

# New Reality, New Awareness

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Modern society is threatened by four serious circumstances: the economic crisis, the ethical crisis, the ecological crisis and, finally, the epistemic crisis. We must take advantage of this era of crisis and transformation, in which everything is open, to guide the transition of our society to a serene maturity, to a reconciliation with what surrounds us, and to a planetary balance that can sustain us. To this end, we must leave behind the unlimited economic growth demanded by today's society and aim for a reconnection with nature and for personal wellbeing in harmony with the wellbeing of all. We can be grateful for being alive in this world and at this historical moment: if we manage to transform our attitudes and values, a new and wiser civilisation may emerge.

## The Four Horsemen

Everything is changing.<sup>1</sup>

Being human has never been easy. And less so now.

The horizon that was guiding modern societies is breaking down on all sides. From each of the four cardinal directions, unexpectedly, a horseman appears, breaking the illusions of modern rationality and the certainties that went along with it.

The first horseman, the loudest and most visible, the one that strikes first and draws most of the attention, is the economic crisis, not predicted by the economics manuals, not resolved by the supposed experts, increasingly hard for more and more people.

The second horseman is the ethical crisis that accompanies the economic crisis: the greed and irresponsibility at its root, the despotism

with which the majority are made to pay for the delirium of a powerful minority (the financial oligarchy) that continues to maintain or increase its privileges. Like Saturn devouring his children, capitalism feeds on its own: in countries like Spain the plague of unemployment affects over half of young people; in countries like the United States, to pay for their degrees young people have to take on enormous debts that will keep them chained to the financial system for the rest of their youth.

The third horseman is the ecological crisis. We are ruining the foundations of life that support us, with consequences that are already tragic for many species and ecosystems and for many human communities. There is a growing risk that the planet as a whole could enter into a phase of abrupt and irreversible transformations that would make unlikely the continuity of human life as we know it.

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1. This article weaves together texts from three works by the author: *Buena crisis. hacia un mundo postmaterialista* (Barcelona, Kairós, 2009), *GPS. GlobalPersonalSocial. Valores para un mundo en transformación* (Barcelona, Kairós, 2011) and *La nueva realidad. Del economicismo a la conciencia cuántica* (Barcelona, Kairós, 2013).

The fourth horseman, less obvious but no less disturbing, is the epistemic crisis; that is, the crisis of our models of knowledge, increasingly removed from the reality they were meant to explain. This is obvious enough in the ideas that come out of technocratic thinking, but it also affects many scientific disciplines in which the old certainties break down as new and bigger conundrums appear. A century ago quantum physics began opening a path into a new way of understanding reality that we have not yet been able to fully assimilate.

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As in the Apocalypse, a word that in fact means “revelation”, after the four horsemen of the uncertainties of our time there should emerge a new heaven and a new earth: a new reality.

## The Cognitive Bubble

Let us imagine that tomorrow at noon there was an eclipse of the sun that no one had foreseen. It would not be enough to take astronomers to task. It would be obvious that theoretical astronomy requires a paradigm shift, such as the one that Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo introduced in medieval cosmology. Instead of patching up the old astronomical theory with more epicycles, deferents and eccentrics, it should be completely transformed.

In 1989 it was said that all political scientists should resign for not having foreseen the

imminent fall of the Berlin Wall. We could also argue that mainstream economists should resign for not having foreseen the magnitude of the global crisis that started in 2008. No better than the crisis of the economic system is the collapse of mainstream economic theories, which have been completely overwhelmed by reality. The gods we worshipped turned out to be false. Yet, out of inertia, we insist on believing in the same methods and the same experts.

There is an older and bigger bubble than the financial and real estate ones. It is the cognitive bubble: the bubble on which the economist worldview floats; the belief in the economy as a purely quantifiable abstract and self-standing system, independent both from the biosphere that shelters it and from the human concerns that move it. In this respect, the crisis of the economic system has its root in a crisis of perception. The solution to the economic crisis cannot only be economic.

## A Rite of Passage

In a crisis all is open. It is like a journey through the spaces analysed by chaos theory, in which a small fluctuation can result in unexpected and lasting developments. In this sense, our actions in times of crisis may have far greater repercussions than in times of stability. All we know is that things will not be the same anymore. As Edgar Morin writes, “before there is a transformation, before a new system emerges, it cannot be conceived or defined.” Or, as Heraclitus stated twenty-five centuries ago, “if you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it; for it is trackless and unexplored.”

Until recently, it seemed that economic and material growth could go on forever. Progress, we believed, would never stop accelerating and would always afford us more prosperity and fraternity. But today we know that our course is not sustainable—neither on eco-



Children hiking by the hills of the Euphrates, Southern Turkey (Nour Salameh).

nomic, energetic, ecological or psychological grounds. While the economy was growing we could ignore the increase in inequalities and ecological damage, or we could dream that they would be somehow compensated by economic growth. Not any longer. The cognitive bubble is beginning to vanish: the real world is there, knocking loudly on our doors, for instance as climate change and a declining availability of raw materials. The interrelated crises of our time confront us, on a global and personal scale, with an unprecedented rite of passage.

In many traditional societies, rites of passage marked the crossing of the threshold between adolescence and maturity. It is now time for us to cross such a threshold. Today's world has a sort of adolescent rebellion and hyperactivity: rebellion against the biosphere that sustains us and against a cosmos in which we feel like strangers, hyperactivity in consumerism and in the acceleration that makes us long for a future that never arrives. The crisis as a rite of passage calls us to reach a sustainable

and serene maturity that rediscovers the joy of existence in the here and now.

### The Economy as a Subsidiary of the Biosphere

As Karl Polanyi explained in *The Great Transformation*, it is unprecedented that a culture would be ruled by the economy. On the contrary, in all places and ages until quite recently, the economy was always subject to ethical, social and cultural considerations. As if by sleight of hand, we have put society into the service of the economy, instead of having the economy in the service of society. Although the global economy sees itself above everything else, it is only a subsidiary of the biosphere, without which it would have no air, no water and no life.

In other cultures, the ultimate aim of human existence was to honour God or the gods, to flow in harmony with nature, or live in peace, free of the constraints that prevent

us from being fulfilled. In our society, the ultimate purpose is for gross domestic product to grow forever and ever. In this senseless race everything else is sacrificed, including a sense of the divine, respect for nature and inner peace (and outer peace when oil is needed). The contemporary economy is the first truly universal religion. The *ora et labora* gave way to another way of achieving paradise: to produce and consume. As David Loy has noted, “the discipline of economics is less a science than the theology of that religion.” A religion that is somehow an opium of the people (Marx), a lie against life (Nietzsche) and a childish delusion (Freud). It is a form of self-deception that is now taking its toll on us.

## How Much Is it Worth?

A sensible economy would reflect its real social and environmental costs in the price of goods. Today, most of what is produced externalises its costs, happily passing the bill to nature, to poorer countries and to future generations. A study published by the United States National Academy of Sciences concluded that the ecological debt of rich countries to poor countries, incurred in the period 1960-2000, amounts to several trillion dollars, far exceeding the entire financial debt that rich countries are claiming from poor countries. Who owes whom?

*Could the growing incidence, in childhood and adolescence, of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression, anxiety and obesity be related to our “nature deficit disorder”?*

Today a major process of in-depth reassessment is underway. The international study *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity* (TEEB) is an example of the incipient recognition of the value of ecosystem services. For

instance, it is estimated that the global value of pollination (performed by bees, besides their production of honey) amounts to 153,000 million euros per year.

For centuries we have been short-sighted about the value of nature. Our calculating mind only saw what was closer: figures and abstractions, removed from the life of the world. Given this short-sightedness, studies such as TEEB provide us with thick-lensed glasses so we can start to see the value (in mere economic terms) of our surroundings. It is a first step. But the web of life will always have a value incomparably greater than that of human economies. The web of ecological balance that sustains us is made of ecosystems and biodiversity. Without them humankind and the global production of the world economies would vanish: gross world product would amount to zero. In comparison with the gross world product, the economic value of the web of life is infinite.

## Connecting with Nature

According to Richard Louv, today we suffer, particularly in the younger generation, from a “nature deficit disorder”. After thousands of generations in which children grew up mostly outdoors, in the last few generations they have been spending most of their day indoors. Could the growing incidence, in childhood and adolescence, of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression, anxiety and obesity be related to our “nature deficit disorder”? Louv thinks so. To remedy this, he advises parents to try their best to enable their children to spend more time outdoors. In children who have more chances to connect with nature, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is significantly reduced. Greater contact with nature also helps to relieve depression and stimulates intuition, imagination and creativity. For children, nature is a much better teacher than a television or a computer screen.

In recent years, the so-called attention restoration theory has argued that we concentrate better after having been in nature or even just by looking at the reproduction of a landscape. The renowned biologist E.O. Wilson speaks of our innate biophilia: we all have an instinctive need to connect with nature. Wilson also suggests that in a purely artificial environment mental capacity and psychological health tend to decay.

Plotinus, the great philosopher from the end of classical antiquity, stated that “every soul is, and becomes, that which she contemplates.” Our mind expands when it contemplates the horizon from a mountaintop or from the shore. In contrast, it tends to contract (and sometimes to concentrate) when in an enclosed space. Several studies carried out in hospitals show that rooms with a good view boost the patient’s recovery; perhaps, we could say following Plotinus, because the soul expands and thus helps to heal the body.

## Wellbeing for All

In his autobiography, Gandhi explained how he found three key principles in John Ruskin’s book *Unto This Last*: that a lawyer’s work has the same value as the barber’s, that the life of the tiller of the soil and the craftsman is the life worth living, and that the wellbeing of the individual is not separate from the wellbeing of all. From this link between the personal wellbeing and the common good Gandhi later coined the notion of *sarvodaya* or “wellbeing for all”.

We know that true wellbeing does not depend on the accumulation of material possessions but on developing a life full of meaning in a cooperative social context and in harmony with a wholesome natural environment. In order to achieve a sustainable society we need to disentangle well-being from much-having. In other words, to disentangle our identity, our

sense-of-self, from material goods (of which we can never have enough), and to ground self-esteem not on having but on being, developing an identity that is more participatory, more fluid and more aware of our interdependence with the rest of the world.

Abraham Maslow realised that all the people he described as self-actualizing were “dedicated people, devoted to some task ‘outside themselves,’ some vocation, or duty, or beloved job,” to which they devoted themselves in a “passionate, selfless” manner. Maslow himself compared this tenet of self-actualization to an act “of oblation in the religious sense, in the sense of offering oneself upon some altar for some particular task, some cause outside oneself and bigger than oneself, something not merely selfish.”

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We can only care for that which we truly love. In order to live in balance with the planet we must feel reverence and love for life. In the final page of *The Art of Loving* Erich Fromm wrote of “love as the only rational answer to the problem of human existence.” For his part, Gandhi said that “power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment.”

One of the most fruitful manifestations of love is gratitude. We can feel grateful for living in this world that surpasses our understanding, and for living in this historical moment, with all its challenges and opportunities. If we manage to transform our attitudes and values, a much wiser civilisation may emerge. True wisdom makes us realise that at root there is

no real separation between the “self” and the world. Gandhi, a declared follower of *advaita* (“non-duality” in Sanskrit), expressed in the following way the fact that we are not isolated: “I believe in the essential unity of man and for that matter of all that lives. Therefore, I believe that if one person gains spiritually, the whole world gains, and that if one person falls, the whole world falls to that extent.”

## Invisible Harmony

Our actions create waves in the ocean of the world, waves that trigger others and reach shores unknown to us. In the same way, in our everyday actions currents converge that come from afar and which we are often not aware of. Some of these currents may be dark, but in all cultural settings the sages see that the world wants to be flooded with light. As Heraclitus said at the other end of the history of the West, “invisible harmony is stronger than the visible.”

The agony of millennia of already exhausted history culminates in the disharmonies of today’s world. A new reality wants to be born. A reality that does not seek anymore unlimited material growth, but the growth of what makes us truly human and participants in the global web of life. A reality where we can pass:

- from a world centred on objects and money to a world centred on people and relations;
- from the greed of the ego to a humane and ecological awareness;
- from calculating intelligence to the development of our multiple intelligences;
- from a reductionist and fragmenting view to a systemic and holistic one;
- from hierarchical organisation to networking;
- from industrial society to sustainable societies;

- from consumerist individualism to a sense of community;
- from alienation to a meaningful life;
- from materialism to post-materialism.

## Shift of Direction

Quantum physics shows us that the materialistic and mechanistic view becomes false when we approach the core of reality.

The current socioeconomic situation shows us that the search for prosperity through material growth is unsustainable.

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Neuroscience shows us that the materialistic worldview stems from a type of thinking (logical, lineal and literal) that should be at the service of a wider and more vital form of thinking: holistic, participatory, contextual and relational.

The evolution of knowledge shows us that the universe is a much more fascinating place than we had thought, and that reality manifests itself through our participation in it, in the present, in an open and creative adventure.

This we know. It should be enough to change our worldview, as well as our values and priorities. It should be enough to transform what we do and what we are. In other words, the evolution of knowledge invites us to imagine a world in which we would see:

*Prose at the service of Poetry,  
Reason at the service of Intuition,  
the Material at the service of the Personal,  
the Analytical at the service of the Holistic,*

the *Methodical* at the service of the  
*Spontaneous*,  
the *Quantitative* at the service of the  
*Qualitative*,  
*Information* at the service of *Imagination*,  
the *Calculable* at the service of the *Creative*,  
the *Tangible* at the service of the *Intangible*,  
the *Machine* at the service of *Life*,

*Power* at the service of *Love*,  
*Having* at the service of *Being*.

With this change of direction, we leave behind millennia of history in which we have endeavoured to dominate and to control reality.

We no longer need to control it, because it is us and we are it.