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Trudeau Fellow 2007,

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BIOGRAPHY

William Rees received his Ph.D. in population ecology from the University of Toronto and has taught at the University of British Columbia's School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP) since 1969-1970. He founded SCARP's "Environment and Resource Planning" concentration and from 1994 to 1999 served as director of the School.

Professor Rees' teaching and research focus on the socio-economic and ecological prerequisites for sustainable societies in an era of accelerating global ecological change. A human ecologist and ecological economist, William Rees is best known as the originator of "ecological footprint" analysis, a sustainability assessment tool now used around the world that has helped to reopen the debate on human carrying capacity. His book *Our Ecological Footprint* (co-authored with then Ph.D. student Mathis Wackernagel) was published in 1996 and is now available in nine languages. Professor Rees has also authored 125 peer-reviewed academic papers and book chapters, and numerous popular articles, on humanity's (un)sustainability conundrum. Drawing parts of his answer from various disciplines, his current book project asks: "Is Humanity *Inherently* Unsustainable?"

Professor Rees is a founding member and recent past-President of the Canadian Society for Ecological Economics and a co-founder of the One-Earth Initiative. He is also a co-investigator in the Global Integrity Project, which seeks to define the ecological and political requirements for biodiversity preservation while sustaining human population health. Professor Rees' work is widely recognized. He

has been invited to lecture on his research in 25 countries around the world. In 2000, the *Vancouver Sun* named Professor Rees one of British Columbia's top public intellectuals; in 2006 he was elected to the Royal Society of Canada and in 2007, he was nominated a Trudeau Fellow.

ABSTRACT

The originator of “ecological footprint” analyses, William Rees is a contemplative man who carefully considers the present ecological state of the world as influenced by humans and the prospects for humanity's future. He is convinced that the current global “slow crisis” is caused by people simply acting naturally. The human social-cultural behaviour and dynamics that contributed to our success at earlier stages of evolution have become maladaptive in the rapidly changing environments of the 21st century. What can we do, since socio-political processes at local and global levels are proving to be ineffective in addressing these changes? Dr. Rees will let us know whether there is a future for humans.

LECTURE

Are Humans Unsustainable by Nature?

Memorial University of Newfoundland

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Introduction:

The State of the World in “Light of Human Evolution”

This paper is an exploration of an extended and admittedly somewhat discomfoting hypothesis, namely that the human species, *H. sapiens*, is unsustainable *by nature*. In short, I am proposing the deteriorating state of the biophysical world and the threat that it poses to the human prospect is a natural outcome of what humans themselves have evolved to be. Initially, some of you may take this proposition to be radically nonsensical. By the end, however, I hope you will see that the main threads of my argument, many of which have been recognized for centuries, have merely wanted knitting into whole cloth.

Most of you will be well aware of the context for this discussion. People are destroying their ecosystems; we are undermining the life-support functions of the ecosphere. Our best science warns that the human enterprise has already overshot the long-term carrying capacity of Earth. According to the latest (fairly conservative) estimates by the World Wide Fund for Nature, the human ecological footprint exceeds global biocapacity by almost 30% (WWF, 2008).

This should come as no surprise. Back in 1992 (the year of the first United Nations Conference on Environment and Development), the Union of Concerned Scientists issued its famous *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity*:

We the undersigned, senior members of the world's scientific community, hereby warn all humanity of what lies ahead. A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated (UCS, 1992).

No waffly ambiguity there! Nevertheless, in the course of the subsequent decade—a decade characterized by increasingly rousing rhetoric on the needed shift to “sustainable development”—ecological trends generally worsened. Thus in 2005, the authors of Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (the most comprehensive examination of the state of the ecosphere ever undertaken) were moved to echo the UCS's statement in their own summary document:

At the heart of this assessment is a stark warning. Human activity is putting such a strain on the natural functions of the Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted (MEA, 2005, p.5).

And still the dismal data accumulate. One recent peer-reviewed climate change analysis concludes that “an optimistic interpretation of the current framing of climate change implies that stabilization much below 650 ppmv CO₂e is improbable.”¹ To stabilize at 650 ppmv CO₂e, the majority of OECD nations would have to begin draconian emission reductions within a decade. Thus, unless we can reconcile economic growth with unprecedented rates of decarbonization—in

1. Anderson and Bows' analysis considered several green-house gases. Thus, the term “ppmv CO₂e” should be read as “parts per million by volume of carbon dioxide equivalents.” The current atmospheric concentration of CO₂ *alone* is an already excessive 387 ppmv, or 38% above the estimated pre-industrial level of 280 ppmv.

excess of 6% per year—this would require a *planned economic recession* (Anderson & Bows, 2008). If this seems outrageous, consider that 650 ppmv CO₂e implies a catastrophic 4 C° mean global temperature increase—the impact of a major recession, planned or not, would be mild by comparison.²

In effect, the world's top scientists are warning that staying our growth-based path to global development virtually guarantees catastrophe for billions of people and threatens the possibility of maintaining a complex global civilization. Such warnings should galvanize any self-proclaimed science-based culture to corrective action. Nevertheless—and this is really the starting point for our analysis—there is scant evidence that national governments, the United Nations or other official international organizations have begun to openly contemplate the implications for humanity if the scientists are right, let alone articulate in public the kind of policy responses the science evokes. Despite decades of accumulating evidence and growing anxiety about the risks of global change, the modern world remains mired in a swamp of cognitive dissonance and collective denial. Just what is going on here? How can we make sense of such conflicting realities?

There is, of course, no shortage of explanations for the ecological crisis. No doubt it can be traced, in part, to technological hubris and humans' inflated sense of invulnerability; some blame it on ignorance, greed, and even the desperation of impoverished people; others point to the flawed structure of industrial capitalism or the sheer momentum of growth-bound techno-industrial society. No doubt all of these reasons are valid, some more than others and at different times and places, but each such explanation has the superficial sheen of *proximal* cause. What we really want to know is

2. For example, a four Celsius-degree-increase in mean global temperature would likely convert China, India, much of Africa and the US—i.e., places where most of humanity lives—into uninhabitable deserts.

the root source of human greed, why some people are propelled by desperation and just how industrial capitalism came to be the way it is. This paper therefore advances a more *distal* cause of our common dilemma, one that lies beneath all the others.

The explanation we explore below was actually inspired by a phrase first penned by famed Russian-born geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky in 1964: “Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution” (Dobzhansky, 1964, p. 449).

To get straight to the point, my thesis is that we will only fully understand the modern sustainability conundrum and society’s apparent paralysis in the face of it if we examine its root causes in human evolutionary biology.

Premise 1: *H. sapiens* is an evolved species

My argument begins from two related and, I hope, non-controversial premises. The first should already be obvious: *H. sapiens* is an evolved species like all the others, and human evolution, like that of all the others, has been shaped by the forces of natural selection. Since individual and emergent social behaviour are as much exposed to selective pressure as any other genetically influenced human quality, it is therefore not much of a leap to extend Dobzhansky’s principle to assert that *nothing in human affairs—including much of economic and socio-political behaviour—makes sense except in the light of evolution*. This is not to say that other factors are not involved. Rather, I am arguing that the picture is unintelligibly incomplete unless we factor in the bio-evolutionary contribution.

It is true, of course, that human evolution differs significantly from that of other species. Most significantly, human evolution is now determined as much or more by socio-cultural factors (memes) as by biological factors (genes). Now everyone knows that a “gene” represents a unit of genetic information encoded in DNA that is passed from parent to offspring and that interacts with the environment to help determine the physical and behavioural phenotype (the

“appearance”) of the individual. But fewer people are familiar with the concept of the “meme,” first introduced by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 (Dawkins, 1976). A “meme” is a unit of cultural information that, like a gene, can be passed between generations and that influences the “phenotype” of the culture. A meme can be a persistent belief, an entrenched assumption, a particular value, a scientific concept or a working technology. Memes are thus the basis of cultural inheritance. Significantly, memes differ from genes in that they can be shared and spread rapidly among living individuals in the *same* generation or population.

Indeed, people acquire much of their memetic endowment passively, just by being exposed to a particular cultural environment and various social contexts, including schools, religious institutions and the family home. Once acquired, such “cultural programming” asserts considerable, often subconscious, influence over both individual and group behaviour. (More on this to follow.) While an individual’s meme-based cultural programming *can* be modified, we shall see that humans are often extremely resistant to change.

Genetic science tells us that genes generally do not perform solo. Many complex characteristics under genetic control are “poly-genetic,” i.e., they are influenced by several genes acting in consort as what might be called a “gene complex.” Thus, we can extend the analogy and refer to any coherent, integrated set of memes that characterize a particular ideology, paradigm, discipline or worldview as a “meme complex.”

Most importantly in the present context, meme theory holds that memes, like genes, vary within and among populations, are exposed to competition, can mutate, and will be exposed to varying biophysical and socio-cultural environments. In other words, memes are subject to a form of natural selection and evolve over time. It follows that if a meme or meme complex becomes maladaptive under particular environmental circumstances, it may be eliminated or selected out. Thus, while memetic evolution is theoretically much

faster than the genetic variety, there may be circumstances in which it is not fast enough. In extreme circumstances, whole societies stuck with maladaptive meme complexes have foundered and collapsed.

Premise 2: *H. sapiens* as work-in-progress

My second premise is that human evolution is incomplete. We may think of ourselves as the pinnacle of earthly evolution, but *H. sapiens* remains very much a work in progress. We can get a good sense of humanity-in-transition by considering just the brain. Neurologist Paul MacLean argued that the human brain has evolved in at least three overlapping phases, each with a corresponding anatomical sub-component having distinct functions, memory and intelligence. MacLean referred to the three quasi-independent structures of the human brain as the reptilian or R-complex (the brainstem and cerebellum), the limbic or paleo-mammalian system, and the neocortex or neo-mammalian brain (MacLean, 1990):

- The reptilian complex is concerned with autonomic functions associated with the body's physical survival (e.g., circulation and breathing). It also influences instinctive social behaviour (e.g., pertaining to territoriality, social stature, mating and dominance), executes the fight-or-flight response, and controls other mainly hard-wired ritualistic or instinctive behaviours.
- The limbic system is the primary seat of emotions (e.g., happiness, sorrow, pleasure, pain), personal identity and related behavioural responses (e.g., sexual behaviour, play, emotional bonding, separation calls, fighting, fleeing). It also houses our affective (emotion-charged) memories and seems to be the seat of our value judgments and informed intuition.
- The neocortex or rational brain is the most recent elaboration but occupies over two-thirds of the human brain by volume. More importantly, it is responsible for the higher cognitive functions that distinguish humans from other mammals; it is the seat of consciousness and the locus of abstract thought, reason and logic. It makes us uniquely capable of moral judgment and forward planning. The neocortex facilitates language, speech and writing and, with these, the very possibility of civilization.

Although some critics consider MacLean's conceptual separation of major brain components to be somewhat simplistic, animal and human research has generally supported the fundamental elements of the theory (Panksepp, 1998). In any event, however localized its various functions, the healthy brain generally acts as an integrated whole—the three sub-brain systems are intricately interconnected, each continuously influencing the others (e.g., emotions stimulate thought and thought may trigger emotion). The emergent behaviour and overall personality of the individual is thus a melding of thoughts, emotions and instincts. Under particular circumstances, however, one of the sub-brains, with its distinct capacities and limitations, may assume the dominant role. Significantly, *the individual may not be fully aware of which part of the brain is in control.*

This last point is particularly important in the context of (un)sustainability. Humans think of themselves as uniquely self-aware and rational. But because of the seeming success of the enlightenment project and subsequent scientific revolution in giving humans mastery over the physical world, western society has come to overestimate the power of mindful intelligence and reason. We seem to live in consciousness conferred by the human neocortex but remain paradoxically unaware of critical influences over our individual and group behaviour that spring from the lower brain centres (see Buchanan, 2007). The circumstances in which logic and reason dominate may still actually be limited and their effect relatively trivial in the grand evolutionary context.

What this implies is that much of expressed human behaviour, from routine one-on-one social interaction to international political posturing, is shaped, in part, by innate subconscious mental processes and their associated chemical/hormonal agents. Most importantly, in situations of conflict or resource scarcity, social/political/behavioural predispositions that operate beneath consciousness (i.e., in the limbic system and reptilian brain stem) may well override higher logic and rational thought in delivering a response. You will

all be aware—perhaps even from personal experience—that passion frequently trumps reason.

The main point to take from this is that *humanity is a conflicted species*, torn on the one hand between what reason and moral judgment says we should do and what pure emotion or baser instincts command us to do. With no knowledge of its neurological basis, 15th Century Italian Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola nevertheless recognized the tension.

Upon man [...] God bestowed seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these a man shall cultivate, the same will mature and bear fruit in him. If vegetative, he will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly being (Mirandola, 1486).

Indeed, it is clear that Mirandola saw humanity's unique capacity for reason as a bridge to godliness and feared the consequences of "losing it" to more primitive drives. Blessed with the unique capacity to assert will and reason over more primitive instincts and passions, we are nevertheless inclined, absent the image of God, to serve the beasts within us. Famed modern-day neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, who studies the actual neuro-chemical mechanisms of such internal conflict, expressed the same idea as follows: "There are indeed potions in our own bodies and brains capable of forcing on us behaviours that we may or may not be able to suppress by strong resolution" (Damasio, 1994, p. 121).

Working Hypothesis: Humanity is Unsustainable by Nature

With this as background, let me advance the following double-barrelled elaboration of my opening hypothesis:

Unsustainability is an inevitable emergent property of the systemic interaction between techno-industrial society, as presently conceived, and the ecosphere. Both purely innate (genetic) and quasi-cultural behavioural factors are involved.

Some explanation is in order. For present purposes we will define “emergent property” as a characteristic, quality or phenomenon that arises from the particular interaction of two complex systems. In this case, the interacting systems are techno-industrial society and the ecosphere. Thus, I am arguing that the various symptoms of unsustainability, from fisheries collapses to human-induced elements of climate change, emerge from fundamental incompatibilities between the structure and behaviour of natural ecosystems and the structure and behaviour of the human enterprise. Ecosystem behaviour is wholly determined by the laws of physics, chemistry and biology, and ultimately governed by the laws of thermodynamics. The human enterprise is subject to those same laws, but its actual behaviour is now as much influenced by various socially constructed technological and conceptual memes. Problems emerge when, for example, effects of techno-cultural innovations overwhelm the natural processes that ultimately sustain the integrated whole (e.g., fish-catching technology and fishers’ strategies now vastly outstrip the escape mechanisms and reproductive capacities of fish stocks).

The biological drivers

Just what are the genetic presets that are pressing us toward the brink? The suspect biological drivers are basic reproductive and survival instincts that humans share with all other species. Many experiments with organisms ranging from bacteria cultured in Petri dishes to reindeer introduced to previously uninhabited islands reveal the following universal properties of life: *unless or until constrained by negative feedback, all species populations expand to occupy all accessible habitats and to use all available resources*. Moreover, in the competition for habitat and resources, evolution favours individuals who are most adept at satisfying their short-term selfish needs whether by strictly competitive or by cooperative means, despite potential negative consequences down the road—i.e., a tendency to discount the

future has evolved by natural selection. As my friend and colleague Dr. Ronald Brooks argues, the potential for ecological destruction “is not merely a cultural trait, or even a [human] species trait, but a characteristic of any species that has evolved by Darwinian selection” (Brooks, 2001, p. 72).

Of course, *H. sapiens* has always had to compete with other consumer species for food and other resources, and there is little doubt that humans have prevailed in the competition. In particular, written language and cumulative technology—unique assemblages of meme complexes—give us a powerful leg up in the Darwinian struggle. As a result, *H. sapiens* has the greatest geographic range of any ecologically comparable species. There is no sizable patch of habitable landscape on Earth that has not been claimed and occupied by people. And does anyone imagine that if, somehow, another resource-rich continent were discovered today we would collectively say, “Well, we’ve certainly messed up everywhere else. Let’s just leave this one in its pristine state”? Consider the universal official response to the disappearing sea-ice in the Arctic. Do governments react in alarm and redouble efforts to negotiate a climate change mitigation treaty or otherwise protect the Arctic ecosystem? Certainly not! Canada and other circumpolar nations are tripping over each other in their frenzy to stake or reinforce their claims to the newly-exposed resource endowment of the ocean floor, including more of the petroleum and natural gas that are the cause of the problem in the first place (Gamble, 2009).

In fact, this is the typical human response to anything we take to be resources. One recent study shows that in terms of energy use (and therefore carbon dioxide emissions), biomass consumption and various other ecologically significant indicators, human demands dwarf those of similar species by orders of magnitude. Human consumption of biomass, for example, exceeds the upper 95% confidence limits for biomass ingestion by 95 other non-human mammal species by two orders of magnitude (Fowler & Hobbs,

2003). By virtue of cumulative knowledge and technology, *H. sapiens* has become, directly or indirectly, the dominant macro-consumer in all major terrestrial and accessible marine ecosystems on the planet.³ All of which means that our species may well be the most voraciously successful predatory and herbivorous vertebrate ever to walk the earth. In this light we can interpret unsustainability as the most recent and possibly terminal manifestation of humanity's competitive superiority.

Humanity's extraordinary material success actually makes us the archetype for an idea first articulated by ecologist Alfred Lotka in 1922 and now known as the "maximum power principle": systems that prevail in the struggle for life (i.e., successful individuals, species and ecosystems) are those that evolve in ways that *maximize* their use of available energy and material resources (see Lotka, 1922). *H. sapiens'* adoption of agriculture ten millennia ago was the first great leap forward in our species' capacity to harvest energy from nature and the one that made permanent settlements and large-scale civilization possible. But more than any other factor, our ability to exploit fossil fuels explains the explosive expansion of the human enterprise that began in the 19th century. In effect, the modern world is made from petroleum.

There is, however, a compound problem.⁴ First, despite today's material abundance, people's competitive drive and tendency to accumulate remains unsatisfied. Modern humans do not have a built-in "off" switch that is tripped by sufficiency (which, by the way, is the basis for the economists' caricature of humans as *Homo oeconomicus*, "a self-interested utility maximizer with fixed preferences and insatiable material demands"). Second, humanity's technological

3. This is ironic considering the common belief that the human enterprise is decoupling from, and no longer dependent on, nature.

4. Yet another problem I will not dwell on here is the approach of "peak oil," the point at which the extraction of petroleum levels off and begins its inexorable decline.

capacity to exploit nature now exceeds nature's reproductive capacity. The combined result of these forces haunts the sorry history of so-called resource management, particularly common pool assets: "While there is considerable variation in detail, there is remarkable consistency in the history of resource exploitation: resources are inevitably overexploited, often to the point of collapse or extinction" (Ludwig, Walters & Hilborn, 1993, p. 17). The implosion of North Atlantic cod in 1992, until then the world's greatest fishery, is a striking local example.

The cultural re-enforcer: The myth of perpetual growth

These basic facts of human ecology alone are sufficient to explain how even primitive hunter-gatherers often caused permanent changes in ecosystems, including the extinctions of many large mammals and (particularly flightless) birds. Certainly, too, humanity's expansionist tendencies, combined with such preindustrial technologies as sail-power, were sufficient to drive the European "rape of the world" that was well under way by the end of the 16th century (Ponting, 1991). But the contemporary sustainability crisis, the global-scale degradation that threatens the future of humanity itself, is a product of the industrial era. This is the period when cultural forces, endowed with unprecedented technological leverage, emerged to *reinforce* humanity's innate expansionism. In particular, industrial culture acquired a universal unifying goal—promoting economic growth has become the principal *raison d'être* of national governments the world over.

There is actually a second layer of nature-nurture interaction at work here. Humans are natural story-tellers and myth-makers. No society is without its myths and legends, its grand cultural narrative. In fact, the social construction of reality (or better, the social construction of perceptions) in the form of stories, myths, ideologies and paradigms is a universal property of human societies that plays a vital role in every culture including our own (Grant, 1998). The key point is that while the tendency to mythologize is yet another

vessel cast from our genes, what we put into it (in this case, the idea of perpetual growth) is determined by social and cultural context. If the modern mind has difficulty in accepting this notion, it is only because we prefer to believe that we are essentially a science-based culture. Most “educated” people have learned to equate myth with falsehood, superstition, and the mystical beliefs of “primitive” peoples.⁵ But this is a particularly sterile and dismissive view of myth. Consider instead Colin Grant’s description of myths “not as mistaken views but as comprehensive visions that give shape and direction to life” (Grant, 1998, p. 1).

With this perspective in mind, I submit that the entire world today is united in a grand mythic vision of global development and poverty alleviation centred on unlimited economic expansion fuelled by open markets and more liberalized trade. This myth springs from the assumption that human well-being derives from perpetual income growth. No other cultural narrative in all of history has given greater “shape and direction to [the lives]” of so many people (Rees, 2002).

The perpetual growth ethic, still spreading into the developing world, has actually taken hold in a remarkably short period of time. Only eight or ten generations of people have experienced sufficient economic growth or related technological change to notice it in their lifetimes—99.5% of human history has been no-growth history. As an *influential* memetic construct, perpetual economic growth has actually been around for only *two* generations. Indeed, there was virtually no interest in economic growth as a policy objective anywhere before 1950. Yet by the end of the 50s, economic growth had bubbled to the top as the “supreme overriding objective of policy”

5. Balance these perceptions against the fact that much of politics and international (i.e., intertribal) tension in the modern world, from the recent pervasive influence of Christian fundamentalism in US governance to the perennial Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle-East, is essentially myth-based.

in many countries. By then, "...more rapid economic growth came to be regarded as a prophylactic or remedy for all the major current ailments of western economies" (Arndt, 1978, cited in Victor, 2008, p. 13). Here the point to remember is that like maladaptive genes, ill-considered memes—no matter how successful in the short term—may ultimately be selected out by a changing environment.

Indeed, the problem for sustainability is that the perpetual growth myth knows no ecological bounds. Mainstream academic models of the economy make no functional reference whatsoever to the ecosystems that contain it. Co-lateral damage to the environment is considered to be a mere "negative externality" that can be corrected by appropriate pricing through, for example, pollution charges or taxes. Resource shortages? No matter—we can relieve local shortages through trade, and should the problem be more widespread, we play the technology card—the expansionist myth asserts that human ingenuity will find a substitute for any depleting resource. The late business professor Julian Simon put the techno-mantra this way:

Technology exists now to produce in virtually inexhaustible quantities just about all the products made by nature... We have in our hands now—actually in our libraries—the technology to feed, clothe and supply energy to an ever-growing population for the next seven billion years... (Simon, 1995).

This is such an arithmetically challenged statement that only the terminally gullible would take it seriously,⁶ but it makes the point to which Simon dedicated his business and academic life—there is no basis whatsoever for concern about resource scarcity or ecological

6. Simon was, in fact, challenged on this statement and promptly backed down to "seven million years," a three orders of magnitude retreat. Nevertheless, starting from 5.7 billion people in 1995, growing at just 1% per year, the human population after "only" seven million years would be 2.3×10^{30410} . This is an unimaginably large number, something like "thirty-thousand orders of magnitude larger than the number of atoms estimated to be in the known universe!" (Bartlett, 1998).

degradation. Indeed, growth advocates regard environmentalists and other critics as imposing a dangerous drag on the world's growth-based pursuit of progress.

It goes almost without saying that industrial capitalism both feeds and feeds on perpetual growth—material accumulation is both the objective of and a necessary fuel for the capitalist production and consumption. But because of its insatiable thirst for cheap resources and labour, capital has become tightly tied to the political and military power needed to sustain its global expansion (just as US President Eisenhower warned it would). The history of conflict since WW-II (particularly the recently ended Bush administration's record) shows how this particular alignment of powers responds to any effort to resist it.

Finally, we must note the average citizen's generally unconscious role in all this. Capitalism needs people to buy its prodigious output. In the 1950s, private capital therefore began to re-think what has become today's multi-hundred-billion dollar advertising industry to flog the products of its factories. At that point, the social construction of reality had become a commercial enterprise with the goal of converting potentially self-aware citizens into autonomic consumers. (By the way, this is achieved by playing on people's innate insecurities, competitive instincts, envy, concerns about social status, etc., i.e., a bevy of emotions and instincts resident in the mid-brain and R-complex.) Our throw-away consumer society was literally invented by private capital mainly to serve the interests of private capital. Listen to how 1950s marketing expert Victor Lebow described the mission:

Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction and our ego satisfaction in consumption. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing rate (Lebow, 1955).

Little wonder that theologian Colin Grant describes the consumer sub-myth as going beyond materialism: "...it is about spiritual reality. It represents the most sustained attempt in the history of humanity to accord total spiritual significance to material consumption" (Grant, 1998). All of which underscores an essential factor impeding progress toward sustainability: The current generation of people has been thoroughly, if unconsciously, socially engineered as reflexive mega-consumers with no consideration of the long-term effects on personal health or the earth.

Parsing the Growth-Based Development Myth

I have argued that the modern world is in the thrall of a global development myth based on continuous economic growth. This myth essentially equates human well-being with ever-rising income (i.e., capacity to consume). It posits that we need ever greater money-wealth to provide the means better to protect the environment. The myth promotes global economic integration as a means to increase gross economic output by taking advantage of the efficiencies associated with specialization and trade. Most importantly, in the present context, growth advocates argue that economic expansion is essential to relieve the debilitating poverty that is still the dominant reality for at least a third of the human family.

It seems appropriate to assess how we are doing in light of these assumptions and in pursuit of these goals: What does the empirical record of the past half century tell us not only about the merits of the myth itself but also about the human nature of (un)sustainability?

- First, we know that growth-driven "development" is degrading the biophysical basis of our own existence—and the problem is not just climate change. Humans are acidifying the oceans; deserts are spreading; tropical forests are disappearing; biodiversity is declining; fisheries are collapsing; soils are eroding; aquifers are falling; surface waters are polluted beyond life and use, etc. The climate system and major ecosystems are approaching tipping points

beyond which they may well “flip” into new equilibrium states that might not be compatible with human economic or ecological needs. Such changes may be irreversible in practical terms on time scales that matter to people. Again, the collapse of Canada’s Northern Cod stocks serves as an archetype of systems collapse. Obviously, such trends can only detract from long-term human well-being.

- We know that the world’s most serious ecological problems (e.g., climate change) can be traced mainly to high-income consumers. The wealthy have per-capita ecological footprints twenty or more times larger than the very poor. The richest 20% of the population consumes most of the world’s economic and ecological output (see below). Clearly, greater income is no assurance of greater environmental protection.
- We know that while economic growth has raised millions out of poverty, the absolute number of poor has never been greater. Particularly in the impoverished parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America, about 1.2 billion people still lack access to potable water and 2.6 billion have no sanitary or sewage facilities. Almost a billion people live on less than a dollar per day and most are calorically deprived. About 2.6 billion people or 40% of the human population live in poverty at less than two dollars a day and most are otherwise malnourished. Over 26,000 children die every day from poverty (meaning hunger, water-borne and other preventable illnesses) (Shah, 2008; World Bank, 2008). These billions of people, ostensibly the intended beneficiaries of global growth, would benefit greatly from even modest income increases but are gaining little ground.

By contrast:

- We know that the greatest share of national and global income growth flows to upper income groups who need it least. In 2006 the world’s wealthiest countries with one billion people—15% of the world population—accounted for 76% of gross world product (\$36.6 trillion out of \$48.2 trillion). The richest 20% of the world’s population take home 76.6% of the world’s income; the poorest 20% subsist on 1.5% (Shah, 2008; UNDP, 2007).

- We know that further income growth for the rich is borderline futile and certainly an egregious waste of the world's resources. Beyond a certain point, a point long past in the development of high-income countries, there is no significant positive relationship between various objective indicators of population health (longevity, infant mortality, post-operative survival, etc.) and rising incomes (Siegel, 2006; Victor, 2008). The same is true for subjective indicators, measures of "felt" well-being (e.g., for the United States, Robert Lane describes "...the strange, seemingly contradictory pattern ... of rising real income and a falling index of subjective well-being" (Lane, 2000).
- Nevertheless, we know that the income gap both among and within countries is widening. In 1960, the 20% of the world's people living in the richest countries took home 30 times the income of the poorest 20%; by 1997, this had increased to 74 times as much. The average American, who was 38 times richer than the average Tanzanian in 1990, was 61 times richer in 2005. (By 2005, the average African household was consuming 20% less than it did 25 years ago [UNDP, 2005]). As noted, the already- wealthy increasingly appropriate the greatest share of national income growth. As a result, by 2000, the richest 5% of the United States' population owned 60% of that nation's wealth. That is, the top 5% had more wealth than the remaining 95% of the population combined. (The US now has the widest income gap of any high-income nation.)
- We also know—ironically—that one of the most significant contributors to declining population health and increasing civil unrest in poor and rich countries alike is income disparity. Countries with increasing inequality and deepening social divisions "...tend to show markedly higher rates of alcohol-related deaths, accidents, homicide, crime, violence and probably drug use" (Wilkinson, 1996). Yet we actively promote national and global political economies that systematically and dramatically increase inequity. More than 80% of the human population lives in countries where income differentials are increasing, including Canada and the US (UNDP, 2007).

It seems that over the past few decades virtually the entire world has bought into an economic growth paradigm that, contrary to its implicit assumptions and stated goals, is wrecking the ecosphere, undermining essential life-support systems, failing the chronically poor, making the already-rich richer without improving well-being, and increasing inequality virtually everywhere with negative implications for population health and social stability. This is not exactly a stellar record. As ecological economist Herman Daly has frequently argued, we may be well into a period of uneconomic growth in which the (mostly unaccounted) costs *outweigh* the benefits. Yet the universal response to these failings—and, most recently, to the collapse of the global financial system—is to add fuel to the (now somewhat dampened) fire. Rather than seize the opportunity to create a potentially sustainable new economy, governments everywhere are attempting to resurrect the old—bailing out corrupt financiers and failed banks, salvaging a grossly mismanaged auto industry, lowering interest rates, assembling stimulus packages and doing everything else they can to reignite the flames of national and global growth.

And we have certainly not forgotten that programmed automation, the lowly consumer. Governments are lowering income taxes to renew people's enthusiasm for performing their assigned role in the capitalist economy (and the blind-sided "beneficiaries" mostly cheer, apparently oblivious to the fact that this means reducing government services that they may actually need). The media are certainly firmly with the program. A recent *Globe and Mail* editorial chided Canadians for their thrift and parsimony, even in these uncertain times. Saving apparently stifles growth. For our own good, the *Globe* urged, "spend wisely, but spend nonetheless" (*Globe & Mail*, 2009).

Now, an alien observer might be puzzled by all this. Can we really claim to be a science-based society? Certainly repetitive futile actions are not the mark of high intelligence. Wasn't it Einstein who quipped, "insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results?"

But this precisely is the point—intelligence and reason are not the primary determinants of human social behaviour. It is raw instinct and emotion, combined with familiar constructed beliefs, not logical analysis and reason, that “give shape and direction to life.” We prefer our myths and ignore the data; shared illusion provides a psychological shield against the harsh barbs of reality. Popular social critic and environmentalist Derrick Jensen nailed the point nicely when he wrote that:

For us to maintain our way of living, we must... tell lies to each other, and especially to ourselves... [the lies] are necessary because without them many deplorable acts would become impossibilities (Jensen, 2000).

Intelligence, Self-Delusion and Sustainability

Modern humans may not be insane but we can make the case that they are genuinely confused. I argued earlier that *H. sapiens* is a conflicted species “torn on the one hand between what reason or moral judgement says we should do and what pure emotion or baser instincts command us to do.” I want now to return to that argument.

In 1955, at the time economic growth was pushing its way to prominence on the policy agenda, German philosopher Martin Heidegger lamented that “...man today is *in flight from thinking*” (Heidegger, 2003, p. 88). Heidegger was not referring to the short-term, goal-driven *calculative* thinking of the kind that, for example, drives the economy, advances technology and proliferates electronic gadgetry. He meant that people have abandoned *meditative* thinking, that uniquely human form of intellectual activity that contemplates “...the meaning which reigns in everything that is” (Heidegger, 2003, p. 89).

Meditative thinking requires concentrated effort, wilful determination, and active consciousness in deep exploration of present reality. This is the kind of thinking that is missing from the roiling boil of modern life. Heidegger is arguing that we moderns have

allowed to “lie fallow” one of our greatest and uniquely human abilities. Instead we are being swept along in the techno-material tide, guided, if at all, by careless whims and sheep-like adherence to prevailing mythology.

Our Renaissance philosopher friend, Mirandola, actually anticipated Heidegger’s concern by 500 years (unconscious human behaviour is fairly constant). Indeed, we may well be living Mirandola’s worst nightmare. You will recall that Mirandola intuitively sensed the evolutionary role of the cerebral cortex—to him the capacity for contemplative thinking was a gift of God that raised man above the beasts. But Mirandola feared that even his contemporaries disparaged philosophy, seeing the pursuit of answers about “the causes of things, the ways of nature and the plan of the universe” as “occasion for contempt..., rather than honour and glory.” He was pained to recognize that society had “reached the point... where the only persons accounted wise are those who can reduce the pursuit of wisdom to a profitable traffic.” In Mirandola’s view, “...if you see a man [thus] bedazzled by the empty forms of the imagination... and through their alluring solicitations made a slave to his own senses [read: emotions and instincts], you see a brute and not a man” (Mirandola, 1486).

Exactly so. By allowing our capacity for self-conscious intelligence to “lie fallow,” we also allow relatively brutish behavioural predispositions that originate *beneath* consciousness in the limbic system and brainstem to dominate our actions. Short-term self-interest, material greed, possessive accumulation, competitive exclusion—these have been the primary and proudly public drivers of industrial capitalism’s expansion around the world in recent decades.

By contrast, acting with high intelligence, consistent with the scientific evidence on global change, and exercising our capacity for moral judgment would require that rich countries recognize that it

is now in their own long-term interest to not only give up the idea of continuous material growth but begin a planned *shrinkage* of their national economies. This is necessary on a finite planet already in overshoot to make room for needed growth in the developing world (Rees, 2008; Victor, 2008). Climate science says that to avoid potentially catastrophic climate change, global society must reduce its CO₂ emissions by 80-90% by mid-century, beginning almost immediately (and even this may prove too little, too late). Similarly, our eco-footprint work shows that for sustainability with equity, North Americans would have to reduce their ecological footprints by about 80%, from around nine global average hectares per capita to our “fair Earth-share” of about two ghas (Rees, 2006; WWF, 2008).

These may seem to be impossible goals, but analysis shows that we actually have the technology today to enable a 75% reduction in energy and (some) material consumption (e.g., Weizsäcker *et al.*, 1997) while improving quality of life in the first world and increasing general well-being in the developing countries. Remember, too, that on average, people in wealthy countries were actually happier with half and less of today’s average per-capita income.

Yet we do not act, even to save ourselves. Contraction is not the narrative people are used to hearing; it is not a story we want to heed. Privileged elites with the greatest personal stake in the *status quo* control the policy levers and are steering us onto the rocks. Ordinary people hold to the expansionist myth as to a life-raft, in deep denial of present reality. It seems we are all willing to trade off uncertain but potentially major long-term gain (i.e., cultural survival) to avoid the certain but minor short-term pain of having to adjust our lifestyles. Despite the growing scale of potential catastrophe, the innate human tendency to discount the future remains intact. And, of course, the world dismisses those analysts who have actually thought things through. Nineteenth century behavioural psychologist Gustave Le Bon described the syndrome well in his book on the workings of “the popular mind”:

The masses have never thirsted after truth. They turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduce[s] them. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim. (Gustave le Bon, 1896).

Le Bon's observation is no mere curiosity. Cognitive blocks and resultant behavioural inertia can determine the fates of nations. The distinguished American historian, Barbara Tuchman, details the tragic effects of self-delusion on entire societies through millennia in her 1984 classic, *The March of Folly*. According to Tuchman, political folly or "wooden-headedness":

[...] plays a remarkably large role in government. It consists in assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions [i.e., ideology] while ignoring any contrary signs. It is acting according to wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts (Tuchman, 1984, p. 7).

For those who still doubt the power of entrenched beliefs over thoughtful deliberation, recent cognitive research has revealed a physiological mechanism. During early development and maturation, social, cultural and sensory experiences actually *shape* the individual's brain structures and synaptic circuitry in an "image" of those experiences. Once entrenched, these neural structures alter the individual's subsequent experience and perception. People tend to seek out experiences that reinforce their pre-set neural circuitry and select information from their environment that matches these structures. Conversely, "when faced with information that does not agree with their internal structures, they deny, discredit, reinterpret or forget that information" (Wexler, 2006, p. 180).

This problem may be particularly acute among political leaders because yet another mechanism is at play. When people perceive a threat to their status, safety or survival, innate behavioural propensities that operate beneath consciousness in the limbic system and brain-stem tend to override more rational defensive responses.

Thus, in addition to being psychologically hard-wired to their political ideologies, politicians may be more than usually enslaved to brainstem-based survival instincts, particularly the deep-seated need to retain their wealth, prestige and political power. So it is that in the history of human affairs, brutish passion and instinct often overwhelm the godly gift of reason (Morrison, 1999).

There is a still further complicating factor in the context of sustainability. Globalization, that hand-maiden to expansionist logic, has lead to such an entanglement of interests and nations, that individual people and countries who do understand the ecological crisis cannot act to save themselves even if inclined to do so. In a thoroughly interconnected world (un)sustainability is a collective crisis that demands collective solutions. Nations that act alone to rationalize their economies would have to abrogate various international treaties and agreements (on trade, for example) and would be regarded as rogues or renegades. Unless most others followed, they would put themselves at great contemporary disadvantage with no long-term benefit—they would inevitably go down with the global ship. Machiavelli, the more cynical contemporary of Mirandola, understood this well, when he observed that:

[...] the way men live is so far removed from the way they ought to live that anyone who abandons what is for what should be pursued his downfall rather than his preservation (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 7).

Conclusions: Coming to Grips with Reality

I want to be sure that we understand the full import of what I am proposing here. Our current unsustainable state is actually the product of *H. sapiens*' inordinate evolutionary success in the struggle for existence. The same genetic traits that assured the survival and competitive supremacy of primitive peoples, however—e.g., an emphasis on short-term individual self-interest, future discounting, loyalty to tribal myths, etc.—have become maladaptive for modern humans in the much-changed circumstances created by humanity's success

itself. To make matters worse, our now disadvantageous innate behavioural traits are being reinforced by cultural memes—e.g., the perpetual growth myth—that were maladaptive from the start. The problem is that both bad genes and inappropriate memes may be selected out by an ecosphere in convulsion. Modern human society is unsustainable by nature.

This thesis is not entirely speculative. Various previous cultures great and small have initially flourished, only later to succumb to problems exacerbated by their behavioural demons. According to anthropologist Joseph Tainter “...what is perhaps most intriguing in the evolution of human societies is the regularity with which the pattern of increasing complexity is interrupted by collapse...” (Tainter, 1995). The inability to cope with climate change and ecological degradation in particular are implicated in the ruin of various cultures throughout history (Diamond, 2005). Once again, assuming our contemporary science is correct, the human enterprise is on a collision course with biophysical reality, only this time on a global scale.⁷ The world may already be at a point where there are insufficient resources and sinks to support a population of eight or nine billion people at an acceptable material standard.⁸ It is therefore by no means a stretch to contemplate the decline if not rapid collapse of global society (e.g., Greer, 2008).

As this possibility becomes clearer to panicking governments everywhere, prospects for a negotiated collective solution will likely fade in inverse proportion. The tension between reason and fear would dissolve like sugar in hot rum. Base survival instincts—looking out for number one, now!—would prevail among still-powerful

7. And so far, the science actually appears conservative—climate models, for example, have underestimated the rate of change experienced in recent years.

8. Given the critical state of key biophysical systems and the accelerating pace of degradation, it may not be possible to sustain even today’s 6.7 billion people at an acceptable material standard.

nations clinging to desperate dreams of maintaining the *status quo*, at least for themselves. Thus, we may well face a future of wars fought not so much over conflicting beliefs as over access to the world's dwindling supplies of vital energy, mineral and agricultural resources. The shape of US foreign policy in recent years provides a foreshadowing template. (There is no shortage of books and reports exploring this scenario—e.g., Klare [2001], Woodbridge [2004], CSIS [2007]). Of course, if any one nation plays its nuclear card, the entire human species would be at risk.

Can We Fix the Future?

The sustainability conundrum obviously poses the ultimate challenge to collective intelligence, complex reasoning and the capacity for moral judgment, vital qualities we humans claim as uniquely our own. The copious historical evidence that, in times of crisis, these cerebral properties generally yield to evolutionarily older and better-tested emotional (limbic) and instinctive (R-complex) intelligence is therefore somewhat disheartening. The integrated human brain obviously does not yet trust higher-order intelligence to be in charge when the pressure is on. The question is whether the world community can muster the sheer cooperative will needed to reverse the intellectual dominance order in today's extraordinary times.

Success in this effort may be necessary for the survival of civilization for one simple reason. For the first time in the evolutionary history of *H. sapiens*, short-term individual and "tribal" self-interest has all but converged with humanity's long-term collective interest. Ecological and social selection pressures have shifted. In today's nuclear-tipped world, "*every man for himself!*" might well mean destruction for all; working cooperatively for all may be necessary to save oneself. This means that the selective advantage has shifted to genes that reinforce cooperative, even (mutually) altruistic behaviour. The question is whether we can create the necessary complementary memetic mutations. Social reinforcement of newly

adaptive mutualistic behaviours is necessary for collective survival in a resource-stressed world.

It is said that in every crisis is opportunity. To date, responses to global financial and economic meltdown have focused on reproducing the economic pyramid scheme(s) that precipitated the problem in the first place. Instead, the available data, intelligently interpreted, suggest that the world community should seize the moment to begin the creation of a global steady-state economy. The guiding principles should be sufficiency for all and a focus on true development (getting qualitatively better) rather than mere growth (getting quantitatively bigger).⁹

In other words, the global crisis offers us the privileged mission—should we choose to accept it—of setting out intentionally to script a new, ecologically adaptive, socially enriching global cultural narrative. This new master blueprint must better reflect ecological reality on a crowded planet than does our failing growth-based paradigm.

Competition, greed, and fetishistic individualism must be balanced or replaced by cooperation, sharing and community values; short-term material wants must give way to long-term survival needs. The key is to recognize that all these terms can found in the dictionary of human behaviour, but the vocabulary we choose to give voice to our new “narrative for survival” is a matter of social choice.

Of course, any attempt to engineer a social transition must confront the fact that humans are naturally behaviourally conservative. We are indeed creatures of habit. Once an individual’s synaptic pathways and associated behaviours are well-entrenched, it is difficult for

9. “Steady-state” implies a more or less constant rate of energy and material throughput compatible with the productive and assimilative capacities of the ecosphere (Daly, 1991). Humans must learn to live within the means of nature.

that person to adapt to significant changes in either the socio-cultural or biophysical environments. To re-establish cognitive consonance between programmed perceptions and new environmental realities requires that the affected parties engage wilfully in the restructuring of their own neural pathways and psychological states. Even when people accept that such “reprogramming” is necessary, the process it can be lengthy, difficult and unpredictable (Wexler, 2006). The good news comes from research showing that the human brain is remarkably plastic (e.g., Schwartz & Begley, 2002). Assuming the availability of adequate resources and political will, it is therefore theoretically possible to inscribe a new narrative even on the resistant psyches of the present generation. Sustainability may yet be within our grasp. Humanity, that wondrous work-in-progress, may yet have an opportunity to pull itself up another rung on the evolutionary ladder.

Epilogue

In essence, the sustainability challenge for the present generation is to come fully to consciousness and to elevate humanity’s capacities for collective intelligence, inclusive reasoning and moral judgment to positions of greater prominence in global politics as it pertains to issues of ecological change. This is theoretically possible but will be extremely difficult. Many would argue that the inordinate diversity of the human family and its distressing array of conflicting values and interests, combined with the power of maladaptive instincts and contrary narratives, render any such plan for global self-rescue little more than a utopian dream. Indeed, given the record to date, its probability of success is less than that for the survival of an overcrowded Newfie dory adrift without power in the wintery North Atlantic.

Other analysts recognize this conundrum. Sweden’s 2007 Tällberg Forum focused on the question “How on Earth can we live together?” Discussions closed with two other questions together with answers: “*Do we know what to do? Probably yes. Will we do it?*”

Probably not.” Participants apparently saw this as a “realistic view of our common situation with regard to climate, sustainability and the necessary transition we must all achieve” (Tällberg Forum, 2008).

Discouraging? Yes—but it is up to every one of us, acting together, to prove the 2007 Tällberg Forum wrong. If we do not succeed in realizing our collective dream, modern humans will, indeed, wind up visiting vast misery on themselves and irretrievably mutilating their planetary home (see UCS, 1992). As I have written elsewhere, “It would be a tragic irony if, in the 21st century, this most technologically sophisticated of human societies finally succumbs to the unconscious urgings of fatally self-interested primitive tribalism. The cycle of societal collapse will have closed once again, this time on the global scale” (Rees, 2002).

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