cost of butter vs. partially hydrogenated palm and/or coconut oil is unimportant. To a large food conglomerate making millions of pies, the few pennies saved on each pie add up to substantial extra profit. Questions of nutrition and taste are largely unimportant. If it tastes roughly like a pie that

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MONEY HAS NO MORALITY IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

will do. Over time people forget what pies used to taste like.

Ironically, to combat the loss in quality as a result of large scale and remote production and the resulting altered consumption habits, businesses sometimes go to extreme lengths.

After driving down the price and reducing the quality (taste) of tomatoes by concentrating production in places like California, agricultural conglomerates have spent millions to genetically engineer a tomato that could be picked later and rot less during transportation.

***watch for
flying truck
tires***

Large also dictates a necessity for consistent and timely delivery of input. This means less variation or a standardization of input. Forget local delicacies, this scale means deliveries by the train load and on specific dates. And because of the need to run a huge production facility to eek out the last drops of profit, the output is dispersed to a wide area, lowering regional variation. Again for food, this also necessitates the adding of preservatives to give the appearance of freshness.

Large scale retailing has a similar effect on local and small scale production. Because these producers cannot deliver either in the quantities or timeliness dictated by concentrated marketing campaigns, they are frozen out of the market. Niche and specialty markets are all that remain open.

Commodification

Perhaps the best of all possible markets in capitalism is a commodity market. Commodities are indistinguishable one from the other, causing their price to tend to just above the production cost of the least cost supplier. This is the ultimate result of economies of scale and free trade, twin pillars of Western economies.

Notice the measurement of a commodity is only

taken of the direct and desired output, all factors of production and byproducts can be safely ignored.

They're All The Same

A commodity represents no nationality, no culture, no environment. It is accepted that we need not concern ourselves with how it came to be. This attitude has allowed the process of globalization to move so rapidly, and with so little comment. After all, who can argue with obtaining a commodity at its lowest price, they're all the same, why should we pay any more?

*why should
we pay any
more?*

But the processes of creating a commodity can be quite different in its effect on people and the environment. The commodity price will rarely reflect human and environmental costs above a bare minimum, because producers that take these into account will not be able to compete on price alone. Safety standards in mines and nebulous qualities like protecting bioregions and endangered species are all external factors that we hear are killing our industries as they try to compete with the rest of the world. This was the reasoning behind the effort to add labour and environmental standards to the NAFTA. Unless all potential producers are subject to the same environmental and labour standards there will be downward pressure put on governments to reduce theirs.

Once the society has bought into the idea that commodities should be freely traded, the next step has been to apply the same lowest price reasoning to any other good or service. As we concentrate on price, we will forget about any external effects of the production and consumption of goods.

People Are the Ultimate Commodity

*people are
the ultimate
commodity in
the global
economy*

This same attitude is applied with shocking regularity in regard to people. As corporations exercise their ability to shift production around the world we find them treating their workers as just another input cost. People are the ultimate commodity in the global econ-

THE GLOBAL VILLAGE HAS GHETTOS AND SLUMS
MONEY HAS NO MORALITY IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

omy. After all, they're all the same, why should we pay any more?

Local employment is no longer a concern of local business as they become world players. They begin to play employees in one location off those in another. The effect of this kind of pressure on people is not appreciated. Any consideration of maintaining local employment is viewed as nationalistic silliness, something to be dismissed in the tough world of global competition.

By expanding our economic goals from personal sustenance, to local prosperity, to regional and national advantage against foreign competitors, we have abstracted out the needs of the people involved. They have become mere factors of production, inputs, unit labour costs, production resources. Through this process we have downplayed the human aspects of commerce.

Maybe our notions of community and citizenship are just fantasies, maybe we should be viewing this with a dispassionate business attitude. At least, that's the way things are going.

It Doesn't Just Happen

Money has become our excuse for acting without regard for others. We've disconnected the movement of money from its representation of human effort. It's not just a medium of exchange it's a means of abstraction. With this abstraction has come the sense of irresponsibility, *it's my money, I'll spend it the way I like*. If we had to do directly what our money does on our behalf, we would probably have a more compassionate and caring world.

We need to consider how to reestablish ethics and

morality as important elements in society, especially in a globalizing world. But the concentration on international economic organization has tended to exclude consideration of political questions. Treating economic blocks as economic-only pacts has allowed the discussion regarding their impact to be disconnected from the practical effects on the people.

If you view NAFTA and the like as an economic arrangement, and the economy as just something that's supposed to create wealth, you deftly exclude questions about how these international economic systems affect people's lives. It becomes a question of national balance sheets, trade flows, interest and exchange rates, and economic deregulation. Economic dialog occurs only on the level of macro behaviour of economies and abstract micro effects. Yet none of these has been defined in relation to citizens. Citizens are not part of the economy, consumers are, workers are. We are thus reduced to our unconnected roles.

***minimize
government***

If citizens do try to exert some control over the economic system through political action, this is condemned as government meddling. But governments are supposed to represent our overall interests, to compensate for the money focus of the economy. As long as we allow the view to predominate that governments shouldn't participate in economic policy, and that government should be minimized, we leave our social, cultural as well as economic fate to the dictates of competition and the global economy. Where the real live people are not to be considered.

V

You Can't Stop Progress



Progress Begat Globalization

Our notions of how society operates are curious. The two prevailing views are that it is being run into the ground by our incompetent or self-serving political leaders, or that everything just unfolds as it should. Underlying these views is the belief that Progress is the immutable force that drives the system. We have different opinions on the success of Progress as the animator, but tend to share the belief that it is a given.

Progress has probably been the most important tool in convincing people of society's worth, and to gain their active participation in following the path of development. It is used as a coercive force to blunt people's natural tendency to resist change in their own lives, and at this it has been spectacularly successful.

*never
increasing
prosperity
for future
generations*

Progress and its closely related notion of development, have been given the credit for ever increasing standards of living, especially experienced since the Second World War. Even the detractors of Progress were forced to concede the attractiveness of increased prosperity, and give grudging acceptance to the changes demanded. The notion of globalization on the other hand had no obvious attractive qualities. Indeed, on its face it represents an attack on the very notion of com-

munity and stability that most people hold dear.

The successful implementation of globalization required a combination of long term planning, stealth, and when it became publicly noticed, a link with the invincible notion of Progress. Accustomed by Progress to the torrent of fundamental change, and mesmerized by the complexity, we have been walking into a whirlpool of globalization with barely a peep of concern.

More recently, Progress seems to have lost its magic, greater prosperity can no longer be assumed for future generations. The declining prosperity is now attributed to globalization, with its attendant plagues of downsizing, restructuring, and global competition.

Progress and You

The myth of PROGRESS has dominated public discourse for many years. What is the idea of Progress and why have we believed in it? What has this idea of Progress done to our ability to question and to control our lives?

social Darwinism

Progress is the notion that all change is leading in the right direction, is inevitable, and unmodifiable. It is the notion that there is some preordained or perhaps Darwinian path that we are following that makes these changes unalterable and right. There may be losers along the way, but in the grand scheme of things, events are unfolding as they should.

There have been two common perspectives on Progress, both fatalistic. One views it as an explanation and justification for change, however unfortunate. By clinging to Progress like a security blanket, people hide from the world and their role in it. The other view sees Progress as natural and desirable, without even considering the merits of what is being progressed from. These people revel in the process, the trip to a strange and wonderful future on the magic carpet of Progress.

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Progress as Comforter

Many people view Progress as an unstoppable force that may have undesirable consequences. Progress is just how the world works and there is no use trying to alter it. Progress may be bad, but there's no use lamenting the inevitable. And the consequences weren't foreseeable anyway.

This notion of Progress is used against these people as a political tool, a calculated way of coaxing the masses into accepting changes they may not like. It is also a scientific tool, used to suppress any tendencies to question the desirability of research. It's a business tool, used to blunt opposition to developments not easily defended. Just label a change as 'Progress' and it becomes a fait accompli. Opposition to these changes is like opposing the passing of time.

How could they have let this happen?

And once they have our consent, or at least resigned acceptance, their responsibility is now shared with us. We are just as much to blame. *How could they have let this happen?* and *no one told me about this* are the lame excuses we are left with when things go wrong.

Rarely does it ever occur to people that change is deliberately labelled as Progress for the very purpose of blunting opposition and sharing blame. Without the shield of Progress these changes would have to pass judgment on their own merits. It is precisely when something has been identified as Progress that it should immediately become suspicious.

the autopilot of Progress

In many ways it has been comforting to have this notion to explain the otherwise disturbing changes taking place in all our lives. Without such an excuse to disengage from the decision making process, we would all have to take responsibility for the way our society is run. Without Progress we would have to analyze, discuss, propose and promote ideas regarding the organization and regulation of our society. Fortunately, the autopilot of Progress has relieved us of this onerous task. We can sit back and relax, knowing that it is all

proceeding as it should, or at least beyond the possibility of our control.

Progress as a Beacon

The other widely held notion of Progress is as an inevitable but welcome force, always leading toward improvement. This version of Progress sees only the benefits. After all, if something is inevitable it's easier to accept when viewed as benevolent.

Under this view, to oppose Progress is like opposing motherhood, and besides, look at how much better off we are. Examination of events in detail is unnecessary because the outcome will naturally be positive. To these believers, the litany of Progress is undeniably good, something we should be happy to recite.

Believers point to the undeniably good developments of society such as improved medical care and plentiful food. The down side of a drugged up, over medicalized society stressing cure rather than prevention, and chemical laden produce are either ignored or not recognized.

***cheerleaders
for change***

This utopian attitude is as bad as the other one of resignation, leading people to withdraw from decision making and to emphatically embrace the new, even to the point of becoming cheerleaders for change.

Change for change sake is a related attitude. We're not progressing if we allow things to remain static. If something has been in place for a period of time then it must be changed, for fear of becoming outdated, stale or old-fashioned. This implies a more active role, actually seeking out opportunities for change.

***out with the
old - in with
the new***

The CBC exemplified this attitude with its now defunct repositioning experiment. First they abolished the National and Journal, a beloved institution, and moved the news to 9 pm in a free form wash of news and analysis. When that didn't work they moved to a news followed by analysis scheme (essentially the old National and Journal format) then moved back to 10 pm, having lost substantial audience in the process. Finally, they dumped the analysis host in a pathetic attempt to liven up the place.

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Brought to You by Progress

Progress has been a distorting and destructive idea of modern times. It has been used as a cover for choices taken on numerous issues of vital importance to society. These developments were trumpeted as exciting, the bountiful harvest of the natural evolution of our societies.

*better living
through
chemistry*

The development of nuclear energy, the chemical revolution, the space age, the pharmaceutical boom, the dominance of television and entertainment, the suburban expansion, the computer and information revolution, and now the genetic revolution have all been conducted under this guise of Progress. Indeed, most people wouldn't even realize that fundamental choices were made regarding each of these developments.

At the time they were taking place, these developments were unassailable. Some still are. Others are so ingrained in our society and economy that we prefer to pretend that nothing has gone wrong. And Progress is such a good political tool that we never can admit that how we got here is our own fault.

Are we fooled by *fresh* vegetables year round? Are we happier thanks to television? Are we better off as a result of the proliferation of over the counter medicines, are we healthier? It's amazing that our ancestors ever managed to survive. People don't even think to consider whether these things are good. They must be, because they exist. And these are the supposed benefits of Progress, what about the down side?

**The Torching of the Past –
Progressive Side Effects**

Have you ever noticed that Progress is usually connected with phrases of powerlessness and despair such as "Oh well, that's Progress" and "You can't fight city hall"? These are the signs of side effects. Typical of developments justified as Progress are the unintended consequences that are dismissed as inevitable and

*you can't
fight city
hall*

minor. Since little or no long term or comprehensive planning is done, side effects become the norm. Opposition to the side effects is portrayed as opposition to the development as a whole and as such is easily fended off. Little attempt is made to lessen the effects since they are taken as normal and ignored in the grand scheme of things.

**modern day
Luddites**

Those that battle Progress itself are dubbed Luddites, people who history will show to have been wrong. Funny that no one ever looks back and analyzes these decisions born of Progress. Are we really better off because of everything we have casually accepted as Progress? Have there not been changes that have turned out to be bad? Is all new mechanization, computerization, chemicalization, or medicalization automatically good? Because that's the way we act. Our modern day Luddites are never vindicated because, by definition, what they were trying to preserve was supposed to change. Their perspective is irrelevant, they are not given the opportunity to choose their course, the course that Progress must dictate.

The Mennonite and Amish communities in North America have lived apart from Progress for years. How do they compare to the social and environmental problems of our society?

Those that don't automatically buy into Progress are considered backward or old-fashioned, people whose opinions are to be dismissed. Society demands that people accept and incorporate these changes into their way of thinking, to adopt a positive attitude. Complainers and trouble makers are the ones who harp on about these things.

In the process we purge tradition and erase the past, without giving it a second thought. We change our ways just to keep up with the times. Not only do we obliterate what's old, we damage the values that go along with it. Values that may have developed over a long period and with very sound underpinnings. Freed from this nostalgia and sentimentality we can build the

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better future.

The Passing of the Torch

But the idea of Progress as the inevitable structuring of society and the environment toward more development, with the consequential diminishment of citizen control, is now waning. It was discredited, finally, by innumerable failed economic, technological, and social experiments, and the belated recognition of the destruction of our environment.

The anti-Spadina Expressway movement in Toronto actually did manage to fight city hall. What was then seen as Progress is now regarded as an appalling possibility.

Progress has been used one last time though in the classical way, to smother discussion of the merits of the recent pivotal issues of free trade and the global economy. The global economy is simply unopposable, just the way things are going to be. This is the basis of almost all media coverage of globalization, the natural, inevitable, and unstoppable development of human economic and societal organization, reaching to a higher plane of civilization.

Its name may not be used, but it is surely thanks to our conditioning by Progress that Globalization is now sweeping the world.

Globalization Q.E.D.

Now Progress has metamorphosed into the even more pervasive and powerful concept of GLOBALIZATION. Globalization, mind you, based on our friend *free market* Capitalism.

Globalization is the process of expanding the scope of markets so that they operate as if local and national boundaries did not exist. Indeed, as if political boundaries didn't exist. Along with the expanded opportunity to sell abroad, which is regularly touted as a

national strength, comes the requirement to compete with the world. This competition takes place in a framework that is not designed to give regard to any local reasoning, including any special local or regional sensibilities. The global market has been designed, has had factored out, the idea that there are people involved in the transactions, and that those people have any requirements other than the exchange of money for a particular good or service. A market transaction does not take into account reasons.

Go Forth and Multiply

factors of production

This globalization gives the green light to exploiting factors of production from around the world. *Factors of production* is so wonderfully abstract, it makes you forget that there are real life consequences to these decisions. But there are radical consequences.

Globalization is the antithesis of local control. Anything that can be decided locally must now be measured against the scale of global competitors. Local reasoning, attitudes, and values are basically irrelevant when labour, goods and services can be freely exchanged for foreign substitutes. A factory can be moved to where the cost of production is the least. Of course this is what business should do, you will hear, this is the correct business decision. Yes, this is how we now organize our society, we are to accept the aggregate result of these cold business decisions. If a societal justification really is required, we are offered up the notion that the result of all this freed up business activity is bound to produce better living standards... and thus a better society. It certainly will produce more international financial activity.

Do we really know what the effects of globalization are going to be? The intended effects seem to be massive restructuring of national economies and forced integration into the world market. Who's to say that all this coseying up to the neighbours isn't going to end in a death-embrace, induced by local impoverishment, wildly gyrating markets and financial instability? We

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certainly can't rely on the economists or financial professionals to predict behaviour. Aren't we just assuming that it will all come out in the wash?

The 1995 Mexican market turmoil required an American bailout, we were told, because failure to act could result in a world financial market meltdown like that of the Great Depression.

And what is the nirvana of globalization? Do we even know if there is one? Are we just lapping up the idea that globalization is inevitable and uncontrollable? After all, it is a good way to explain away the *difficulties* we are currently experiencing. We certainly wouldn't want to blame any of our problems on our system of Capitalism, or the structure of our political system, or the notion of Progress. Or on our own disengagement from the system.

The problem is that we are living under globalization now, we have no choice, everyone else is, and we better make the best of it. At least, that's the party line.

Standards to Live By

Through this notion of globalization we now have an economy where everything changes, nothing is stable or can be counted upon. There are no assurances, no jobs for life, no sacred social safety nets, we just have to cut back to survive. And remember, the government can't control anything for fear of upsetting the balance dictated by globalization.

What have we traded all this for? The general business argument, the main justification of global markets if Progress doesn't cut it, is this: increased business activity (more buying and selling), brought about by increased productivity (more output by fewer people using less equipment) produces higher standards of living (more money for workers), and that this must be good. That we've traded social stabilization programs for more money is assumed to be a good thing. After

all, you can always use some of that new money to buy yourself a better home security system, or your own armed guards, or to donate to the homeless.

Business activity alone does not address social equity, does not support those that can't cut it in the fierce global arena. Globalization forces push governments to drop expensive social stabilization programs funded by taxes which could put local businesses at a competitive disadvantage.

harmonization Harmonization is the order of the day.¹¹ Harmonization means reducing our social standards that affect commerce (potentially just about anything) to the levels of our prominent competitors. If we don't, we're told, our businesses will be disadvantaged leading to lost jobs. Only in a world defined in the terms of capitalism could we expect the process of harmonization to be useful and beneficial. No consideration is given to the social reasons behind these standards, they are simply viewed from the business perspective.

Our lingering belief in Progress has allowed us to passively accept globalization as eventually good for us, even if all current evidence is overwhelmingly to the contrary.

Globalization is No Accident

This allegedly worldwide *phenomenon* of globalization conveniently goes unexamined and unchallenged. Nobody is even discussing the fact that globalization is a planned, deliberate campaign. It didn't just happen, this was no spontaneous combustion. It was the logical and desired outcome of the system of global trade agreements, financial mechanisms and institutions, and regulatory reductions that have been put in place since the Second World War.

¹¹ I find it interesting to insert the word away after harmonize when I find it being used.

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The World is Their Oyster

The attitudes of the victorious American system were enshrined not only in the constitutions of Germany and Japan but also in the world financial institutions that were set up after the war. The Bretton-Woods exchange rate system, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank are all institutions that carry out Western (mostly American) notions of capitalism in the world trading system. These notions stress individual achievement over social harmony, business growth at the cost of human suffering, and development over stability.

Imposition of the American system of capitalism on impoverished countries by the World Bank and IMF wasn't just happenstance. Privatization of state industries, disastrous mega-projects, and cash crop and resource based export oriented economies were the result, with practically no regard for internal welfare (or warfare for that matter). Maintenance of Western advantage in trade was the driving force. The reason Western governments support the World Bank and the IMF is to encourage and integrate developing countries into their system of commerce. They want good customers and resource exporters. Creating economic rivals is not in the plan.

The GATT was ostensibly a mechanism to prevent repetition of the wild prewar trade protectionism swings. It is more importantly an all or nothing trade integration pact. To gain entry to the world trading system, countries must agree to the whole package. National and local variations in economic and social organization are submerged by the world trade rules. Cultural differences are dismissed when they affect trade.

In the latest round, the GATT even outlaws national self-sufficiency strategies, by enforcing trade in food and industrial products. Countries must open their

economies to all international trade regardless of the way they perceive such dependence.

The Uruguay round was delayed by Japan's objection to allowing American imports of its staple, rice.

***dumping a
subsidy***

The conveniently wishy-washy concepts of dumping and subsidy are used to bash away at any successful trading partner. Dumping is defined as selling in another country at a price below that in your own, or below cost. The idea is that companies would either dispose of excess production or deliberately try to harm the foreign producers by flooding their markets with cheaper goods. A standard *price your competition into the ground* strategy, it's known as *predatory pricing* when carried on within a country. Once the damage is done and the competition evaporates, the prices are hiked to gather in excess profits. What's convenient about dumping charges is that they are defined by the recipient country, which then imposes stiff tariffs against the offenders. This encourages much leeway in definitions and application.

Canadian steel companies were charged with dumping in the U.S. market, even though the Canada-U.S. steel industry is tightly integrated and U.S. companies were following almost identical practices.

Subsidy can mean just about anything, from direct grants to business, to generous income support or health care systems. The one defining feature is a connection to government. So almost anything your government does successfully is open to attack as a subsidy to one of your exporting sectors.

Social Consequences

One exasperated GATT negotiator explained, during the final days of negotiation before the conclusion of the Uruguay round, that they were "not attempting to solve all the social problems of the world". Perhaps they weren't attempting to solve any.

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Government and business go about the age old struggle of trading taxes for social services. Even if the taxes are not levied directly on the businesses, they argue that taxes on their sales reduces them, or taxes on the wages of their workers drive up their salary demands. Except during buoyant business periods, this acts as a damper on social spending. In the global market there is an added damper, as businesses compete with others in jurisdictions that have lower social spending.

Public social services are inherently disadvantaged in this system of trade that considers only the money value of goods. Downward pressure is put on all services paid through taxes including unemployment insurance, welfare, family benefits, pensions, health care, child care, education, and infrastructure spending. Even minimum wage and labour and safety standard laws (child labour laws?) are under threat by this myopic focus on trade for trade sake.

*environment
versus jobs*

Environmental and health regulations are lumped in with non-tariff barriers as bad. Environment versus jobs has been the troublesome tradeoff in developed countries for years. The thinking is that if we don't accept the jobs that pollute our environment then the companies involved will simply shift production and thus employment to a location that will. The minimum wage has undergone this same analysis since its inception. The danger is that this tradeoff will now be expanded to include other social costs as well. If we don't lower our taxes that pay for health care or welfare then we'll lose jobs to another less costly jurisdiction.

Change for Change Sake

*living with
change*

What the notions of Progress and globalization try to explain is the process society has been living with for hundreds of years, living with change. Change of ever increasing magnitudes – the industrial revolution, the information revolution, the biotechnology revolution.

But almost all changes are introduced for short term

gain, or at least with regard only for the short term consequences. This seems to be the nature of our society. We implement first and ask questions later. The gee-whiz aspects tend to captivate our imaginations so. When a study of the longer term consequences of changes is finally made, we are usually left with a mess that no one is capable of or willing to clean up.

The Children of Progress

global culture There is a flip side to Progress, change and globalization. I think of it as the ratcheting up of problems and the way society tends to permanently incorporate complexity. It is also the way the norms of one society become part of another. The way a global culture, good and bad, is formed.

We see this in our ever increasing expectations of violence, and the law and order consequences. We see incorporated into our laws ever increasing protection against others and ourselves. We see this in the institutionalization of coroner's jury recommendations. A freak accident is permanently incorporated as complexity into our society by regulations and standards meant to prevent the unlikely or the rare. These are the responses in the manner of Progress.

the worst of the world We see it in people's expectation of violence and social decline. Like inflation, the reporting of other people's problems tends to ignite fears of our own. People live with fear all out of proportion with their experience and surroundings because they are shown the worst of the world. Ordinary people are needlessly afraid of car jacking, home invasion, child snatching and child molesting because this is what their society tells them is going on.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

We seem to be able to admit to ourselves, however reluctantly, that we become more like our parents the older we get. This is a result of the way we are social-

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*drive-thru
shooting*

ized and how we learn our culture. The way we think and the way we act is in large part a reflection of how others around us conduct themselves in public.

In the age of television and instant news, the range of examples of public behaviour that is available to us becomes the range of the world. In particular, we see examples of behaviour that would not normally occur in our surroundings and our culture, but these too become examples of how to behave.

As I write this, we in quiet and safe Ottawa have been shocked by the random drive-by shooting death of someone who happened to work for the same company as I. He was out to the corner store in the early evening, when he was shot in the chest from a passing vehicle. Several other shots had been taken at store windows earlier in the evening.

To some people in this world, especially our neighbours in the cities of the U.S., this would not be particularly notable. "Oh we have drive by shootings all the time" said one visiting New Yorker on our evening news. But we don't, and shouldn't have had this one either.

Our news casually covers the horrors and degeneration of societies around the world. We see it every day. It becomes part of the repertoire of things people can do. And then someone decides to copy an act they have seen numerous times on T.V. Our society becomes infected by the worst aspects of others. Our children grow up incorporating into their minds the ways of acting that they see around them, including what they see on T.V.

We tend to throw up our hands and say 'that's the way things are'. This is how the changes become permanent. We excuse ourselves by thinking that nothing can be done, certainly not by us. These are *global* forces and you can't stop *Progress*. And so nothing is done.

The problem is we don't even entertain the possibility that things could be changed. We look at regulating

television and say that it's either an issue of freedom of speech, American style, or that technology changes so rapidly that we have no hope of controlling it. We've given up responsibility because it's so easy to think nothing can be done.

We let our society get out of control. We let violence escalate. We also give it a place to incubate.

Like Parent, Like Child

Children are a reflection of their parents' attitudes and actions. I've always found it interesting that parenting is practically the only important thing we do where society requires no qualifications, we are neither taught nor licensed, and we have no supervision or support. At times it seems that society places little value on this activity.

We have participated in a great experiment on the family in the last several decades. Our economic and social structures have changed drastically in relation to child rearing. Once the extended family was common, providing ample supervision and example for children as they grew up. We then moved to the nuclear family, father at work providing for the family, mother alone at home looking after the kids. Now because of changes in economics, aspirations, and social bonds, it is normal either for both parents to work or for single parenthood. Is it a big surprise that children have less supervision and see less of their parents than in the good old days?

What is the likely result of this diminishing parental involvement? As less socialization takes place in the home and more at school, on the streets, and through popular culture we are experiencing more and more behaviour from children that does not meet with our approval. Society struggles to fill the void, but in the process is over taxing the schools with the increased need to socialize kids at the expense of educating them. As these children get older we are shocked by more involvement with gangs and violence. We are worried. Our answer is to build community centres for fear teenagers will get bored and start a riot.

*YOU CAN'T STOP PROGRESS
PROGRESS BEGAT GLOBALIZATION*

The U.S. has midnight basketball programs for youths, to get them off the streets at night.

Assuming that we aren't happy with these consequences, shouldn't we be examining the reasons, the real underlying reasons and dealing with them?

It Doesn't Just Happen

A shift occurred in society from resisting change to embracing it, from inherent conservatism to hardly noticed radicalism. Progress was the justification for change, the safe option. In the process we seem to have discarded our ability to analyze the purpose of a change, the motivations and the likely results. We have also squelched the desire to look at and analyze change after the fact. We seem unwilling to examine events with the purpose of trying to correct the problems, as if doing so is futile.

Change has not only become expected but is actively encouraged and embraced. This support for change has become a defining aspect of modern times, one of the basic beliefs that drives our society. Not to be confused with fashion which follows a steady oscillation, change represented by Progress is profound transformation toward unknown destinations.

Questioning change has become a touchy proposition. Since by default society will now absorb change, to suggest that changes are best deferred, studied or modified is to be thought out of touch with the dynamics of modern society.

The odd thing with all this implicit and explicit support for change, is that we are at all surprised when our lives are affected in ways we do not like. As we are supporting change through Progress, we don't seem to get the connection, that the very things that we com-

EVERYDAY ORTHODOXY

plain about disrupting our lives, are the results of this Progress.

Ironically Progress's greatest triumph, bringing about the passive, almost comatose acceptance of globalization, has ensured the acceptance of change. Progress, discredited and failing, was saved by its spinoff of globalization. Through globalization, nations are so concerned with global competition that they will willingly, gladly rush to accept any change, any new technology, that will be seen to give them the edge.

Globalization, proceeding under cover of Progress is reshaping what it means to be part of society. It is redefining the notions of citizenship, nations, even democracy. It will cast us adrift, where society is no longer a cohesive support system, but rather a ferocious enforcer of competition.

And nothing is more the animator of Progress, indeed the very nucleus of change, than technology, and it's benignly appealing front, science.

VI

The Deification of Science



Science and Technology Aren't Good

Closely allied with the idea of Progress is the assumption that science and technology are good. That they must produce results where the good outweighs the bad is simply taken as a given.

Science and technology are the driving force behind Progress. They are taken not only as its initiator, but as the saviour when things go wrong. There will always be a quick technological fix for our problems, we believe, not noticing the irony that technology introduced the problems in the first place.

The Promethean Path of Progress

The faith in the positive results of science and technology is a curious notion since many scientists insist that they do not even consider the broader consequences of their research, and that science is inherently neutral regarding the moral consequences of its application. This is even more striking when science and technology are married to capitalism, so much so that

**better living
through
chemistry**

negative consequences are often ignored or disguised.

The development of nuclear energy is a good case. Questions about safety in uranium mines, safety of reactors, and the ultimate disposal of spent fuel were brushed aside in the quest for an unlimited electrical supply. Interestingly, both science and capitalism failed in the end, as reactors have shown to be detrimental to both public and economic health.

Even the safety of electricity, especially high voltage transmission lines, is in some doubt, though you wouldn't know it by listening to scientists. But given its pervasiveness, it's unlikely that any real study of possible danger will emerge.

There is no reason to assume that developments in science or technology will invite applications that are good rather than bad. Often this categorization is not even made during the considering of the application. What is possible is the only thing that matters when striving for the advancement of science — what is profitable dictates the introduction of technology.

**must there
be a better
mouse trap?**

Yet we have deeply ingrained in our society the idea that *innovation* is positive, so that we can hardly hear the word without thinking *good*. The word *innovate* only implies new. But new and Progress work hand in hand with science and technology as predefined goods leading us inevitably to a better society. And so we are condemned to repeat our mistaken belief in the benign effects of science.

When science is our only guide we are often unable to see the cause and effect relationship. A blurring of causes prompts us to do nothing, as lack of scientific proof (what we think of as certainty) means that we have no basis for action.

But science and technology do have bad effects. These effects aren't always unpredictable if we would only choose to consider the possibility. We have to learn to recognize these effects as a result of something, something we need to examine. They didn't just happen, they were caused — we caused them. They are also not uncorrectable, if only we would stop believing in

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technological fate.

The Pugwash Group, the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize winner, is a group of scientists that believes that scientists do have a responsibility to consider the social implications of their work.

It is our complacency that allows technology to run amuck. It is our responsibility, society's responsibility, a burden we refuse to accept. We are taught to believe in science and its practitioners. Worship of science and technology as a replacement for a belief in God. The belief that science and technology are an omniscient realm of human progress is a powerful force. It is a doctrine that needs to be challenged.

Scientific Subterfuge

Science, like any other belief system, has its own built-in doctrines. The two most powerful tenets, usually not articulated, are that science is the only way to explain how the world works, and that science can ultimately explain everything. Quite a claim when you think about it, but where do these two beliefs lead us?

Only Science Explains

*anecdotal
evidence*

Science tends to dominate any discussion once it has been brought into the debate. This can be especially convenient when using reverse-onus arguments since it's often exceedingly difficult to prove something caused something else. The existence of science leads us to think that anything not scientifically proven is not true. This is the arrogance of scientific thinking. Any non-scientific explanation is dubbed *anecdotal evidence* or an *old wives' tale*. These phrases reek of disdain and untruth. Indeed *experience* is a perfectly good alternative description, but one that would give too much credence to ascientific explanations.

Explanations cannot be true, prescriptions cannot be

effective, until they are quantified and statistically proven. This has been the plight of all sorts of alternative medical treatments, from the benefits of vitamins to holistic or traditional medicines. To be considered effective they must be sanctioned by the orthodox scientific community, the one least likely to approve.

Only with the recent discovery of a scientific basis for the health claims of vitamins, have they been removed from the class of voodoo medicine.

social science Whole disciplines of study have been consumed by the belief that scientific proof is the be all and end all of learning and understanding. The mere term *Social Science* is an inditement of a way of thinking that has done enormous harm to the study of human behaviour. We have political scientists who can ream off statistics on what percentage of voters believe such and such, but who flounder in explaining why or what effect this will have on their behaviour. The same is true of sociologists and psychologists who become trapped by the idea that they must use scientific methods in all their work.

The subjective is condemned or dismissed, unless of course it can be turned into statistics. Without scientific analysis and proof the subjective is considered invalid.¹²

Yet the scientific process only dictates that proof is necessary for questions that are proposed in advance. Questions that are ignored do not need investigation under this system. Unfortunately, these unstated questions tend to be the most interesting and crucial.

The blind idolization of science has brought us high chemical use on farms from pesticides and herbicides, to antibiotics, to artificial hormones and steroids, to genetically engineered plants and animals. Yet the science that was used to introduce these either didn't dare or

¹² This is true even in everyday life. I was at the dinner table one evening when my mother mentioned she thought one brand of dripless candle she had used was better than another. My brother quite seriously started to devise a way that we could prove this.

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was incapable of asking the questions related to long term effects (such as cumulative low dosage exposure, or the narrowing of the genetic pool). In fact, science is often only used by society to answer the easy to prove questions related to short term, localized, and macro effects.

Public health officials are alarmed that most antibiotics have lost their effectiveness, leaving the public at risk. Many believe that high antibiotic use on farm animals, and over-prescription by doctors allowed this to happen. Proving this is another matter.

why me?

We ask questions like “why me?” when we get cancer, in the despair of not having a scientific explanation of this fate. But shouldn’t the question really be “why not me?” in our contemporary environment? Who can say that they haven’t had high chemical exposure in their daily lives? Is it any wonder that there are long term effects that the scientific methods of today cannot explain? But we continually allow science to have the final say, to be the only arbiter of cause and effect, and by doing so we abdicate our responsibility.

Scientists in Boston accidentally discovered estrogenic effects in commercial plastic. Studies are now being conducted to determine the extent to which normal exposure to this is causing the increased rates of breast cancer and abnormal sexual development in humans.

**the shifting
sands of
theory**

The irony is that science is built upon the shifting sands of theory. Time and again theories have been defended, almost worshipped, until finally discredited and repudiated they are discarded like yesterday’s news. Theories are dressed up as fact until it is proven, scientifically of course, that they are wrong. Then a replacement theory is trotted out and mounted on a pedestal for admiration.

**The Church
of Science**

We like to think that this is only a fate of long ago, that there are no modern day Galileas being persecuted by the new Church of Science. Unfortunately our

modern day worship of science doesn't really accommodate imperfect understanding, doesn't recognize guesses and speculation paraded as theory.

**Cold
conFusion**

The media don't help either. When scientific *heroes* are regularly proclaimed and celebrated, often out of context and proportion, this only reinforces the public worship of science. We also have the regular reporting of contradictory or preliminary scientific studies on subjects like coffee consumption, cholesterol, and suspected carcinogens. This apparent confusion causes people to believe science is too complicated and deep for their understanding, leaving them only with their faith.

Science Explains All

The scientific community assumes that everything is understandable, logical, ordered, and fundamentally simple. That with the proper understanding, everything is provable or disprovable. Everything is definable in mathematics, if only we could discover the formulae.

Unfortunately this belief that all is scientifically knowable does not stop scientists from applying their half-baked knowledge in the real world. Indeed, it seems almost a scientific imperative that partial results be used in a manner that wildly projects the full consequences.

Theory worship is also part of the science explains everything school. We tend to think that scientists exhibit the behaviour of impartiality, lack of bias, and adherence to fact. Yet adherence to favourite theories long after the weight of evidence is against them is not uncommon. The norm is to propose a theory and to cling to it tenaciously.

**chaos in
control**

When order and predictability were proving to be inadequate for describing reality, scientists conjured up the theory of Chaos. Chaos describes a system of ever increasing complexity and unpredictability. Chaos explained why physical phenomena such as the weather couldn't be predicted with any long term accuracy. But

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Chaos was too disturbing for scientists as it shattered the hope of explaining everything.

So now we are offered the more reassuring and conveniently complementary theory of Anti-Chaos, which attempts to understand why Chaos doesn't get out of control. Anti-Chaos explains why disordered systems seem to spontaneously become ordered, and why this is natural and inevitable. It is being used to explain why life is created out of disordered chemicals, even why the economy and society are ordered systems of individual complex behaviour. Anti-Chaos is a product of the scientific search for a universal principle of organization. The desire to have a reason for life to exist.

Medical Technology

Medical technology has a peculiar slant. Undue attention to economic and prestige considerations has meant it is geared to the diagnosis and treatment, rather than the prevention of disease. Using high technology, chemical and now genetically manufactured products, this has led to the indiscriminate use of tests and prescriptions of drugs. We're treating diseases not people.

Good nutrition or stethoscopes pale in comparison to CAT scanners and endoscopic surgery.

The minuscule understanding of the human body and mind that medical science offers is emphasized every day by the development and use of drugs where side effects of serious proportions are considered normal. We tend to sneer at the quaint practices of physicians of earlier times. We cringe when we think of the use of leeches, blistering, and other inappropriate treatments used in the past. Yet our modern worship of medical science blinds us to the amazing lack of knowledge that medicine still hides.

Ulcers, long said to be primarily caused by high stress, have now been shown to be caused by bugs. However, this was

only accepted by the medical profession after one tireless doctor finally infected himself, in an effort to produce evidence that would convince his colleagues to abandon their old theory and treatments.

It appears that medical science is often just flailing away, in search of new treatments and drugs. Comparatively little research is devoted to prevention and understanding of cause, partly because big money can be made on treatment in the meantime. Prevention is also hard to quantify and prove, is not as politically valuable, and is far less glamorous.

a needle in a haystack

Technology also plays its part. Technology to aid prevention is much harder to create as it requires deep understanding of cause and effect, often over the long term. Research that is done on prevention is usually centred around screening techniques that involve technology in the form of tests for predisposition or early signs.

Now we have stumbled into casual application of reproductive technologies, including in-vitro fertilization, developments in treatment of premature babies and even in-utero operations. Only now are we considering that there might be ethical issues that society should examine.

Playing God

The problem with the advancing medical knowledge of genetics is, as usual, the lack of thought put towards the consequences. Scientists love barrelling ahead with research identifying genetic defects, but this research has potentially devastating personal and social consequences. Consequences which only now, well into the process, we are beginning to recognize and discuss.

It is certain that we will shortly have a furious debate about the *right* to be genetically tested, or to refuse, and the *right* to know the results, or to bar others from knowing. Refusal to disclose will be casually taken as confirmation of a bad result.

Is an employer entitled to know the genetic predispo-

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sition of an employee? What if it is to protect the person from exposure to harm? But it could just as easily be used to screen potential long term burdens. How about an insurance company or the government? These aren't sudden questions, but the predictable results of this genetic research. Unfortunately they weren't dealt with before we had to navigate the mine field.

These aren't just questions for the future either. We have already seen the screening of employees based on drug tests, and on insurance applicants based on habits and heritage. What happens when genetic predisposition predicts that specific behaviour will certainly lead to harm?

*unnatural
selection*

In some sense, we have been thwarting natural selection for years. Using medical treatments we have ensured that common human problems become prevalent rather than be eliminated. Defects such as poor eyesight will eventually dominate the population. I don't give this example to suggest we ban eyeglasses, but rather to prod us to recognize that our common practices have long term effects.

Yet all our technology has not brought us cures but rather treatments for symptoms. We do not cure cancer, we only allow for remission.

There Can Be Too Much Technology

The introduction of new technologies into society usually occurs without public debate or control, even without much thought. Yet profound implications flow from this casual attitude.

Technology is about making tools. Tools are supposed to aid people. Yet most of our technology was introduced as commercial products whose primary purpose is to generate profits, not to better society. Many things are possible technologically, but this doesn't mean that we should produce them.

Somehow we have become a society where even ab-

surd technology can flourish, and be considered essential. The cult of technology has convinced us that we need these devices to live better lives.

**technological
fate**

We are also a society that unquestioningly believes that technological development is irreversible. We believe that once introduced it is impossible to put the genie back into the bottle, or even to tame it. Thus we usually don't even try, and just accept all the results bravely.

We just accept the introduction of technology. Even worse, we actively encourage the takeover of society by technology. Whenever a new technology is on the horizon, we either expect the government to foster its introduction or we expect government to get out of the way through deregulation or lack of regulation.

Business executives now argue that the government should stay out of the way regarding the definition and regulation of the information superhighway.

Because the idea of technology is so seductive, its pace so frenetic, its direction so tantalizing, we are reluctant to interfere with its development. The sense of technology is that it is the engine of business growth, the potential behind medicine, the key to knowledge. It thus becomes equated with societal benefit, it must be good, we should want more.

Consider television, where we now expect to move to satellite delivery, to unlimited channels, to unrestricted access. But if the past is any predictor of the future, why are we so complacent about this television outlook?

Television Trauma

The technology of television has inflicted a trauma on our culture, one which may never heal. It was introduced with no understanding of the enormous long term consequences. It has redefined public debate and politics, education, sport, entertainment, and leisure time. It has redefined what it means to be an informed citi-

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zen.

Introducing yet more technology is not going to lessen the effect. Do we really need *more* television? Yet the technology steamroller continues at its frenzied pace. All the technology players are converging. More and more of our society will be conducted through the television conduit.

***500 channels
and
nothing on***

Who wants a 500-channel universe? There isn't any reason to believe that more channels will bring us better programming. Five hundred channels of mediocrity, titillation and schlock will not improve the situation. Death stars may only hasten the decline of our minds. Channel surfing isn't a result of a cornucopia of fine programming, it's a fruitless search for quality.

The motto for Britain's recent Sky satellite TV network is There's no turning back. They don't know yet in how many different ways this could prove to be true.

What is the inditement, what has television wrought?

Promotion of passive viewing has induced an amazing tolerance for poor quality in entertainment and information programming. So called interactive television will not improve the situation. Giving the viewer the choice of one of several outcomes, viewing angles, news clips, or multiple choice opinions is an empty gesture meant to imply active participation. All the decisions have been taken, as usual, long before the viewer's involvement. With entertainment programming the decisions have been taken largely based on attracting advertising. In news programming, decisions are dictated more by budget constraints and the visual quality of the subjects than the news value.

Television has prompted a marked reduction in literacy and interest in reading, even by the potentially literary minded. It takes great self-control to turn off the television and read, especially for those raised on the tube. The decline in literacy and short attention spans have struck newspapers and magazines, prompting

them to emphasize short articles and graphics in a self-defeating attempt to attract the T.V. generation.

The literary decline has also shown up in education. Pedagogues have engaged in endless experiments to try to compensate for poor reading skills and concentration. This has had the unfortunate but predictable result of amplifying the lack of skills rather than neutralizing the damage.

The impact of television on literacy and news has resulted in a less informed citizenry. Serious sustained debate on issues cannot be expected when television is the medium of information and discourse.

*the medium
trivializes
the message*

The imminent and much predicted convergence of telephone, television and computer networks brought about by technological change, is assumed to be a good thing. That the various industries involved want to grow by expanding into each other's territory is easy to understand. That this must be a good thing is taken for granted by the pundits and regulators. And anyway, if we don't do it then our global competitors will take over our market.

It is assumed that governments can't do anything about this new television. They must simply stand out of the way because the technology is uncontrollable. The best we can hope for is healthy competition. What are you going to do, ban satellite dishes and monitor all telephone traffic? Our governments tell us this, that culture is on its own in the harsh technological reality. Yet when something like taxes are at stake, they will go to practically any length to interfere, distort and control.

Computers Cultivate Complexity

Computers have ensured society would become increasingly complex. Many modern activities would be impossible to sustain without computers. The massive changes in the nature of work and the economy for instance, have been enabled only by the use of computers.

Computer technology for managing complexity has

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increased at a much faster rate than the sophistication of its dealings with humans. As more complex tasks are enabled by computers, more burden is placed on humans to manage the process, and to live with the consequences.

One of the reasons that computers are so hard to use is the cult of technology that surrounds them. We expect to not understand them, we feel it's our fault if we don't, and we know we're supposed to defer to the experts. But what incentive is there to produce computers that function as better tools?

***impersonal
computers***

During much of the personal computer revolution, the dominating factor in purchasing decisions has not been quality or ease of use, but rather price. For many years most personal computers were purchased by companies for their employees in the hope of increasing productivity. Basically, those who bought the things didn't have to use them, their underlings did. Since the definition of a thing that can be called a computer, even a personal computer, can vary so widely, lowest price usually means lower quality in terms of human usability. This produced a market dominance by PC compatibles, prompting home purchases based on the lower price and similarity to work machines.

So far, the dynamics of the personal computer software industry have been to reduce choice and in turn to reduce quality. Through a combination of the corporate purchasing process and increasingly dominant players, software has become harder to use.

***Techno-
Peasants and
Social
Apathyists***

So computers are not all that easy to use, but generally they have made life better, if at the price of more complexity. Increasing complexity is not a bad thing in itself. The problem is that computer development has introduced complexity in human affairs that is not being adequately dealt with by society. Those who run our society don't understand technology. Those who produce technology aren't interested in our society.¹³

¹³ Well they are, just not what we think of as our society.

Tremendous social complexity has been introduced thanks to globalization and the global economy could not exist without computers. Financial networks have allowed the free and timely movement of money and information that was a prerequisite for globalization. Lack of regulation has ensured it. Technology was introduced that fundamentally changed the rules of the economy, with barely a hint of public comment. Work displacement thanks to computer technology has turned out to be enormous, with comparatively little compensation in high-tech jobs.

The point is that society abdicates its responsibility for examining these changes merely because they involve technology, which is considered uncontrollable.

The educational system first leapt on computers as a better way to teach, as a substitute for teachers for rote learning and individual attention. When the experience with computerized classrooms proved less than ideal they then moved to a position of teaching about using computers, as preparation for the real world. Finally, they have discovered the *Internet* and *distance learning* as the holy grail of computers in education.

But computers are only another technology in a long line that has been used in the classroom. Pedagogues should pay more attention to the goals and results of their teaching rather than focusing on the snazzy new technology. They should teach about the implications of computers, for the students and for society, not just how to use them.

Computers and their networks now offer an overwhelming amount of information. Much of it should be classified as junk. Wading through the glut is fast becoming the task rather than finding nuggets of value. But the sheer capacity of electronic information sources does not ensure quality, and certainly doesn't imply availability.

The information superhighway is the next technology to be foisted on an unsuspecting public. Is there any demand for this technology or is it just seen as the next cash cow? Video-on-demand and an on-line source of

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games are the driving economic forces. It's clear that the content of this system will be entirely unregulated, as it has been closely associated with cherished notions of free speech and expression. People dream of the opportunities of self-publishing and access to unlimited information sources. The down side is an inability to find the quality material and a proliferation of socially unhealthy material like hate propaganda and pornography.

Computers large and small knitted together in a pulsating web offering the glories of more information and entertainment, all for a price. Of course that's what the world is lacking, what we really need is more information and entertainment.

Virtual Unreality

virtual society Now we are on the verge of the large scale introduction of virtual reality technology. The potential harmful effects of this are being ignored as usual. People only want to foresee the good effects.

Virtual reality will be quite varied. It's hard to see any problems with the ability to *experience* the design of a building or streetscape before it is built. Artistic, educational and cultural applications are also seen as potential beneficiaries.

The problems will probably come from the same source as the bad effects of television and computer games. The real money in virtual reality will be in producing entertainment and games. People quite willingly pay to be entertained, and have come to expect it.

fake Love
not War Long exposure to television and video games has lead to children who are easily bored and are desensitized to violence. It's interesting that a large proportion of this entertainment is violent. The unreality of this kind of entertainment is that it ignores the morals of society and encourages attitudes of callousness and aggression. The military has known for years that repetition of training in simulated combat leads to a

kind of discipline and unthinking attitude that allows people to perform tasks without considering the consequences. Even more realistic violence through virtual reality games will only further this tendency. Is society prepared for virtual reality of simulated rape and torture? It's just a game, lighten up.

But it's not just violent games that could be a problem. What effect will there be when we can spend considerable time in an unreal world, one that we can tailor to our whims? How will this affect our attitudes and actions in the real world? Society should be prepared to address these questions before it's too late.

Genetic Gerrymandering

We are experimenting with the recipe of life. Since scientists discovered DNA we have possessed knowledge of profound implication to our world. Experiments crossing genes from one species to another could have horrific social and environmental consequences. The problem is we don't know, and we can't. Nature is far too complex, and science too feeble to completely predict the results of these manipulations. Numerous examples of well meaning scientific experiments gone awry should give us pause when we consider allowing the use of genetic technology.

genetic reengineering

What will be the result of introducing these genetic manipulations into our food supply, and our environment? How will it affect the gene pool to concentrate on specific characteristics with food production?

Killer bees, the Gypsy Moth, and Purple Loose Strife were all products of well intentioned experiments with nature.

How about manipulation of our bodies through the new gene therapy? Who will deserve treatment? What effect will this have on subsequent generations? Will we require people with socially aberrant genes to have them fixed? Can we really isolate the effects of these alterations?

Leeches and thalidomide were once embraced as treatments

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by the medical profession.

Do we let science forge ahead with these developments, believing the assurances that all will be well? Society needs to realize that these are the kinds of questions that should be answered before genetic engineering becomes another uncontrollable technology.

It Doesn't Just Happen

We live in an age dominated by technology. What started out as a desire to make tools to lessen drudgery and physical chores has transformed into the underlying factor of much of modern society. No longer are we making tools for our use, we are now a society dominated by tools. The economics of modern technology mean that quick introduction and continual refinement are the ways to success. Unfortunately, this doesn't lend itself to thoughtful analysis of the societal implications of new technologies.

The animator of scientific discovery is curiosity, the desire to know how things work. The motivation has shifted from proving, or rather reinforcing a belief in God, to proving the nonexistence of God. For many, science has taken the place of religious belief, or put another way, the belief in science as a benevolent force has taken hold.

The belief in scientific research as a good has grown to encompass technological development. Unfortunately, the application of science in the form of technology is never morally neutral. Technological use has profound implications for society, yet our society does a terrible job of simply assessing this impact. Perhaps we are afraid of what we might find, if we only looked.

Unless sudden, dramatic problems arise, no one

EVERYDAY ORTHODOXY

notices that technology is reshaping our society. Even then, our inherent belief in technological progress prevents us from assessing the impact and attempting to change the outcome. The changes just seep in. Unbridled technological development has and will have much more of an influence in shaping our society than we like to think. What kind of society would we have today without the telephone, the airplane, or the automobile? How about television and computers? And what is to become of us thanks to genetic engineering, so carefully couched in the unassailable terms of technology so we don't realize we are referring to the artificial manipulation of life?

The talk of the information superhighway as the great leveller in society, the way that we can finally achieve equality, is wishful thinking. Because it is the sophistication of the exchange that matters, not the access to the medium, nor technical prowess with its manipulation. It is not a lack of access to information that we are suffering, it is a paucity of knowledge, analysis, and understanding.

U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich opined that every poor child should have access to a subsidized portable computer.

We grope for yet another technological fix for our societal ills. It is through education, and especially culture as it's pervasive and potent teacher, that we could achieve our lofty goals. By teaching our citizens to think for themselves, to question, to prod, to explore, to choose.

VII

Corporate Culture and Sanctioned Art

The kind of culture we have, and want to have says a lot about us as a society. It's particularly interesting to see the ways that our culture is defined and changed, which influences it embraces and which it resists.

Here we touch on so many orthodoxies it is hard to know where to start. Many people have surprisingly rigid and unexamined definitions and opinions about culture and art, and become almost personally offended when a contrary view is expressed. People view their culture as something personal, and take personally any suggestion that there is anything wrong, and that they have some explaining to do.

What I see is a long term trend of a laissez-faire attitude toward culture, as a result of the increasing dominance of society by its own economic system. Here, technology has played a major role, from mechanization in mills and factories, to the automobile, to films, television, and computers. Each new technology brought immense change in the organization of society and the culture that inhabits it.

Today we live in a culture that is dominated by commercialism and its communications technologies. This has brought about a scattering of cultures around the world, most importantly American culture, which has learned to harness communications to its advantage.

Culture's Surrender to Commercialism

To an astonishing degree the ideals of corporate commercialism have taken over the definition and control of our culture. While once confined to the realm of popular culture, this dominance has steadily overtaken cultural institutions and so called *high culture* as well.

What commercialism demands is that its products become our culture – what sells is good, or at least what the people want. But we consumers of commercial products don't see the connection to culture, and thus are not prepared to forego the pleasures for some greater good.

Popularized Culture

***culture as
marketing
tool***

We see this especially in the dominance of commercialism on television, radio and in films, the troika of popular culture. Few are really aware that television and radio exist solely as a means of delivering consumers to advertisers, and thus advertising dollars to the owners. As the consumers became more sophisticated in their screening of this advertising, the commercial advertising has moved from the obvious and easily ignored sponsorship of programming to more subtle and effective means, such as heavy promotion of the content as culture.

We are now bombarded by T.V. show related T-shirts and mugs, and books by the latest sitcom star – as if they knew the secret of life.

Film studios now regularly sell direct product placements within the content. Film stars no longer have to hock products outside their craft, their characters can do it for them.

Coke was a prominent product placement in the film The Paper.

Now we see heavy co-marketing of the content itself.

Merchandizing of products related to a film is now more lucrative than the film itself. The goal is not to provide us with a plastic figure of our current favourite action or animated figure, it is to cross-market hamburgers and other film paraphernalia. The tie to culture brings the appeal, influencing culture becomes the effect.

**opportunity
costs**

**quantity not
quality**

Commercial sponsorship also dictates high rates of return on investment. Money is lavished on the latest blockbuster in hopes of mega returns. Works of less massive appeal are left unpublished or unproduced thanks to the rule of opportunity cost. Even when produced, through lack of promotion these movies, books and records are destined to have little impact. Numbers of screens, book tours, and radio station debuts are what bring attention in a mass culture. The rule is more and more that if it doesn't make a ton of money it isn't worth doing. And if it does, then clone it again and again. It's quantity not quality that counts. That this attitude would have precluded many of what are now considered the great works of art and literature seems to be given little thought.

Access to the popular culture is controlled based on expected commercial viability. The safe strategy is for small markets to import proven foreign products. In response, Canadian content regulations have allowed a home grown production industry to flourish in the face of overwhelming financial pressure to consume imported hits. Yet this system is under attack for less than perfect definitions of Canadian content.

Bryan Adams – a product of the Canadian content system if there ever was one – believes that we should scrap the regulations and let the market decide.

The music business, the outlet of popular culture perhaps least prone to being thwarted by this crass commercialism, has itself seen the growth of *Alternative* music. An alternative, that is, to the now thoroughly commercialized *Rock and Roll*, *Classic Rock*, and *Pop* music.

**It's Not Whether You Win or Loose.
It's How You Make Money**

**What are the
Bell Canadian
Open,
Rothmans In-
ternational,
du Maurier
Ltd. Canadian
Open?**

The dominance of commercial sponsorship of most artistic, sporting and cultural events is almost complete. Indeed, in many of the sponsored events, it is difficult to tell by the name what the event is about, but you certainly can identify the sponsor. But sports is not a game, it's a business, and it's run with profit, not the spectator uppermost in mind.

For years Harold Ballard's Maple Leafs were regular losers, and still sell-out crowds would attend. No need to improve then.

Professional sports franchises are just that, franchises. They are an outlet of a larger league the purpose of which is to make money, and lots of it. If a team doesn't perform in one location, then move it somewhere else, being sure to use this as a threat to extract maximum concessions by the host city.

The Minnesota North Stars were moved to Dallas because of lack of financial support. Later, the owners of both the Edmonton Oilers and Winnipeg Jets threatened to move their teams to Minnesota if concessions from their cities weren't forthcoming.

Nowadays, teams are being treated as extensions of marketing campaigns for products, rather than the other way around.

The Anaheim Mighty Ducks will make more money as a movie sequel and product endorsements than it will as a hockey team.

We were told the name of the Toronto NBA team, the Raptors, was chosen not for any affiliation to the city, but purely for marketing reasons.

Americans and Canadians just couldn't admit that their beloved sports were not there to entertain but to make money. The business of the baseball and hockey strikes were the final confirmation that these aren't pri-

marily sports but businesses. In exchange for acting as human trading cards, players demanded a larger piece of the huge financial pie. The fans reacted as if their sport has been tainted, and withheld their full support. But they'll be back.

Always™

But the greatest sell-out of sports, by far, has taken place in the Olympics movement (or is that the *Coca-Cola™ Olympics™*). The ideal of amateur athletes competing to be the best in the world has now vanished. Amateurism has been almost completely discarded as a criteria, and sponsorship of athletes is only controlled because the IOC itself wants to reap the rewards.¹⁴ The belief that the athletes should, quite naturally, cash in on their success is a classic theory of capitalism. The amateur ideal is out the window.

We're All For Sale

The commercial appetite is not satisfied with the takeover of our public lives via our culture. Our private lives are up for grabs too. Every product we purchase, every event we attend, the records of our driving and our health, can all be correlated and used in focused attempts to sell us more.

Consider what happens when you purchase something using a credit card. Your transaction is registered with the credit card company, and may also be registered by the store, even by the supplier. This information about you is sold to others who have a financial interest in knowing people's habits and preferences. This can unleash a flood of related junk mail and telephone solicitation. It can be correlated with all your other electronic transactions, not just the financial ones. The same is true of mailing lists, which are regularly traded and sold. This commercialization of personal information will really take off on the information highway, as advertizers instantly latch on to every tidbit we reveal about our lives. Appearances aside, nothing on the internet will be free – your loss of privacy will be the main cost.

¹⁴ Oops, I mean it's everywhere you want to be.

***business,
not the state
is Big Brother***

The commercial reasoning behind all this is that businesses have collected this potentially valuable personal information and thus it must be fully exploited. Your privacy is of no concern, there's money to be made. Unless we do something, this trend will only continue and intensify. Big Brother may end up being business rather than the state.

The Descent of High Culture

The commercial way of thinking has taken hold in many areas previously antagonistic to traditional capitalistic thinking. The idea that cultural, artistic, and educational organizations can and should be run like businesses has taken hold, based on the business logic of what sells is good, and only what makes money is important.

If an extravaganza can be staged that simultaneously brings in money and attends to the artistic requirements, so much the better. Then the full forces of commercialism can be unleashed safe in the knowledge that the main event is artistically worthy. Unfortunately under these circumstances, the event threatens to drown in its own hype.

The Barnes exhibit tour is a good example of the frenzy of commercialism that can surround a cultural event.

It's now even unfashionable to have taken an artistic grant, it being proof of commercial inviability. The idea that culture should only be pursued and expressed when financially lucrative is beginning to take hold.

Several prominent Canadian writers felt it necessary to proclaim that they had never taken a government grant.

But high art won't give up that easily. Seeing only two possible routes, outright commercialism and status quo snobbism, public art galleries have for the most part chosen to remain relatively inaccessible. They can't see that becoming more open to educating the public doesn't have to lead straight to theme park status.

This is the Public's Art?

***all art is not
good art***

Art galleries curators have an unfortunate tendency to dismiss public criticism, to label it the uninformed opinion of the members of low-culture. They usually give very little explanation of why art is selected and grouped for presentation, when that should be the perfect opportunity to educate and explain. Challenged to explain, they make pathetic attempts at showing the importance of the work. Perhaps this art is really meant for the exclusive appreciation of the artistic élite, but then why are we paying for it?

***art historical
importance***

There are two interpretations of art that compete in a public gallery. One concentrates on the art historical importance, as defined by the technical and cultural significance the piece held at the time of creation, and the influence it exhibits upon later works. The other is the *beauty is in the eye of the beholder* school, in which the public is forced to lump much of modern art. Thus the uninitiated are dismissed out of hand.

After years of refusing to supply surtitles for their operas, the Met in New York finally and at great expense installed airplane seat-like screens for the patrons.

Art and architecture are often developed for the élite for technical reasons. When for instance, an architect is "more interested in the building as an image than as a three dimensional experience"¹⁵, this tells us a lot about who is the intended audience.

Voice of Ire

The art élite insists that the public is a collection of Philistines who refuse to acknowledge the importance of modern art such as *Voice of Fire*. Granted these works may be historically and technically important in the professional domain, yet the public in large part insists that this art is not good, or even interesting.

Unfortunately for the typical member of the art élite, the human eye is the medium of understanding and ap-

¹⁵ Rosalind Krauss -Art Historian in reference to the Portland Building by Gauss. The television program Art of the Western World : In Our Own Time - 1989

precipitating art. The nature of human vision is that images captured by the eye are interpreted by the brain, and the brain attempts to recognize images as representations of objects that are known to the brain. The eye does not see a face or a chair, the brain constructs the understanding of these images. The brain is always attempting to construct objects from these images, and can be fooled in its interpretation.

Perhaps this is why abstract art like *Voice of Fire* is perceived by most of those outside the art élite as uninteresting and meaningless. They see three vertical stripes that their brains cannot construct into any object of interest to their minds. They are seeing the painting outside the context of historical importance used by the professionals, who make no real attempt at providing the public with this context and explanation.

Communication Corruption

Our culture is defined by the current dominating media, and as such is subject to buffeting from the changes in values that flow from each medium. Television has transformed our society as profoundly as the press transformed Gutenberg's, yet we see little role for us in defining what communications environment we should foster or resist.

The introduction of the press brought about a diminishment of oral discourse and especially oral history. Spoken arguments became suspect and lost validity as carriers of truth. The written word was proof, was history. We should easily be able to see that television has had, and computers will have equally profound effects on our ideas of truth and our sense of history. Our very definition of citizenship is shaped by the style and content of communications, yet we do almost nothing to analyze and affect them.

**Information
super-hypeway** The written word has suffered at the hands of television, as images captured our attention. Now as the battle is poised between television and the information

superhighway, we don't have any idea what effects these will have on our modes of learning and discourse. Television as we know it is threatened by the lure of new excitements offered by multimedia, networking, and interactivity, although the promise may yet prove hollow due to the frequency of the toll booth.

The Television Society

Today's public discourse is constrained by the artificiality and superficiality of television programming which is driven by its dependence on commercial sponsorship. It takes too long to read and it's not as entertaining. Besides, if it hasn't been on T.V. it can't be that important.

Television news lingers on the sensational and lurid, the trivial and the odd. Advertising favours a fast paced and visual presentation of events, thus we get pictures of a train wreck or flood in a far off land rather than details of an unphotogenic trade negotiation. The scoop is more important financially than an analysis of events. Exclusive interviews, rather than in-depth reporting, attract advertisers.

**television
moments**

Political battles are now fought through television moments, the debate being constrained to a snappy phrase and a good photo opportunity. Entertaining campaigns do not include pronouncements and discussion of important policy. Entertainment and the unusual are what get on TV.

**movie of the
week**

Television is really about entertainment, and American entertainment is too expensive. The movie of the week is no longer about any important social issues, it is now simply a rehash of the latest scandal. Ironically, entertainment has become an echo of the corrupted definition of news — a definition based on entertainment. Reality-based drama shows now compete with the news for viewer interest. This full circle has also surrounded live entertainment, practically submerging all signs of live theatre not based on the spectacle model.

Television has also come to define the modes of edu-

cation and discourse. What started as a trickle in the '60s and '70s has transformed into the environment. Education is no longer about teaching people to think, but rather it's about teaching them to be happy. Entertaining television, and especially children's educational television, has constrained the modes of teaching. It's not fashionable to enjoy thinking and learning for its own sake, it must be supported by a layer of entertainment and superficial self-esteem. Concentration levels have declined in a generation that has been brought up on ever more fast paced images. The music video is a perfect symbol of television's power to define the modes of creativity.

*seeing is
believing*

To be attractive to this generation of consumers, computerized information has taken on the guise of multimedia, the successor to television. And like television, the visualness of the information threatens to become more important than its content. *Seeing is believing* needs to be checked with as much vigour as the proscription *don't believe everything you read*.

The information superhighway is also becoming a prisoner to this entertainment belief. The access points will all be geared to drawing people in with fun and games. Multimedia is the watchword, and cartoon characters will act as our hosts and guides.

The Demise of Writing, The Dawn of Multimedia?

Predictions of the demise of the written word abound. Will writing suffer the same fate as oral discourse? The economics of electronic publishing will doom large scale printing just as the appeal of the printed word replaced the oral culture. The mistake we make is to equate printing with writing. But does this mean we should give in to the tendency to equate information with multimedia, or knowledge with information? What television didn't obliterate will multimedia finish off?

Continued use of the written word offers important benefits over multimedia. Good writing requires an

enormous distillation of thought, an attention to coherence, pacing and flow, and above all compelling ideas. In fiction, it also involves the reader's imagination, perhaps our greatest human trait. Although compared to early cinema and television we are now visually sophisticated, we are still just captivated by the spectacle. The American movie and television economic model produces either blockbusters or superficial portraits of society, because that's what makes the big money.

Movie critics Siskel and Ebert regularly complain that what movies need is good writing reflected in authentic dialog.

**couch
potatoism**

The potential for even more laziness is looming. The economics favour games and mindless entertainment, and the insatiable demand of potentially infinite channels doesn't favour quality writing. It's hard to read without engaging your mind. Television has the quality of providing mindless entertainment.

It's normal to veg-out in front of the tube, a feat practically impossible with reading. Interestingly, television's older cousin the movies, offers an experience much closer to reading or the theatre than television. Going to the cinema requires deliberate planning including the decision to pay, an interest in the topic, and a focused and sustained attention. Our culture also encourages thought and comment after the fact about the content.

**channel
surfing**

Channel surfing on the other hand encourages inattention and lack of focus. And there's often nothing in the content worthy of discussion or thought. The impending mega-channel universe, with the likelihood of pay-per-view may inadvertently reverse the decline into mindless viewing. Direct payment does promote attention, unfortunately, it doesn't seem to assure quality. We'll be consciously watching bad programs.

Multimedia, so far, is too much like television. The ability to tack together a movie clip, some animation, and audio with banal or badly chosen text is too tempting for the new multimedia producers to pass up. Just because there's a video clip doesn't mean the content is

important, interesting, or even correct.

Internet To The Rescue?

**surfing the
net**

The global *Internet* is the latest wave in the multimedia craze. *Surfing the net* is a description of how people have come to use global computer networks. It describes a process of mostly skimming the surface of information, finding tidbits of interest but gaining little understanding of anything of substance. Oh sure, there is the possibility of delving deeply into a topic of interest, if you can find the information. But years of television training has not lead to an appetite for deep and sustained examination. Flitting about would better describe the process.

**What do you
want to say
today?**

There is much hype about the glories of the Internet, how it will enable anyone to become a publisher. Aren't we then going to be overwhelmed by poor quality, even erroneous or deliberately false information? Already the unmoderated news groups are mostly filled with speculation, false, redundant or irrelevant information and vehement opinion. Wading through all this chaff takes considerable time and skill. The interesting thing about the Internet forum is that the quality generally doesn't improve over time. As new users access the system, with a steady dose of new college and soon younger students, the quality gets diluted. The wheat to chaff ratio is very low.

There is obvious benefit to on-line access to traditional information sources that would normally require tedious searching, and a similar benefit could be seen for the new forums of information. But unless our education system is prepared, we will not produce citizens who are ready to engage in such a learning endeavour or to contribute in a meaningful way.

The process of editing and publishing in writing is there to maintain standards of taste, quality and accuracy, and give an indication of the expected bias. What then when most of what's available on-line is self-published? How will we find the quality material? The current flap over pornography and hate propaganda on

the Internet is an indication that the public is only now paying attention to this new medium.

Censorship and You

Censorship is always a controversial subject. Most people are either strictly opposed to any censorship, or are in favour in certain grievous cases but would really rather not support it. The typical reasons for censorship are a desire for protection from bad influences like pornography, violence, and degradation, influences that are said to corrupt morals. Those that furiously oppose any censorship subscribe to the domino theory of government control leading inevitably to 1984.

Traditional Censorship

Our society gets very touchy when you talk about how our culture is defined and whether we should try to control or even direct its definition. The dominant belief appears to be that we should willingly accept whatever it is we get when we apply a laissez-faire attitude with respect to culture. Anything else is immediately and self-righteously labelled as censorship. Any mention of trying to control the content of the media is condemned as a slide down the slippery slope toward mind control by the wicked state. Next stop book burning and thought police.

Aside from the idea that in a democracy the state is supposed to be us, and that education is certainly the most effective form of mind control imposed by the state, isn't it naïve to believe that we'll get a good culture if we just let it all hang out. I can hear the critics, tsk tsking now; " 'good culture', who does he think he is!" We're not even willing to engage in a discussion about whether our culture is good or not.

Debates about pornography, for example, always seem to end up as discussions about censorship. Even those that agree that pornography can be damaging to society argue that any attempts to impose legal sanc-

tion are doomed to vague and broad language that will lead to state abuse. So we do nothing.

The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers television show was condemned by the private broadcaster's standards council because it induced violent behaviour in kids.

The ensuing debate raged around notions of censorship as a substitute for parental responsibility. That our whole society pushes toward the acceptance of these influences says a lot about our priorities.

The Real Censorship

Freedom of expression, which is so vehemently defended against even the hint of public censorship, is regularly censored by capitalism without a peep of opposition or perhaps even recognition. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and publishers are regularly constrained by what sells, both directly and through the intermediary of advertisers.

Radio stations were given new freedom from public regulation and promptly became slaves to commercial regulation. The idea that this strengthened freedom is laughable. Radio and to a lesser extent television stations have begun, through perceived commercial necessity, to serve only the dominant market (that is, Baby Boomers) that advertisers crave. In line with typical commercial thinking, these businesses are only willing to serve the largest market, leaving others in the lurch.

Classic Rock stations have come to predominate, essentially smothering new music. Television programs shifted their focus to young families, in line with their target market.

The commercial media only cover what will be non-controversial and popular, unless the controversy can be used to sell. They are constrained by what their advertisers are willing to be associated with. Organized minority and fringe lobby groups can effectively ban discussion of their sensitive topics by targeting the advertisers with boycotts and public denunciation, essentially requiring they drop their support of the offending

programs.

Advertising support is regularly withdrawn from U.S. television drama episodes that feature gays or abortion. Even the portrayal of independent women, like on Cagney and Lacey, suffers from lack of advertising support.

**what is
balanced
coverage?**

The public media labour under the constraint of policies that require *fairness* and *balanced coverage* and must refrain from political involvement. If balance is lacking in the actual event, the other side (notice there are always exactly two sides) must be manufactured or promoted and served up as if it carried as much weight.

The Valour and the Horror was essentially banned by the CBC after the outcry by the Senate (of all places!) and some WWII veterans.

Even when topics of controversy are aired in the media, they are treated with such brevity that only the conventional views can appear with credibility. The risky other side is rendered either ridiculous or mute by a format that demands concise pronouncement of complicated opinion.

These simple constraints effectively ensure media exposure will only be given to mainstream, orthodox thinking. Unless of course art and 'free speech' combine to produce commercially controversial art that sells. This safe anti-orthodoxy is certainly acceptable.

The Cultural Chernobyl¹⁶

Cross pollination of cultures is not new, but in the age of instant communications and saturated media coverage, the media dominant culture begins to act like a world culture.

The dominance of American culture, like the Chernobyl nuclear accident, has both obvious local devasta-

¹⁶ It was the French Minister of Culture, I believe, who coined this striking phrase, with regard to the construction of the Euro-Disney theme park near Paris.

tion and lasting harmful fallout around the world. Like fallout, the harm is often not detected until too late. And the half-life of the effects is long indeed.

The responsibility for this is on both sides. The Americans can't see any effects their culture may have on others as negative, the recipient countries don't offer adequate alternatives.

Most Americans have never been exposed to another dominant culture and thus don't realize what effect their culture has on others. And this process is self-reinforcing. As American culture is transported overseas the world begins to look and act more American. The small fraction of Americans who do then travel, see the world as quite like theirs.

Americans, like other peoples tend to think that their culture is the best in the world. However Americans are alone in thinking that other people, if only they had the chance, would really like to be American, and that it is their duty to give them that chance. That others would choose to be different is incomprehensible.

That's Entertainment

This culture, dominated by reverence for wealth and celebrity, is promoted relentlessly by Hollywood and on television. Their whole entertainment industry is focused on making money, not on making culture. To these people, culture is primarily a business, and a very lucrative one indeed. The definition of this culture is whatever sells. Concerns about the effects this cultural industry have on society are dismissed in the same way that American business views any constraint on commerce.

entertainment products

This view of culture as entertainment, as a business, is perhaps uniquely American. It leads to all kinds of problems dealing with people who don't understand this fundamental connection. And nowhere is this basic miscomprehension more easily seen than when American cultural products are exported.

The Uruguay round negotiations of GATT were al-

**cultural
Trojan horse**

most scuttled by the U.S. inability to recognize that their *entertainment products* were viewed by other countries as a cultural Trojan horse. The Americans want others to buy into their culture, which will give the U.S. an advantage in trade. They are now actively promoting the exposure of American products in their entertainment exports. To buy American culture is the first step on the path to subscribing to American economic and political ideals.

That protection and promotion of culture, indeed cultural survival, is viewed by American negotiators as simply a restraint of trade issue, demonstrates the fundamental gulf in cultural thinking. The Americans don't even play by their own rule of what sells is what the people want. They have cleverly trained their people into disliking any entertainment products not from their own mould. Cultural imports are simply not in demand.

Culture Is More Than Economics

**does World
Class mean
indistin-
guishable?**

What are the effects of American culture on other societies, particularly Canada's? The main effect seems to be that other cultures have to compete on the playing field of popular entertainment. And that playing field is now global. But is it necessary to have globalization as the driving factor in culture as well as economics? *World class* is a label that has become a badge of distinction – if you don't export your culture then it isn't worth having. If your culture doesn't sell, it's worth nothing.

A large market can easily pay for its own production and promotion internally, and then dump their product on the rest of the world. To compete in production value, countries with smaller markets join together in awkward co-productions, often producing lavish but laughable results which reflect an artificial, often bizarre hybrid culture.

The Destiny Ridge and Due South television series illustrate what happens when trying to imitate American val-

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ues. Authenticity of plot and locale are jettisoned in favour of stereotype, action and drama.

Is it a failure that you don't sell your culture abroad? This is the thinking of a global culture mind set. Any country that has a relatively small market suffers this problem. It's not a sign of cultural failure but rather economic failure. Unfortunately, the economic rules will not change, so cultural regulations must be invented. Canadian content regulations, like other domestic content schemes, are meant to ensure exposure to cultural works that would otherwise never have been produced or submerged by imports. They are also designed to give economic benefit to native cultural expression.

The fight to save our cultural industries from American ownership is an attempt to save our culture from being overwhelmed by cheap American entertainment imports. Because we Canadians have bought the whole American package, not just the music, books, magazines, films, and television, but also the business styles and economics that define how these are produced and sold. If it works once, clone it and feed it to us again, and again, and again. Hype becomes a substitute for content, celebrity brings the pot of gold.

Celebrity is also becoming the goal in fields outside entertainment. Business and political stories revolve more and more around the star quality of the protagonists rather than their deeds.

Conrad Black is known outside financial circles not for his business acumen, but for his tendency to harangue his opponents and to sue them when they say anything negative about him.

By concentrating on the celebrity aspects of politics, business and culture, we remain oblivious to the substantive effects these are having on us. Since most of us don't understand the effects, or if we do, find them bizarrely out of touch with human reality, it's easier to focus on the antics.

Thanks in large part to the overwhelming effects of

television, our culture is being measured on the grounds of economic activity. This is true of our politics and education as much as it is of our entertainment. The emphasis in politics is the economy and facilitating economic growth in a competitive environment. Education is now about producing the workers needed to compete in the new global economy. Our society seems unconcerned about this transformation.

It Doesn't Just Happen

Our society acts as if the kind of culture we have doesn't matter to us, that we should just accept whatever happens. We live our lives playing the roles of audience and consumer, contented with being the passive party. We are particularly bad at defining our culture, and sometimes deduce that we can't have much that makes us different, or special, or worth keeping. So, by and large, we don't defend what we have.

We learn our culture first from our family. It is augmented by our neighbours and our schools. It is transformed by our media like it or not, and we let this happen. It's no use throwing up our hands in despair, we are the authors of our own cultural fate. Pointing to the unstoppable technology as the cultural culprit is no response, it's a facile attempt at escaping responsibility. This technology doesn't exist in a vacuum, it is not self-producing, it is not in control, we are. We just don't think we are, and thus do nothing. Technological progress has brought us many things, they are invented and introduced for reasons that have little to do with societal well-being. Yet we do almost nothing, including simply examining the impact of such technologies on our culture and our society.

Our economic system is closely engaged with technology, and bears an equal responsibility regarding our cultural development. These twin influences work to-

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gether to mould our culture in ways that serve their styles, their assumptions, their definitions. Culture has become an extension of economics, it is moulded into a form that best serves in the creation of markets of entertainment consumers. In the process the impetus for civic discourse has suffered, from the commercialization of most forms of art and entertainment, to the trivializing of news and public affairs.

We need to learn to stand up for our culture, to uphold what we find dear, and to critique what seems lacking. This can only be done in an environment that encourages serious and sustained examination, even thought, something our current communications media do not.

It is in this cultural and intellectual climate that we now find ourselves engaged in a struggle to define proper modes of discourse and thought.

VIII

Political Correctness



Questions We Won't Ask

Throughout history there have been many instances and long periods of organized attempts to suppress examination and debate regarding certain topics. The usual suppressor was either the church or the state, the usual reason was to prevent challenges to its authority. The official doctrine is defended vigorously using the full force of the institution. The stronger the doctrine the more absurd the extremes of persecution.

Galileo was only recently rehabilitated by the Catholic Church.

Today we are going through a period of suppression that is largely enforced by social pressure rather than official sanction. This orthodoxy of POLITICAL CORRECTNESS is all about power. What's unusual about this system is that it is primarily a case of auto-enforcement by the powerful, as a weapon of the powerless.

For all its faults, Political Correctness is at least an overt suppression of expression. Its legitimacy can be challenged because it can be recognized. It is much harder to challenge doctrinaire thinking and selective

examination of events when these attitudes are built into the fabric of society, through education and culture.

Political Correctness

The tyranny of self-censorship that has been imposed under the doctrine of Political Correctness has done great harm to our ability to pose and answer important questions. Why have we let this doctrine come to dominate public debate?

Political correctness has constrained public discussion of some public policies to such a degree as to render it almost useless. Gone are the days when we could, even tentatively, discuss various options regarding topics such as immigration, multiculturalism, literary expropriation and its many variations (the term itself politically correct), pay and employment equity, or feminism without being casually labelled a racist or misogynist.

What we have now are well-intentioned people who tiptoe around topics with any potential for controversy for fear of offending anyone. For these people Political Correctness seems to be a substitute for the need to define a personal morality. Just digest today's version of correctness and you're safe.

Political Correctness pose

The pattern of correctness is now so easily duplicated in new situations that people can automatically assume the correctness pose with no real thought. This is exactly the problem. That otherwise thinking people abdicate the responsibility for deciding themselves, or at least concurring with the thoughtful opinions of others. Instead, by donning the cloak of correctness, they seek to avoid unnecessary embarrassment and stigma from expressing incorrect views. But this cloak is not a shield but a dead weight, a leaden hand that pushes down any opinion that falls outside the narrow and extreme regime imposed under political correctness. Instead of addressing and solving problems in a thoughtful, open and honest manner, we produce solu-

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS
QUESTIONS WE WON'T ASK

tions mired in useless layers of verbal camouflage.

On the other hand are people who vehemently reject the notion of political correctness and who boldly proclaim their opposition to *progressive* measures of all sorts. Because of the evident extremes that political correctness has encouraged, it becomes safe to attack the doctrine itself, and conveniently discredit all that can be represented by its application.

correctness
speak

The debate thus jumps to these two extremes. Facile and meaningless correctness speak, and virulent anti-progressive opinion. In the middle are the masses who avoid the problem altogether, by not participating. These people have concluded that there is no point in exposing themselves to attack from either side, that there is no safe position.

Correctness is a Moving Target

The idea of political correctness is a concoction usually attributed to well-intentioned liberals wanting to correct the discrimination of the past and prevent unequal treatment in the future. By making unacceptable the expression of ideas and attitudes that are even potentially harmful to others, we cast a pall on the very forum for redress.

But this is only the most recent manifestation of the disease. Just because it has only recently acquired a catchy label doesn't mean it wasn't taking place. In general, it is a state where people repress their speech for fear of being branded as politically incorrect, that is, not worthy of respect in society. In one form or another, this has been happening for a long time.

In the recent past it has been incorrect to give an opinion that the U.S. shouldn't be spending so much on arms, or that Israel ought to treat the Palestinians with more respect. Today it is incorrect to question immigration levels or to suggest that there might be an ethnic or cultural component to any sort of behaviour - even ex-

emplary behaviour.¹⁷ Expressing these opinions could lead to public branding as a bad person with unworthy thoughts.

Innocent behaviour can be swallowed up in the pursuit of enforcing political correctness standards. Behaviour that is even intended to follow correctness can be consumed by ever more extreme interpretations of what is correct.

The unfortunate curator of the Into the Heart of Africa exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum was ostracized for showing that colonial attitudes toward Africa did once exist.

The damage of correctness is most extreme when it has invaded the traditional areas of intellectual discourse and social concern. By rendering certain opinions as unacceptable, even unexpressible, discussion and action get skewed toward unrealistic extremes.

The problem with the recent strain of correctness is that it so readily replicates itself in new, and often more extreme situations. Notions that all men are potential rapists or that people shouldn't be allowed to write about situations outside their race or class or sex, are examples of ideas that have grown all out of proportion to their due, thanks to the suppression of contrary thought brought about by the chill of political correctness. What starts out as deserved frustration about the prevalence of rape or the suppression of alternative voices in writing quickly leads to unhelpful extremes, when released from the scrutiny of contrary opinion silenced by the fear of voicing incorrect views. And what good do these extreme notions bring about? Instead of concentrating on helping to prevent rape, men are forced to defend their honour. Instead of judging fiction on the quality of the prose, we are expected to scrutinize the race of the author.

Worse still, people simply disengage from public debate out of fear or disgust at the way correctness has treated opinion. The damage is thus much greater than

¹⁷ That is, exemplary from the bourgeois, white, male, heterosexual, Western perspective.

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QUESTIONS WE WON'T ASK*

**correctness
crusades**

just the perceived casualties of the correctness crusades. The publicly branded are the tip of the iceberg. Legions more avoid the debate altogether. What is perceived as apathy may be simple self-preservation.

Much of the impetus for political correctness comes from the historically unequal application of rights, and the sense of injustice, grievance, and need for amelioration that this demands.

Shades of Right

Our sense of rights has become distorted by our style of debate. Either it's a right or it's nothing. Thus there is only one kind of right, a fundamental right. Coupled with the now entrenched notion of equality as the basis of all rights, it becomes impossible to respect a differing opinion on the merit of any claim for rights.

There is a difference between the right to life and the right to shop.

Many activities can be converted into fundamental rights by changing the definition to one of a right to equality. By making equality the key, we will tend toward unsuitable sameness. Circumstances should be examined. Something can be morally or socially good without it being converted into a right, especially an equality right.

The Ontario NDP government's defence of their sexual orientation bill was based solely on the fundamental right of equality, rather than on a decision of society to extend a benefit.

The Tibedeau decision on the unconstitutionality of taxing child support payments was based on a right of equality, not on a right to have non-taxed child support income, in effect a subsidy of divorce.

**dinosaur
mentality**

By posing a question as a matter of rights you preclude the opposing sides. If you don't agree with the right, then you're suffering from a dinosaur mentality.

You aren't allowed to have an opinion on a claim for rights when they are all considered fundamental. Here again, changing your mind is seen as opportunistic and shallow since there is nothing to debate.

Some forms of correctness have attempted to deny or even erase history and culture. This pitting of traditions against claims for equal treatment results from the confusion of equality and sameness.

Zealous government bureaucrats decided to prohibit Christmas decorations in the Ontario legislature building on the grounds of religious equality.

If only we would concentrate more on justice and less on rights we would have a society that acted on its beliefs rather than just talking about them.

Euphemism Overload

Generalizations are bad, *stereotypes* are abhorrent, *discrimination* is unacceptable. Of course, generalizing is how we make sense of the world. If everything had to be considered in its particularness we would be constantly overwhelmed with useless detail. Stereotypes are a way of generalizing about groups of people, and are often a useful means of analyzing and predicting behaviour. Finally, the ability to discriminate is essential to making sense of particulars in the context of generalizations and stereotypes.

Loss of Meaning

What has happened to these words is that they have been equated in the public mind with negative connotations, and have thus been condemned to political correctness oblivion. Similarly, other terms that have taken on derogatory meanings are simply replaced by empty tokens, place holders for meaning that will probably in time become just as unsavoury.

Other words suffer the reverse fate. Once powerful and specific expressions, their inappropriate overuse

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renders them meaningless. *Racism* is a prime example.

June Callwood can attest to the now casual use of the term racist.

Most swear words go through this process. Through overuse, they lose their power to offend. Conversely, the swear word euphemisms, like *friggin'* and *gosh darn*, should be equally disturbing to those that use them as substitutes. Everyone knows what words they replace, but they have little effect when the real thing has itself lost meaning.

This process is certainly not new, but seems to be accelerating in our media saturated culture. By referring to terrible events as mishaps or incidents, for example, we sterilize language, lose precision and descriptive power, and make light of complex and profound experiences.

Language is Not a Substitute for Attitude

Language is a powerful tool, that can and does have a negative impact on the way people see themselves and the way they are treated. A good case has been made to jettison gender-specific occupation names, so *fireman* and *stewardess* can be changed, but only example and attitude change will alter our image of *doctor* and *nurse*. And words like *herstory* or *womyn* seem to take this argument too far.

Replacing offensive words with hollow phrases will not produce the desired result. If anything the euphemism will merely draw ridicule. The casual replacement of pejorative terms with euphemisms will become an endless cycle unless the underlying attitudes are addressed.

Differently abled, *once* crippled *then* handicapped *then* physically challenged, *is about the best example.*

nomenclature The more euphemistic the term, the more it attracts
transformation ridicule. The nomenclature transformation has its in-

tended effect only for a short period of time, then the new becomes similarly tainted and must also be discarded.

The use of euphemisms and repression of thought are an attempt to cover up attitudes, to deny they exist. The hope is that this will affect the ways of thinking, that if bad thoughts are suppressed those thoughts will eventually cease. On the whole though, it is not through the suppression of thought and expression that our society will become more just, but through debate, education, dialog and involvement. Political correctness in all its forms attacks the symptom of the problem rather than the cause, often even prevents the discovery and exposure of the cause.

Questions We Should Ask

Orthodox opinion is a heavy weight upon society. It is the opinion taught in school, found in print, and seen on T.V. It is self-reinforcing, by its very nature the opinion of those in charge. In some ways, it reflects the collective wisdom of the ages, in others the stubborn conservatism or just plain self-interest of the powerful. Because of this, we are too trusting in our leaders in politics, business and science, too prone to believing that they are naturally right because they have attained their exalted positions. These people are not of super human intellect, and are often in their positions through a combination of inclination, perseverance and luck.

*in a
mass society
the individual
carries no
weight*

Our deference to leaders has thrived as a result of living in a mass society where specialization is the key to success. The rewards of specialization are prestige, money, and advancement, the things we are taught to seek. Unfortunately, this leaves us less able or inclined to examine issues outside our field of expertise, to look at the broad picture, to accept responsibility for the way things are run.

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Silent Partners

We act like silent partners, along for the ride, willing to collect on the profits of the endeavour, but unwilling to contribute to the doing. And we don't question until it directly affects us. How many stories of personal injustice or tragedy have we heard that have spurred the people involved to help others in similar situations. They become advocates for action to help prevent similar problems in the future. It seems natural to want to turn your negative experience into a way to help others who might suffer the same fate. It's the personal connection to events that makes us willing to become involved.

*silence is
not
golden*

This is exactly what is missing in the way we run our society. We feel disconnected and powerless to affect change so we don't even try. Until it affects us directly, we don't even want to think about it. Isn't this the way we have come to treat politics and government? We let the politicians do what they will until it has a direct effect on us or those close to us, and then we act. Sort of a not-in-my-backyard attitude.

I would think that this attitude is pretty well the expected result of the way that commercialism has come to define economics, and economics has come to define politics. Commercialism is not about sharing the wealth and helping your fellow human being, it's about individual attainment. So the path of politics is not out of whack with the people's attitudes, but has merely changed to reflect their growing commercial attitude.

Which is all fine so long as everyone is doing well, which they're not. And then the problems start. They have to do with how we treat each other, how it is we organize our society to deal with those who have not made it. Or those who thought they had but now find they are surplus to requirements, just another expendable human in the economic equation. Which as society becomes less labour intensive could well be just about any one of us.

Why Do We Just Accept Things?

Our society is organized to produce people who have shared attitudes and values. Our educational system, consisting of both formal education and popular culture, is exceptionally good at ensuring consistent attitudes about how our society works and is run. It also very effectively limits the range of questioning we will contemplate – we just won't think of questioning the fundamentals. We may be willing to question the broad structures of society, especially when we won't have to implement them.

It was with great gusto that people behind the Iron Curtain threw their lot in with capitalism, safe they thought, in the knowledge that they would never have to participate in the doing.

We also seem to be able to question things that immediately affect us, the local and personal concerns. What we don't seem to be able to do is question the way the system itself is run, once we have decided on the broad structure.

***total
immersion
program***

What we don't do well is to critique the systems of which we are an integral part. While immersed in a capitalist market, a technological medical environment, a science and technology whirlwind, or a corporate system, we cannot bring ourselves to comment on the nature of that very system. We are blind to the fundamental faults, perhaps because it is too painful to admit the basic nature of the problems. We can postulate about grand theories that purport to describe these systems. We can also rail against personal maltreatment within, but we aren't equipped to question the actual working of the system.

Nor are our systems designed to encourage or accept criticism from within. People who do attempt to question the fundamentals are either brushed aside, or berated for disloyalty. We don't tend to create self-correcting systems, ones that would accept or even encourage criticism from within.

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Everyday Orthodoxies

We live in a society of assumptions, of built-in ways of thinking with many hidden and overlooked attitudes. We accept these assumptions, sometimes without even knowing it. And there are great implications that flow from what we assume.

Globalization for instance is a current assumption. Orthodox opinion would have us believe that it was inevitable, natural, irreversible, and above all that it had to take the form that it did. And from this we must accept that the structure and dynamic of our economy will and must be dictated by global forces beyond anyone's control. Are we sure that this is what we want, or that we have no choice?

The benign nature of science and technology is another orthodoxy. In the West this one is drilled into us from birth. When something goes wrong, we look to technology to save the day. When technology threatens to wrench our way of life, we welcome it with open arms. When science experiments with life, we tout it as another amazing human achievement. We have reached a stage of almost total worship of science and technology, believing in its infallibility, or at the least, its inevitability.

The very nature of our economy is an assumption. When studied it is treated as an autonomous system, full of danger and opportunity, but well beyond the political and moral control of the citizens. Yet everything we do in a modern society is constrained by the economy. The very idea of society is bound up in the belief that the economy will provide for the individual and collective pursuits of its members.

The commercialization and hence trivialization of culture is another reality we have come to accept. That we would passively accept this is astonishing, as culture is the very soul of society. This is a result of the fusion of our beliefs in the nature of the economy, in globalization, and in technology.

***A general
unease
Permeates
society
Like having
forgotten
to do
something
We grope for
the cause
Which is
ourselves***

And we believe these orthodoxies. They are beliefs because we have no basis for questioning the foundation of these propositions. Our political system is now so tightly coupled with the economy that it has squelched all will to question these things. Our education system is incapable of preparing us to question these orthodoxies because it is bound up with them. It is a product of the same forces that perpetuate orthodoxy, and in turn acts as one of its most powerful tools.

The System Is For People, Right?

Either we live in a democracy or we don't. If we do, then we are in charge and have responsibility for the way things run. We must exert control, and not just at the ballot box! It takes effort to be involved in the running of society, effort that must be expended by as many people as possible if we are to truly live in a self-governing system. The evident frustration of large numbers of people is a testament to their desire for control that is being thwarted, intentionally and unintentionally. The lack of confidence in our political system is both obvious and unnerving, for, short of revolution, it is this system we must work within.

**anti-
tax
anti-
government
anti-
people**

I believe the anti-tax, anti-government mania that is sweeping the land is an expression of a lack of confidence in our ability to govern collectively, and thus a turn toward self-interest. For too long the political system has just ticked along on auto-pilot, with practically no citizen intervention. And this was fine, until we started to notice that we were losing jobs and thus financial predictability, were paying more and more in taxes, faced a ballooning debt, and watched as our cherished social safety net was dismantled. And then we clued in, and started to notice that everything wasn't unfolding as it should.

What we haven't yet noticed though is that the economic system isn't structured for people. Yet, as things go wrong economically, we move to the right, toward the same economic forces that produced the problems,

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that defined the system. We move to constrain our government – the means to express our collective will – in an attempt to take back control. But all we end up doing is to inhibit our ability to counteract the autonomous forces that we have unleashed.

We need to question the way society runs. And to be able to do this, we need to be able to recognize the structures of society and the motivations of people. But first, we have to recognize our own perspective, the orthodoxies we accept, and especially the ones we don't notice. This is not an easy task, it is hard to be vigilant about our creeping assumptions. But if we are not, our society will continue on its current path – in the direction that so many of us find unattractive.

Dennis Potter, who was passionately concerned about the disintegration of civic life, had this to say about the Thatcher era in Britain:

There was a genuine radicalism in the air - it was coming from the right. But then it became that everything was given, in a sense, its price tag, and the price tag became the only gospel and that gospel in the end is a very thin gruel indeed, and if you start measuring humankind in those terms, everything else then becomes secondary, or less important, or in some sense, as I say, laughable, and all the things that bind us a community ... they're partly right-wing things ... But those things are very difficult to put prices upon and to quantify in the terms, terminology, of Mrs. Thatcher and her successors ... and [they] claim that things are getting better ... what is actually happening when a young person in many, many, many a town in this country sees

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no prospect of a job, and then they say, they will moralize, that's the worst thing, and say 'Oh crime is everything to do with the criminal.' What is the life of not expecting to get work? What is the life of only expecting cynicism in political conversation? What is a life that sees no horizon further than the latest nasty video...?¹⁸

¹⁸ Dennis Potter, *Seeing the Blossom*, pp 16-17.

Notes

I have tried to gather here and briefly describe a list of books that I have read that have affected my thinking on these topics. Many present unabashed unorthodox thinking, while others are examples of good common sense. Still others will give an insight into the state of technology, the economy and society.

David Barsamian, *Noam Chomsky: Chronicles of Dissent*

This is the essential Chomsky, a series of wide ranging discussions where Chomsky is allowed to hold forth at length on his favourite topics. He is often accused of promoting the conspiracy theory of government, which I think is a result of his insistence that all human events can and should be understood using a scientific method. A fascinating book.

Stuart Brand, *The Media Lab*

There is no better book to introduce you to the cult of technology. The Media Lab at M.I.T. is at the forefront of the school that believes technology can and should be applied to most aspects of everyday living.

A. Alan Borovoy, *Uncivil Obedience: The Tactics and Tales of a Democratic Agitator*

Borovoy advocates ways to bring about change that don't violate the law but do violate social sensibilities.

Noam Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader*

A selection of Chomsky's own writing, which is more analytical and precise than *Chronicles* and thus often less penetrable.

Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*

The classic depiction of the generation at the tail end of the Baby Boom. Coupland is praised and criticized with equal ferocity. I enjoyed it and generally agree with its descriptions. The X label has been incorrectly applied to subsequent generations. It is a description

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of a particular generation, born in the late '50s and '60s and how they particularly are affected by the dominant mass of people before them.

James Dale Davidson and Lord William Rees-Mogg, *The Great Reckoning*

Their premise is that the world has and will be governed by the exercise of power in the geopolitical sense. This should have been good, but I found it tedious. Their view is rather too technical for me, at times it felt like reading a stock newsletter.

Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*

Drucker asserts that society has passed from the dominance of capital to one where knowledge is the controlling factor. He believes knowledge is inherently a portable commodity that the employee possesses and that this will lead to a drastically different definition of organization and productivity. A bit too much cheerleading and wishful thinking for my taste but I would be pleased if he were right.

Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*

A detailed documentation and analysis of the American reaction to the women's movement. Extremely broad and deep coverage which shows an awful pattern of repression. An important book.

John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Journey Through Economic Time*

Galbraith sketches the major economic events of his lifetime from the point of view of one of the participants shaping the action. Well worth reading.

Václav Havel, *Summer Meditations*

This was such a joy to read, with clear and eloquent arguments. Havel presents his ideas on the way people should govern themselves, particularly that ethics and morality should be part of the decision making process in business, science, politics and all other human affairs. The chapter regarding Slovakian independence is startlingly similar to the situation in Québec.

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J.N. Patterson Hume, *By Chance Or By Design: An exploration into the Nature of Physical Law*

This book asserts that the existence of God can be neither proved nor disproved by gaining greater knowledge of science – and that scientists have actually spent a considerable amount of time trying. Along the way it shows that grandiose scientific theories of everything are only an illusion.

Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*

Ignatieff's main point is the necessity to distinguish between the basic needs of human survival, upon which the modern notion of human rights rests, with the needs of the human as a social being. He argues that the application of these two definitions of need are often in conflict in our law and policy.

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

An amazing study of the decline of the American city and why cities work. Even more amazing is that it has been simultaneously praised by readers and ignored by planners.

Jane Jacobs, *Systems of Survival*

This book offers a compelling thesis of two systems of organization. One is the commercial and the other the governmental. Her argument is that they are both quite natural and distinct and that rules from one system should not be imposed on the other.

Lawrence E. Joseph, *Gaia: The Growth of an Idea*

This book offers a detailed but not too technical account of the unorthodox Gaia theory of the planet. It shows both the proponents and detractors and puts in context the great environmental debates of the '80s and '90s.

James Laxer, *False God: How the Globalization Myth has Impoverished Canada*

The argument in this book is that free trade is not itself bad, but that we have been deluded that the United States is bound to be the

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right partner to hook up with. Much evidence is given to the contrary.

Michael Lewis, *Liar's Poker*

This is the real life saga of Wall Street traders in the '80s, with detail of the kind of thinking that pervades the money world.

Linda McQuaig, *The Wealthy Banker's Wife*

The author asserts that the steady, almost creeping erosion of our social system will lead to its destruction.

Marlo Morgan, *Mutant Message Down Under*

An amazing account of an American doctor's journey with a remote Australian aboriginal tribe and their relationship with each other and with their environment.

Donald A. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*

Norman provides a litany of design errors in everyday objects, often induced by a concentration on aesthetics or lack of testing. He believes that all products and systems should be designed to be used, and need to be tested and modified before production.

Sidney Piburn (ed.), *The Dalai Lama A Policy of Kindness: An Anthology of Writings by and About the Dalai Lama*

The Dalai Lama presents the Buddhist way of thinking about our responsibilities for others and the world. Quite a contrast with the Western way of thinking.

Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

This book shows that the American system of television with its emphasis on entertainment, dominated by advertisers and profit making corporations, is leading to an overall diminishment of citizen control, not through state coercion but rather through voluntary amusement.

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Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*

Postman gives us a sweeping history of the institution of childhood. He takes us from its creation thanks to the need to become literate, to what he suggests is its demise thanks to television and a culture that does not value children with a separate societal status.

Neil Postman, *The End of Education*

The latest in the thoroughly enjoyable Postman output in which he argues that American schools need to find what he calls a new narrative, if they are to survive as public institutions.

Neil Postman, *Technopoly*

This book ties together Postman's ideas on culture and technology with a compelling thesis on how technology has come to dominate us. He argues that American society is now defined and controlled exclusively by a reverence for technology.

Dennis Potter, *Potter on Potter*

Dennis Potter, *Seeing The Blossom*

Potter offers many interesting views on the state of television and media and their relationship to society. He is especially concerned about the 'commercialization of everything'.

Hubert Reeves, *Malicorne: Earthly Reflections of an Astrophysicist*

Scientist tries to reconcile his belief in science to love of art, culture, and life. It's sad that scientists believe that they have to think about everything scientifically, and that science can explain all. It's also sad that others find these views more valid when expressed by scientists.

Jeremy Rifkin, *Biosphere Politics*

Rifkin leads us on a wide ranging historical look at how the world has moved through stages of consciousness. First it was the desire to secure control of 'the global commons', followed by the doctrine of geopolitics, and next Rifkin hopes, to a new stage where the state of the biosphere is considered in all decisions.

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Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work*

Here we are presented with the rise and decline of mass employment. Its peak was generated by the invention of mass consumerism, its decline is forecast by replacement with technology. He argues that society has to replace work with something to maintain income (thus purchasing power) and self-esteem, and that a formalized voluntary sector and shortened work week could be an answer.

Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

This is a fascinating look at how imperial states are sustained through political and cultural institutions. He offers a detailed examination of great works of Western fiction and how they contributed to domestic support of the vast imperial activities.

Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*

Said argues that society needs intellectuals to retain an independence from institutions and the lure of money and prestige if they are to retain the ability to question power and privilege.

Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat and Other Clinical Tales*

Sacks shows with great compassion and wisdom the human side of mental illness and disease. He takes the scientific study of neurology beyond abstract references to patients, into the worlds they construct for themselves. A delightful read.

Ricardo Semler, *Maverick: The Success Story Behind the World's Most Unusual Workplace*

An almost unbelievable account of true workplace empowerment. Workers set salaries and work hours, choose their own bosses, and make all production decisions. And the company is wildly successful. A powerful example.

Gail Sheehy, *The Man Who Changed the World: The Lives of Mikhail S. Gorbachev*

This biography of Gorbachev shows how he moved from being a

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country Cossack, to ardent Communist, to the man who brought about the end of the Cold War.

Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom*

This is an interesting and important political and personal account of Gorbachev's foreign minister during the crucial years leading to the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Mark Slouka, *War of the Worlds*

Slouka warns that the computer technology revolution is being steered toward virtual reality worlds and a redefinition of community. I think his thesis is overdrawn, but is worth reading as a taste of things to come.

Gore Vidal, *At Home*

Gore Vidal, *The Decline and Fall of the American Empire*

In these books of essays, Vidal provides thoroughly enjoyable and readable accounts of political and intellectual life in the United States. His criticism of the state of the American political system is forceful. He argues that the system needs to be given back to the people.

Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*

Tom Wolfe captures the excess of the '80s beautifully in this novel that's extremely hard to put down. A barely fictional version of *Liar's Poker*.