

THE PROBLEM IS NOT THE GLOBAL ECONOMY *PER SE*, BUT THE FACT THAT WE ARE PART SOCIAL ANIMAL AND PART GORDON GECKKO¹

Comment on Waleed Aly's, "Holden Demise the Price of a Global Economy."²

Aly states near the end of his article:

The larger story here isn't really about our car industry, or whether we could have delayed Holden's decision to some other day. It's about the fact our politics don't match our economics: that the assumptions of a hyper-specialised global free market and its effortlessly mobile labour force don't reflect the more diversified, comparatively static nature of our societies.

It is an appropriate ending for his main point, but I choose it as a beginning – a means of looking briefly at why the globalised free market system is not compatible with our society. Social change has made society more diversified but this has happened much more slowly than the pace set by the globalised, free-market system. For this quest the story is even longer than Aly's. We could, for example, begin in 1250s with the trading journeys of Niccolò and Maffeo Polo, the father and uncle of Marco. This was not the first example of trading beyond the confines of familiar boundaries, but with the publication of the book about these travels it was the first known-world distribution of the fruits of such journeys.³ It was a stimulant for adventure, seeking riches and treasures, and perhaps above all else, for envy and greed.

The basis for our social system has an even longer history. Aristotle wrote in *Politics* in 359 BCE:

Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.⁴

A more recent statement on humans as social creatures rather than as individualistic, self-contained people, was made by David Brooks:⁵

¹ "Social animal" is interpreted here as that stated by Aristotle in *Politics*, and Gordon Gekko is the character created by Oliver Stone and Stanley Weiser in the film *Wall Street*.

² From the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December 2013. Available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/holden-demise-the-price-of-a-global-economy-20131212-2za89.html>.

³ *The Travels of Marco Polo* was written in Old French by Rustichello da Pisa from the accounts he heard from Marco Polo when they were both imprisoned in Genoa. See Peter Jackson, Marco Polo and His "Travels?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 61, Issue 1 (February 1998), pp. 84-85.

⁴ The precise wording of these sentences vary with different translators. This version was translated by Benjamin Jowett and appears to be more commonly quoted.

⁵ David Brooks, "The Social Animal," *The New York Times*, 12 September 2014. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/12/opinion/12iht-edbrooks.1.16101148.html>. The article is based on Brooks' book entitled, *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement*, Random House, 2011.

Over the past 30 years, there has been a tide of research in many fields, all underlining one old truth – that we are intensely social creatures, deeply interconnected with one another, and that the idea of the lone individual rationally and wilfully steering his own life course is often an illusion.

Much of the research referred to by Brooks comes from sociobiology, which is the study of social phenomena on the basis of genetics, with environmental factors also included. Added to this is recent work on memes, which are elements of a culture that are passed from one person to another by non-genetic means. Similarly added are contributions from evolutionary psychologists who generally accept the notion that humans have innate predispositions resulting from a long evolutionary history.

These three areas of academic study typically presume a basic causality going from biology to culture, but if mutations, as changes in the basic structure, are recognised with genetic material, then structural changes should also be accepted with cultural evolution so that some feedback from culture to biology is possible in terms of the mechanism of natural selection.⁶ Morality has a major role in this mechanism, an observation that was first made by Charles Darwin:⁷

It must not be forgotten that although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other men of the same tribe, yet that an increase in the number of well-endowed men and an advancement in the standard of morality will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. A tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.

This has two important implications for contemporary applications of natural selection. First, it presumes that the selection mechanism includes groups so as to avoid focusing exclusively on individuals. Second, and perhaps of greater importance, behaviour at the two levels is likely to be in conflict. A pattern of behaviour that is group-advantageous will seldom maximise fitness for individuals within the group. For example, altruistic behaviour of a skilled, Stone Age toolmaker, in devoting time and effort in training others to develop that skill, will enhance the likelihood of survival of the group but will lessen the toolmaker's relative fitness within the group. A skill that is shared widely within a group is no longer rare.

⁶ A genetic mutation is noted by a variant form of gene that may be transmitted to subsequent generations and is caused by the alteration of single base units in the DNA, or by the deletion, insertion, or rearrangement of larger sections of genes or chromosomes. A cultural change is generally not capable of being displayed in physical terms but nevertheless can be traced to a change or an adaptation to either internal or external forces, which are generally identifiable. A major difference is the treatment of genetic mutations as random, whereas cultural "mutations" have causal influences and these influences may be genetic. Any reverse influence of culture on genetics is apparently limited to the selection process, by influencing the adaptability of the organism to its environment and thus to influence its survival.

⁷ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, first published in 1871. The portion quoted is from page 86 of 135 in the Kindle edition.

The trade-off for within-group fitness and among-group fitness may be a characteristic of all adaptations. As explained by Wilson and Wilson:⁸

Antipredator adaptations usually interfere with harvesting food, adaptations for moving through one medium (such as the air) usually interfere with moving through another medium (such as water), and so on. ... This does *not* mean that the trade-off must necessarily be severe, Benefiting others or one's group as a whole does not invariable require extreme self-sacrifice, such as rushing into a burning house to save a child, but it *does* require some set of coordinating mechanisms, such as organising and paying for a fire department, passing and enforcing fire safety legislation, and so on. It is unlikely that these coordination mechanisms evolve as a coincidental product of organisms that are adapted exclusively to survive and reproduce better than other members of their group.

Sociobiologists are apparently content to define evolutionary change in a population as a final vector made up of at least two component vectors (within group and between group) that often point in different directions. These components are obtained by adding up individual traits that show a predisposition for altruism or other forms of pro-social behaviour or for its absence, as indicated by the more egoistic behaviour such as selfishness and greed. Except in rare cases where one component is absent entirely, we are therefore part social animal and also part Gordon Gekko.

The study of evolutionary transitions has produced “widespread agreement that the balance between levels of selection can itself evolve and that a major transition occurs when selection within groups is suppressed, enabling selection among groups to dominate the final vector of evolutionary change.”⁹ Given sufficient time, therefore, natural selection in both genes and memes may be sufficient to balance the cooperative traits with the self-interest traits to produce a benefit to society in much the way as Adam Smith described for the working of the “invisible hand.”¹⁰ This is to little avail, however, if other evolutions occur within such a transition period. For example, Turchin¹¹ found strong indications that intense between-group conflicts led to melting pots for cultural change that subsequently produced extremely cooperative societies and therein led to the establishment of great empires in the past. However, this success produced cultural evolution within groups that

⁸ David Sloan Wilson and Edward O Wilson, “Rethinking the Theoretical Foundation of Sociobiology,” *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (December 2007), pp. 329. Available at: http://bio.kuleuven.be/ento/pdfs/wilson_wilson_qrb_2007.pdf.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 339.

¹⁰ “... and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.” From *The Wealth of Nations* (illustrated), Kindle edition, page. 313.

¹¹ Peter Turchin is a theoretical biologist who specialises in nonlinear population dynamics and he wrote several books on the rise and fall of empires. The latest is entitled *War and Peace and War: The Life Cycles of Imperial Nations*, and was published in 2007 by Plume.

led to “myriad forms of exploitation, free riding and factionalism.”¹² Apparently the changes that restored a balance failed to create an equilibrium and thus initiated an imbalance.

Contemporary conditions would appear to be consistent with “exploitation, free riding and factionalism” during which the within-group conflict substantially outweighs the between-group conflict. We are witnessing now a struggle between a desire to return to the balanced position of the recent past, which might be viewed as a devolution, and a turbid approach to stepping into new and unknown frontiers. Neither side is winning support. What is perhaps needed is small movements in the two vectors in assessing the extent to which old precedents fit into new realities and then decide which precedents to replace, if that is shown to be necessary.

To return to Aly’s closing remarks, the “larger story here isn't really about our car industry, or whether we could have delayed Holden's decision to some other day.” We can add that it is not even principally about altruism versus self-interest, though that is part of it. It is about taking ourselves out of the current within-group conflict to determine the direction in which the evolutionary vector is pointed. To paraphrase a comment made in *The New York Times* opinion section by Tim White,¹³ the problem is not the resources, or the personnel, or the data. It is that our existing organisations and institutions do not know how to arrange the data to identify, in a timely manner, patterns of both strength and weakness. “There is too much data, and not enough perspective.” Taking that to mean we need a multiplicity of points of view, it must start with us – that is, with civil society.

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¹² Quote was taken from David Sloan Wilson and Edward O Wilson, *op cit.* p. 343.

¹³ Tim White, “Finding a Needle in a Digital Haystack,” *The New York Times*, 22 January 2014. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/23/opinion/finding-a-needle-in-a-digital-haystack.html?ref=opinion>.