

Mankind in the XXIst century: blind passenger or conscious actor?

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“They did not know it was impossible, so they did it” (Mark Twain)

Over the course of the last decades, human beings have come close to resemble lemmings. Their behavioural pattern is increasingly individualistic and their capacity to critically assess their environment has shrank to worryingly low levels; so that they have entered the XXIst century as blind passengers, opting for highly streamlined paths. This follows from a depersonalisation of social exchanges and a detachment from political decisions, a phenomenon induced by the expansion of the market economy and the liberal democracy, and reinforced by features of human psychology. Oddly enough, it is also the result of economic development, since rising standards of living weaken individual incentives to innovate. Nevertheless, shall it have the willingness to act decisively, mankind has the capacity to combat these trends and become again a conscious actor.

In the course of January 30, 1948, mankind lost a man of great wisdom. Having preached non-violent opposition for years, the Mahatma was shot by Nathuram Godse, a Hindu nationalist. Fortunately enough, the legacy of his acumen has inspired many a generation. Here is one of his lessons: once surrounded by people claiming that the world had to change for them to change, he said “No, the world will not change if you don’t change”, implying that one had “to be the change he wants to see in the world”. Nowadays, only few people seem to be heeding Gandhi’s voice.

Post WWII generations living in the ‘first world’ enjoyed an era of steady economic, intellectual, and cultural development, the so called *Golden Age* (Hobsbawm (1995)). Both formal and substantial freedom of western civilisations were greatly enhanced. This was the time of stability, in which euphoria prevailed, where there seemed to be no limits to mankind’s achievements and where the source of ideas seemed to be inexhaustible. This time has passed. Nowadays, caught between a past that he regards with nostalgia and an uncertain future, the man is stuck in an unstable modernity that he barely understands, waiting for change but forgetting about his own capabilities to initiate it. Individuals born after the fall of the Berlin Wall seem to be passengers of their own existence. Confronted to a *complex* and *fragmented* reality, they no longer question it and, consequently, potentially fail to understand it. Hence an *unstable status quo* prevails.

Yet, reasons to question it abound. But initiating change and putting mankind on another “evolution track” requires self-knowledge. Just as one needs to know himself in order to evolve – “Know thyself” was Socrate’s lesson, the society needs to know itself to be able to move forward. This fundamental maxim finds one of its modern forms in the work of Richard Hoggart. In his book *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart reviews

the mechanisms through which he learnt about himself before starting his investigation (Hoggart (1957)). As far as that goes, the prerequisite for a successful transformation of the society by itself is a better self-understanding. This starts with questioning.

Thus, shall younger generations have stopped questioning and engaged in highly streamlined trails, it would place a substantial limit on the society's capacity to reinvent itself and formulate the appropriate answers to the challenges ahead. While the society's increased complexity should take part of the blame for a higher streamlining among younger generations, we argue that several features of the organisation of modern societies are key in explaining this pattern.

Institutional and behavioural factors of streamlining

In a survey that we conducted recently, respondents agreed (58,3%) that younger generations tend to embark on streamlined paths.¹ We claim that it is the consequence of the establishment of two of the most central social institutions of modern western societies, the liberal democracy and the market, as well as of inherent features of human psychology.

As far as liberal democracy is concerned, citizens that have been enjoying that kind of political system for a while equate the associated delegation of power with indifference and show declining interest for political participation. A recent study for France conducted by the Cevipof illustrates this trend (CEVIPOF (2013)).

Reinforcing this disinterest for democratic participation is the existence of the market as a central tool for interpersonal exchanges. Interactions through markets dominate all other kinds of interaction and have undermined the sense of community that is necessary to build a healthy democratic system. Indeed, the market system does not reward social interaction or, to be fair, only does so when these can be counted as 'services' and exchanged within it (Lietaer et al. (2012)). Besides, the market economy puts high pressure on its agents. The search for profit and competitive advantage requires to be constantly on the lookout for any opportunity. This has considerably accelerated the pace of life; to the extent that the *homo economicus* has no longer time to reflect on social developments and to exploit his innovation capacities. Hence, instead of enhancing "creative destruction" (Schumpeter (1976)), competition leads to 'destructive creation'.

Strengthening these institutional drivers are, as argued by Jepson (2001), at least three behavioural and psychological factors that naturally inhibit human beings' overture to its surrounding environment. First, the human being naturally expresses a disinclination to broaden its sphere of concern both spatially and temporally (Garbarino (1992)). Second, he apparently has a predisposition to "tune out long-term trends over which [he has] no control" (White (1994)). Third, Jepson (2001) maintains that we have a tendency to "make decisions on the basis of nearly every conceivable consideration except the facts".

All this has led to the creation of human beings who lack courage and vision. Individuals are increasingly unable to think of themselves as a constituent of a broader whole and sacrifice part of their private comfort to contribute to the renewal of society, the Greater Good. Some have lost faith in the future, hoping for the best but expecting the

¹The survey *Enhancing unconventional behaviour and thinking in a streamlined world* can be accessed online at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/FWJTRP3>.

worst.

While the aforementioned factors hold for developing and developed societies alike, the problem seems to be more acute in developed societies and we next shed some light on why it might be so.

The Development Paradox

Kumi Naidoo, International Executive Director of Greenpeace, speaking at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2012, complained that the School was no longer the vibrant centre of new ideas that it used to be (Naidoo (2012)). Oddly enough, a possible driver of this trend is economic development.

The excitement that used to accompany the developments of the last century in the western world has faded away, for they have now entered the circle of normality. Some past political and economic achievements are nowadays taken for granted and, perhaps, less ideas emerge. For instance, having enjoyed peace for the last 65 years or so, European citizens no longer realise the inestimable value of a public good that they are daily provided with and that took two world wars to secure.

However, this view may not be shared by individuals in parts of the world which are currently experiencing fast economic development. Anjali Pandit, an Indian student, speaking at a TEDx event in Paris last year concluded: “the young French see a world without opportunity. The young Indians see a world that has plenty of them”. So are innovation and creative dynamism inversely related to development?

Respondents to the aforementioned survey stated that while not sharing F. Fukuyama’s view that liberal democracies had reached “The End of History”, they believed (66,7 %) that material, social and intellectual comfort reduced the incentives to innovate. Corroborating this statement is the view that a powerful engine of change is dissatisfaction with the status quo (Maslow (1943)). In other words, that innovation and social change would emerge as the result of a ‘creative discontent’.

This might legitimate a positive answer to the above question and suggests the existence of a *development paradox*, i.e. as the standards of living rise, ‘intellectual fertility’ diminishes and streamlined behaviours become mainstream. Put differently, this means that enfeebled by material contentment the western ‘modern man’ has stopped questioning and, consequently, has halted the very process that lays at the heart of a society’s evolution, surrendering control of his futurity to forces that he is no longer able to understand.

This is not the way to go. We have the duty to make the most extensive use of our personal resources to contribute to the society’s evolution, i.e. to innovate socially and technologically. We owe ourselves to operate the re-enchantment of the world, to revitalise (western) societies. But where do we start?

Re-enchanting conditions

The arguments above point to the difficulties of avoiding the ‘streamlining’ option. Yet, most of the respondents living in more developed countries recognised questioning the society they live in relatively often. So, to the extent that mankind has the willingness

to alter the features that foster streamlining, it is not a fatality. And several steps could be taken to enhance critical thinking.

First of all, one needs to truly account for the idea, advanced years ago, that *small is indeed beautiful* (Schumacher (1973)) and that local communities matter. Currently one lives in an *unbalanced* system in which the economic sphere has grown far beyond the borders of the social and political ones. This imbalance prevents a ‘natural’ regulation of the economic sphere by the political and social structures, jeopardises the existence of local interactions and causes the system to be every now and then on the verge of collapse.² Yet, no ‘global village’ will be created if the system in place jeopardises the existence of the local one.

Secondly, *slow life* must be rewarded. One will only be able to reflect on the society if it can enjoy the *luxury of time*. Understanding and contributing to the development of the society one lives in requires time to reflect on it. An illustration of that necessity is to be found in the cancellation of Mario Draghi’s participation to several official meetings, including the 2012 annual session of the Jackson Hole economic policy symposium, because he needed “time to think”.

Thirdly, the heavily specialised and fragmented society in which we live would greatly benefit from the presence of more *bridge builders*. As the society grows ever more specialised and fragmented, it is of the utmost importance that bridges be built across its different fragments.

Eventually, we have to rise *simplicity* to the rank of *supreme sophistication* (Leonardo da Vinci). Along with economic and social development of societies came an increase in organisational, technological and institutional complexity. Yet, while complexity increases the resilience of systems, it is also argued that systems tend to grow ever more complex “until lag times and systemic interdependencies leave them virtually unmanageable and prone to a catastrophic collapse” (Jepson (2001) and Rees (1995)). The last financial crisis offers a striking but disastrous illustration.

But if complexity directly threatens the sustainability of the system, it also undermines the ability of its constituents (human beings) to correctly understand its structure and functioning, thereby preventing them to contribute positively to its existence. Hence, there is a need to cut down complexity. However, where complexity cannot cut it down, an increased effort is to be made to create channels and tools that simplify that complex reality. In this respect, the Ecological Footprint developed by Rees and Wackernagel is a clear example of how a complex issue like sustainability can be summarised into a simple indicator (Wackernagel and Rees (1996)).

To conclude, streamlining is indeed a distinctive characteristic of modern behaviour. However, avoiding a streamlined attitude is rendered particularly difficult by some existing structures of social organisation and there are reasons to believe that this evil is more present in economically advanced societies. Thus, unlike what the Mahatma suggested, it may actually be necessary to change the structures of the society in order to enable people to be the change they wish to see in the world. To that end, raising people’s *substantial empowerment*, i.e. their ability and capacity to have a decisive impact on the society’s organisation, and opening up *corridors of thought* through the pursuance of the

²Anthony Giddens’ spoke of modernity as “an unsteerable juggernaut traveling through space”.

aforementioned conditions shall be key to the success of the society's revitalisation. Paraphrasing Gro Harlem Brundtland and Ben Okri, only then will we be able to make our common future greater than our individualistic past. And in light of past achievements, we are confident that mankind has the capacity to do so and travel through the XXIst century as a conscious actor.

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