

What is Humanity's worst Invention?

Entry for the Ecologist Annual Essay Competition

One cannot overlook the fact that some of the inventions which have had, and continue to have, the worst consequences for mankind are also some of the most useful and important. The motor vehicle and aeroplane are two obvious examples, their misuse (particularly, overuse) being a major cause of the unsustainable drain and strain we are placing on our planet's finite resources and carrying capacity, not to mention the way in which cars and roads have been allowed to blight our cities, towns, villages and countryside, or the huge toll they extract in human lives.

But of all mankind's inventions, there is one, perhaps the greatest of all, the use/misuse of which underlies the use and misuse of all his other inventions, making it absolutely central to his future – indeed, to whether or not he has a future:

MONEY

MONEY is surely one of our most important inventions, without which civilised society would be unthinkable. Most of what we do is either *for* or *with* money. It doesn't only make the world go round, it also determines the speed at which it turns (the pace of the *rat race*), and even more importantly, *where* it is going. If it is schools and hospitals we want, it is money that we use to plan, build, equip and staff them; if we are *plundering* and spoiling our planet - and with it our own children's future - it is *money* that is being earned, spent and invested doing so.

MONEY has been with us since ancient times, but we have not yet learned - nor shown much interest in learning - how to use it *responsibly*. Instead, our animal nature (behaviour that evolved over millions of years to serve the “*Greatest Ape's*” survival and advantage in the natural environment), aided by a prodigious, but *unenlightened* intelligence, has used and developed it as the *most versatile form of power* in the struggle for survival and advantage in the artificial *socio-economic environment*, which for humans, with the advent of civilisation, has come to replace the *natural environment*. This, by the way, is crying out for recognition as explanation for *why* we persist in giving priority to the economy (the household of man) rather than to ecology (the household of our planet), when it is obvious – to a more *enlightened* intelligence, not blinded by dumb-animal self-interest, fearful of biting the hand that feeds it – that for medium and long-term human survival it *has* to be the other way around.

MONEY is vitally important to the functioning of society as a whole, and to every individual. No one can survive without it, any more than they can without air and water; although, in contrast to these, it seems that we can never have enough *money*. This is because of its *addictive* and *magical* properties (making its misuse by our animal nature both inevitable and extremely dangerous, as attested to by history and the present state of civilisation). Although worthless in itself, it can be exchanged for virtually anything (including air and water, if these are what we need). It can even be used to create more money (now, if that is not *magic*, I don't know what is!) We depend on it for our most vital and basic needs, but the same money is also used to satisfy the most trivial, infantile, extravagant and wholly unsustainable desires of creatures still dominated by their *animal nature*.

Perhaps this is what comes of worshipping a (concept of) God, who instead of praising us for our emerging self-awareness (beautifully portrayed in the first part of the biblical story of Adam and Eve), encouraging us to take *responsibility* for our behaviour and advising us how best to do so, cursed us and filled us with guilt, treating us like the animal we need to transcend, in order to become *responsible* human beings (“Do what I (my priests) tell you and I will reward you; don't, and you will be punished!”), thus keeping us compliant and obedient to (priestly) authority.

With MONEY we can satisfy not just our material needs, but most of our non-material, social and psychological ones as well. It plays a dominant role in determining our status among family, friends and acquaintances, as well as in society at large, where - typically for an ape - we are far more con-

cerned with how much *money*/power someone has than with how they acquired it or whether they deserve or are worthy of it.

MONEY may not buy you "real" love (whatever that is), but is *ideally* suited to provide the kind of love humans are *naturally* inclined to feel for those with power over them - in the hope, if not expectation, of winning their protection and favour (or at least, not incurring their disfavour), an inclination deeply rooted, socio-psychologically, in the feelings of a child for its parents and exploited not just by monarchs and dictators.

MONEY is the most *versatile* form of POWER. Making it mankind's most useful, misused and dangerous invention. It can be used as ruthlessly or devastatingly as a fist, a sword or a gun, but with the huge advantage – and sanctity – of legality. It is the central pillar of modern capitalism, which developed and has been honed to take advantage of our *animal nature* (explaining why some aspects of it work so well), the advertising and credit industries helping to keep us fatally addicted (quite literally) to the grossly materialistic, spiritually stunting, and wholly unsustainable lifestyles (and lifestyle aspirations) it engenders.

We all feel and fear our dependency on others, and seek security, and "independence" in the power of MONEY, which our modern socio-economic order was moulded (by those who benefited most) to facilitate. Our behaviour, however, evolved in an entirely different setting, within a framework of mutual dependency in our family group (clan), whose even most powerful member would have known personally and had at least some love and concern for its least powerful members. It has had no time to adapt to the rapid expansion of the group to include thousands and now millions of individuals, or to the artificial *socio-economic environment* that this development has given rise to, replacing the *natural environment* (which included rival groups of humans) and confounding the distinction between "our own group" and others, to which we are *naturally* inclined to respond very differently. Group bonds are emphasised under various banners, such as "company loyalty", "national identity" or the "brotherhood of man", while at the same time we are in competition with and exploiting each other (within, without, or bending the law) as if belonging to *rival* groups.

What were the aristocracy, other than a bunch of thugs who forced others to do the hard work, while lording over them, strutting about and mainly squandering the fruits of their labours? Or the Church, other than a group of clever individuals who used the power of their intellect, rather than the sword, to their own advantage? And together they formed an unbeatable alliance, the latter sanctifying and legalising the power and privileges of the former (who protected them in return), along with their own.

As the most effective means of controlling, coordinating and directing the activities of large numbers of people, *money* gave grossly excessive power (and privilege) to those in control. These became the most highly desired niches in the *socio-economic environment*, which – true to our animal nature - were (and still are) fiercely fought over and defended.

Having evolved to live (with all the diverse activities and interactions that entailed) in relatively small family groups, *real* relationships (as opposed to ones mediated, e.g. through *money* or the *media*) and *community* are still hugely important to us, emotionally (and spiritually), but are largely unfulfilled in a world dominated by the impersonal use and power of MONEY (and the *media*), where virtually everything we need is bought and paid for with varying degrees of anonymity and alienation.

Modern states seek to harness the individual's need to belong to a group with "national identity", but with wholly inadequate, when not disastrous consequences. So-called "local communities" are rarely more than just collections of largely isolated households, free (thanks to *money*) of all dependency on each other and, thus, of any "real community" or intrinsic community infrastructure (just extrinsic, supplied by the local authority). Individual and social dysfunction and much of the inhumanity and insanity of modern society - although familiarity and dependency make it difficult for some to recognise - are a consequence. Insanely, the more that is done for MONEY rather than for

love, friendship or neighbourliness (including all the measures, which are many, that attempt to counter its negative effects), the more "successful" the economy is judged to be.

We have really got our knickers in a twist. And the more we attempt to solve our problems with MONEY, the more twisted they become (New Labour are providing the latest, sad – because well-intended - example, while the Conservatives and LibDems vie to provide the *next*).

The problem is not *money* itself, but its *misuse*, not by *wicked* humans (or *fallen angels*), but by our *animal nature*. In view of what Charles Darwin is supposed to have taught us about human origins, this insight should hardly surprise us, but for some *reason* (or a lack of it) we are loath to face it.

Who wants to be a millionaire? We ALL do (6-7 billion of us) - and *that's* the PROBLEM.

It is our animal nature to crave the power that MONEY provides in an artificial *socio-economic environment* and *order*, which themselves grew out of and are deeply rooted in the same animal nature.

In view of our complete dependency on, and vested interests in, the *existing* socio-economic order, what can be done about it? Making the rapid and radical (i.e. revolutionary) changes necessary to achieve sustainability, before a ruthless mother nature (who is already "*warming up*" for the job) does it for us, is hard to imagine, with everyone *naturally* inclined and determined to defend and justify (professionally if they can afford a lawyer) their own particular niche and advantages in the status quo. This is why we didn't face up to the *Problem of Sustainability* 30 years ago, when Dennis Meadows, Edward Goldsmith, Fritz Schumacher and others were already warning us about it, but instead went into *collective denial*, putting Mrs Thatcher and President Reagan at the helm to hold course for disaster - which we are now fast approaching.

The solution is not to try changing the existing order - which is impossible - but to create an ALTERNATIVE (within, but *distinct* from and increasingly independent of it), based on values, attitudes, aspirations and, of course, *behaviour* (particularly in respect to MONEY) rooted in our more *enlightened*, human nature. As it grows, we can transfer our activities, dependencies and vested interests to it, bit by bit, when we are ready and at our own pace (attempts at coercion are likely to encounter desperate resistance from our animal nature, defending its niche, making it both highly dangerous and counterproductive), but keeping in mind that we DON'T have a lot of time; probably too little, but even if we cannot avoid disaster completely, we can at least reduce its impact and improve our (children's) chances of survival and recovery.

By "we" I mean those of us who have come out of denial (to some extent, at least) and recognised what is at stake, not just for ourselves, but for our children and coming generations. Surely, there can be no greater motivation than that!

As the ALTERNATIVE grows, others will find it easier to come out of denial, recognise the peril we are in, the non-sustainability of the existing order, and join us.

by Roger Hicks (23/02/06)

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