

Past-Present-Future and Societal Worldviews

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In our everyday waking mode, we humans are focally presentistic. We have to attend to “What’s Happening Now” so as to behave productively and assure our security and survival. For most of human existence, we had to be alert and able to defend ourselves from various predators. At root, we are not so very unlike the mallard duck that “sleeps” alternately keeping one eye open and alert while the other eye is shut. We humans also have to be experts at denying the discomfort and pain that can arise as we defend ourselves and persist through difficult circumstances. So, living pervasively in the present and being oriented to denying/discounting/avoiding negative experiences are innate to humans.

How do these innate tendencies play out when it comes to our societies?

Human societies can be broadly differentiated by whether their worldviews regard the present as repeating a relatively stable past or as anticipating a more or less rapidly changing future. Denial enters this picture when the results of events in the past are felt as negative/uncomfortable/“painful.”

For 96% of human history, we lived as scavenger-hunter-gatherers in an overall ecological and social context that changed very slowly. Technological change was extremely gradual, and the norm was to be able to depend on the fact that the social and ecological cycles of the past would predictably repeat themselves in the evolving present. This Past – Present perspective is reflected in the fact that even human oral language was very late in adopting a future tense denoted with its own separate word marker [“will”] rather than a simple suffix [“ed”] to indicate the past.

Some 10,000 years ago, the shift to an agriculture/husbandry based source of food promoted concentrated settlement, an increase in population, and the rise of complex society [from chiefdoms to city states to nation states to empires]. A great many characteristics of our societies underwent dramatic change in this transition, resulting in greater attention to and planning for a more complex present and a potentially different future. Managing extensive internal tax and external exchange/tribute networks and a dramatic increase in the scale of social conflict [domination and defense] across much larger social groups required much greater specialization of social roles. In this context, the prior largely egalitarian hunter gatherer society evolved into hierarchical social classes with an autocratic, privileged elite at the top. The assumption of a stable, predictable, repeating past gave way to greater overall uncertainty. And

uncertainty put a premium on a) developing the means to protect the present system and b) anticipating and planning for likely future changes. In this context, the search for knowledge about exactly how “things” worked and how they could be “made” to work better to meet potential new challenges increased substantially leading to a much more rapid rate of technological change. In turn, looking to the future and anticipating change supported by ever expanding knowledge and improving technology sustained economy, military defense/ domination, and autocracy. This became the new formula for complex societal success. In this evolving process, the institution of religion emerged to convert spirituality into elaborate belief systems that provided a divine underpinning to justify the elite, authoritarian, social class structure.

Over a six thousand year period this new, more future oriented, complex form of society spread across most of the world. With the advent in recent centuries of industrialization and a market driven economy, the rate of change has exploded supported by the close association of institutionalized science and its pragmatic twin – technology. Life in general is now guided by the core assumption that the future will be defined by rapid change which will inevitably result in progress. Looking to the past is no longer predictive; forward looking to a very different future is the rule; and the past receives less attention and has much less influence.

Our current complex society fixation with the future gets amplified by our human capacity for denial. Denial is avoidance, and as has already been mentioned, humans are genetically disposed to being very good at denial. So, our dramatic shift from a hunter-gatherer, Past – Present perspective to a complex society focus on the future first renders the past mostly irrelevant; then it denies/avoids the results of past events if they are “painful.”

Both Past – Present oriented societies and Present – Future oriented societies have their advantages and disadvantages. Past – Present hunter gatherer societies are very stable, socially egalitarian, and socially and ecologically sustainable where Present – Future complex societies invite instability and either ignore or unevenly attend to social equality and ecological sustainability. Present – Future oriented societies readily accommodate and seek change where Past – Present societies are not prepared for and mostly avoid change. Present – Future societies get into trouble when they deny or fail to control the negative consequences of rapid change where Past – Present societies find significant change itself destabilizing and even overwhelming. Past – Present societies are “stuck” in a present defined by a relatively fixed past where Present – Future societies are “stuck” in a present defined by a very volatile, potentially dangerous, future.

Neither of these societies is ideal. Each can and should learn from the advantages and disadvantages of the other. That means fostering societies that are balanced and defined by respect for both the positive aspects of the established past and the positive possibilities of a potential future. In this balanced condition of society, change is viewed as desirable if it is carefully evaluated, controlled and regulated which means it must not be too rapid. And in this societal scenario, the past is respected without being allowed to be definitive.

Modern complex society – especially in its representative democratic iteration – has a great many admirable characteristics and achievements to its credit. But, unfortunately, it is not balanced with respect to the past – present – future continuum of potential societal orientation. It has lost respect for the past. And in its fixation with the future, it has supported a voracious, global scale, market economy which has promoted a) an out of control rate of change and b) a government “bought” to support its short term monetary goals. In addition, our complex societies are largely in a state of denial regarding the many negative consequences of their having collectively produced this unbalanced, worldwide, and dangerous condition for the whole of humanity.

THE OPTIONS

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Adjust Creatively and Quickly
To

Achieve Past – Future Orientation Balance
And
A Responsible Rate of Change

OR

Risk the Demise
Of
Humanity’s Experiment
In
Complex Society