How we've made ourselves into abstractions

Contributed by Chris Maser
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Editor's note: Chris Maser is a leading author with an interdisciplinary knowledge-base of sciences. His purpose is to help his readers and clients deeply understand our world and its problems, so that his answers resound with logic and heart. In considering the development of our species, touched on briefly but well done, Chris identifies our essential challenge: "...once the world is divided into ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ people perceive the necessity of acting either in ‘self-interest’ or ‘self-defense,’ which today translates into our ‘national interest’ versus everyone else’s. And it’s this sense of dualism that’s the seat of humanity’s increasingly fragmented view of a seamless world." He develops this further in a section titled Consolidation of Personal Power. Chris’s insights include hunter-gatherer culture, which helps him be a most effective ecologist and forester, among other capabilities. - Jan Lundberg

In discussing how I think fear subverted the sharing, caring way of life that most hunting-gathering societies enjoyed (replacing it gradually, insidiously with a life ruled progressively by acquisition, competition, subjugation, and fear itself), it is important to remember that mine is -- at very best -- a grossly simplistic notion of what might have happened, beginning with the development of language.

Development of Language

Of all the gifts of life, language is one of the most incredible. Through language, we can create, examine, and test concepts, those intangible figments of human thought and imagination. Concepts, such as love and fear, can only be qualified, not quantified; only interpreted, not measured. And concepts can be reinterpreted hundreds, even thousands, of years after they were first conceived, uttered, and written. Language thus guides thought, perception, and our sense of reality by archiving knowledge—and our cultural sense of fear.

Knowledge, in turn, is the storehouse of ideas, and language is the storehouse of knowledge. Language therefore allows each succeeding generation to benefit from the knowledge accrued by generations already passed, as well as their perceptions of love and fear. Language is a tool, a catalyst, a bequest from adults to children -- that based on love is a gift, whereas that based on fear a curse. Moreover, language allows each generation to begin farther up the ladder of knowledge than the preceding one. Language is an imperative for our survival because the tenets of society are founded on it. As well, our understanding of Nature, and our place therein, is founded on knowledge conveyed through language. We simply must understand one another if our respective societies are to survive.

Technology and the Abstraction of Life

Development of any kind is the collective introduction of thoughts, which inevitably lead to further introductions of practices, substances, and technologies in a strategy to use or extract a given resource or to defend those already in possession. Another facet of technology is the sense it gives us humans of ever-greater control over our environment, which in today’s Western industrialized society is often a war against the uncertainties of Nature -- against the creative novelty of the Universe itself. Consider the development of weapons.

The abstraction of life, which shifts our perception from the spiritual to the material, began unconsciously through the technological development of weapons. Weapons initially came about as a means of protection from predators and for obtaining food. The first weapon probably was a hurled rock or a piece of wood used as a club. Then, a human-like creature saw the advantage of using a long piece of wood to hold some viscous predator at bay. With time, it was discovered that a stick could be fashioned into a more potent weapon by rubbing one end against rough rocks until a sharpened point was affected, one that caused pain or death.

Next, a pointed stick was hurled at a foe or potential meal, and thus was born a spear, the sharpened point of which could be hardened by subjecting it to heat from a fire. Then a piece of sharp bone was fastened to the end as a more lethal tip and finally a piece of stone shaped into a cutting point. With time, a throwing stick or atlatl was devised to hurl a spear with greater force than available in one’s extended arm.

Next came the bow and arrow, which could be shot faster and farther than a spear could be thrown. In addition, one could carry more arrows than spears, and arrows were probably more economical to make and less of a setback when broken or lost. This progressed to the crossbow and finally gunpowder and guns. Today’s rifles can fire bullets so fast one scarcely has time to see an enemy’s face, and others are exceedingly accurate at long range. Each technological advance made life and killing more abstract—such as "smart bombs."

Domestication of Animals

With the advent of domesticating and herding animals, came the necessity of continually finding enough pasture on which to graze one’s herd. The more people in a given vicinity who had flocks of sheep or herds of goats, and later herds

of cattle and/or horses, the more inevitable it became that competition for grazing lands would sooner or later find its way into culture. Competition became accentuated when people viewed their animals as their wealth and thus built flocks or herds to numbers far exceeding those necessary for mere

survival.

Here the challenge is that once the world is divided into "us" versus "them," people perceive the necessity of acting either in "self-interest" or "self-defense," which today translates into our "national interest" versus everyone else's. And it's this sense of dualism that's the seat of humanity's increasingly fragmented view of a seamless world.

Invention of the Irrigation Ditch

As the first ditch—a human-created water diversion—became the many ditches, it allowed the expansion of humanity, plants, and animals into places heretofore uninhabitable by those needing water in close proximity. In so doing, the supply of available water and the ability to divert it to areas of one's choice became a basis of a more secure life with respect to the production of food. Thus, local populations of people increased, as well as competition among them. With time, the supply of available water became contentious as those people who controlled more land than others wanted more of the available water.

This scenario was compounded when water either originated on the land controlled by an individual or ran through a piece of land under a person's direct control. The farther away one's land was from the source of water one used, the more at the mercy and good will of the person or people upstream one was likely to be.

Over time, ditches, and the water they carried, gave rise to agriculture and eventually led to such feats of engineering as the Suez and Panama Canals, each of which physically connects one ocean with another, and in the process, both canals became commodities over which wars have been fought.

Centralization of Leadership

Centralization of leadership, which may well have given rise to the proverbial struggle for power, probably arose with the acquisition of material goods, such as herds of livestock, and the inevitable material advantage that came from having more than someone else. Such distinct material advantage undoubtedly prompted the notion of personal privilege-based material wealth.

For example, when the first European invaders set foot on the shores of the "New World" and saw its wealth, did they not set out to get what they decided was rightfully theirs by the act of "discovery" before someone else did? However, the New World was already discovered—and occupied—by humans, but that did not stop the European invaders, with their superior technology, from stealing whatever they wanted. So began the centralization and consolidation of alien powers in the New World.

Consolidation of Personal Power

The struggle for power was born the moment the first person with a social advantage consciously eliminated human equality from the heart of the hunter-gatherer way of life and replaced it with inequality based on gender and/or social class, both of which are a contrived behavior disguised as privilege and translated as "power." This sense of privilege, the underpinnings of most organized religions, is based on holding power. Fear of losing power through opposition means that all voices but its own must be silenced—as exemplified by the Catholic Inquisition in olden times and dictatorships today.

With the advent of wealth and personal power, still another lesson from the hunter-gatherer culture was lost, namely that self-centeredness and acquisitiveness are not inherent traits of our species, but rather acquired traits based on a sense of fear and insecurity within our social setting that fosters the perceived need of individual and collective competition and the notion of "rights" such competition for power engenders.

Establishment of "Rights"

The establishment of "rights" led to the introduction of slavery, subjugation of the growing masses, and finally to the perceived unequivocal and absolute "ownership and rights of private property." Speaking of rights, the Dalai Lama said: "If we are prevented from using our creative potential, we are deprived of one of the basic characteristics of a human being. It is very often the most gifted, dedicated, and creative members of our society who become victims of human rights abuses. Thus the political, social, cultural, and economic developments of a society are obstructed by the violations of human rights."

Those who violate human rights attempt to do so in the secrecy of an information blackout. To remove the cloak of

secrecy and shed light on these violations, hundreds of journalists have given their lives to bring the news of such atrocities to the world by going into areas where free journalism is discouraged, if not outright forbidden.

Today, one understanding of a "right" is a legalistic, human construct based on some sense of moral privilege. Although a right in a democratic system of government is created by people and defined and guaranteed by law, access to a right may not be equally distributed across society. Conversely, a "right" does not apply to any person outside the select group, unless, of course, that group purposely confers such a right on a specifically recognized individual—someone from a foreign country seeking political asylum from clan violence in Somalia, rape in Kosovo, or forced sterilization in China.

Ostensibly, a "right" in democracy gives everyone equality by sanctifying and impartially protecting socially acceptable behaviors while controlling unsanctioned ones—which includes the "right" to extract natural resources by the global corporate powers. There is, however, a price exacted for having rights, even in a true democracy.

Rights have responsibilities attached to them, such as protecting the legitimate rights of all peoples from the overreach behavior of resource-mining corporations, which means protecting the rights of extant hunter-gatherers, even those who simply want to be left alone to live their lives in peace and harmony within their homelands, be they forest, jungle, desert, or Arctic shores. Thus, whenever a law is passed to protect the rights of the majority against the transgressions of the minority, everyone pays the same price—a loss of freedom of choice, of flexibility—because every law so passed is restrictive to everyone. Put succinctly, we give up personal freedoms in order to gain personal rights, but those without access to the cherished "rights" reap only less freedom.

The problem is that rights, as granted by humans to one another in daily life, including in the United States, are based on access, not on equality. Access is determined by some notion that one race, color, creed, sex, or age is superior to another, which means that differences and similarities are based on subjective judgments about whatever those appearances are. In American society, for example, men are judged more capable than women in most kinds of work because society has placed more value on certain kinds of products, i.e., those demanding such masculine attributes as linear thinking and physical strength as opposed to those demanding such feminine attributes as interpersonal relationship and physical gentleness.

With notable exceptions, the stereotype holds that perceived differences in outer (superficial) values become social judgments about the inherent (real) values of individual human beings. Superficial characteristics are thus translated into special rights or privileges simply because the individuals involved are different in some aspects and either perform certain actions differently or perform different actions. The greater the difference one perceives between another person and oneself, the more likely one is to make black-and-white judgments about that person’s real value as expressed through one’s notion of that person’s rights.

The most extreme example of personal judgment is the use of superficial differences to justify a social end. One group of people thus declares itself superior to another group because it wants what the other group has. The "superior" group tells the "inferior" group that they have no rights, and through this denial of rights justifies its abuse of fellow human beings.

By replacing spirituality, Nature, and human well-being with material wealth, as symbolized by the money chase, the road to social impoverishment, environmental degradation, and, in numerous instances throughout recorded history, the collapse of societies and their life-support systems become the norm—exemplified by the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution and the Rise of Capitalism

If we leap forward in time by the thousands of years it took to advance from the domestication of animals to the Industrial Revolution, we find that technology was still idealized both as labor saving and as a means of increasing the predictability of control over Nature in maintaining material lifestyles. But then something shifted in the human drive for predictability and power, a shift that began to focus technology on replacing people with machines, which in turn fostered the growing social inequality among those with material means and those without.

Those who could afford to own the machines, which did more work than one person could, kept more of the profits. Thus, if it originally took ten men to produce a given amount of goods for sale, each man was paid a certain amount. With the advent of a machine that could now replace nine of those men and still produce the same amount of commodity, the reasoning became something like this: "I’ve invested my monetary capital in the purchase of this machine; therefore, I’m entitled to keep nine-tenths of the profits since my machine represents nine-tenths of the productive capacity because it takes only one person to operate the machine." And so the first people were put out of work by a "labor-saving" invention that not only separated economic production from social life but also strictly reinforced the tie of individual well-being to individual production. This coupling of individual well-being to individual production inevitably led to competition, which in turn led to social inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation.

Labor-saving technology shifted to social tyranny when those who lusted after wealth and power discovered they could both own and use technology to produce more of a given product with fewer people and thus keep a disproportionate

amount of the profits for themselves. At that point, the unspoken purpose of such technology began to move from labor saving in terms of creating a better life for everyone, to people-replacing in order to garner more wealth and power for the few who could afford to own the technology. After all, machines do not ask for wages; are not late to work; do not call in sick; make no human mistakes; do not want child care or maternity leave; do not expect health benefits, paid vacations, retirement pensions, and so on.

The Industrial Revolution spawned not only the ability to produce more products than were needed to fulfill life's necessities but also the capitalist economic thinking that contrived the notion of scarcity as an economic construct to foster consumerism and increase profits. And thus fear choreographed the psyche of the industrialized human to deal with the economist's notion of scarcity and want.

The contrived scarcity, which is built around the economist's vision, which perceives the ever-increasing need to consume-always consume, was built into the Rational Economic Man (and Woman) as an inherent part of human nature.1 As the dominant behavioral paradigm permeating conventional economic theory, Rational Economic Man is a bundle of assumptions about human nature from the philosophers of the Enlightenment who were responsible for early economic thought. The features assumed by economists to define Rational Economic Man are:

1. self-interested

2. competitive with perfect knowledge of all alternatives

3. acquisitive

4. materialistic

5. believing more is better—always preferable to less

6. preferring immediacy—something now is preferable to something later

7. always making the same choices ("rational")

8. the desire for power and its perceived psychological benefits

9. and, I might add, an addiction to machines and gadgets

To the uninitiated eye, the traits appear to accurately describe human nature and behavior. Anyone who builds mathematical models realizes that realistic assumptions generate useful models because they have the ability to accurately predict real-world phenomena. Economists, among others, go to great lengths and invoke elaborate semantic gymnastics to convince themselves and others that their assumptions are realistic and, therefore, "factual" in that people really do act this way. In so doing, their style of speaking can be incredibly difficult to decipher, which Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan refers to as "constructive ambiguity."

When, however, economists are confronted with evidence of human behavior that is inconsistent with the assumptions of Rational Economic Man, the instinct of self-preservation often leads them to point out that a particular assumption was not

really granted or that a twist in language, which would indicate an apparently altruistic behavior, was

really self-interest, and so on. If nothing else, they retreat to the premise that most people act consistently with the assumptions of Rational Economic Man most of the time, and that

should be sufficient to ensure the validity of their "rationalistic" economic theory.

Of course, if exceptions do exist, monstrous errors in describing the goals and behavior of people can also occur, as pointed out by Sherlock Holmes to Dr. Watson: "While the individual man is an insolvable puzzle, in the aggregate, he becomes a mathematical certainty." Holmes goes on to explain that it is impossible to foretell what any individual person will do, but an average number of people are always predictable because, although individuals vary, percentages remain constant.

Holmes, in his discussion of the predictability of human behavior, touches the core of special cases and common denominators. Although each person is a special case and therefore unpredictable, if we study enough special cases with an eye for their common traits (common denominators), then we can make certain predictions about the generalized behavior.

Where technology is not yet available to replace people, corporations still find ways of divesting themselves of those

people they feel cost more than they want to pay. As corporations downsize, and as technology increasingly replaces people, lower-paying jobs, such as clerks in retail stores and positions in fast-food establishments, fill the gap, but most receive minimum wage or slightly higher (usually without benefits, such as health insurance), which is not enough to pay for housing. As a result, many people with jobs are homeless. That is different than in the past, when a full-time job almost guaranteed a person the dignity of being able to afford housing. There is yet another way human dignity is lost, one that especially affects men.2

In the days of the hunter-gatherers, there were clear rites of passage to help men find their path in life. In the not-so-distant past, men had communities (churches, unions, political groups, civic groups, and various associations of war veterans) to help them find their way along the time-honored path of masculinity. Now, however, good work is difficult to find and real community has been replaced by virtual community, which offers but a faint shadow of the once ways. Today, there is a sick, sinking feeling in the pit of many a man's stomach as the bedrock of community continues to crumble.

For lack of a more substantive way to define themselves in today's society, men have become overly obsessed with their images because their jobs not only change too often to become a firm basis of personal identity but also are increasingly demeaning. Nevertheless, the dark side of technology (and its negative, human fallout) is ignored, brushed aside, as it were, by most corporations and many economists so more and "better" technology can be developed to deal with the problems of earlier technologies. The latter, however, more often then not become the technological problems of tomorrow and the endangerment of social-environmental sustainability. Although I could go on at length about the cumulative impact of making ourselves into abstractions, I think the point has been sufficiently made.

So, where is society today? Now that we humans have the technological capability to destroy the entire world as we know it, more and more people are beginning to question the wisdom we possess to cope with many of our so-called technological advances. I find hope in this questioning because people are beginning to realize that we have duped ourselves into thinking that technology can progressively allow us to control Nature and therefore to separate ourselves from Nature, and from one another along the way. By the same token, people are gradually beginning to understand that they are, in fact, an inseparable part of both Nature and one another's experiences of life.

Endnotes

1. The discussion of Rational Economic Man is based on: Chris Maser, Russ Beaton, and Kevin Smith. 1998. Setting the Stage for Sustainability: A Citizen's Handbook. Lewis Publishers, Boca Raton, FL. 275 pp. For a more thorough discussion of Rational Economic Man, refer to Chapter 6 of this book.

2. The preceding discussion about American men is based on: (1) Susan Faludi. 1999. The betrayal of the American Man. William Morrow & Co., New York, NY. 662 pp., (2) Joseph H. Pleck. 1999. Balancing Work and Family. Scientific American 10(2):38-43, and (3) Martin Daly and Margo Wilson. 1999. Darwinism and the Roots of Machismo. Scientific American 10(2):9-12,14.

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This essay is condensed from Chris Maser's 2004 book The Perpetual Consequences of Fear and Violence: Rethinking the Future. Maisonneuve Press, Washington, D.C. 373 pp.

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Further Reading:

"Ancient innovations for present conventions toward extinction" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #161, June 10, 2007:

culturechange.org