

A Vicious Circle of Crisis and Cultural Decline. Towards a Rebirth of the West?

Why even economists will take ethical issues serious

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Scientists are pushing the panic button. Since it is reasonable to assume the advent of more humanitarian misery due to increased wealth differences. Yet nothing happens to prevent this; mainly because ethical language has lost its popularity among politicians when the economy is concerned. Hence this attempt to revitalize the ethical argument.

It has been known for a while, but since the French bestseller economist Thomas Piketty and likewise British bestseller epidemiologists Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, virtually no critical thinker can deny it anymore. The slowly evolved coup d'état the financial world carried out since the beginning of the 1980s and onwards, leads inevitable to humanitarian disaster - for everyone involved, the rich and the poor. But in the meantime no one does anything to prevent this cultural disaster from happening. It makes you wonder:

“Who will create for mankind one system of interpretation, valid for good and evil deeds, for the unbearable and the bearable, as they are differentiated today?”

This unanswered ethical question Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) once expressed when he accepted his Nobel Prize back in the 1970s - remains valid to this date. However, change is on its way. The ethical argument is about to make its comeback in cultural discourse, especially when one talks about economic issues. Although, it must be said, at present this seems quite inconceivable - nevertheless there are good reasons to expect that change is heading in our direction.

Cultures flourish from time to time, just as plants and flowers do - and according to the British Nobel Laureate and philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) who studied history, this often occurs in between periods of strict morality and moral decadence. So don't think that the decadent 'free' market paradigm, in which life revolves around competition, consumption and manipulation is forever engraved in cultural stone. The free market is ripe for a bit of morality; since this one-sided focus on economic growth hinders increasingly the culture to bloom and flourish.

First, to make things clear: a paradigm or worldview is a web of ideas, usually transmitted through upbringing, education, media and politics, with which the individual gives meaning to the experience his existence (of his emotions, instincts, intuitions and rationalizations). A good understanding of what this concept means, is important; since there is a tremendous psychological, almost magical power hidden in paradigmatic ideas; mostly because virtually everyone unconsciously accepts these ideas.

In our timeframe most people accept the idea that the possession of products, especially of they are rare and make life comfortable, determines whether someone deserves reverence and love. And who doesn't want to experience love? Therefore most people work themselves towards, so to speak, a burnout to eventually be able to get that stuff on which 'happiness' seems to rely. Ironically, in doing so, they often neglect those moments (or choices) that are priceless for one's own development. But seen from an economic perspective, this is precisely what is needed. Because the more isolated one becomes and the greater the lack of self-love one has, the greater the appetite for goodies to compensate for this inner emptiness - as also the marketing industry clearly knows.

Meanwhile, nothing happens without consequences. The idea that the value of people depends on the amount of products they own creates all kinds of side effects. It explains for instance the social acceptance of a bank manager to bankrupt his bank (at the expense of the community) and afterwards to pursue his career like nothing has happened; while someone from the lowest ranks of society who commits, lets say, a 1000-dollar fraud, risks a jail sentence.

If a society is more and more one-sidedly focused on material goods, it starts to neglect those items that are intangible in nature, like in this example the decay of social justice. But also the importance of things like compassion, solidarity and cooperation are neglected within the materialistic and competitive worldview; what is increasingly emerging is a mindset of "it's every man for himself" that goes hand in hand with a cynical attitude; as if the faith in the inherent goodness of mankind is slowly disintegrating to make place for a much darker picture of human nature. And while this cynical attitude (considering the circumstances) is understandable, it generates passivity to actually stand up for the interests of the community as a whole; and this could make things worse, especially if a self-filling prophecy is at work here.

All in all, it cannot be ruled out that what has been set in motion is a vicious circle of cultural decline. Recent research by the British epidemiologists Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson stresses this notion as well. People turn out to be far more inwardly interconnected than it seemingly looks like on the surface of the material worldview. To be more precise, as hierarchy in society increases (and with it the differences between the rich and the poor), people are more and more valued based on their 'stuff' instead of who they really are as a human beings.

Psychologically this is experienced as an increase in internal pressure since one has to keep up one's appearance all the time - a mindset known for its health risks. Hence, in countries with large wealth differences, and now it comes - both, among the rich as well as among the poor - an increase is observed in stress related illnesses, in mutual distrust, in mental disturbances such as depression, in addictions, in the pressure to succeed - that in itself leads to an increase in school drop-outs, and furthermore in a decrease in average life expectancy among other things. Actually, many academic argue now, that the only personality type that thrives in the neo-liberal world is: the psychopath, someone who is naturally inclined to experience less stress and inner pain.

This cannot continue forever, thought none other than the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. He warned at the time for cold materialism that would erode both communism as Western neoliberalism from the inside out - mainly due to the lack of inspiration and vitality society generates in and of itself.

This situation, however, is far from static. There are of course many parameters involved here – but based on the human ability to reason and the insight that one faces a joint problem, means that sooner or later the immaterial values will return in the heart of public debate; especially when it comes to the economy. What is needed is only a symbolic tipping point (a too-big-to-fail falling bank for example or a mass protest movement) and the overall reappraisal of the ethical argument can become a reality; and don't even be surprised if this argument is defended by republicans (since it happened before): if the rules of the game change, anything is possible.

In the meantime the dominant worldview of the last thirty years is slowly collapsing under the heavy burden of the current crisis. More and more people have serious doubts – even down to Wall Street, where firms like Standard Poor's are now openly warning for the consequences of increased wealth differences. Who knows – The first signs of a booming and flourishing culture may already there.

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