

## 2 Theoretical Interlude (I)

### History, economics and some invisibilities

History is made by historians. No event becomes a historic event unless historians turn it into one. The famous English historian E. H. Carr wrote in his essay 'What is History?': 'It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context.'<sup>1</sup> Paraphrasing a statement by Vilhelm Moberg about Sweden, we may say that history has been 'only about a single group of individuals: the decision-makers, who on the people's behalf (have) decided what conditions they should live under'.<sup>2</sup> Although some modern historical research is taking a sociological turn, traditionally the voice of the masses has not been heard nor their presence felt. *We* may claim, in company with Moberg, that in our readings of history we have missed those `who had sown the fields and reaped them, who had hewn down forests, cleared roads, built the ... palaces, castles and fortresses, the cities and cottages. Of all these people who had paid the taxes, salaried all the clergymen, bailiffs and officials (we have) caught only occasional glimpses here and there. In all those armies that had fallen for the fatherland in other countries (we) missed the rank and file, their wives who had waited for them at home, the whole class of serving men and women ... the unpropertied vagabonds, the "defenceless" who owned neither land, house nor home.'<sup>3</sup> These people

who form the ranks of those invisible to history are, paradoxically, to a large extent the ones who have made 'visible' history possible.

Economics is devised by economists. No event becomes an economic event unless it satisfies certain rules established by the economist. As a discipline, economics has suddenly become one of the most important subjects of the present day. There would be nothing wrong with this if the importance assigned to economics corresponded with its capacity to interpret and solve the pertinent problems affecting humanity as a whole. This is, however, not the case. Its vast abstractions, such as the Gross National Product (GNP), price mechanisms, growth rates, capital/output ratios, factor mobility, capital accumulation and others, though admittedly important, are selective and discriminatory when it comes to the mass of human beings. Through these abstractions, economics, instead of turning into an 'open' discipline, becomes a sort of exclusive club. In fact, economic analysis embraces only those whose actions and behaviour are adjusted to what its quantifiers (such as those mentioned above) can measure. What they can measure, taking GNP as an example, are activities that take place through the market mechanism, regardless of whether or not such activities are productive, unproductive or even destructive. The result of such limitations is that the dominant economic theories assign no value to tasks carried out at subsistence and domestic levels. In other words, such theories are unable to embrace the poorer sectors of the world or the majority of women. This means that almost half of the world's population—and more than half of the inhabitants of the Third World—turn out to be, in terms of economics, statistically 'invisible'.

The sectors that are invisible to history are practically the same as those that are invisible to economics. These invisibles are of the greatest importance, and the fact that they have remained unseen for such a long time is no accident. The reasons lie in our cultural traditions and evolution. That is to say, the evolution of the Western Judeo-Christian cultural branch. I will try to demonstrate this in the following pages. I should only like to add at this point that these invisible sectors of humanity have become my main interest, not only from a theoretical point of view but also as a concrete life experience.

It is for this reason that, after working for a number of years as a 'pure economist', I decided to become a 'barefoot economist' and try to live and share the invisible reality. The remaining sections of this and the following chapter will be devoted to a description and interpretation of the thought and behaviour of the 'visible' sectors of history and economics, and the frightening conditions they have brought about for humanity as a whole and for the 'invisible' sectors in particular.

### **Anthropocentrism and the 'original myth'**

For technology to exist, both human beings and nature are required. Humans, who may conceivably abstract themselves from technology to a large degree in order to live, cannot, however, disengage themselves from nature. Nature, however, needs neither one nor the other to fulfil its evolutionary programme. Such an organic hierarchy should not be broken, if it is to evolve under conditions of dynamic equilibrium. It requires a form of integration in which the rules of interdependence have primacy over those of competition. Unfortunately, the scheme has not operated like this and, although it is true that the world has resisted the assaults of anthropocentric behaviour for a long time and remained apparently unharmed, its effects are now beginning to be felt, most clearly in terms of the very real possibility of a crisis affecting not only the world but the whole biosphere.

When I say 'a long time', I am talking in relative terms. If we imagine a line two metres long as representing the time that has passed since the birth of planet earth up to the present day, mankind's total existence accounts for only *the last millimetre*. Against this perspective, the 'effectiveness' of human beings in so dramatically and rapidly altering a programme more than one thousand million years old is undeniable. It is even more surprising when one realizes that the most intensive efforts to lead us headlong towards a total crisis, have taken place only *in the last ten thousandth of a millimetre* of this imaginary line. It is also within this last infinitesimal segment that humanity became divided into what I have called the 'visible' and

`invisible' sectors. If we add to all this that human beings are the last of the superior creatures to emerge on the face of the earth, it is undoubtedly disquieting to ask ourselves why such an old system should have given rise to a new component (we might even say an alien) endowed with such a surprising capacity to destroy the system as well as itself. It is outside my scope to find an answer and I only pose the question as something which every now and then absorbs my imagination.

I am convinced that the total crisis which threatens us, our world and even our biosphere, does not have its 'final cause' (*causa finalis*\*) in planning faults, nor in the incompleteness of social, political and economic theories, nor in the limitations of one ideology or another. All of these, although not exempt from responsibility, are only `efficient causes' (*causa efficiens*\*\*\*) of the situation. The matter goes much deeper. I believe *causa finalis* flows from the very essence of our culture or, in other words, from what one might call 'the original myth' on which our culture has been built.

Man and woman, according to the Bible, were created on the sixth day. The 'original myth' assumes the role of a normative body and, therefore, generator of culture, through the account in the Book of Genesis of the event. After completing his work of that day: `.... God blessed them saying: *increase* and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue* it ...'.<sup>4</sup> I believe that this mandate gave divine sanction to, in the Judeo-Christian-Moslem culture at least, what *were* to become unlimited aspirations for expansion and conquest, which inevitably resulted in domination, exploitation and the establishment of class hierarchies.\*\*\* The undeniable fact is that humans—particularly

\* In the Aristotelian sense, *causa finalis* is the relationship between a goal or purpose (whether supposed to exist in the future as a special kind of entity, outside a time series, or merely as an idea of the proposer) and the work carried out to fulfill it. In this sense the concept is teleologic because it explains present and past in terms of the future.

\*\**Causa efficiens* is, also in the Aristotelian sense, the relation between a moving force and the result of its action. In such a sense the concept is mechanistic in as much as it explains the future in terms of the present or the past.

\*\*\* I am willing to accept that the mandate could have been misinterpreted. However, it seems sufficiently simple and direct as to make misunderstandings unlikely.

men, as is also indicated by the account in Genesis—were placed above nature, which extended all around with the sole purpose of serving them. The mandate was not to integrate, which would have induced humility; the mandate was to subdue, and as such it could stimulate nothing less than actions and emotions of arrogance and disdain towards the environment, as well as towards those humans who were weaker or less prone to engage in games of power and domination.

Current concern about a total crisis is deepening among some, and solutions are sought and proposed. However, it is necessary to stop and analyse and understand the causes which are pushing us, with increasing momentum, towards a scenario which looks at times disconcerting and at others terrifying. Reaching an understanding of this potentially disastrous panorama involves deciphering a dialectic that oscillates between the drama of contradictions and the comedy of the absurd (a sort of dialectic of dialectics). It involves interpreting not only conflicts but also stupidity. It obliges us to catalogue not only errors, but also irresponsibility. In sum it calls for an holistic effort which, by liberally exceeding the range of any mechanistic approaches or analysis, restores philosophic, and perhaps also metaphysical, thought to a preponderant place within whose scope (and not within that of technique) the most transcendental revolutions are to take place in the near future—always provided, of course, that `technique' has not blown us up before that.

It is not hard to guess that nothing will remain the same—but we should add that nothing can remain the same. The integral *problematique* displayed before us, like a fan which upon opening reveals more and more surprises because of all the novelty it holds, is not only a crisis as such, but, in addition, calls for equally integral reformulations. The 'crisis of the foundations' which, at the beginning of the century, brought down a good part of classical mathematics and mechanics, takes its turn, at the end of the century, at toppling the economic theories and the political and social philosophies.

The time has thus come to revise matters and causes from their origins, without *a priori* considering anything so sacred as to absolve it from any questioning of its validity. Our attitude must be summarized

—at least as members of the 'visible' sectors that are to be blamed for the crisis in the first place—in the phrase of the Argentinian poet Juan Gelman: 'Hurrah, at last no one is innocent!' I will try, therefore, to take a swift overview—which to some may appear iconoclastic and irreverent—of the period of history ending in the present situation, which is of such great concern to some of us, and then propose some foundations for the philosophy of the future to which I adhere and which I have tried to put into practice as a 'barefoot economist'.

The importance which I assign to what I have stated in previous paragraphs is not based on an assumed historical validity, something which the biblical quote of course lacks, because it is a myth. It is rather based on the fact that an 'original myth', because of the teleologic programme it implies, is a generator of culture; even of a culture—and this should be emphasized—which, being capable of giving life and force to a rationality adverse to the myth, paradoxically reaches its apparent maturity when human behaviour becomes congruent with the 'original myth' in spite of the fact that it might have been forgotten, invalidated or abolished by the new rationality which is, in fact, never new but always old.

Ideologies, especially those which regard themselves as scientific, arise—as they must do—in opposition to the myth. Yet even by denying it, they don't succeed in eliminating its influence (maybe *we* should say its bewitchery) for the simple reason that their weapons and rational arguments are an intrinsic part of the cultural body that the myth itself has generated. The proof is not hard to find. Ideologies have expanded throughout the world establishing boundaries within which to consecrate their efficiency, or at least, their advantages. They have given rise to and established systems supposedly opposed to each other. They have obliged people to take sides and hold positions that range from the barricade to the parliamentary seat. All this in the name of legitimate confrontation between partially or radically different alternatives. Thus has the course of our history been marked. Conflicts have been perceived as clear-cut and inevitable. The curious thing is, however, that with respect to ecological or environmental preoccupations, no ideology has yet endangered

the prevalence of the 'original myth'. They continue to be in accord with it. All of them contribute to a persistent escalation of the anthropocentric spirit, which bears the greatest responsibility for the situation now affecting our world.

During the period in which the West (the Judeo-Christian-Moslem cultural branch) was basically dominated by the 'original myth', the effect of people's anthropocentrism over nature did not go beyond expressing itself in terms of a mixture of superstition and indifference. Nature was there to deliver its fruits to human beings or to act as mere background. This becomes apparent, even in literature and painting, far into the eighteenth century, where the only role nature played, according to the few references or representations available, was to fill the space around the central subject: the human being. This long period of indifference slowly began to give way to conscious assaults on nature, a phenomenon which coincides with the initiation of what I would like to identify as the period of ideologies. This later period I consider to have become clearly established, in a modern sense, with the thinking of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and consolidated with the thinking of John Locke (1632-1704), both creators of liberalism.

Reason, in this new epoch, is worshipped as in no previous era since that of the Greek philosophers. It is worth recalling that this is the period of Spinoza (1632-1677), Descartes (1596-1650), Newton (1642-1727) and Leibnitz (1646-1716), among many others. The myth is not yet rejected, but neither is it accepted without question. In the face of the caution which still dominates these first ideologues, rationalistic support for the myth is sought. The myth is not yet dead, but it is the beginning of the end. The finishing strokes will come from the thinkers of the nineteenth century, in the midst of the Industrial Revolution.

A central theme of Locke's political teachings is growth; a theme which will not only be central to the philosophy of the liberal state, but also to the other ideologies that are to emerge in the course of the two hundred years following the philosopher's death. This emphasis on economic growth, or on the wealth of nations (to use the language of the time), brought with it—as is well known—concerted and

varied forms of exploitation. Heritage ideologues responded to only one of these forms of exploitation: the exploitation of man by man. Of course, only a few recognized it as exploitation, for most it was simply a matter of a 'natural' relation between power and subservience. In any case, the fact remains that this concern with the power struggle between human beings obscured any recognition of the transcendence of the assaults on nature which, as we have discovered to our cost, are of equal importance.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), a little bit more than a century after the death of Locke, stated his concern about the damage done by man to nature, and became sceptical of the supposed advantages of indefinite growth of production and population as advocated by liberalism. His arguments caused little impact.

Liberalism as well as conservatism and socialism emerged as the alternatives for human society. Their differences on a number of fundamental issues are well-known, and in this particular context it is more pertinent to emphasize the aspects they have in common. In the first place, all of them accept growth as indispensable, even though they differ as to the forms and mechanisms most appropriate for the distribution of its fruits. Secondly, all of them limit their primary philosophical-political concerns to power relationships among people, while ignoring the *direct* power that both nature as well as technology, at the existential level, are capable of exercising on the destiny of mankind. This means effectively 'ignoring two of the three basic actors in the drama of human history'.<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, all of them cultivate an unlimited admiration for technology as nothing more than an instrument to solve problems. Finally, they are all agreed that one of the unavoidable means of achieving a superior human destiny lies in the domination and control of nature, for which technology again becomes a primordial weapon. In this manner the myths of Genesis and Prometheus become one single equation.

The thinking of Marx (1818-1883) reflects the belief in the possibilities of unlimited growth and of the victory of mankind over nature, aided and influenced by a fully realized and developed technology. For Trotsky (1879-1940) it is technology, among other things, that will make it possible for socialist man to become 'superman', capable

of moving mountains and altering his surroundings as he pleases. 'One searches in vain in Marx, despite his allusions to man's projected harmony with nature under socialism, for any feeling for nature at the concrete existential level. Man is a maker, a doer, a conqueror'.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Engels (1820-1895), in his capacity as a more complete scientist, than his colleagues, gives warning on the dangers involved in the indiscriminate conquest of nature. He holds that 'each such conquest takes its revenge on us'.<sup>7</sup> Engels' reservations have, as Ferkiss points out, 'been ignored by virtually all socialist thinkers'.<sup>8</sup> This same attitude, common to all the main ideological currents, is also seen in the fact that 'in none of the numerous economic models in existence is there a variable standing for nature's perennial contribution'.<sup>9</sup> The relationship established by these models with the environment is confined to David Ricardo's (1772-1823) notion of land, which is no more than a synonym for space, immune to any qualitative change. 'Marx's diagrams of economic reproduction do not include even this colourless coordinate'.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, conservatism (which, in its purest sense, is possibly the oldest of political creeds in the West) has invalidated its original essence to such an extent that it bears little or no relation to its present form. In fact, at present conservatism tends to become confused, in its most contradictory expression, with the philosophy of the liberal state carried to its extreme; and in its most innocuous although dangerous manifestation, with the philosophy of nostalgia carried to the acme of futility. Not everything that is possible is desirable', was one of its basic principles, on behalf of which it went as far as to protect the interests of the peasants and the poor, threatened by the emerging bourgeoisie, and thus meriting identification by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto as 'anti-socialist socialism'. Its ideological foundation emanated from Aristotle's *Ethics*, which holds that the essence of man is fixed and immutable—a basic error (begging the master's pardon) because humans are evolving beings. 'Human nature is real, but an essential part of human nature is its capacity for change. Humanity evolves. As a result, what is proper to mankind in one time and place, as a legitimate expression of human nature, will not be universally so'.<sup>11</sup>

Conservatism's original concern to hold down the uncontrolled and anti-natural technological forces released by capitalism, which could only stimulate increasing greed, showed an attitude of evident love for the natural state (though, of course, of an elitist structure). Such an attitude has been exchanged today for an equally evident and unconditional love for the 'magic' of the market, for free competition as the essence of social justice, and for unlimited expansion and growth. Contrary to capitalist liberalism—which, transformed into corporate liberalism under the impulse of technological development, has become essentially irreverent of the past and of all and any institutions when they stand in the way of its purpose of growth as an end in itself—conservatism becomes futile when trying to promote the same technological race, for it places it within an institutional framework that emanates not from congruence, but from equal shares of nostalgia and the 'original myth'. Just listening to some of the spokesmen of the Reagan administration should illustrate the point.

From the above it may be concluded that although ideologies differ as to their interpretation of the power relationships between human beings, they are all basically the same as regards the role they assign to nature as well as to technology. Moreover, I will go as far as to say that, in this respect, they are all—in a way—daughters of liberalism. More important than this last assertion, however, is the fact that the paradox stated at the beginning of this chapter appears to be confirmed. In other words, while the myth was dominant, humans went no further than believing in it. Once it was discarded by reason, human behaviour conformed to it more than *ever* before. The assault on nature did not take place while the 'original myth' was the Law; but when it ceased to be the Law. This is a strange but true fact, one which in itself merits serious and profound investigation.

I would like to summarize in another way what I have stated so far. If we observe our world now, in 1982, we can detect a new stage in the evolutionary process I have tried to describe. Let me put it like this: in the beginning there was the myth, and the myth alone. Then came reason, and man attempted to use reason in order to justify the

myth. Then reason triumphed over the myth, and reason alone ruled. Now, if *we* listen to spokesmen of the Reagan government, such as, for example, Mr Richard Allen, one has the feeling that in the hands of such fundamentalists, the myth is being used in order to justify reason. It is alarming, to say the least. And what lies ahead? Again the myth, and the myth alone? I can *feel* only fear when I think of present corporate liberalism married to the 'original myth'.

# Notes

1. See Moberg, Vilhelm, *A History of the Swedish People*, P.A. Norstedt & Söners Stockholm, 1970, Vol. I, p. 2.
2. Ibid., p. 2.
3. Ibid., p. 2.
4. Genesis, Chapter , verse 28. (The italics are mine.)
5. See Ferkiss, Victor, *The Future of Technological Civilization*, George Braziller, New York, 1974, p. 7.
6. Ibid., p. 68.
7. Engels, Eriedrich, *Dialectics of Nature*, Inte<sup>r</sup>national Publishers, New York, 1940, pp. 291-292.
8. Ferkiss, Victor, op. cit., p. 68.
9. Georgescu-Roegen, N., *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1974, p. 2.
10. Georgescu-Roegen, N., op. cit., p. 2.
11. Ferkiss, Victor, op. cit., p. 63.
12. Some of the most interesting proposals are contained io *What Now: Another Development, The 1975 Dag Hammarskjöld Report on Development and International Cooperation*. The Dag Hammarskjöld Eoundation, Uppsala, 1975.
13. Georgescu-Roegen, N., op. cit., p. 1.
14. Georgescu-Roegen, N., op. cit., p. 19.
15. Georgescu-Roegen, N., op. cit., p. 6.
16. Hardin, Garret, 'Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor', *Psychology Today*, 8, 1974. For good criticism of Hardin's ideas see Bay, Christian, 'Toward a World of Natural Communities', *Alternatives* No. 4, Spring, 1981.
17. For the first two points I llave taken ideas from Ferkiss, because I identified with them oven before reading him. I have added the third aspect (which he ignores as do most) for reasons that I consider quite obvious. I have added it because I consider it logical and essential to consolidate the factual possibility of the other two. No form of humanism makes any cense to me without a drastic redistribution of power.
19. The detailed information of this history has been taken from Julio Estrada Ycaza, *Regionalismo y Migración*, Publicaciones del Archivo Histórico de Guayas, Guayaquil, Ecuador, 1977.
20. Juan Mangache mace bis second visit to Quito in 1598, accompanied by bis two sons, Pedro and Domingo, who were painted. Their portrait is to be seen in the Archaeological Museum of Madrid.
21. The quotation has been taken from the first chapter of Ma<sup>f</sup>shall Wolfe's Elusive *Development*, published in 1982 by the UN Reserarch I nstitute for Social Development and the Economic Commission for Latin America.
22. Ibid.
23. Eduardo Ribeiro de Carvalho died in 1979, in bis early fifties. His untimely death represented an irreparable loss tu all those who, under bis stimulus, were allowed tu advance and promote the most audacious and innovative ideas, something rarely found in international organizations.
24. Tiradentes means literally `Toothpuller'. It was the nickname of Joaquim José de Silva Xavier, leader of the first independence attempt in Braza, in the late eighteenth century. The attempt was known as the 'Inconfidencia Mineira'. Tiradcntes was executed ih Ouro Preto alter the movement was crushed. His bode was dismembered and the head and limbs were exhibited in the main towns of the arca as a warning tu the population. I le was born Glose tu the town that today bears bis nickname.
25. In this respect, a fundamental contribution has been nade by Tibor Scitovsky in *The Joyless Economy*, Oxford University Press, 1976. He does not concern himself with the problem of size as I do here, but he does 'look deep into the consumer's soul'.
26. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1326a and 1326b.
27. Plato, *The Republic*, 423b.
28. See Valaskakis, K., et al., *The Conserver Society*, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1979.
29. Bent Sorensen, *Energy and Resources, Science*, Vol. 189, No. 4.199, July, 1975, pp. 255-260.
30. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Proposition 2.012, fourth phrase.
31. Ibid., Proposition 2.013. (The italics are mine.) I agree with Wittgenstein that we can *imagine* an empty space, although with some difficulty, since some form of object will tend tu appear as a boundary or limit of that imagined empty space. However, we can certainly *not perceive* an empty space.

31. Robert Ornstein, *On the Experience of Time*, Penguin Books, New York, 1975, pp. 21-22.
32. Léniz and Alcaíno's paper was presented at the Seminar on 'Time, Quality of Life and Social Development', Bariloche, Argentina, October, 1980.
33. The embryonic theory that I am presenting here was greatly inspired by this dramatic paragraph of Kafka's.
34. Tiradentes is located at the base of the Sao José Sierra which is a haven of spectacular and rare flora as well as interesting fauna. It has been, and still is, in constant danger of depletion and destruction. Some species have already vanished. Tiradentes itself contains an invaluable colonial cultural heritage, in spite of its long abandonment, deterioration and decay.
35. For an interesting exposition of the idea that follows, see Michael Todaro, *City Bias and Rural Neglect*, The Population Council, New York, 1981.
36. See *IFDA Dossier 17*, International Foundation for Development Alternatives, May/June, 1980, pp. 11-13 and *Development Dialogue* 1981:1.
37. The Foundation contributed to the financing of the Third Latin American Meeting on Research and Human Needs, sponsored by UNESCO, in Tiradentes in October, 1979. Although I was coordinator of the meeting, it was not properly an action of the Project.
38. They were: Fernando Rocha Pina Sampaio, painter; Vania Lima Barbosa, economist; Olinto Rodrigues dos Santos Filho, regional historian; Ann Mary Fighiera Perpetuo, secretary; Edson dos Santos, office boy. Their ages ranged from 19 to 28 years.
39. Norma Nasser and Ademar Salomao. A II the information and data that follows about children has been taken from a preliminary (unpublished) version of her paper 'Visoes da Infancia; o Caso de Tiradentes'. This version was produced in 1980.
40. It was the Third Latin American Meeting on Research and Human Needs, sponsored by UNESCO and carried out in Tiradentes in October, 1979. The subject of the meeting of that year was 'Human Needs and Childhood', hence the presentation of our research on that occasion.
41. Exactly the opposite had been the finding of Eleonora Masini who had studied children in small towns of Italy. Her research was contained in her paper 'The role of childhood in different development styles', presented at the Seminar mentioned in notes 37 and 40.