

TWO WHAT PRICE PROSPERITY?

“To feel much for others and little for ourselves; to restrain our selfishness and exercise our benevolent affections, constitute the perfection of human nature.”

Adam Smith (1723-90)

Almost half a century ago, as Apollo 8 emerged from the dark side of the moon, the astronauts aboard became the first humans to see an Earthrise. This event has been immortalized in the most reproduced photograph of all time, and is considered by many as a pivotal moment in the evolution of human consciousness (F2.1). This was the moment when it became irrefutably clear that the Earth was finite, its resources limited, and its biosphere as fragile as it was beautiful.

As American architect and author William McDonough puts it, ‘this was the moment that away went away’. No one could claim to be throwing something ‘away’ anymore, as every place on the planet was identifiably ‘somewhere’.

In their book ‘Cradle to Cradle’ McDonough and co-author, German chemist Michael Braungart argue convincingly that our linear system of production, consumption and disposal is leading us liter-

ally to a dead end. However carefully we manage non-renewable resources, they are ultimately finite commodities that we must learn to perpetually recycle — or live without. In its place, McDonough and Braungart propose a circular ‘closed loop’ system in which products are designed to be 100% recyclable or biodegradable at the end of their life. Rather than being treated as ‘waste’, the constituent materials become ‘food’ for the next cycle of production (W2.1 VID 6m).



F2.1



F2.2

Predictions of disaster as a result of resource depletion are not mere speculation. Easter Island provides the most celebrated historical example of a culture consuming its resources to the point of self-extinction. Deforestation seems to have been the catalyst for climate change, the consequent loss of land bird species, and the collapse of the human population. Given that most large trees were felled to facilitate the transportation and erection of the massive stone effigies used for ancestor worship (F2.2), the fate of

Easter Island would appear to have been a triumph of religion over reason — the unintended consequence of privileging subjective concerns while suppressing objective ones.

In the post Apollo era, the Republic of Nauru, another Pacific Island, provides evidence that we are slow to learn the lessons of history (F2.3). In fact on Nauru these lessons were consciously ignored.



F2.3

An atoll composed almost entirely of phosphate rock (a valuable constituent of agricultural fertilizer) Nauru was systematically strip mined by its inhabitants. Literally selling the land from under their own feet, 80% of their island was soon transformed into a barren moonscape of pinnacles and trenches (F2.4). Rather than rehabilitate the land, the Nauruans invested all their profits offshore, with the intention of buying themselves a future in some other green and distant Eden.

The ironic twist in this tale is that, before the islanders could find a new home, those investments (mostly in Australian real estate) collapsed, plunging Nauru into economic, social and political turmoil. Rain no longer

falls on the island as it once did, because the heat rising from the bare rock of the central uplands dissipates clouds. Many indigenous species of flora and fauna have become extinct, and even subsistence agriculture on the narrow coastal strip is now a marginal enterprise dependent on water from desalination plants. Following a failed attempt to become an international tax haven, Nauru now gets most of its income from running a detention camp for refugees seeking asylum in Australia.



F2.4

Nauru is a tiny island of about 21km², with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, but its story should serve — to use a carbon-age metaphor — as the canary in the coal mine for the rest of humanity. If we continue to treat our environment with contempt, future generations will surely reap the consequences. If Easter Island failed because it privileged the subjective, then Nauru clearly demonstrates that the opposite approach can be equally catastrophic.

McDonough and Braungart's vision of closed loop 'Technical Ecosystems', fed continuously by a finite stock of non-toxic, fully recoverable and reusable materials, cleverly addresses the quantitative limitations of our linear system of extraction, production, consumption and disposal, and offers the promise of a future of sustained abundance. However, it leaves the cultural roots of consumerism, including how we define prosperity and our apparently insatiable appetite for growth, largely undisturbed.

While the story of Nauru may seem surreal, British economist Tim Jackson believes we may all face a similar fate, if we continue to operate under an economic system predicated on endless incremental growth. In his book 'Prosperity without Growth', Jackson attempts to quantify the impact of growth and its contribution to greenhouse gas emissions (W2.2 VID 24m).

Jackson calculates that the carbon intensity of the 2% increment in average annual growth, which represents the 'comfort zone' for most economists in the developed world, is currently 770 grams of carbon per person per year. This increment alone represents a significant annual increase in GHG emissions, but one which may arguably be manageable with a combination of energy conservation and innovative technology.

However, Jackson goes on to project that, if the rest of the world shared a similar material standard of living and maintained the same rate of economic growth, then by 2050, with an estimated 9 billion people on the planet, the current incremental growth figure of 770 grams of carbon per person per year would have to be reduced to only 6 grams per person for the aggregated global increase to remain manageable.

Jackson calculates that This reduction would represent a 130-fold improvement compared with today, and further believes this would require a rate of technological advancement 10 times greater than anything we have achieved to date. While this may not be an impossibility, it would certainly appear to be a long shot, upon which only the most reckless would bet.

In its over-mature 21st century form, our economic system seems to be driven by a search for novelty and differentiation, rather than utility and value. While technological progress is an essential component of cultural development, it must be held in balance by a value system that connects the experience of the past, through the reality of the present, to a shared vision of the future.

In the West, and North America most particularly, that continuity and sense of dynamic equilibrium have been lost. We have gone beyond a desire for material sufficiency, and have a growing appetite for the latest gadgetry and ostentatious luxuries. The unfortunate reality is that these conceits only elevate our social status momentarily, their limited shelf life contributing nothing to the common good. Our system persuades us, as Jackson puts it, “to spend money we don’t have on things we don’t need, to create impressions that don’t last on people we don’t care about.”

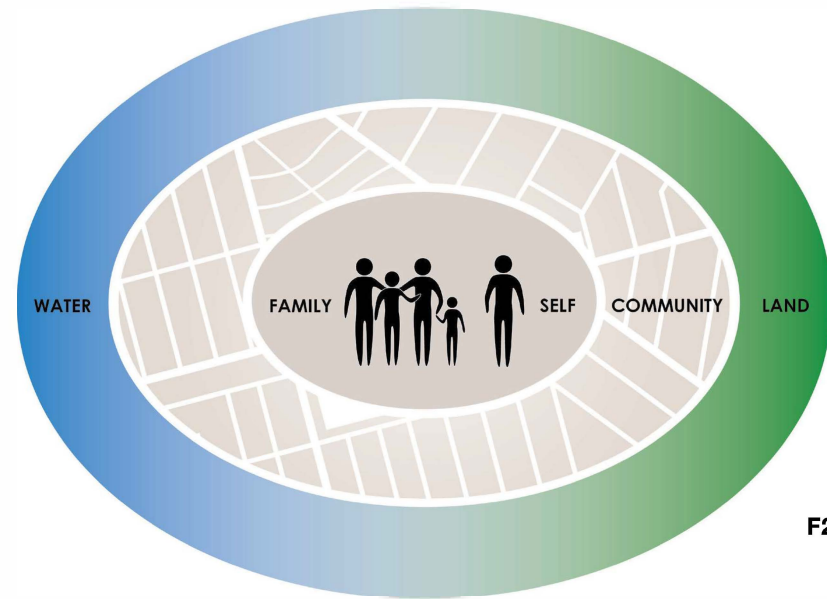
However, when we stop consuming and turn our attention to cutting back and saving for the future as we did during the recession of 2008, the system crashes. Jackson believes that this system has served its

purpose, and is now at odds with the desire of most human beings to construct a social world and to find a credible place within it.

Such sentiments have deep roots, extending back to the writings of Adam Smith, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher and pioneer of modern political economics, who also believed that altruism, rather than hedonism, lies at the core of the human soul.

Looking ahead, Jackson suggests the solution may lie in re-evaluating the meaning we ascribe to the word ‘prosperity; while most equate it with material wealth, its Latin root ‘speres’ in fact means ‘hope’.

If we are to transform our thinking and ultimately our culture, Jackson considers there is much we could learn from the traditional philosophies of indigenous people. For most of them, the success of the individual is inextricably linked to the success of the group; and their notion of prosperity embraces social bonds to family and community, a sense of worth and self-respect, and a mutually enriching relationship with nature — in short, prosperity equates to a meaningful place in the world.



F2.5

Historically, this kind of world view might have been visualized as a series of concentric circles, symbolizing the mutually enhancing relationship between each individual, his or her family, the community and the land (F2.5).

Today, it would be reasonable to expand our understanding of ‘land’ to embrace the bio-region, and some would even suggest the world. American social and economic theorist Jeremy Rifkin believes that information and communications technology have the potential to foster a truly global consciousness, and lay the foundation for what he refers to as an ‘empathic civilization’.

While thinking globally, we must also act locally; nurturing the ecological assets upon which our future depends, investing in public places where we can make connections with one another, and forging what Tim Jackson refers to as ‘a common citizenship’.