

## The History of the World: an exploratory essay

*Francis Fukuyama, in The End of History and the Last Man, demonstrates, with a convincing overview of global trends and historical philosophy, that human society is funneling into a single strategy, the mode of liberal democracy. This outcome is explained by the convergence of two historical forces, the drive for satisfying desires and the drive for recognition. The first finds success in capitalist economics, the second in the guarantee of freedoms. By Fukuyama's own analysis the result is not necessarily utopian; nor is stability guaranteed. The drive for recognition (or thymos) is the volatile element; the problem being whether the comfortable conventions of liberal democracy allow sufficient challenge for the prideful human spirit.*

A personal note, by way of introduction...

Of the generation of the Bomb, I've been forced from an early age to come to terms with a questionable human future. I've huddled dutifully under my desk in elementary school air-raid drills, and awakened fearful to the cracking thunder of low-flying jets; survived with dim understanding the Cuban missile crisis, and with grim foreboding the invasion of Cambodia. By the eighties, first-strike strategic plans and weapons systems had brought disarmament to center stage in my personal life's priorities--along with the project of building a sustainable life in a sheltered corner of the world. Housebuilding and peace education competed for space in my life while I started a new family.

Now having established a comfortable home base in rural British Columbia, I've had to act locally--through blockades and other nonviolent group efforts--to protect my watershed from pesticides and logging. I've learned there is much untapped power in a concerned citizenry. Seeing how desires can manifest in the world, I've felt a renewed need to ground my politics in a more deeply considered vision of the future. What am I aiming for? Does what I want for my life make sense on a global scale?"

In some ways my whole pattern of life choices reflects these questions and the provisional answers I've found for them. Perhaps it's a symptom of middle-age to ask them again more consciously. In this recent exploration I've relied primarily on reading a small number of seminal books, punctuated by personal experiences and connections with other concerned individuals and groups. I'm no longer a scholar in a formal sense (though I have a Master's degree in literature). Yet I believe there must be room for the intelligent layperson to grasp some of the problems facing humanity as a whole, to evaluate some of the more well-researched and well-considered options, and to share this analysis with others in a useful form. I am that person and this is my attempt at sharing what I have found.

In the nature of evolution, any conclusion reached here is tentative. More research and analysis, a surprise turn in historic events, an exciting new book, will appear tomorrow to

change the shape of a desirable outcome. Yet at each point I can only strive to make the best of the knowledge available--providing a foundation for further growth. A related drawback to my conclusions might be that they are "idealistic"--an epithet familiar to me when I was twenty and had accomplished nothing. Twenty-five years later, I can claim experience in hunting and growing my food; in building my shelter; in participating in a healthy relationship and community; in educating myself, my child, students and political activists on a wide range of topics through a wide variety of means. I have experienced something of what it takes to manifest desire in the world. So am I qualified to speak of such matters as human survival? Any one alive is.

I see my present situation as emblematic of human history. I get my meat from wild bear and deer and fish, and from domestic fowl and pigs I've helped to raise. My partner grows our produce in the garden, and we harvest fruit from our orchard. That takes care of the historic human food strategies--throwing in the rifle and rototiller as industrial aids. I also rely, of course, on the money system for other needs. I've worked primarily as a teacher and treeplanter--in both cases a cog in the world industrial network. As I write, the computer bespeaks of the post-industrial, or cybernetic mode of human activity. It's all here! But where's it going?

*This exploratory essay is unfinished. It began as a review of Francis Fukuyama's The End of History and the Last Man (New York: The Free Press, 1992), expanded to include evaluation of a number of related works (notably Marshall Savage's The Millennial Project), and evolved into a longer odyssey. I invite feedback as to where it might—where we might--go from here.*

---

My immediate objection to Fukuyama's study is to wonder why he's left the inherently democratic (or rather proto-democratic) structure of North American aboriginal peoples out of his calculations. Certainly some of those, the Aztecs for instance, fell into authoritarian forms of social organization. But many of these peoples apparently had no formal structures of government or authority by which one person's will was imposed on another's. Nor, in the case of all of the New World cultures, do we see the purportedly innate drive in the "first stage" of history to assert one's need for recognition by bloody battle with others. It was enough to survive against the obstacles placed by nature. To the extent living was easy, in the systems of the west coast bands for instance, art and social artifice were highly developed, in the manner of the Noh theatre or the tea ceremony across the ocean. Respect was gained through orgies of giving (the potlatch) rather than of destructive conquest. These may be fine points, esoteric distinctions of the main point, the drive for recognition, what Fukuyama calls thymos. Or they could undermine his thesis of the central importance of that drive.

I could accept a view of human nature that offers the possibility (as Buddha and Christ did) for the transcendence of egoistic desire—including that desire for recognition. But as

Fukuyama warns, the "last man" of the liberal democracies is essentially a secularized, cardboard version of the saint or Bodhisattva, in his abrogation of thymos, or ambition. He attains peace and tranquillity on a less evolved plane than the true spiritualist, because his consciousness is still based on the maintenance of, if not the struggle for, physical comfort and convenience. And there is no end to physical suffering or the threat of it, in this mortal life. The only transcendence possible ultimately is an inner condition attained by spiritual grace or practice, not by piling up of goods and social rights in the bourgeois way. The bourgeois heaven is a shallow and meaningless one, for the man with the drive of thymos still active.

I've still bought into the acceptance of thymos in my critique of the bourgeois alternative, above. Is it not possible to look, then, to a humble and non-bourgeois lifestyle as a satisfactory alternative to either material bondage or ceaseless ambition of whatever stripe? (For even the spiritualist can find in his esoteric or ascetic practice an opportunity for the exercise of ambition: "spiritual materialism.") Thus, while the Mahayana Buddhist finds some intrinsic glory in the Bodhisattva stage of exercising compassion for other, less evolved sentient beings (ultimately this means educating them in the glories of Buddhistic enlightenment), the Hinayana path of individual salvation might be the model for the man or woman freed of both materialistic strivings and the ambition for spiritual greatness. I have no quarrel with either branch of Buddhism, and in fact find much sympathy with both approaches.

Having come to some peace with my own not-entirely-peaceful nature, I want to look at a wider view of what it is to be human, especially in the collective sense, with an eye toward the evaluation of political and economic choices. I do this with some urgency today as forces of resource-extraction and ecological denigration are clashing in a growing war ever closer to home. (In my case I've merely escaped them for a while, in a geographic area more isolated than where I grew up; but the voracious growth of a human population and social engine has caught up to me now.)

How do I relate to the compelling arguments of Fukuyama and the philosophers regarding the drift of human history? Regardless of whatever bones I might want to pick about aboriginal societies or the psychological composition of human nature "in a state of nature," I should have to come to grips eventually with the reality of the world situation today as it appears for the bulk of its rapidly increasing five or six billion human inhabitants. And I do accept the assertions of the irreversibility of human knowledge (Fukuyama points specifically to the concepts of modern scientific method), so that even in the case of the cataclysmic reduction of human population to prehistoric levels, the memory--and indeed the residual imperialistic inclinations of some of those humans--would lead logically (if over a long time of reconstruction) to the same picture again, of what is seen today.

If this assumption is incorrect (a repeat of the same conditions does not necessarily entail the same outcome, as the accidents of history and the random nature of chaotic influence, as well as the arguable concept of free will argue), it is interesting to contemplate the

likely fate of the native American model writ large. I suspect immediately that a form of social cooperation suited to an individualistic and small-group struggle for survival would not suit well the complex requirements of satisfying the material needs of six billion people on a planet of rapidly depleting resources. Witness the fate of hunter-gatherer societies in the Old World, which died out by a variety of factors: dispersal, cultural evolution into agricultural modes of production, simple overhunting. Population increase alone militated to the replacement of the major form of economic activity, and therefore also of its efficient forms of social and political organization.

Can it not be posited in any realistic format, then, in today's world, that the archaic tribal model might not work, say, in every neighborhood or community? Again, we're up against the prevailing and, given present numbers, necessary modes of economic survival--industry and agriculture. The two go together in today's world: mechanized agriculture. There is obviously not enough game and wild food to support six billion (nor would there be for long even if somehow miraculously six billion could have started fresh with the planet's wild food resources unravished by the intervening centuries of agricultural and industrial despoliation).

Could we not then support six billion in the Maoist model of low-tech, communalistic agriculture? Maybe. But to do so would risk falling into the Maoist trap of forced employment in ways that stifled individual thymos, or creativity. Whether or not Mao was right or not to me or you is beside the point. Human nature rebelled against the program of forced agricultural labor. Maybe that is because those particular Chinese humans who rebelled were flawed by conditioning to other kinds of opportunity; or by the attraction of other societies, even communism Soviet-style, where everyone didn't have to work on the farm. Maybe we're all just spoiled children who sooner or later need to recognize as a matter of survival that we need to get back to the earth, literally. To get back with our bare hands and feet to growing our own food, ourselves, and finding outlets for our extraneous creative impulses when the rice harvest is done.

As an ideal formulation of a means of survival for six billion people, such a model has a certain simplistic appeal. But is it necessary? Clearly the industrial path of the liberal, capitalistic democracies shows another option, more realistic in accounting for the varieties of existing human ambitions. Whether or not the economic model of those societies is sustainable over the long term in planet suffering in tangible ways from its impact is debatable. In fact the prognosis is unfavorable.

Fukuyama makes the point, largely unsubstantiated, that only advanced science and technology can effectively deal with advanced ecological damage. This supposed cure is sufficient neither as a logical justification for the ecological damage in the first place (we could have taken the less-damaging economic path instead), nor as a guarantee that the ameliorative efforts will be effective. There's no cure in sight, for instance, for the widening ozone hole, for extinct species, for the replacement of old-growth forests, for desertification, for global warming, for nuclear waste, etc., etc.

So let's review the three economic strategies in the light of a given that we have six billion mouths to feed (six billion, that is, on its way to doubling in this generation). Hunting-gathering is obviously untenable on this scale. Intensive but nonindustrial agriculture is a theoretical possibility. I haven't the expertise or the research at hand to evaluate it as a technical option. My gut sense is that everyone could be fed if everyone put in the effort, personally and directly, to grow one's own food. I suspect there is enough arable land per person, in other words, to grow the necessary food--up to a point defined by the limits of population--whether twenty million or twenty billion. In this sense the technical question becomes a moot point, and gives way to the political question (pushing aside for the moment the preeminent underlying problem, of population growth itself). As a political choice, the pursuit of "personal-scale" agriculture is always possible: but the facts of its decrease by choice for the bulk of the world's population--most graphically when there is a movement from farm to city in an industrializing or modernizing country--prove something about the political desirability (read feasibility) of enforcement in the opposite direction. For the moment I'm satisfied with the failure of Maoism as an indicator of what happens.

This leaves me with three major unanswered questions:

- 1--How do we reckon with, or deal with, the threat of overpopulation?
- 2--If we choose the industrial path, how do we deal with the threat of ecological collapse (as well as the more immediate or subsidiary failures of systems or stocks of resources)?
- 3--If we choose the agricultural path as the road to economic/ecological sustainability, how do we deal with its political/cultural obstacles (as well as with its own brand of economic and ecological drawbacks)?
- 4--Can we evaluate the "Millennial Project" (a plan to colonize space) favorably as a solution or successful skirting of the three major issues above? And even if it passes the theoretical/logical test, can it pass the technical/engineering tests it purports to master; and perhaps most important of all, can it pass the test of political acceptability? My feeling is that if it supplies a compelling enough answer in the affirmative to the first two tests or levels of evaluation just mentioned, and if the planetary issues above form a convincing enough platform for change in the understanding of people generally, then their political choice in this direction will be inevitable--if there is enough time for the necessary education to take place.

The mission of the Millennial Project (detailed by Marshall T. Savage in his book of that name, published by Little, Brown, 1992/1994) is similar in some ways to that of the early eighties, when the world was poised quite literally on the brink of annihilation, and people were thus galvanized, mobilized, energized, convinced to change and to work for the change in others and in public institutions so that the threats might be addressed in the shortest time possible. Today the pervasive problems of economic and ecological survival are vastly more complex, so that more than simply pointing to a Presidential first-strike policy memorandum or to a specific missile system, or even to comprehensive

phenomena such as the Cold War or nuclear proliferation, concerned activists must address (as the deeper thinkers of the disarmament era insisted then) fundamental, systemic causes, in human nature and in the nature of our present social condition on the planet as a whole.

Thus, we have to confront baldly the issue of overpopulation. We have to confront baldly the issue of choice when it comes to how we intend to feed ourselves, in the light of the environmental impact of that choice. And if we care at all about the chances of survival for our children or grandchildren, we need to consider not just the immediate repercussions of our personal choices to survive, but the long-term implications of our collective choices. Judging, to use the Iroquois conception, by the outcome in seven generations' time.

All of the major problems are pressing on us at once: really it's a single problem with major strands interwoven. Time is running out, in a very real sense for the human race, because our numbers are increasing at a rate unsustainable by any terrestrial means; because the environment that sustains us is already breaking down in that capacity; and because even now our economic systems are failing to adequately support present population levels. Improvement in any one of these areas would help matters, partially and temporarily, but improvement in any one or even two areas is not enough to insure species survival.

If by immediate sterilization, or birth control, or unforeseen plague or war or starvation, the population would stabilize or decrease, we would buy time to deal more effectively with the other major problems--until or unless the population curve again boomed upward. If we could suddenly find or invent a cure for any of the plethora of environmental disasters looming, we would still be faced with the problem of feeding our numbers adequately--even existing or reduced numbers--without further damage. And if we managed politically as a species to arrive at an understanding of our condition on a fragile and small planet, sufficient to move our choices of economic activity to a more sustainable pattern (toward less consumption, toward less industry and more intensive, personalized agriculture), we would still be faced with the oppressive burden of the growing impact of our activities on the land and water and air and wild flora and fauna, especially as our numbers continued at present or increased levels.

Let us then explore the final two options: attack of the "major problems" all at once, or escape from the confines of the ecosphere altogether. Is it conceivable that people can, through accident or design, arrive at a more sustainable level of population? The level targeted would depend largely on the degree of environmental impact that was realistically sustainable forever, and on the method of sustenance taken from that perpetually sustaining environment. So several scenarios would fit the bill:

- 1--a worldwide population numbered in the millions, committed by a lifestyle of minimalist survival to live by hunting and foraging, dedicated by spiritual/moral values to the protection of ecological integrity, and committed by a combination of hardship,

cultural contrivance, and herbal knowledge to an ongoing restriction of numbers: the model of much of pre-conquest North America.

2--a worldwide population numbered in the low billions, committed by recognized ecological limits to low-impact farming methods. This is the model of, say, Vietnam or any number of other "underdeveloped" Third World countries. The problem is that even low-technology agriculture allows the growth of populations (especially when combined with traditional cultural reinforcements such as the perceived need for numerous children to share in the workload of the farm) that would soon outstrip the capacity of the land and/or the environment to support them.

3--a worldwide population at current levels or above, supported by a mechanized agriculture, compensating for some of the environmental impact of industry by technological controls (cleaner smokestacks, waste processing and sewage treatment, genetic engineering, intensive reforestation, etc.), and prepared to intervene through sterilization or other forms of birth control or euthanasia to control the population boom.

4--the Millennial Project or a clone of it offering similar means of relief by expanding into extraterrestrial space.

5--a hybrid scenario: in the present world, for example, some aboriginal peoples are still allowed to hunt and gather relatively freely (as in northern Canada, where they use industrial aids in these pursuits, are subsidized by the purchase of flown-in agricultural foods, and have been negotiating through political compromise to live relatively traditional lifestyles alongside oil and gas exploration or hydroelectric development). In other parts of the world, or even in the backwaters or backyards of the most advanced nations, people can still choose to eke out simple livings by subsistence or small-market gardening, aided by simple tools, tractors, rototillers, plastics, soil additives, and hybrid seeds. There are obvious conflicts and compromises to be made in such a system: it remains to be seen whether populations of caribou and geese and seals can remain viable alongside major industrial activity in fragile northern ecosystems; and the backyard or small-market gardener has to contend with air and water and noise pollution, subsidized competition from agribusiness, and global problems from the monster systems such people have opted not to fuel in a major way. In this model we plunge ahead, doing the best we can, trying to accommodate a variety of cultural and individual preferences for economic lifestyle; but the result collectively is still unsustainable growth and increasing encroachment on farmlands and wildlife habitats by the industrial juggernaut.

This last, the hybrid option that we have chosen more or less blindly as a species in the course of our evolution, may continue as the collective and even the individual choice for most, as long as it is practically possible. Even when we are forced against its limits, as with an oil shortage, a nuclear reactor accident, or skin cancers due to depleted ozone, we can still throw our numbers forward in waves like the trench armies of the First World War: biting the bullet, so to speak, until the immediate crisis passes or becomes familiarly integrated into our expectations like the cost of gasoline or coffee. Is the environmental

crisis, the population crisis, the economic crisis, the planetary crisis that these problems feed, simply overrated? Might we simply proceed in the fashion we have mastered on our way here, throwing numbers at the limits as long as we know how to breed, and to grow food ever more efficiently--taking our losses manfully, so to speak, while we continue pursuing the talents and skills that make us human?

We might. Savage's analogy of the yeast in the bottle, that when half-filling the bottle on the 29th day, dies in its own toxins as it fills the bottle completely on the 30th, might be misappropriated for the human condition. We might better look to the example of the deer and the wolf, and see that if we continue breeding like this now, we're in for an eventual dieback at the hands of our likeliest predators, infectious disease or other humans. But not extinction. Similarly with the question of economic survival: we might run out of big game animals, even permanently; or enough farmland to support ten billion people; but we can always grow enough to feed a certain, lesser number of survivors. Extinction becomes more plausible by the accounts of planet-wide problems like global warming, ozone depletion, a pole shift (which we probably could not help one way or another), or the like. Of these, only a complete breakdown of the ozone layer seems like a real threat to the species as a whole (and indeed to most if not all other species as well). Every other ecological disaster--like nuclear winter, which we might remember has not left the closet where it's been stowed away temporarily--is a disaster but not really complete extinction. Is the hope of a number of "lucky" or resourceful survivors of planetary cataclysm sufficiently positive and plausible to sustain us on our present course, our current trend for how we inhabit this planet? Or are such scenarios sufficiently terrible to deter us from our present course, to shake us from complacency, and, as with those possessed by the abhorrence of nuclear Armageddon, to mobilize us into single-minded activism for change?

It might be instructive to look back at that campaign stretching from the sixties through the eighties to gauge how effective it really was. Certainly by the mid-eighties the superpowers had to take notice of the widespread opposition to the arms race, and moves were being made to cut back, substantially if not completely. Disarmament was not achieved, of course, and still has not been achieved. The winds dropped out of the sails when one superpower collapsed, so the urgency of the question lessened considerably. Meanwhile the deeper systemic issues that were raised by looking at the arms race have not been remedied. For instance, it was pointed out that "defense" at all costs was an excuse for supporting a high level of consumerism, in the West; or for coercing Third World countries to do the bidding of the nuclear-armed. While the policies of the World Bank can achieve whatever nuclear saber-rattling occurred in the eighties, and while on a collective level consumerism has increased rather than decreased--arguably at the expense of some of those very same less-developed countries--it can be said that the disarmament movement was not effective in its basic aims. Yet progress was made.

Certainly the growing environmental movement, and the growing fanaticism and dedication of its activist elements, harkens us back to the days when disarmament was on



everyone's lips. Are the arguments being raised today, concerning the threats to human survival, as convincing as those raised about nuclear war? The nuclear war issue, while evolving a different political complexion, is today still relevant but now only one part of a whole arsenal of the Earth's current "weapons of mass destruction". For this reason alone we might conclude that yes, the problems today are even more compelling as motivations for obsessive activity for social change. The character of these movements, as before, will take on the hue of the group undertaking its own avenue of concern: whether noble, or justifiably paranoid, or committed, or conscientious, or fanatical, or mainstream-institutional, or radical-feminist, or . . .

So the issue of extinction might really be beside the point. People are likely to be again as concerned about a cataclysm that could affect them at any time, as about the more abstract danger of everyone's, or even all life's extinction. It comes down to self-preservation, and if the threats of skin cancer and drought and plague and war are seen as immediate, people will naturally respond.

The issue of the degree of threat brings us to the issue of political means of choice. In respect to the scenarios for long-term survival listed above, no single political system--not even liberal democracy--is ideal without reference to the particular scenario itself. So the political system suited to the worldwide hunter-gather society might appropriately devolve to a tribal, autonomous structure, hardly "structural" at all and largely non-authoritarian. The low-tech, personal or communal agriculture model might follow a neo-Maoist philosophy for its political structure, giving formal ideology a strong role, or it might be more practically based, even anarchistic in the manner of contemporary North American variations: independent farmers with local marketing boards, counterculture communes or land-cooperatives, shared city garden plots or simply private backyard efforts.

The political structure best suited to the industrial model is, to take Fukuyama's findings seriously, the liberal democracy. The hybrid view (and indeed the industrial or liberal-democratic world-in-the-making) consists of a major trend toward liberal democracies, but allow also the variations of tribal or anarchic/libertarian or collective means of governance where appropriate. The issue of sovereignty and jurisdiction is complex and fraught with problems, however: why or to what extent should I give allegiance or tax money or votes to a national or even regional government if I'm largely self-sufficient on my wilderness homestead or rural community or ethnic neighborhood? The answer to some degree depends logically on the degree of self-sufficiency. But there's more than logic at stake, there's also clarity and practicality: who's going to figure out in every case the just division of responsibility for what areas of influence, if not a single comprehensive government in charge of a large area of diverse economic activity?

It's a valid question and the obvious answer is not necessarily the central government, as Fukuyama tends to assume too readily for my taste. There is a question here of logic and inevitability, but also of personal bias. If I may be entitled to mine I could state it as

follows: I think there is room for autonomously created and autonomously functioning political institutions to operate in areas where its residents might together decide not to give all their political power (or even just the power that counts, to control local resources like forests, for example) to a government or its allied industries based a thousand miles or ten thousand miles away. Again, the principle that I feel should apply is this: a political structure that suits the economic activity and the circumstantial preference of a given people in a given area. And to be most responsive to local differences and input, the smaller the scale the better. But federations and free-trade and even large-state political structures might be desirable in some societies, such as North America, where people have already become more or less comfortable with the sovereignty of their liberal-democratic central governments. However, the option for succession should always be an option, if decided upon by a clear majority of citizens in any local area of whatever size: of whatever size, that is, which clearly can fend for itself in the matter of resources and services; of whatever size which is capable of economic self-sufficiency, and prepared to give in trade for whatever infrastructure or goods or services it receives from the larger body.

The once-touted issue of national defense is losing its credence as a "service" provided to a would-be secessionist region. I do not share the fear that Quebec will be invaded by the United States or any other government once it declares independence from Canada.

Returning to the larger question of how to get there from here, I'd say that the hunter-gatherer society is a long shot that will not be chosen freely by the world's peoples in general but may come about through the back door: by a cataclysm of such major proportions that the world's human population, through disease or war, is reduced to a natural balance with sustainable levels of wild foods. Of course a large-scale ecological collapse would have more serious consequences, wiping out, along with a substantial number of humans, a corresponding number of the species on which we might hope to depend in a neotribal era. An alternative scenario might involve a more long-term, progressive conversion, an education or realization of the preference of that form of lifestyle and values in the face of the damaging and soul-emptying consequences (even in success mode) of the present liberal-democratic-industrial path. If major cataclysm is inevitable, I see the recovery in tribal forms a desirable option. If the industrial mode is inevitable (and possible without ecological collapse) I also look forward to the day when we might, through conscious population reduction over a long period, return to preindustrial levels of population and corresponding ways of life. But this scenario is, despite my own attraction for it, unlikely for ecological as well as political reasons. By the time humanity developed the will for such a reversal in our economic and cultural commitments--if ever--the environment would have likely ceased its ability to support more than a handful of people--if at all.

Having staked my preference on the first option, for reasons of lower population and lighter ongoing impact on the planet's support systems, I recognize the attendant political

dangers if our inner nature is unreformed. We might easily revert to those hoary authoritarian or man-over-nature modes, or the warrior-slave modes, that began this doomed march of western history in the first place.

So it may happen, by chance, sooner or later, that we find ourselves back in a somewhat mutilated garden of Eden, but I'm not about to commit genocide to take us there, nor to attempt the slow task of education with my sandwich board saying "Turn Back, the End is Near" against the stream of incoming traffic.

I might, however, simply do it myself, or with friends and neighbors, if I really believe it is the most desirable course of human adaptability no matter how temporarily anachronistic or increasingly difficult in a regulated and denuded society. This as an educational strategy is far more compelling than the sandwich board approach; though as education it also needs the communication component: thus, beside the rifle, the computer or the video camera--at least until the multitudes (after first paring their numbers to a manageable handful I could hospitably feed with my next kill) finally agree to see it my way and have learned like me how to make bows and arrows from flint and sticks and we can ritually burn rifle, computer and video camera in a joyous bonfire of celebration at reaching the end, and the beginning of history.

Have I in the process of exploring this option discovered my own hypocrisy? Reexamining the scenario I've painted no matter how ludicrous and ironic and implausible (even, by all historical accounts, irrational), I can maintain, "Yes, I could do that." And who knows, we just might try reinventing that rifle and computer the next week. Or rather, the rifle first; the computer could wait until meat returned to the table. I've already pretty much squelched the second option, the low-tech agricultural one, with the twin obstacles of population growth and ecological damage from overintensive farming. Enforced sterilization or education discipline might conceivably solve the first and thereby also the second problems, in which case we're up against the same arguments that make the first scenario unlikely, politically. It's asking people to turn back the clock, to retrace the many arduous footsteps of history, to return to a less affluent, less comfortable era. We might continue to feel righteous in doing so, by valuing sustainability of a certain level of population above all else. But large numbers of people are unlikely to accept the tradeoff of working the soil forever in exchange for perpetual survival. The Hopi might serve as an instructive, even inspiring example. They happily grew corn and lived in harmony with the earth. Their values were similar or identical with those of the more nomadic hunter-gathers, but their agricultural model appears more practical in this world of disappearing game and copulating humans. Maybe so, the reborn Sioux warrior might say, but something about their lifestyle seems weak, womanish (even, we might correct him, "bourgeois"). The Nietzschean super-man might similarly object to the sedentary, peaceful life tending the corn--just as he objects to the meekness of the American law student or Japanese engineer. All right. But we at least have glimpsed another option for human survival.

So, we come again to the present option, if it is an option, the course of industrial activity, with certain improvements in population and pollution control; the liberal democracy, perhaps fine-tuned or hybridized to allow autonomous regions to opt out of the system, both economically and politically. This option is the easiest to imagine, the most realistic politically because closest to the status quo, and yet the most dangerous in terms of its present headlong rush into population blowup and consequent and contemporaneous ecological disaster, along with the inherent limits to the economic growth paradigm and endless and impossible hunger of industry for resources that will run out. Given these natural and mechanical and logical obstacles to progress along the current course, its political appeal seems almost beside the point. A popular war (like World War One, at first) is still a prescription for suicide.

So what are we left with for options? The more or less extreme cases of turning back the clock on material "progress," technology, economic evolution, and population to an archaic model of agricultural or preagricultural self-sufficiency, easy on the earth but hard on people spoiled by life in the fast lane; and the course of more or less rapid progress forward in ways that are familiar and comfortable in the short term but doomed to backfire on us in some form or other of systemic collapse in the foreseeable long-term. In which case we might be thrown back on the first options but with less to work with, the longer we wait and thus the bigger the disaster we create for the earth's support systems. Again it seems in the face of such a choice, for anyone concerned with the coming fate of the species as a whole (or even, to be truthful, with what is in store for each person alive today), wisest to begin as soon as possible to imagine and paint the pictures of the projections of current trends. Part of the problem with planetary, ecological collapse (as compared, say, to the simple, and thus powerful images of the mushroom cloud or nuclear winter) is its unpredictability, its complexity, its feedback mechanisms, its multifaceted and largely invisible manifestations: the death of soil organisms, or plankton, or the starting of cancers that take years more to show up, or the year-by-year gradual but irreversible tripping of cycles of climate change, the increase in ultraviolet radiation, or encroachment of deserts, the failure of silviculture to replace old-growth forests, the imperceptible dwindling of a wildlife population to numbers below a certain threshold for continued viability. The nature of these problems is so complex that it seems only a comprehensive attitude toward solving them can approach a turnaround of present trends. Thus the education effort needed is huge and intimidating, on the order of convincing people that ending the arms race depended on giving up their attachment to their high material standard of living. In the present case it's perhaps, fortunately, more directly apparent to people that consumerism causes ecological damage, or that overpopulation is bound to end in a bad way if allowed to double one time too many. Still we're caught between that unpleasant rock and the hard ground we've been over already. But okay, it's true, the picnic is over. Once we recognize that truth for once, we might have realized the first consciousness shift that can bring us to accept the rest of the spiritual and economic package involved in living in a sustainable way closer to patterns the earth can handle:

whether in the extreme form of the hunting-gathering bands, or the more familiar agricultural mode (with the necessary modern addition of some form of effective birth control as a counterbalance to the un-natural productivity of agriculture).

Now, if there is an effective enough control of population in place to sustain an agricultural population indefinitely, then logically such a system could co-exist (in somewhat lesser numbers) with a system of open lands for hunter-gathers to also carry out their chosen mode of living. Without the artificial and unnecessary urges of imperialism (fueled, in historic times, by unenlightened forms of thymos, or megalothymia, as well as increasing populations) such systems might (with a little fine-tuning or much fencing to separate wild animals from domestic) theoretically and practically learn to coexist, giving at least a choice for individuals to get their thymotic kicks by the pursuit of leisure made possible by agricultural productivity, or in forms of settlement and trade administration, or by the adventure of the hunt and nomadic life. Thus people of these radically different cultural inclinations (Eurasians as opposed to Amerindians, for example) might see common cause in a visionary reconstruction of the best of their respective traditional ways of livelihood, and work together politically to bring about such a world before its chances are made impossibly thin in the years of delay while present societies rush headlong toward inevitable environmental collapse. Lacking such foresight or political will, the contemporary world still might see inklings of change in that "backward" direction by spontaneous programs for change, by individual "prophets" or experimental groups, by traditional peoples still fighting against the original or ongoing or threatened assimilation of their hunting or agricultural ways, by imaginative and resourceful researchers keen on finding a way out of the dark days ahead, by the unconscious dread arising in the otherwise insensate and material-drugged mass of people, and by the natural awakening of common sense in people living in a world breaking apart before their very eyes. Unlike nuclear war, the collapse the planet's support systems has already begun: this war is already evident (that argument was valid to a lesser extent in support of activists for disarmament, who could point to overburdened economies, bomb-test victims, and Third-World oppression as advanced symptoms of nuclear-war-in-the-making).

The choice seems clearly now reduced to two options: either "go back to nature" or "get out." Both unpalatable for most, perhaps, but what else can we reasonably expect to do? I won't deal with the Millennial Project here in detail except to say that, like the going-back option, this going-forward option has a limited window of opportunity. In fact Savage points out that very soon the pressures on budgets and populations and political agendas will likely increase to the point that the economic, engineering, and political conditions necessary for launching the project will no longer exist. Then we'll have but the one option left--to go back--and its chances of success will in the meantime also be seriously compromised by further species extinction, destruction of wildlife habitat, desertification, poisoning of air, water, soil, and atmosphere, and the deterioration of climatic conditions for viable agriculture.

Personally it's hard to make a value judgment about going back or going out into space; both paths are obviously strongly rooted in human nature. The obvious argument holds that the going-forward option has already won the battle; except that to argue in this way neglects to account for the very real probability that in winning the battle against "traditional" nature-based cultures we've forfeited our larger war with nature. So we might, as in the fable "The Tortoise and the Hare," withhold our bets awhile longer. Or we might take a lesson from the dire consequences our cultural choice has wreaked on the planet already, and move early while the odds are good, to side with the Tortoise.

To do so denies some of our thymotic nature: the reckless adventurer into new unknown lands; the creative spirit at war in a symbolic sense with the ease and mindlessness of nature; the drive to invent ways to manipulate nature to our benefit as humans. Looking back at the stone age and how we got here from there, we see that very impulse at work. From stone axes, to fire, to language . . . to bows and arrows . . . to planting seeds, riding horses, working metal. . . . So going back, we find ourselves going forward again. Maybe there are natural limits, we can consciously hold to, next time. The Amerindians and Amazonians and Australian Aborigines survived (in continents of perhaps irreplaceable bounty) well without the wheel, gunpowder, or authoritarian governments. The Japanese were doing fine living on rice and cultural refinements before the age of steamships, computers and VCR's. Or, maybe Fukuyama and Savage (as Jonathan Schell before them) are right, and there's no going back. No disinventing nuclear weapons, no un-invention of the scientific method. Even if history is indeed directional, however, we still have choice. Part of our learning as a human culture is to leave behind practices that don't work, or are counterproductive, or that we simply have outgrown: gladiatorial combat or crucifixion, in one era; slavery, or dueling, in another; glorification of war or the dehumanization of other races, in another. So we might conceive of adopting, again, previous practices of lifestyles that worked, in harmony with a sustainable environment, without, the second time around, the drives for overpopulation, conquest, spiritless affluence, uncaring destruction of habitat. Or, we might like the idea of colonizing the stars (or, for starters, as Savage suggests, the oceans).

Either way, it seems necessary to choose quickly. Finally, why not choose both options? Given the wholesale shift in values and earth-consciousness needed for either option to come about, both could occur simultaneously. Indeed, the throwback option would appear more palatable to those craving an industrial fix or an assertion of the human drive to be recognized as essentially different from the rest of creation, if they could still put their energies into a space colonization project. And the Millennial Project itself depends from the very beginning on a viable earth support system, which extended very far into the future, implies the sustainable model of the throwback society. So each needs the other.

Jerry Mander, on the dissident side, has come out decidedly for the traditional peoples of the earth as opposed to the television and the computer and the superficial societies they represent. But to be politically viable and, I'm tempted to say, spiritually whole,

accounting for the wider range of human thymotic nature which is not evil but curious, creative, and inventive, the world-choice offered to the masses of people caught in the contemporary dilemma has to provide both the hunt and the computer, both the organic garden and Star Trek.

So what will I do tomorrow, to further this cause? As for my actual, personal lifestyle, I don't know. Perhaps I'll end up a Savage-groupie, or a second-coming mystic, or a bourgeois writer, or a drummer lost in the beat. Or a local zoning board member, or a tree-hugger, or a throwback-hunter. In any case I'll attempt to stay conscious of the implications of my action or inaction on the whole system, in direct and indirect ways, and try to enjoy participating with whatever essence of thymos I might personally find to contribute, from my own light of being and in concern for the fate of the whole human family.

\*\*\*\*\*

***A personal note, by way of afterward...***

After reading Green Delusions by Martin Lewis, and talking to a neighbor about community political process, and walking through the forest in the rain, I realize:

- that nothing is sacred but life itself.
- that to be open-minded is not a liberal delusion but a strategy for admitting the real into a vision of the ideal.
- that everyone deserves choice but that as some choices preclude the choices of others, some restraint should be exercised, some limits recognized, for the sake of equality of resource-sharing and a greater consensus.
- that the seeds of evil having been sown, some account must be made for piracy and murder, for pathological destruction by individuals and groups, both occasional and systematic, and some means devised to reach the core of commonality in those people, while also protecting the innocent from their predations.
- to advance quickly on the population problem via education, social security, and gender equality. And as these take time, to advance even more quickly with short-term measures: state-subsidized birth control and sterilization, and even enforcement of one-child limits (sterilizing each mother giving birth).
- that the Inuit had appropriate insight into the question of technological development, not judging arbitrarily by some quasi-spiritual standard but by the harsh practical requirements of survival. As a population in present numbers compared to our ability to find adequate resources in our planetary environment, we are comparable to the situation of the Inuit in the arctic.
- that similarly in political questions, it is important to be flexible: as in the question of how to facilitate each community meeting, or of what measure of consensus is sensibly required in deciding each issue--with that question itself likely decided best by consensus.

--that in regard to the primitivist enclaves or low-tech agriculture or high-tech millennialists of my Last Man essay, the first two are flawed by geographic analysis of Lewis: that the primitivists require a greater than fair share of world resources (even though culturally they have lived in a sustainable manner and thus have earned insulation from the less fortunate or less profligate or less wise portions of humanity that have come knocking at their doorstep?--but are probably imperfect enough in some way or other to thus forfeit the protective label "utopia"); that the low-tech agriculture model is likely responsible for a gradual degrading of the environment that dooms it as a strategy of choice (not to mention its retrogressive degree of hardship in actual living conditions unless mollified by higher technology in some critical ways); and thus I'm thrown back reluctantly against my idealist principles and current lifestyle privileges (which themselves are truthfully in contradiction to the primitivist or Arcadian ideals), to support the space-probes and sea-colonies of Savage and the Chinese sterilization policies of the Chinese government, as a twin-pronged attack on the yeast-in-the-bottle problem facing humanity now.

--that I might justify, for myself or others of like inclination, a primitivist mode of existence or low-tech agricultural lifestyle like the Amish, but that to advocate it as a mass survival strategy is untenable. The question really then comes down to what rights I and my tribe, and the ancient tribes we support, can justifiably claim against the incursions of the swelling hordes of humanity for land and raw materials. Is the planet truly a shared pie, to which everyone is entitled equal access, or can I justify exclusive rights by prior occupation or superior control of my reproductive faculties, by deed of title or force of law? I can no longer justify it by claiming an objective superiority of lifestyle, because neither the gatherer-hunter nor the agrarian model holds up for current population levels worldwide. Is my insistence then purely selfish, "pragmatic" when it suits me by defining the status-quo privileges I already enjoy (money and land), while increasingly unpragmatic on a global scale or in terms of ethics of equality and compassion? Still I hold out--claiming that the wannabehere's will have to sterilize, or go into space, or go back to their own wasted farmland.

--This enjoyment I have with my nostalgic place is, in short, a marriage of convenience. I may as well enjoy it while I can. Why trade my luck for a luckless beggar of the ghetto or desert, in the interest of fairness? Fairness itself is an ideal unsupported by reality of the human situation. Why worship it any more than a vanished pre-Pleistocene Arcadia?

--Laissez-faire: this too is a dangerous philosophy. All philosophies are dangerous to those who are oppressed in their name.

--I would be a fool not to enjoy the last of the wilderness, while it lasts. Or not to fight for its preservation, for old-time's sake. So bears and fir trees are obsolete? It doesn't mean I should hasten their extinction. I should continue finding the appropriate solution for any person in the given place or time. In this place and time, for this person, the appropriate thing is to enjoy the semi-Prometheus forest life I've managed to carve out for myself. In a few years, it may become increasingly uncomfortable to enjoy such an



anachronistic existence. But then the pressure will be (and is at this moment, logging in watershed) mounted to swallow it and me into the maw of the global human menace. If I am not pure, do I not forfeit my right to enjoy it on my own terms? I am not pure, I am part of the global human machine. And yet I advocate and practice progressive solutions: birth control, reduced consumption, practice of social and environmentally sustainable principles even imperfectly. To this degree do I deserve a larger piece of the pie? Or am I doomed by the mistakes of others to have only my meager share of the collective result, an impoverished sliver of beaten earth?

--Who has the real right to land claims? This is the key question. By what standards or criteria do people have the right to decide what happens to the land they live on, their surroundings and raw materials? Are the old or present models valid, or do we need new ones? Are we all of a sudden global citizens with no past and an uncertain future, and equal rights in present global time and space?

--Still the past ties cling: what we are used to; what we have learned to expect; what we have invested in. Our culture, our traditions, our memories, our inherited land and earned wealth and lived experience rooted to land: whether settled or roamed over, developed to ruin or visited once in pristine beauty. How valid are these memories in determining our competing rights to a scarcer future? I have one child. My neighbor of equal residency, let's say, has ten. When they grow up, where do they go? Do I watch self-satisfied and complacent while they crowd my neighbor's subdivided plot, fenced from my still-bucolic acreage? Do I open the gate and let them all live with me, calling us new family? And then do we let our yet-more-populous neighbors move in, to crowd us further? Do the neighbor's kids now looking for homes need to suffer for the reproductive leniency of their parents, or are they entitled a fresh start equal to that of my one child? Can I in conscience leave the keys to the gate in the hands of my privileged child, leave her also the burden of responsibility and decision to share what she has been given with those who have not?

These are the questions of the day.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Fukuyama advocates equal opportunity without automatic equal rights. You have to earn your share: in so doing you join your "unlimited desires" with your "drive for recognition." He takes the moderate position in regard to the correctness of political and technological, and even psychological choice. That crucial engine thymos is neither good nor bad in itself, but a fact of human nature that we use with more or less wisdom. Thus we are thrown back in the familiar position of Miltonian man who is not given everything on a golden platter (not even the answers or philosophies), but who must choose to walk the path God sets before us. When I come back to my moral dilemmas about abdicating my karmic privileges in favor of a global standard, I realize the lesson contained in the failure of Communism. People cannot be successfully forced to behave in a spirit of compassionate equality with their fellow human beings. It is only to be*

*hoped that more and more of us will volunteer to do so given an enhanced awareness of our condition as global brothers and sisters. We may not be there yet but increasingly the pressure-cooker effect will become evident. Then we may choose to react with fear and the historical paradigm of war: or choose to embrace a different kind of future in which there is no place to run or to tell the crowd at the gate to run to.*

---

Nowick Gray  
1997

[email@alternativeculture.com](mailto:email@alternativeculture.com)  
<http://alternativeculture.com>