

Humanity's Principal Challenge

(This paper was written for a seminar in Santiago, Chile with Ela Gandhi, a granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi who continues his work. Each participant was asked to write three pages on the topic, "What is the principal challenge facing humanity today?")

In these few pages, it is unlikely that I will be able to convince anyone who is not inclined to agree with me already. I will try to start a discussion by outlining a point of view. Seen from my viewpoint, humanity's principal challenge at this point in history is to transform the basic cultural structure (BCS for short) of the global economy. The BCS is, roughly,ⁱ the ethical and legal principles, chief among them freedom and respect for property rights, that organize market exchange. The BCS provides the principles that the global economy operates under today; it is, together with physical reality, the main *cause* of its successes and of its failures.ⁱⁱ

There is a reason for calling structural transformation the principal challenge, and not putting first some other challenge, such as saving the biosphere and with it life on this planet, or nuclear war, or the end of work as technology makes humans obsolete, or unpayable debt and the fiscal crisis of the state, or terrorism, or racism, or civil war, or the defeat and powerlessness of the majorities as smaller numbers of richer people get still smaller and still richer, or spiritual despair. The reason is that because of the BCS the world is ungovernable. The BCS separates the winners from the losers. The ethic of liberty guarantees that there will be losers in the market game, because in a market economy -- unlike in a tribe where kin are expected to take care of you because you are kin—freedom entails that nobody has to buy from you just because you need to sell to make a living. Property separates the haves from the have-nots. Separation is the whole point of today's prevailing Roman-styleⁱⁱⁱ property rights, and as Thomas Piketty has shown^{iv}, over time the separation gets worse.

The have-nots are ungovernable because their needs are not met. The haves are ungovernable because if they do not like the government they can move their wealth elsewhere. The whole system is out of control because the people as a whole depend physically on the confidence of investors. If investors are not confident that there will be profits, production stops. A consequence is that maintaining conditions suitable for profit-making is not a choice. It is an imperative. Without structural transformation, what needs to be done to create sustainability, peace and justice, will continue to collide with what needs to be done to create consumer goods, jobs, and profits. Sustainability, peace and justice will continue to lose.

Transforming freedom and property does not mean ending them. It means making them more functional; it means making them better at doing what they are supposed to be doing already. It means rethinking and remaking the global economy from the bottom up; going back to the basics of physics, chemistry, biology and medicine; it means putting into historical context and taking out of transcendental reason the 18th century European mythologies of social contract, self-evidence, and natural rights, as well as Justinian and Ulpian and the *Corpus Juris Civilis*; it means transcending Eurocentrism to respect and learn from the mosaic of diverse human cultures; it means revaluing the spiritual heritages of Europe itself that the 18th century *philosophes* underestimated.

Structural transformation already has a charter. It already has in principle a global consensus in its favour. Its charter and its global consensus are in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights approved by the United Nations in 1948, and later supplemented by adding more rights. The BCR liberty

and property rights are at the top of the list. They were there in the 17th and 18th century British, American, and French declarations; and they are still there in all the newest ones. But now, since 1948, the right to cultural identity, rights to be different from other people, the right to employment, the right to security in old age, the right to health care and other younger rights are sleeping in the same beds with their older siblings freedom and property. Now at the level of ethical and legal principles, there is a global consensus calling on freedom and property to adjust to being members of a large family. All those who signed and ratified the human rights treaties, were signing, whether they knew it or not, a warrant for the arrest and compulsory re-education of the self-regulating free market with no social safety net.

Now I will contrast the book world of human rights treaties with the real world of violent terror, by telling a true story of two women. Their story will be a segue to suggesting that to make it possible for human rights to come off the bookshelf and start happening, more people need to start following Mahatma Gandhi's advice to "be the change you want to see."

The first of the two women is my friend Evelin Lindner. After graduating as a medical doctor in her native Germany, and going on to earn a doctorate in psychology in Norway, she set up shop as a clinical psychologist in Cairo, Egypt. The second of the two women is Farida, a not-quite-twenty Palestinian woman who comes to Evelin with a severe depression. Here is part of what Farida said to Evelin:

My father wants me to study, get married, and have a life. But I cannot smile and laugh and think of a happy life, when at the same time my aunts and uncles, my nieces and other family members face suffering in Palestine. This suffering is like a heavy burden on me.... Sometimes I cannot sleep. Our people are suffering and we should stand by them. If we cannot help them directly, we should at least not be heartless and forget them altogether. I feel that I do not have any right to enjoy life as long as my people suffer.... I would go to my homeland, get married and have as many sons as I could have. ... I would be overjoyed to have a martyr as a son, a son who sacrifices his life for his people. I feel that suicide bombers are heroes, because it is hard to give your life. I want to give my life. I want to do something. I cannot just sit here in Cairo and watch my people suffer.... Their suffering eats me up. I feel so powerless, so heavy. The burden crushes me. What shall I do?^v

Like Gandhi, and like many others Evelin has come to know as a clinician and researcher in the Middle East, Africa, and around the world, Farida sees what I am calling the basic cultural structure of the global economy from a point of view much different from that of the mainstream media. Simplifying, Evelin has drawn a key conclusion: In the times we live in, humanity is undergoing a long and painful transition from a species that evolved living in extended families, clans and tribes; to a new global civilization whose ethical basis will be human rights. At this stage of the transition, there are billions of people like Farida who identify with their kinship groups and perceive the western rhetoric of freedom, rights, and democracy as violence, fraud, and *humiliation*.^{vi}

Our task as builders of the new global civilization is double: (1) To make human rights real and not fake, caring and not lying; and (2) To dignify the humiliated. To the extent that we succeed in building actually functioning social rights for all, and dignity for all, we will be building a governable world. It will be governable not just because the formerly ungovernable poor will no longer be either ungovernable or poor. It will also be governable because there will be no longer be an ungovernable class of powerful rich people who can and do bring any economy to a standstill whenever they want to, for any reason or for no reason.

Well, you say, you might as well try to drink the ocean until it is dry, or try to persuade the stars to come down from heaven and enrol as members of the Rotary Club. If structural transformation of the modern world-system requires the poor to reform and the rich to cooperate, then, you say, it will not be transformed. It will continue being the way it is. In reply, let me remember that Gandhi held the opposite opinion. It is not that the basic cultural structure of modern civilization will never change. It cannot not change. Gandhi wrote in *Hind Swaraj* in 1909 that modern civilization was unsustainable.^{vii} It could not possibly last. The reason why it could not possibly last was that it was *adharma*. *Adharma* means absence of *dharma*.

What does *dharma* mean? My reading of this complex and untranslatable theological term with a long history tries to capture briefly the way Gandhi used the term. It is right order and righteous living as it was conceived in a traditional Hindu village where everyone had a place, and everyone had a calling to serve.^{viii} It was the *dharma* of the bee to make honey, of the cow to give milk, of the sun to shine, of the river to flow. We too will live rightly and conform to the order of the world if we find our *dharma* and follow it.^{ix} Gandhi said of his own life that his aim was *Moksa*, to see God face to face, and that he saw his life as a series of opportunities for service. Modernity, on the contrary, on his view, lacked spiritual discipline; it lacked self-discipline. Gandhi preached non-possession: renounce everything every morning; I do not have a right even to a glass of water until I give everything to Krishna, and then I get back just what I need to be able to devote my life to serving others. Those who have wealth should declare themselves trustees for the benefit of the poor.^x I would classify the *dharma* of the Hindu village as a species of a wider genus of many ways of life that organize reciprocity^{xi} and redistribution.

Thus, for Gandhi the basic cultural structure is transformed. The ethic of liberty that underpins the modern rule of law and the market economy, is transformed along lines Martin Luther suggested when he wrote that a Christian is at the same time perfectly free and a perfectly dutiful servant of all.^{xii} The ethic of property rights is transformed along lines Thomas Aquinas suggested when he wrote that our belongings do not belong to us alone, but also to whomever we can help by sharing our surplus.^{xiii}

I do not want to suggest that there is only Gandhi's way, or only Gandhi's and Luther's and Aquinas' ways, or only a thousand ways, to transform the BCS. Alternatives are unlimited: they are throughout history, throughout anthropology, and throughout every-day life experience. Solutions are plural: they are not one big solution; they are sums of many small ones.

I do want to suggest that *homo economicus* is obsolete. I warn whomever proposes to remake the modern world-system to cope with its challenges without doing a safety recall on *homo economicus*, taking him back to the factory for some necessary conversations about ethics, that it has already been tried and that it does not work.^{xiv} Let me unpack this figurative way of speaking a little. In the twentieth century and in the twenty-first so far, many attempts to change the system have been made. But the modern ethics that underpin modern law and modern economics are rarely questioned. It is assumed that the difference between right and wrong is a known quantity. It is assumed that when we try to raise ethical standards we already know what the standards are; or it is assumed that we already know that moral education is futile, and therefore we must do power politics because power politics is the only politics there is. What I am proposing is that we need *different* ethics. We need necessary conversations about bringing ideals thousands of years old like *dharma* into harmony with 18th century ideals like freedom.

ⁱ For more detailed discussions of the BCS see my books cited elsewhere in these endnotes and also my (1995) *Letters from Quebec*. San Francisco and London: International Scholars Press.

ⁱⁱ That ethical principles provided by culture *cause* economic phenomena is the burden of my 2004 book *Understanding the Global Economy*. It is available on Internet as a Google E-Book.

ⁱⁱⁱ On the Roman Law foundations of the global economy, and their contrast with traditional African *ubuntu*, see Catherine Hoppers and Howard Richards (2012). *Rethinking Thinking*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

^{iv} Thomas Piketty (2015). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

^v Farida is not her real name. This quote is taken from Evelin Lindner, *Humiliation as the Source of Terrorism: A New Paradigm*. *Peace Research*. Volume 33 (2001), pp. 59-68

^{vi} Evelin Lindner, *Honor, Humiliation and Terror* (2017). Lake Oswego OR: World Dignity University Press. See also other books by the same author.

^{vii} Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. (1909)

^{viii} Howard Richards and Joanna Swanger (2013). *Gandhi and the Future of Economics*. Lake Oswego OR: World Dignity University Press.

^{ix} J. A. B. Van Buitenen, Dharma and Moksa. *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 7 (1957), pp. 33-40

^x At one point Gandhi suggests that wealthy people who do not act as good trustees for the poor should have their wealth taken away from them by a judge and given to someone else who would be a better trustee.

^{xi} Alvin Gouldner, The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement. *American Sociological Review*. Volume 25 (1960), pp. 161-179.

^{xii} Martin Luther (1520) *On the Freedom of a Christian*. Recent printings are easily found. See also St. Paul, *Galatians* 5:13.

^{xiii} Thomas Aquinas (1265-1274) *Summa Theologiae*. II – II Question 32, Article 5, Reply to Objection 2

^{xiv} This is the burden of my book with Joanna Swanger (2006). *The Dilemmas of Social Democracies*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield. We study the repeated failures of social democracies, arguing that the BCS is to blame. Any future attempt to build social democracy should learn from past experience and make moral development part of the program, consulting books like Martin Hoffman (2000). *Empathy and Moral Development*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.