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GUT DING WILL WEILE HABEN : ACCELERATION, DECELERATION, PROGRESS

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FOREWORD:

This is the third in a series of scholarly position papers by Board Members of the CREED Project. Each paper deals with an issue of interest and concern to the author in the broad general area of 3E (Energy, Environment, Economy) Education and Public Awareness. Each paper is intended to initiate or add to open public debate on the issue in question by digging below the surface to expose basic causes and by offering different perspectives on what these causes mean. Some of these will be controversial. It should be understood that the views expressed in these papers are neither endorsed nor rejected by the CREED Project as an organization, they are those of the author only.

Roger G. Aiken, Executive Director, CREED Project.

GUT DING WILL WEILE HABEN:

"[I] attribute the social and psychological problems of modern society to the fact that society requires people to live under conditions radically different from those under which the human race evolved..."

The Unibomber, Mid 1990s.

"The college will strengthen its commitment to technology and learning through increased utilization of technology...[and] its presence in the global community by increasing our commitment to international programs..."

Anoka-Ramsey Community College, strategic initiatives, 1999.

"It used to be said," writes UTNE magazine, "that America's young lacked a ritual to mark the start of their adult lives. They ought to be sent on vision quests or flogged

with holy reeds, we declared - some gesture to symbolize that childhood was over. But thanks to the triumph of the market and all its values in recent years, this problem has been solved. Americans now have a new rite of passage: selling out. ... If by chance you possess a gift that someone wants to buy - a head for figures, perhaps, or just your figure, period - the message is clear. By all means, child, sell!... Never before has there been such opportunity to seek one's true self... And yet never have so many been so reluctant to live by their own scripts. Today's tremendous wealth should be funding a time of great creativity and free expression, but that has yet to happen. Instead, this may be one of the great conformist eras, even more than in the 1950s." (1). If this assessment has any merit, how did we get there? What explains the revival of this one-dimensional and conformist market fundamentalism? And what is the direction we ought to progress towards?

Here are three explanations why the market rules now with the last one key. First, communism as the great enemy has collapsed and obvious successors are lacking. China and India are still too weak, global warming too abstract, and religious fundamentalism perhaps already too discredited. Organized crime, terrorism, and rogue nations may present threats but not challenges for our societal model. As a result, Western market based civilization looks shiny.

A second reason for the dominance of the market rests in ideology. Antonio Gramsci and Herbert Marcuse, among others, developed this point. Gramsci argued that market systems are upheld not only by unequal economic and power relations but also by the hegemony of bourgeois ideas. "Hegemony means leadership or domination, and in the sense of ideological hegemony it refers to the capacity of bourgeois ideas to replace rival views and become, in effect, the common sense of the age. Gramsci highlighted the degree to which ideology is embedded at every level of society, in its art and literature, in its education system and mass media, in everyday language and popular culture." (2). The market appears as common sense in 2000 as segregation in 1900 in the American south.

Similarly, Marcuse argued "advanced industrial society has developed a [one-dimensional or] totalitarian character in the capacity of its ideology to manipulate thought and deny expression to oppositional views. By manufacturing false needs and turning humans into voracious consumers, modern societies are able to paralyze criticism through the spread of wide-spread and stultifying affluence." (3). Conformism is the price we pay in our endeavor to participate in the booming economy and become rich and successful.

While Gramsci's and Marcuse's thoughts are intriguing they make the more sense against the backdrop of recent developments within our market economy. This economic system has not merely modernized but seemingly reinvented itself. In Europe they call it "turbo-capitalism". And that is the key third point to explain.

Glantz writes, "the computer as a medium of media integration lowers the transaction costs of business by compressing time and space. In the dominating branches of the information society, tankers (huge corporations with up to seven management levels) are being replaced by speedboats (small business nuclei cooperating with virtual

companies, that is to say ad hoc teams). No longer does the big one gobble up the small one, rather the speedy one beats the slow one. This development...creates possibilities for rationalization." (4). Many companies are forced to flatten their bureaucratic hierarchies and give their frontlines more autonomy. A fast changing business environment makes reporting back to central headquarters before each move too cumbersome. Many businesses, Rifkin observes, replace a large full-time workforce with a small top management, a core professional and technical staff, and a growing number of part-time and temporary workers (5).

The feedback loop between producer and consumer is nearly immediate. "Marketers and technologists anticipate your desires with fast ovens, quick playback, quick freezing, and fast credit." (6). In some cases, e.g. computers or software, product innovation and succession is so rapid that consumers have trouble to actually identify new products as such. The fast pace of technology change urges consumers to constantly update the things they own. "Lets say you are watching television, on a flat-screen active matrix LCD screen that just hit the marketplace, or just on an "old" color set, fed its five hundred channels by a digital satellite service that sprang into being and signed up its first million customers within months, and either way the set is attached to a video tape recorder, not Betamax, of course, because that format was obsolete almost as soon as it was born, but Dolby-capable, and not just old Dolby, but Dolby surround, Dolby Pro-Logic, in fact Dolby Digital AC-3, ready for DVD and HDTV, bypassing altogether the dead end of the laser disk player - anyway, you are watching TV, and you are not fiddling with rabbit ears, because you barely remember what rabbit ears were.... ." (7).

As the Tofflers have characterized the fast world of the new information technologies, "the old adage, 'time is money', is now obsolete. In the new accelerated system of wealth creation, it is being superseded by a new hidden law of economics in which time is no longer just money. Now each unit of saved time is actually worth more money than the last unit. The faster economic processes work, the more wealth is created in the same period of time with the same or even fewer resources." (8).

Who are they, the information and knowledge professionals, the virtual class, and the accelerators? Politically they are the mainstream. Al Gore, George Bush, Bill Clinton, Jesse Ventura, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schroeder, libertarian conservatives and New Democrats. Their interests focus on promoting globalization and free trade, WTO and NAFTA, individualism, pluralism and civil society. Opposing them is an unlikely coalition of 'values' conservatives and progressives; churches, community activists, labor unions, indigenous people, artists, environmental and other new social movements. Ideologically, it's not far from the 1999 Seattle anti WTO alliance. This alliance is concerned with social, environmental, and human rights effects of acceleration and globalization, and its effects on democracy and local communities.

The accelerators make five arguments in support of their case:

First, not everything accelerates. Speed limits on highways continue to exist. Airplanes do not fly faster than decades ago. The Concorde, the only supersonic passenger aircraft in service, is scheduled for permanent retirement with no replacement in sight.

Second, the new fast information and knowledge sector is merely one among several. Mechanics, truck drivers, teachers, construction, hotel and restaurant workers, and the like will be around for the foreseeable future.

Third, the quest for acceleration is not new. At the end of the 17th century, Maak writes, the French debated introducing a general speed limit since racing the new one-horse carriages in narrow streets caused havoc. The 18th and 19th centuries witness the promethean embodiment of speed in railway stations and on postcards. Speed increasingly is perceived not as danger but as cultural progress able to awaken collective yearnings and fantasies. The 'spirit of ecstasy', the young fleeting female figure on Rolls Royce hoods, the canon like design studies for the 1954 Cadillac Cyclone and Oldsmobile Experimental Cutlass, the Jaguar E-type, a phallic full throttle fantasy of the 1960s, all embraced speed (9).

Fourth, acceleration promises prosperity and progress. In Silicon Valley, "the talk is of satisfying our deepest hunger. Scientists [may] stomp out disease, use computers to make us hear and see and feel better, maybe even beat back death itself. 'the evolution of technology just continues the ...explosion of biological evolution', says Ray Kurzweil, a cutting edge scientist and author of 'The Age of Spiritual Machines'. 'In the 21st century we will make 20,000 years of progress'." (10).

And fifth, one must ask the question whether it is feasible or even desirable to slow down the transition from the industrial to the information age. Would not implementing such deceleration, asks Glotz, infringe on liberty through paternalistic 'we know what's best for you' policies? After all, communism can be described as an attempt at deliberate deceleration; the delayed introduction of new technologies and production methods. The attempt of fleeing from the coldness of modernity into the cozy familiarity of the traditional - with all its human costs. Furthermore, is the decelerators' anthropology truly desirable? The naïve tree hugger, the deep, brooding person who celebrates what Marx and Engels have called the 'idiocy' of countryside living? (11).

The decelerators' rebuttal begins with clarifying misconceptions. Deceleration has wrongly been equated with simplistic back to nature and turning back the clock strategies, e.g. getting rid of the internet or somehow slowing down computers and rejecting globalization of trade. In reality the challenge is to balance societal processes and humane processing capacities. If the former develops faster than the latter, the result will be stress. Strasser elaborates on two reasons why the feeling of having no time has increased steadily over the past 100 years. First, the need to more fully utilize capital intense production machinery and, second, changed consumer demands. Longer running times of machines, more shift and night work, greater work intensity, the demise of the free Saturday and Sunday, spell greater flexibility for employees, that is to say, undermine traditional rhythms of day's work and night's rest as well as work week and weekend. Leisure time becomes more stressful too. "Many more stimuli and pieces of information assail us, far more options are open to us than we can realize or process". (12). Attentiveness becomes a scarce resource. Modern man is busy simultaneously "drinking a Brazilian coffee, smoking a Dutch cigar, sipping a French cognac, reading the New York Times, listening to a [...] concert and talking to his

Swedish wife (13). The industrial organization and management of time on the one hand and the 'inner clock' of the human being on the other tick at different speeds.

Increasing acceleration, quantification, dematerialization, globalization, flexibilization, individualization - how is it possible under these conditions to gain a sense of stability and predictability in one's own life and to organize continuing relations with family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, elected officials, and how to build a democratic civil society?

Gauland believes the mainstream has capitulated. Libertarian conservatives downplay how acceleration beats up on tradition and conservation. And they dismiss victims of acceleration as the unfortunate but unavoidable price of progress. Edmund Burke's credo 'when it is not necessary to change it is necessary not to change' is forgotten. New Democrats in their quest to promote globalization and acceleration abandon what Norman Rockwell and FDR called 'freedom from fear' and 'freedom from want': strategies of redistribution, universal health care and welfare, strong labor laws, employee ownership concepts or a global New Deal. One of the few remaining mainstream tools for 'integration' and 'stability' is education. To make the slow in society fit or fast so they hopefully survive individually where there used to be solidarity and a support net (14).

And the decelerator's recipes? Strasser suggests a turn towards a society in which working and living is more in synchronism with biological rhythms that we as humans are part of anyway. That does not mean a return to a pre industrial, agricultural society. It means a move towards an environmentally sustainable society, especially since the growing ecological problems of the acceleration path force us into the same direction. Strasser notes that acceleration makes ecological risk assessment, for instance, nearly impossible. The accelerating stream of new synthetic substances, spewed out by the chemical industry, and rapidly distributed globally, represent risks no longer reliably assessed. Correcting these dangerous developments cannot be left to the market alone. Long lasting goods, slowing the flow of substances, and an economy based on sustainability are goals to be implemented politically and culturally (15). This 'return of politics' could be seen this way: "for Aristotle, an argument based on a poem was as valid as one based on science. We've lost that. I don't sense [...] that an ethical, spiritually based argument carries nearly as much weight as a capitalist imperative or the notion that progress is the ultimate. That whatever happens happens". (16).

Societal institutions blindly jumping on the acceleration bandwagon and the violent protest of Unibombers are counter productive. Through democratic procedure citizens must have the chance to carefully determine where to accelerate and where to not. Then perhaps, progress as a truly humane and not merely technical/rational process will be made.

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