

Aurelio Peccei

Human Beings at the Crossroads

The Club of Rome was founded by Aurelio Peccei with the objective of examining contemporary problems from a global perspective.

This extract from the opening address at the Club's 10th Anniversary meeting discusses the relevance of the fullest development of human potential in terms of its effect on worldwide socio-economic progress. It outlines the present human predicament and argues that the fullest development of the individual human being is the keystone towards guiding the collective destiny in a positive direction.

At this advanced stage of human evolution, our destiny seems to be governed by the interplay of two quite recent and extraordinarily dynamic macrophenomena. One is the scientific and technological revolution which gives us undreamt-of knowledge and power, if not wisdom, and the other is the unexpected complexification of our world, which confronts us with enormous tangles of problems.

Ever since the time of its formation in 1968, The Club of Rome has stressed that the cross-impact of these dominant factors would lead to a period of extreme alternatives. Unprecedented human fulfilment and ultimate catastrophe are both possible. What the outcome will actually be, though, depends on a third major - and decisive - factor: our understanding and behaviour on the global plane.

Ten years ago, the mood was still one of great expectations. Now, after an eventful decade, it appears not only that the world situations have substantially deteriorated but also that adverse trends are steadily gaining ground. True, the techno-scientific enterprise has continued to progress on so many fronts; but its conquests are neither systematic nor coordinated, and all too often originate new problems; meanwhile, still other problems of a political, social and psychological character keep emerging; and all of them intertwine, so that the overall human condition becomes ever more difficult.

The perception that the current general crisis is going to get worse before it can eventually be turned around is however blunted by our reluctance to face up squarely to unpleasant realities. We prefer to trust in the miracle of science and technology, and even believe in the promises of politicians, the art of diplomacy and the beneficial effect of international declarations and resolutions, rather than make the effort of assessing the situation thoroughly and comprehensively. Whatever evaluation or forecasts we undertake, they are just sectoral, fragmented or short-term. Never is our vast assortment of resources mobilized across disciplines and boundaries with a view to pursuing common, global goals.

As a consequence, we are all pitifully unprepared to cope with the formidable challenges and threats looming ahead. Although such a bitter reality is seldom recognized, it is high time to understand at least two essential things.

t mankind as a whole is striding rapidly towards a momentous cross-roads where there can be no place for mistakes. Yet, its values, institutions and bearing are still a reflection of the past and certainly cannot carry it safely into the future. That something fundamental is wrong with its entire system is quite evident - for even now it is unable:

- * *to assure the minima of life to all its members,*
- * *to be at peace with itself,*
- * *to be at peace with Nature.*

The second is mankind's desperate need to break this vicious circle, while it can still get free and mould its future.

Consideration of a few facts and trends suffices to warn us that many danger points lie just ahead.

The major single problem is global over-population - due to modern man's incapacity or unwillingness to control his own runaway numbers. According to the population clock of The Environmental Fund of Washington, the world's inhabitants reached 4.4 billion at 3.42 p.m. on 9th July 1978, and every year sees 73 million more people, concentrated especially in poor countries. Even if fertility is somewhat checked, the 'additional mankind' existing on this planet by the year 2000 will equal the total population at the time of World War 1.

There are no reliable plans or even ideas on how to find work for the 300 million able-bodied men and women currently unemployed, or how to create the 1,000 million more jobs which are indispensable during the '80s and the '90s. Unemployment, which is always a human tragedy, particularly for young people, and a shameful blot on society, at this macroscopic scale evidences the shaky foundations of the world order - and will eventually bring it to its knees.

The usual recipe is given: expand productive investment and raise annual growth to five per cent. It should however be clear by now that, for all their endeavours, most nations are up against so many constraints that they find it impossible to apply such simplistic prescriptions. The obstinacy with which old, ineffectual, if not counterproductive, schemes are nevertheless upheld confirms that the entire thought process needs a good overhaul even in the developed countries, rather than just the economic system alone.

More generally, in the international arena there reigns that 'great disorder under heaven' which Chairman Mao used to denounce. No wonder this occurs. Still rampant is the principle of territorial sovereignty which was affirmed in the Peace of Westphalia which in 1648 brought to an end the Thirty Years'

War and feudalism. Most things have changed in these three and half centuries - except our basic political philosophy. Then, people crossed Europe on foot or horseback and used oil lamps to read. Now, we have supersonic airplanes and see the world on satellite-monitored TVs. But the functional unit of the world polity is still that same sovereign national state of yesteryear.

Nationalism, dictatorships, militarism and racism thrive in the name of this sovereignty, while the aspirations of minorities are trampled underfoot. And this partitioning of the world among introvert, self-righteous sovereign entities - now numbering more than 150 - contrasts sharply with the reality of interdependence, thus causing the entire system to be ungovernable, and kills the spirit of world solidarity without which there can really be no future. Such a divided humanity can never be at peace with itself.

Besides the Marxist revolutions, attempts have been made three times during this century to reorganize the world system, but each has failed. The last time, after World War II, saw the creation of the United Nations and its agencies; but even this has proved inadequate. The demand for new reforms is almost as widespread as society's ills.

The syndromes of the profound global malaise are quite evident. For one thing, the North-South cleavage is widening. It divides the world even more drastically than the ideological and political walls which separate East and West; and, short of quite radical measures, it will prove unbridgeable. Commanding 80 per cent of the world's wealth and trade, over 90 per cent of the industry and services and nearly 100 per cent of the institutions of research, the human groups of the North have grown to such gigantic dimensions that they can dominate the world by sheer weight. The South - atomized in more than one hundred economically uncompetitive countries unable to coalesce stably (see Table II) - is no match for them.

Another pathological symptom is the fact that people and nations, seeking security, are instead just being lured on by a mirage. The world is transformed into an armed camp, and a frantic arms race is spreading from the great powers to scores of other countries, including the poorest. Fear, unreason and shadowy interest prevail everywhere.

The nuclear overkill capability has attained demential levels; the entire world population can now be wiped out twelve times over. Two-thirds of the non-nuclear countries have recently imported major weapons. Yet, nobody seems satisfied. Almost half the world's scientists are engaged in 'defence' projects, and the annual military expenditure is approaching 400 billion dollars - a record of more than one billion dollars a day. "The world" - said President Carter at the United Nations - "has spent last year (1976) 60 times as much equipping each soldier as we spend educating each child".

Humans are not even at peace with Nature - in this, they are destined to lose disastrously in terms of habitat, health and quality of life, if not the very capacity for survival.

The major problem is not, as generally thought, the depletion of the non-renewable resources. Although overexploited, these can still be found in respectable quantities in the Earth's crust and oceans. Moreover, technology is at its best when the question is that of saving or substituting materials. Nevertheless, some resources are becoming physically scarce, or more expensive to extract or process, and hence more energy consuming.

On the border-line, lie energy and soil - matters of great concern. For energy, the situation is expected to stiffen greatly due to oil shortfalls sometime during the '80s before safe, acceptable alternative energy sources are sufficiently developed to take over. Once wars were waged in quest of salt; now energy is the salt of the economy; and the economic, political military consequences of an energy crunch are unfathomable.

Soil - just a minor part of the land mass which occupies about one-third of the world's surface is essential inasmuch as it combines the physical and biological elements required by life. But good soils, too, are becoming scarcer. The best ones are already being exploited, and precious croplands are degraded or eroded away almost as a routine by agricultural and water mismanagement, while pastures are destroyed by overgrazing. It is estimated that in the United States - the world's largest granary - topsoils are being lost many times faster than they are being formed, and that at this pace by the year 2000 increased domestic consumption may well absorb all food produced in the country.

The gravest dangers, however, concern the so-called renewable resources; and in the front line stands the progressive degradation of the world's biomass, on which human life itself depends.

One example is the reckless destruction of the tropical rain forests, which evolved in a stable state for tens of millions of years to constitute the most complex congregation of plants and animal life in existence. Now forty per cent of them have already been razed, while the remainder are being burned or cut down at the rate of 20 hectares a minute - equalling the combined territorial areas of Denmark, Holland and Belgium every year. Unless this orgy of destruction is slackened, they will practically disappear in three or four decades - paralleling the practical drying up of oil fields, but with far more severe consequences for mankind.

Yet another example is the accelerated extinction of animal and plant wildlife. Species after species is being ruthlessly eliminated by man.

Whether moved by greed or caprice, negligence or ignorance, the modern world employs science and might to kill and corrupt everything that life took billions of years to create and perfect. Even if this wanton and stupid behaviour had no consequences on humankind's own existence, it would remain an insult to their vaunted humanity and will inflict an irreparable cultural loss on the generations to come.

Three basic questions are thus forced upon us.

- * *How much time has humanity got to come to its senses and and set itself on a safer course?*
- * *Who has the capacity to propose and initiate this new course?*
- * *What in essence must be done to make it materialize?*

If the analysis of the downtrend of human fortunes just made is substantially correct, then the time available to change the system and choose another course is decidedly short. A reasonable guess is that, at the present tempo of events, there are probably less than ten years left before certain options which we may have still today will be irredeemably lost.

Altogether, there is no period of grace for humanity. It would be most imprudent, possibly fatal for it to bank on a longer respite.

Unquestionably, the protagonists of this epochal change must be the people at large - citizens of all parts of the world. The great religions and *all spiritual, secular and ideological movements whose aim is the good of wo/man* should take a leading role in it.

The yeast of change does exist - although scattered - in the myriad spontaneous groupings of people springing up here and there, like the antibodies in a sick organism. They are the peace movements, population policy societies, ecologists, women's lib, defenders of minorities, of human rights, of civil liberties, social workers, amnesty apostles, non-violent reformers, conscientious objectors, world federalists, consumer advocates, etc.

However, despite the need for a vast popular base and its eminently ethical and existential character, the movement for world renewal must be conceived in practical political terms, at the highest organized level. Therefore, for the time being, the major responsibility rests inescapably with governments. They have the power and rule the world; but unless they abandon national parochialism, the global human drama will drift into tragedy.

The overriding goal is to product a mature, responsible, selfgoverning and well-managed global community which - while preserving cultural identities and social dynamics - should give the conscience of the species precedence over national and class conscience. The process will no doubt be long, tortuous and painful, but it is certainly within the realms of the possible - if we all accept a few basic guidelines.

To start with, we must recognize that it is a vital necessity to re-establish satisfactory and sustainable equilibria, both within the human system and in its relations with Nature. There is in this an overarching nexus of shared interests uniting all nations, whatever their economical condition or political regime - for they all need, ultimately, to abide by global imperatives of social justice and good earthkeeping. The developed countries should do this by adopting much more realistic and austere modes of life, and the developing ones by bringing into practice the spirit of self-reliance not as an individual

virtue, but as their joint effort, at least regionally.

We must further admit that it will be nevertheless impossible to move to a higher level of human organization without a modicum of global planning. Having become the major agent of change on Earth, humans can no longer count on the automatisms upon which they used to rely in the past, such as the regenerative capacity of Nature, the market's 'invisible hand', and the checks and balances inherent in simpler democratic systems. Yet, since global coherence is ever more necessary, they must provide for it themselves - by concerted forward planning.

The solution certainly cannot be sought in any form of centralized planning which would soon engender a monstrous world-girdling and no doubt inefficient bureaucracy. A new kind of planning of a global scope, yet adaptable to a variety of local conditions, is one of those major social inventions and innovations which have become indispensable in our age - much more so than any further techno-scientific progress.

But even all this is not enough. The shocking discovery we have yet to make is that, for all their science and might and all their plans, structures, systems and tools, modern wo/man cannot change their fate if they themselves do not change .

Human beings greatest problems and possible salvation lie in fact within themselves. They have created their own world, where everything interacts with everything else at ever higher levels of complexity, thereby radically altering natural flows of life on the planet, including their own life. But culturally and behaviourally they are lagging behind. A 'human gap' is thus created, which endangers their existence - no less than mutations in the environment endanger the existence of every species which is unable to adjust to them.

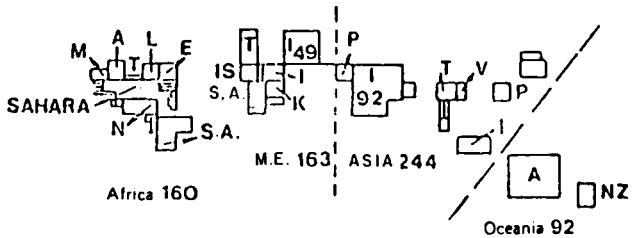
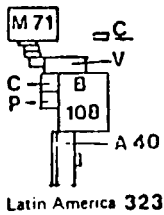
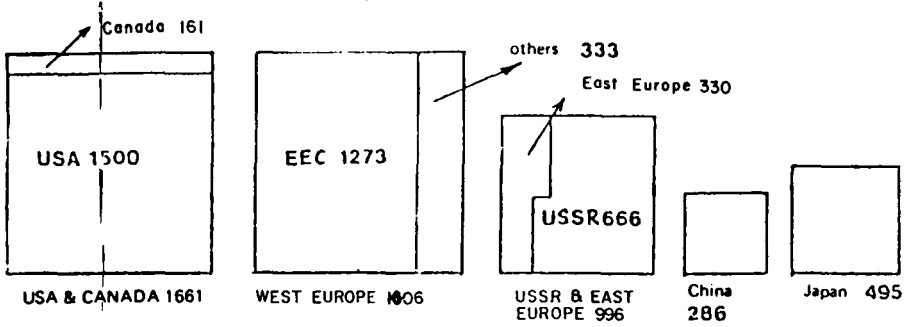
Our condition is of course different; but only in that the human brain - a unique resource - has still a great latent potential to be harnessed. It is the new frontier, the deciding factor of our collective destiny. This will depend essentially on whether or not we are able to learn fast enough how to develop this untapped human potential - for it alone can move humanity to make a quality jump comparable to the one it engineered in its universe.

The great step is then for all of us, and specially for those who command knowledge and power, to realize that - if we will it - ahead lies not catastrophe but the best part of the human venture. The keystone is the full development of the human being - the human revolution which can guide and crown all other revolutions of our time.

TABLE II

THE 5 POWERS OF THE NORTH AND THE 114 COUNTRIES OF THE SOUTH

Surfaces are proportional to 1975
Gross National Product
in thousand million dollars
according to World Bank



Source:
Maurice Guernier
The Club of Rome

TABLE III

SPECIES EXTINCT OR THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION

SPECIES	DISAPPEARED DURING LAST CENTURY	DISAPPEARED DURING THIS CENTURY SO FAR	THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION
BIRD	75	53	345
MAMMAL	27	68	200
AMPHIBIAN/ REPTILE	?	?	80
PLANT	?	?	20/25,000

EXTINCTIONS ARE ONLY THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG.
MANY MORE SPECIES ARE BEING DEPLETED SEVERELY,
PROBABLY BEYOND LEVELS FROM WHICH THEY CAN RECOVER.

Source:
World Wildlife Fund
International Union for
Conservation of Nature
