

Civil Society stands at a critical juncture:

The thesis of my book (*A Philosopher's Guide to Natural Capitalism: A Sustainable Future Within Reach*) is that we can establish a genuinely sustainable society without abandoning capitalism. Which is a good thing since, as Tom Rand, Paul Hawken and others have pointed out, it will really make the necessary transition a lot easier if we can exploit existing economic and social systems (as opposed to what? Have a revolution first, and then completely reinvent our economic and social systems on some other model?).

However, I argue that this will require us to embrace a new worldview that would re-contextualize our capitalist economies in ways that would completely revolutionize our lives. It would have the effect of changing the way we look at our relationships to the natural world and to one another. This might sound daunting, but there are abundant historical examples of human societies having done this before (more on this in a later post). Suddenly everything looks different: Our problems are reframed in ways that open up new possibilities for solutions that were not even conceivable from within the older worldview.

To explain in more detail, let me introduce Thomas Kuhn, a historian and philosopher who in 1962 published a book that shook the academic world. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* argued that science goes through episodes of revolutionary change that are characterized by a predictable progression (as we'll see, this is not to say that we can predict outcomes). First, the existing scientific paradigm begins to exhibit signs of strain: it becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile the theory with the data and solutions become increasingly difficult, ultimately impossible, to find. (I should mention that Kuhn used the term "paradigm" in ways analogous to the way I am using "worldview.")

Kuhn's view has always sounded to me rather a lot like Hegel's claim that society progresses through stages determined by episodes of generation, maturation and ultimate collapse before giving way to the generation of a new social order. The basic underlying idea is that, as a social order matures, contradictions become increasingly pressing (thesis leads to antithesis) and are ultimately resolved by moving to new ground that resolves the contradictions of the older view by embracing certain features of the newly emergent view and rejecting the parts of the older view that don't work anymore (synthesis). One big difference is that Kuhn is not, like Hegel, a historical determinist. For Kuhn, as I read him, there is no guarantee that such episodes will lead to a resolution that moves the enterprise forward. This last point is significant and I will come back to it.

So, I'm claiming that Kuhn's theory of scientific change is analogous to a plausible theory of societal change more generally. The presently dominant worldview has reached a state of maturity where the premises that constitute the conceptual foundations are in tension, if not outright contradiction, with one another and with our daily lived reality. Let me refer to this worldview as Classical Liberalism (I think Piketty uses the term "Classical Proprietarianism" to mean much the same thing in, *Capitalism and Ideology*). As a result, the system is exhibiting signs of significant stress. Increasingly urgent problems arise with no apparent solutions or

ways to move forward. Think of the great recession, SARS, Covid, climate change, and the erosion of our democratic institutions and social capital. All of these are made more likely and more urgent because of the way we live, and the way we live is supported and facilitated by our worldview, which I'm calling Classical Liberalism.

In Kuhn's book, these periods of turmoil are characterized by a busy marketplace of ideas: a variety of alternative approaches emerge that compete for our attention and our allegiance. Ideas are clarified, tested against reality and, if we're lucky, a view emerges that better fits the facts, reframes our problems, and opens up real possibilities for new solutions. Even if you're not intimately familiar with the details, you will probably have heard, for example, of the irresolvable problems facing Newtonian physics (Classic Physics) beginning in the late 19th C and which were resolved only by moving to new ground: Einsteinian Relativity Theory for large scale objects moving at or near the speed of light, and Quantum Theory for the realm of the very small, the sub-atomic 'particles.' This period was a fractious one in physics. The community was divided between those committed to finding some way to 'fix' Newtonian Theory and those exploring new ideas. Particularly in regard to Quantum Theory, the discipline was in a state of crisis for years and it was not clear a solution would be found.

This is the juncture we stand at today in the developed Western democracies committed to some version of Classical Liberalism: The situation is urgent and everyone knows it but, as Kuhn pointed out, many will stick with the older view for non-rational reasons that include sunk costs, fear of change, uncertainty about what the future might look like under a new worldview, and even tribal allegiance. I must remark that, as pointed out by Chandran Nair in, *The Sustainable State: The Future of Government, Economy, and Society*, the problems for the non-Western world will be quite different but they will be impacted, for better or for worse, by what we decide to do. I will take up this point again in a later post, but you would do yourself a favour to read this book.

As for the marketplace of ideas, we have a set of bold ideas that have been around now for a little over twenty years that, I argue, hold out the real potential for achieving genuine sustainability within about a single generation. I take no credit for the ideas. These include the economic model in, *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution* (Paul Hawken and Amory & Hunter Lovins) and the details of the infrastructure required to implement this economic model from Jeremy Rifkin, *The Third Industrial Revolution*, and many others.

What I have tried to do in my book is to extract from these views the narrative or worldview that contextualizes and rationalizes these theories. (I will use the terms "narrative" and "worldview" as stylistic variants.) The point about a worldview is that this is how we organize information in our minds, and it is how we are able to remember this information and use it to make sense of the world. It is this organization of information into a narrative structure in our minds that shapes how we perceive events. The narratives in our head determine salience, underwrite our ability to see patterns and make inferences about future events, and, crucially, influence how we value events in our lives. And in these ways, worldviews are determinative of outcomes. And note, I say "determinative" quite deliberately. These narratives shape outcomes

but not in ways that are deterministic. There are other factors, many beyond our control, that contribute to shaping outcomes (think of the war in Ukraine, Covid, and more). The only point I wish to make here is that we ignore the power of these narratives to shape events at our peril.

Additionally, in my book I devote considerable attention to the critique of Classical Liberalism. Before we can criticize a view, though, we must thoroughly understand it – both its enduring strength and exactly why it is no longer suitable to our present circumstances. If we are to reinvigorate and strengthen our democracies and re-establish the social capital we have lost, we must begin by learning to listen to one another – listen truly and sincerely with the goal of understanding one another. We can't simply dismiss those we disagree with as "a basket of deplorables." To do so is, essentially, to turn our backs on democracy. So, it's important to me in the book to really understand Classical Liberalism on its own terms before exploring the genuine shortcomings.

In closing, I come back to the point noted above: there is no guarantee of success when our worldview enters into an unproductive period of distress. There is no guarantee that we will come out the other side with a new worldview that allows society to move forward and refashion our lives in ways that make them better. Sometimes the outcome is societal collapse. The prospects for collapse this time are particularly pertinent because of the increasing velocity of climate change. Before we can abandon the ground we stand upon, though, we must have new ground to move to and the courage to leap. This is what I've tried to do in my book: articulate the new ground, explore in imagination what it might look like and, I hope, inspire confidence. If I'm being honest, I'm afraid to leap and I'm frightened we won't do so. It is, I suppose, the human condition.

Thanks for reading.
Wayne