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SACRED COWS IN THE WAY

Why We Aren't Getting to Where We Want to Go

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We hear more and more about global awakening and healing ourselves and our world, and not just from young people. There is a movement getting under way for recognizing our responsibilities and bringing up the empathy and even the love we need to thrive on this planet. More and more people seem ready to embrace the values and behaviors of a better future. At the same time the world is full of inequality and injustice, poverty and deprivation, violence and war, with scarce attention to the continuing degradation of the environment. What has gone wrong—why aren't we getting to where we want to go?

Young people and concerned people of all ages seem to be on target toward a better world, but they are blocked by interests that go contrary to their aspirations. There are sacred cows in the way.

A sacred cow in India is simply a living cow that is not to be touched: all cows have this privileged status. But unlike real cows, the sacred cows that stand in our way today are man-made. They are values and beliefs, and operating structures and institutions based on the values and beliefs, that became obsolete but are still revered and are not to be touched. In the case of the sacred cows discussed here, this is a big mistake. These cows are not truly sacred, even if they are regarded as such, and they are very influential. They need to be recognized for what they are, and ushered out of the way.

The sacred cow of the public sector: the sovereign nation-state

When we speak of the nation-state and calling it the sacred cow of the public sector, we are not talking about nation-states as such. We are only talking about one particular kind of nation-state, the kind that not only claims to be sovereign, but also acts as if it were.

What's wrong with sovereignty—why does claiming it make the nation-state (or any economic, political or social institution for that matter) a sacred cow?

The idea of sovereign nation-states was hailed as one of the greatest accomplishments in history, the same as the idea of national independence. Sovereign states were, and in some quarters still are, revered and considered untouchable. But this quasi-sacred ideal became obsolete, the same as the ideal of their independence.

To be sovereign means to be free from interference from the outside: the sovereign nation-state is independent, nobody is permitted to interfere with its affairs and decisions. This has become unrealistic and even counter-productive. There is no real independence in an interdependent world, and in consequence there is no real sovereignty. Any attempt to ensure independence for a nation-state means cutting the ties that link it with other nation-states, and with actors and entities below as well as above nation-states. Cutting such ties may seem like an attractive option—liberating oneself from external interference and influence—but in practice it is a painful operation, as the British found in the aftermath of their Brexit from the European Union.

Why did nationalism and independence under the banner of sovereignty shift from a noble to an illusory and then negative aspiration? What caused the transformation from a high ideal to a roadblock? The answer is, *new technologies*. These are the technologies of information, communication, and transportation. They expanded the boundaries of contemporary societies and brought distant people and countries into contact. They have shrunk the world into a global village.

This is not a temporary and reversible development. “Structure follows function” as systems scientists well know. Flows of information, communication, and of goods and people bring together previously separate groups and lead to structural relations among them. This has been the case in all parts of the world. A good example is the European Union. It started with the European Steel and Coal Community, a functional structure dedicated to facilitating the flow of these resources. Then the flows created tighter and more formal structures, first a Federation, and then a Union. They made the sovereignty of the member states an illusion, and insistence on it a path to isolation.

Similar alliances, federations and unions are, or would be, happening in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Their effective functioning is blocked, or at least reduced and delayed by the sacred cow of the public sector, the sovereignty-claiming nation-state. Such a state puts itself first, and believes that it can “go it alone,” not needing others to succeed. Better independence than dependence on others. This does not work in today’s world. Functional relations on all levels, from the local to the global, became a basic requirement for the wellbeing and even the existence of organizations and states in the contemporary world.

At a time of an impending crisis, insightful politicians who realize that this is the case and act on it are difficult to come by. People’s mood swings widely, and public sentiment looks to those who shout the loudest and offer the fastest and most radical solution to their problems. The solutions they offer tend to be of the “my country first and never mind the others” sovereignty-pretending kind. The consequences bear out Adlai Stevenson’s oft-quoted pronouncement, that anyone who manages to get elected, doesn’t really deserve to serve.

The sacred cow of the private sector: the shareholder-serving company

The sovereign nation-state has a counterpart in the private sector: it is the traditional variety of privately owned and commercially managed business company. Not the presence of such companies in the world is the problem, but the presence of one particular variety: the company strongly focused on, and dedicated to, making money for its owners. Doing so is the credo of mainstream companies, following the famous (and now infamous) declaration of business-guru Milton Friedman in 1970. Any executive, he wrote, who pursues a goal other

than making money is an unwitting puppet of the intellectual forces that have been undermining the basis of a free society. In that society the managers are the employees of the owners of the business: the shareholders. Making money for them is the only legitimate purpose the managers could follow.

The privately owned business company has become an untouchable sacred cow in market-oriented economies. Its growth from the local to the national, then to the regional and ultimately to the global scale is a historical and very likely irreversible phenomenon. But the values, aims and philosophy of the business company are not engraved in stone. The company need not be uniquely dedicated to making money for its owners: it could be, or could become, an agent of social, and even of world benefit, as Case Western Reserve University's Fowler Center "of business as an agent of world benefit" declares. There are alternatives to pursuing the shareholder strategy. Management guru David Cooperrider noted that business companies could create wellbeing and even flourishing at every level. As his collaborator Chris Laszlo pointed out, this includes true cost accounting and regenerative agriculture, supply chains designed for a circular economy, and financial market incentives for long-term value rather than fractional trading. The bottom line is that, as the English magazine *The Economist* declared, it is entirely possible for a company to do well, and to do good.

However, if they are to focus on doing good, and not only well, managers and shareholders need to give up some comforting assumptions. For example, that an invisible hand distributes benefits in the marketplace, and a rising tide lifts all boats. Happy automatism such as these absolved managers from the responsibility of caring for anything beyond their own company. Unhappily, in today's world, these self-correcting dynamics are out of commission. Income and living-standard inequality remains rampant, the gap between the haves and the have-nots keeps growing. The poor are sinking further into a vicious cycle where poverty generates deprivation and deprivation reduces the ability of the poor to compete in the marketplace. The invisible hand turns into a more and more visible foot that kicks the poor and the powerless. And the rising tide, wherever it still occurs, fails to lift all boats. Many leak and just sink to the bottom. The evidence is getting clearer by the day. Millions are pressed below the threshold of physical existence and leave their homeland in search of a place to survive, flooding countries and areas that seem to offer the chances of a new life.

The shareholder-oriented business company competes without regard for other companies, for the host societies, and for the environment. What happens to these is of little concern to the managers. Their objective is to make money, and that means competing with other players—and winning. In an emerging global village this strategy creates inequality and injustice, the same as the self-centered strategy of sovereignty-pretending nation-states.

The sacred cow of the multicultural community: the fundamentalist sect

Fundamentalist sects consider themselves even more sacred than sovereign nation-states and shareholder-oriented business companies. They maintain that there is only one truth in the world and that is theirs, and just one just cause in the world and that is likewise theirs.

Like traditional nation-states and mainstream business companies, fundamentalists put themselves first. They add a further element to their self-declared priority: serving their own interests is not only their right, but their holy duty. For fundamentalist sects, people who follow other beliefs, have strayed off the true path. They need to be brought back, by force if necessary. That is the essence of the “jihadh” of Muslims, and of the goals, even if less violent, of other fundamentalist cultures.

Fundamentalists reduce humanity’s multicultural community to opposing groups of true-believers and non-believers. They break apart the integrality required of flourishing in the world, the same as the sovereignty-oriented nation-state and the shareholder-oriented business company.

There are other sacred cows in the contemporary world, but the sovereignty-claiming nation-state, the shareholder-dedicated business company, and the exclusive truth-possessing fundamentalist sect are the clearest instances of the violation of an imperative that is important, but is seldom taken into account. It is a physical imperative applying to all complex systems and it must be respected if we are to get to where we want to go.

The physical imperative in getting to where we want to go

Our world has become an integral global-level system. More exactly, it has become a planet-wide open thermodynamic system. There are basic preconditions of the effective functioning of such a system, and they can be briefly sketched and readily understood.

A brief excursion into the physics of open systems

Systems in the world are open or closed. Open systems take in, process, and radiate energy, matter, and information. Closed systems are closed to flows of matter, energy, and information. They obey the second law of thermodynamics, that energy degrades irreversibly as a system performs work. This means that a closed working system moves irreversibly toward the “dead” state of thermal and chemical equilibrium.

Entirely closed systems do not exist in the real world, but there are systems that, although open, obey the second law because they do not adequately replenish the energy and matter they use and degrade. They move toward entropy just the same, diminishing and ultimately losing their viability.

Open systems can only maintained themselves by constantly replenishing the energy and matter they require to fuel the irreversible processes that keep them going. For this, every element in the systems needs to cooperate with every other element, and they must all be focused on the same basic end: to replenish the resources used and used up by the system. No open system can persist on Earth or anywhere in the universe if it does not coordinate and orient the functioning of its components to this paramount task.

This is a physical imperative, and there are no alternatives to it. Any component that is not aligned with the rest in maintaining the system in the functional state far from thermal and chemical equilibrium is a flaw in the system. In an artificial information-processing system it signals a breakdown in the information flowing through the system; in a biological system it indicates the malfunction of a cell, organ, or organ system: a disease. And in a social and socio-cultural system, it is a sign of incoherence; a flaw in its self-maintaining dynamics and a threat to the wellbeing and even the life of its members. The coherence created by the sensitive fine-tuning of every component to every other component and their aligned orientation to the survival of the system is what makes a living system coherent. It is a survival imperative that allows of no alternatives.

A simple example of a man-made nonequilibrium system

Physics tells us that every component of a viable self-maintaining system needs to be continually and effectively “in touch” with every other part: it must respond sensitively and correct for every deviation. A good example of such a system (even if a short-lived one) is the human pyramid formed by circus acrobats. The pyramid is made up of acrobats who climb on the shoulders of other acrobats, creating a multi-storey dynamically self-maintaining far-from-equilibrium structure. The structure can be maintained only if every acrobat sensitively registers, and instantly corrects for, any deviation by the other acrobats. The sensitive fine-tuning of every part to every other part is what makes for the ability of the human pyramid to maintain itself, and this is the same in the case of human beings—and of the sociocultural systems formed by human beings.

Viable systems in nature are coherent, indeed, they are doubly-coherent: they are coherent with regard to the interaction among their parts (every cell in a biological system is constantly “in touch” with every other cell), and they are coherent with regard to their relation to other systems around them. They are “supercoherent.” This is true not only of biological systems, but of all self-maintaining systems, whatever the nature of the parts that compose them. Striving for supercoherence is a natural and basic aspiration for every human being aspiring to health and to a sustainable world.

This aspiration is of particular importance today, at a time when human incoherence has become a life-threatening issue. We have become critically incoherent in regard to our body and the social, economic, and ecological systems we form with others. This incoherence threatens to drag the whole system of life on the planet into incoherence. The culprits are many, but among them the sacred cows play a key role. The sovereignty-pretending nation-state, the shareholder-serving business company, and the exclusive truth-claiming fundamentalist sect puts itself first and disregard its connection to others, and to the system of life on the planet. It exports its incoherence instead of correcting it. Sovereign nation-states seek to create coherence within their own country (for example, by enforcing “law and order”); shareholder-oriented business companies wish to create coherence in their own business sector, and fundamentalist sects align the thinking and actions of their followers and create

coherence in their own country or region. But the tunnel-vision and self-concerned behavior of these actors increases poverty and creates frustration and violence beyond their bounds.

Powerful states and wealthy companies try, of course, to counteract the degeneration growing on around them. They use primitive methods (building walls to prevent the inflow of destitute masses and expell those who have already penetrated beyond); or softer methods (such as injections of money and information); or intermediate technologies (cheap energy and advanced chemistry); or aggressive technologies (police actions or wars fought with weapons of local or mass destruction). These are remedial measures with side-effects and limited effectiveness. Ultimately they devour more resources than are available for them and produce “collateral damage”—more heat than light.

Today’s sacred cows are major sources of incoherence in the world system. They fractionate it, reducing its coherence to separate fields and domains, and particular economic social, and cultural areas. This is not a lasting way to deal with the problems we now face. Little wonder that stress, unrest, violence, poverty, and ecological degradation are increasing in nearly every part of the world. There is no enduring substitute for coherent functioning, based on cooperation rather than competition, and embracing perspectives instead of tunnel vision and self-interest.

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The way to a better world is still open, and the will and motivation to enter on it is gathering momentum. But it is blocked by powerful actors that have been revered in the past, but became obsolete. Their presence is a fault in the system, and it threatens the life and wellbeing of everyone.

Fortunately, coping with today’s sacred cows is not a purely utopian quest. The awakening under way on the planet is not limited to a few to the exclusion of the many. It can include national politicians, business managers, as well as spiritual gurus. We are all in the same boat, and we all share the same destiny. The sooner we realize this and start working together for the common good the better it is for all us—the leaders of sacred cows included.

