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Planetary Consciousness: Our next Evolutionary Step

Ervin Laszlo

Whether we know it or not, systemic processes hold sway in the development of society, the same as they do in the evolution of nature.¹ The new sciences of complex systems and evolution, cybernetics, general system theory, the theory of dynamical systems (known as chaos theory), and general evolution theory, among others, tell us that, whatever their nature, complex systems evolve with an underlying logic of their own. This evolution is not haphazard, though it is not entirely predictable. It does have an underlying direction; a probability that, following any basic transformation, certain kinds of states and conditions will come about.

Today we live in an epoch of critical thresholds, and thus of basic transformations. In consequence the dynamic of basic evolutionary processes becomes unusually relevant. This dynamic is toward greater and greater structural complexity expressed by the convergence of the existing systems toward new, higher-level systems formed by their mutual relations; toward greater dynamism due to the availability, through ever more powerful technologies, of growing quantities of free energy; toward more and more direct and complex forms of communication among the diverse parts of the system brought about by the new technologies of information and communication; and toward a condition of transforming and potentially creative chaos, with enhanced sensitivity to other systems in the surroundings, societies, cultures, enterprises, and the ecologies and life-support systems of the biosphere.

There may not be much we can do to go counter to the basic evolutionary trends; our interests lie with going with it, facilitating their unfolding. But what good would it do us if we evolved a system of interacting and interdependent societies if in that system there was a dictatorship of the rich and the powerful; if the great majority lived at or below the margins of basic human subsistence; if nature became inhospitable; if resources turned scarce; if life was harsh and competition unfettered; and if violence was rampant and might was right? Such a world is entirely possible, but reaching it is not in our interest. On the other hand creating a more equitable and generous world is equally possible, and doing so is within our power. Moving toward this positive path of our collective evolution calls for recognizing the real imperatives of our day.

Evolving a planetary consciousness is among these imperatives. With the current level of consciousness in society, diplomatic negotiations, legal and administrative measures, and armed military or police actions show little success, they often produce more problems than they solve. They constitute superficial short-term tinkering with long-term basic problems. Enduringly effective solutions call for a different kind of thinking and a different kind of commitment. It is

becoming increasingly evident that such thinking and commitment cannot be achieved without the evolution of people's individual and collective consciousness.

If we are to cope with the problems that face us today and in coming years, the consciousness of today's women and men must rise from the ego- and nation-centered dimension to a global and planet-centered one. In this regard it still has a long way to grow. In many societies the dominant consciousness is beset by a layer of egotism, misplaced nationalism, and cultural chauvinism. The result is the persistence of social and political narrow-mindedness, economic warfare, cultural intolerance, and disregard for the environment.

How can we evolve a more adequate consciousness? The question is not as arcane as it may seem: when people sense that a core belief system is a threat to themselves and their children, they search for alternative ideas, values, and beliefs. This is happening today. Despite the persistence of outdated myths and illusions in the established layers of society, there is an impassioned search for alternatives at the margins. The rise of inner-city deprivation and violence, the drift toward anarchy and the impotence of police and military measures to cope with it, the dissolution of the social contract between society and the worker, the spread of drug addiction and of esoteric cults, the rise of unemployment and homelessness are so many signs of a decline that does not fail to leave its mark on people's beliefs and priorities. The old order is breaking apart, and its coming demise motivates young people, and open-minded persons of all ages, to look for better and more reliable visions and values.

The truly promising signs of our times include the coming of a spiritual renaissance, hallmarked by an intense search for new values, new principles, and new visions to live by. The Pathfinder Project, an internationally networked project of the Institute of Noetic Sciences of California, summed up these trends under the following headings:

Creating a home for humanity within nature: Revisioning of humanity's place within nature and the cosmos, together with a multitude of creative efforts to design human activity in consonance with ecosystemic principles and environmental limits.

Local and global self-organization: Simultaneous proliferation of creative initiatives at the local and global level, including the revitalization of civic society, the cultivation of new forms of community, and the emergence of effective global institutions.

From outer to inner authority: Realization of the primacy of consciousness as a causal reality and a corresponding shift from reliance on outer sources of authority to a trust in inner sources of knowing.

From separation to wholeness: Recognition of the fundamental wholeness and interconnectedness of all aspects of reality and experience.

Awakening spirituality: Widening search for ways to revitalize spiritual practice and nurture a sense of spiritual community, together with growing exploration of the role of spirit in such areas as health, business, and public life.

From centralized to "acentric" power: A shift from relationships, systems, and institutions based on centralized power to perspectives and approaches that emphasize peoples capacity for creative self-organization and learning.

From mechanistic to living systems: A related shift from models of the world, organizations, and human experience based on mechanistic systems, to perspectives and approaches based on the principles that inform living systems.

From greed and scarcity to sufficiency and caring: A further shift from values, perspectives, and approaches based on greed and scarcity to those based on a sense of sufficiency and caring.

From competition to reconciliation and partnership: Last but not least, a shift from relationships, organizational models, and societal strategies based on competition to those based on principles of healing, reconciliation, and professional as well as male/female partnership.

These trends suggest that a new consciousness is surfacing at the cutting edge of society. But how influential are the new trends and how fast will they spread? Will they be powerful enough to move to center stage and impact on the way the great majority of the people live, and the way managers and politicians make decisions? The answer is by no means clear. Helping to articulate and spread the emerging consciousness is a major cause, worthy of the best minds of our day.

We need another Apollo mission, not on the plane of technology this time, but on the plane of culture. The deepest wellsprings of human motivation must be mobilized: wellsprings that have always nurtured the creativity of artists, writers, and women and men of the spirit. In great art and literature, and in the deepest foundations of the spiritual sphere there is love for and solidarity with our fellow humans and empathy with nature. In these areas we find a wealth of insight that goes beyond superficial rhetoric to the substance of deep feeling and clear intuition. Creative people in all spheres of contemporary culture could teach our eye to see, our ears to hear, and our mind to absorb the new realities that unfold in our changing times. Their message could go beyond our brains to reach our hearts.

The stakes are high. Without an evolution of our individual and collective consciousness it is unlikely that we could avert deepening economic, social, and cultural conflicts and ecologic

breakdowns. But with the evolution of our consciousness from the ego- and nation-centered toward the global- and planet-centered dimension we would have a real prospect of matching the growth of our technological sophistication with corresponding intellectual insight and emotional maturity. We would have a chance to muster the will and the motivation to use our technological powers and our social creativity to bring us and our children to a soft-landing in the post-modern world of the next millennium.

The Mission of the Club of Budapest

The Club of Budapest is committed to promoting and facilitating a worldwide movement keyed by the advance from thinking in terms of the existing limits to growth to the emerging chances of evolution. It pursues this crucial objective by motivating and highlighting the unfolding of the consciousness, the thinking, feeling, and perceptions of contemporary people, through a set of highly focused and coordinated yet autonomously managed projects, implemented with the advice and active participation of its Members, its Ambassadors and Trustees, and its worldwide network of Regional Centers.²

This is not a mission impossible. It is one of the essential missions of our times. Why so?

At the turn of the 21st century we live in an epoch of transition; witnessing the deepest and fastest transformation in the history of humanity.³ This transformation is not without crises and difficulties, the birthpangs of a coming age. Today hundreds of millions are without work; a thousand million or more are exploited by poor wages; three thousand million are forced into growing poverty. On the one hand the population of the world is growing, on the other the number of jobs is diminishing. The gap between rich and poor economies, and between rich and poor people within nations, is increasing. The problems of the environment, the same as those of society, confront all people. Yet, though the world community is relieved of the specter of superpower confrontation and is threatened by ecological collapse and socioeconomic polarization, national governments still spend a thousand billion dollars a year on arms and the military and only a tiny fraction of this sum on socially conscious development and a livable environment.

The ecological problem, the employment problem, the developmental problem, the population problem, the armaments problem, and the many problems of energies and resources will not be overcome merely by reducing the number of already useless nuclear warheads, nor by signing politically softened treaties on world trade, dangerous technologies, global warming, biological diversity, and sustainable development. More is required today than piecemeal action and short-term problem-solving. The fact is that, as Einstein remarked, one cannot solve a problem with the same kind of thinking that gave rise to it. The critical factor in coping with today's mushrooming problems is the thinking of today's people. The approaching crises we face are due to ways of thinking and acting that lag behind the needs of the times.

Updating and upgrading our ways of thinking and acting is a challenging task, but not an intractable one. The required concepts are largely known, the indicated technologies and practices are for the most part already developed. The missing factor is the commitment of people young and old to the indicated objectives, and their willingness to adopt the corresponding practices. If this hiatus is to be filled, more is required than intellectual understanding alone. Such understanding can enable us to grasp the issues and potential solutions, but cannot give us the will and the motivation to act on them. Intellectual understanding must be undergirded by feeling and intuition, by fresh values and a new commitment. When all is said and done, we come to a basic insight: we need a more evolved consciousness. Entering the 21st century with the consciousness that hallmarked the 20th century would be like entering the modern age with the consciousness of the Middle Ages. It would be not only inappropriate, but dangerous.

Having a consciousness that is in tune with our times means evolving it to the dimension where we can understand as well as feel our new, more embracing relations with each other and with nature. It calls for planetary consciousness. Evolving it is not a supernatural feat, nor is it one reserved for individuals of exceptional endowment. It does not mean knowing everything about everything, nor does it mean counting in terms of millions or billions, whether of numbers of people, hectares of land, or barrels of oil. Rather, it means openness to new ideas, sensitivity to emerging dangers as well as opportunities, and the ability to apprehend the humanistic and sustainable values and priorities that can, and must, shape the next century.

Many people are already evolving their consciousness to the required planetary dimension; many more would do so if made aware of the need and given the opportunity. The Club of Budapest is dedicated to the proposition that promoting and facilitating the evolution of planetary consciousness is a vital aspect of our sustained well-being and individual as well as social development. It is an essential mission of our time.

Subject-headings: Systems science ; Living systems ; Wholeness ; Social thinking

¹ Ervin Laszlo: Evolution: The General Theory. Creskill, NJ 1997.

² further information on the membership and activities of The Club of Budapest is available from its Secretariat: Szentháromságter 6 H - 1014 Budapest, Tel/Fax 36-1-175-1885.

³ see The Challenge and the Vision: The Creative Path of Human Evolution: Report of The Club of Budapest (in press).