

Cultivating cognizance at the End of the Age of Agriculture

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This essay addresses Jeffrey Rubinoff's concept of cultivated ignorance, as applied to the post-baby boomer generation's lack of awareness of major turning points in twentieth century world history. It was written for the May 2010 Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park Company of Ideas Forum, at which scholars were invited to present aspects of this history as related to Rubinoff's concept of the End of the Age of Agriculture.

Rubinoff's question

Throughout the preparations for the Forum, Jeffrey Rubinoff asked me whether I could explain my generation's profound lack of awareness of the historical context of what he has termed the End of the Age of Agriculture. For Rubinoff the consequences of not learning from the industrialized mass slaughters of the twentieth century, are a likely repeat in the twenty-first.

This essay is a response on behalf of my generation, the post baby boomers, to this question. It is not a knowledge claim, subject normally to more rigorous standards of evidence, but a judgment. As such, it is meant for those sufficiently familiar with the facts that I will discuss to evaluate the usefulness of my arguments. This judgment of the post baby boomer generation is drawn from over 15 years of experience working intensely with several hundred young people of this generation as an educator, mentor, and coach. It as well profits from my subsequent work within agencies that set international social policy agendas. That is why I must briefly digress, so that you may understand the professional background informing the argument I will present.

I am among the few of my—or perhaps any—generation that contend seriously at an early age and consistently, over long periods of time, with a wide range of cultural, economic, political, and technological challenges.

Throughout the past fifteen years I have developed and tested various techniques to influence consumer, businesses and industry behaviour related to environmental protection. I have worked to increase young peoples' engagement public policy, through participation in official government delegations to international negotiations, establishing national youth representative institutions, and developing inclusive local governance methodologies in Africa. Recently, I worked with the United Nations to test urban entrepreneurship models to address the unemployment of the growing youth population within African slums. I then worked as a UN policy lobbyist successfully advocating the passage of international social and environmental policy. Subsequently, I became United Nations consultant on a programme that showcases potential of art for the empowerment of the young urban poor.

In short, as a member of my generation who has been highly involved in social issues working directly with young people, as well as with policy makers and researchers on international social issues, I feel that I can make and offer an informed commentary on Rubinoff's question.

The danger of cultivated ignorance the End of the Age of Agriculture

Rubinoff has described the End of the Age of Agriculture as the breakdown of the implicit social contract between the warrior class and the rest of society. Throughout the progressive development of agriculture, and other techniques of mass production, the specialized warrior class approached the technological limits of war as a gainful social strategy. History seems to show that war tends to escalate to upper limits of technology and strategy, regardless of established cultural norms or taboos. The advent of strategic bombing, for example, eroded the distinction between civilians and combatants, which was fully erased with the development of nuclear weapons.

War is often an existential struggle, and there is no reason to think that those motivated by survival will not resort to the most powerful means at their disposal. At the End of the Age

of Agriculture war has reached a technological-strategic, as well as moral limit. Rubinoff contends that the implicit social contract of the warrior class during the age of agriculture was protection in exchange for subjugation. However, as the rationale for their moral claim was dissolved by the demonstrated rational limits of total war, we must ask the question 'what of the warrior class'? Does it remain dangerously on an inertial path? Do they pronounce new rationales that are unwittingly accepted? Are there new institutions worthy of displacing their primacy as protectors of life and property?

The dangers of a generation who does not have means to think productively about these questions surely must be clear, even in the absence of an imminent global conflict. Merely, assuming the indefinite extension of the absence of global conflict seems just as dangerous as cavalierly coasting on the work of previous generations who built the firewalls that have mitigated conflict thus far.

These include institutions that work to quell the various perceived causes of war and conflict: comparative scarcity, expansionist ambition, defensive reaction, misunderstandings, rage, desperation, or honour. Global trading regimes have made it more effective to trade for goods, than to invade the territory in which they are produced. Multinational normative regimes such as the United Nations discredit imperialist ambitions and mitigate the psychological causes of conflict. Balance of power politics, military alliances as well as periodic multi-national military interventions work to raise, for would be belligerents, the costs for war on anything but the most serious grounds. However, as the moral and practical threshold for war is raised, surely one of the most difficult causes to address is conflicting ideologies of absolute Truth.

Absolute Truth, is based on the notion of a transcendent point of reference for human knowledge about existence.

Materially, even psychologically, empirical conflicts are amenable, at least in theory, to pragmatic resolution through economic or diplomatic compromise. The belligerents at

least implicitly recognize, to some degree, a common moral and institutional order; they recognize the possibility of common ground.

However, conflicts of absolute Truth occur outside a shared frame of reference, and thus exhibit their danger in the absolute and irredeemable exclusion the Other from ones own moral territory. For absolute Truth there can be no shared moral territory. Indeed it seems that in the age of weapons of mass slaughter, there is a constant danger of conflicts over absolute Truth escalating to the use of absolute weapons.

It has been left to succeeding generations to apply their imaginative intelligence to mitigate this remaining danger of the age of agriculture.

Post boomer generations X, Y and Z

For my generation, roughly speaking the children of the baby boomer generation, the distance of personal experience with the survivors of the world wars is great. For the next generations, their personal psychological connection even to the cold war, and the various proxy wars such as Vietnam, Korea etc, is slight, if any.

However, ignorance of the trauma of the industrialized mass death of the twentieth century conflicts cannot be solely explained by distance from personal experience. Otherwise, vital lessons would have to be learned time and time again, and humanity would never have maintained great civilizations.

Upon reflection on Rubinoff's question, and in attempting to formulate an answer for this Forum, I was struck by the realization that my generation scarcely thinks much about war at all, and much less nuclear war.

Again part of this is my geographical perspective, since for those now living in western societies, war is something perpetrated upon the territory of the Other, and not something experienced directly.

Most of my generation is at least one, if not two, generations removed from a family member who experienced war, or the existential threat of war, directly.

My mother was born in Germany during the middle of World War II and has told me of the terrifying drone of the bombers, and recounted what it was like to grow up among the ruins of Berlin. My grandmother and relatives explained the horror of those times to me, recounting personal stories of women and children conscripted into the final futile defense of Berlin. As a boy attending high school in Berlin, I was required to make a visit to a concentration camp. By intentional design my school was a mix of children of marginalized migrant workers as well as socially advantaged classes. As a group they exhibited great contempt of authority, but not one student took the concentration camp tour lightly.

This is likely as close to the personal experience of the great wars my generation gets, and most of the post boomer generation does not have the privilege of that direct a source of knowledge. However, given all that personal access, university training, and professional career in social policy, I have yet to fully come to terms with this history.

Now war and mass slaughter is so morally repugnant that there is a likely natural aversion to thinking about it, especially so in the many decades during which conflicts seemed either abstract, or of reduced scale and in distant lands. In these circumstances it is likely that no great number spend much time thinking about such unpleasant topics.

Moreover, I have observed among my generation that only a small minority end up in vocations whose primary inputs and outputs are ideas of great importance to society. Of those, the majority are, by necessity of time pressures and coherence to their institutional

mandates, primarily consumers of ideas. Still fewer are involved in the generation of new ideas. Less yet have had enough experience to judge the merit of their ideas by real world application. I am a junior member of this very small group.

So the deeper implications of Rubinoff's question of my generation in general, really must be reflexively posed as a question to myself as a representative of my generation:

'How can a person who has personal access to the experience of World War II and the Holocaust, who is educated, and who has been practically engaged in the creation and application of social ideas for over 15 years not have come to terms with the consequences of this history?'

If one subtracts the influence of obvious factors such as time, distance from personal experience, and in general the repugnance of thinking about war, I think the answer must be that the ignorance to this reality has been cultivated, either consciously or unconsciously.

With the benefit of reflection, it now seems obvious to me that you cannot ignore war as a persistent feature of human civilization since the advent of agriculture. Thus this cultivated ignorance, unconscious, structured, or deliberate must constitute a large part of the answer.

Ideologies of Truth

As with others of my generation with the means and opportunity, I was in the fortunate position of choosing a course of university studies. My academic talent, from a fairly young age was for science, and my first consideration of a university career was theoretical physics or engineering. My young mind was attracted by certainty of answers about the natural world, and not the seemingly vague interpretations of the human one.

However, thinking seriously about it, I realized that answers that really mattered to me were going to be about the human world, and though I was untalented in 'the arts' it was there I would have to make my contribution.

It was at that point that I diverged paths with those pursuing scientific disciplines, not to rejoin them for many years. It was my impression, years later jointly researching biofuels technology, that scientists do think seriously about the social implications of technologies that they develop, but that their technical focus, precluded sophisticated articulations on social policy matters. Thus, in my experience, the graduates of 'arts' faculties remain the predominant group self-consciously using and developing social ideas in a professional capacity.

So in returning to the question of cultivated ignorance, I will primarily limit the scope of my judgment to the 'social science' disciplines, with which I am personally familiar, and may illustrate a point you may judge to be more broadly applicable.

What I experienced throughout my education in various social sciences was that most of the knowledge was presented as a confused mix of history, ideology, statistical data and logical models. The excuse for this muddle, was that the field, being in its infancy and having such a nebulous object of study, was necessary methodologically heterogeneous.

Within a field that cannot settle on conventions of what constitutes knowledge, the minimum one would expect is the illumination of the ontological and epistemological claims of its various conventions of knowledge. Notwithstanding those honest educators for whom this is the norm, a more significant criticism is the under-emphasis on the development of the intellectual tools of judgment of these truth claims.

Without this, immature minds must invent a yardstick to judge the merits of the confusing mass of data, rational models, and historical narrative. Unfortunately this judgment is highly susceptible to the simplifying power of the very ideologies presented for

consideration. When contested theories, political agendas, social paradigms and economic laws are simply presented as knowledge claims without a means of evaluation, students' thought, like water, flows by the path of least resistance. The danger of this laissez-faire approach to social science education, is the cultivation of generation with a cavalier pick and choose approach to knowledge claims.

The cultivation of the tools and mature habits of judgment, is the minimum degree of intellectual discipline prerequisite of a field that aspires to accumulate systematic knowledge of use to society.

Cultivating ignorance by prescriptive narrative in the social sciences

Critiquing social science on its metaphysical obfuscation, demands of course a deeper analysis of where it went wrong and a proposed course of action.

The way I understand the emergence of social science is as part of the epistemological shift during the enlightenment away from transcendental points of reference for the authority of knowledge claims. As the natural sciences discovered seemingly unchanging laws of the natural world, existence as observed and explained by human mind challenged the authority of the religion as arbiter of truth. It was thought that just as universal laws of nature were being discovered in the natural realm, surely they also must exist in the social realm.

There seemed to be a desire to discover universal principles of human society, that would serve as the new and more objective authority upon which to base judgments of value. The intellectual paradigm that human history could be reduced to essential principles of action, and hence modeled, is really the ambition of early social science.

My argument is that the extension of the scientific method into the social realm, perhaps inadvertently, created the conditions for the proliferation of ideologies within the discipline. These ideologies replaced truth claims based on a transcendental arbiter of value, but nevertheless aimed at finding an impersonal and objective point of reference for social values, not dependant on 'arbitrary' preference.

On the one hand it provides a handy foil against the arbitrary authority of wealth, tradition or force as the basis for truth claims. The objective laws of history, society and economics could be invoked against naked and obvious self-interest. What could be worse than being out of step with the impersonal and inevitable laws of human history? Social science proceeded along this path for decades, checked only by the realization of the difficulty in drawing sweeping generalizations, and thus gradually reducing the scope of its knowledge claims.

However, the confused marriage of an academic discipline with a socio-political programme is highly problematic. Politics is instrumentally focused and is less bothered about the means than the ends, however, we expect academics to be concerned with both. The creative thought uninhibited from political interference is one of the most important qualities we have come to expect from public intellectuals.

There are two major problems concerning this fused political-intellectual paradigm which are relevant to the cultivated ignorance of the post boomer generation. The first is the presupposition that history must necessarily be reducible to essential principles and societies to systematic models, and the second that these principles and models described 'existence' itself, rather than human knowledge.

Address the first problem, I believe this hidden methodological presupposition of social science leads its students to avoid mental engagement with the narrative of history and absorption of facts, in favour of first understanding various models that prescribe a certain explanation of them. The manner of teaching within the discipline, conditions young

minds to see history and facts as mere instances of impersonal principles and prescribed models.

This stifles the type of novel thinking based on a mastery of the collective memory, which generated these principles and models in the first place. Generations of students are thus conditioned to think like photocopies of ever decreasing fidelity.

The second objection with early social science is its ambition to develop knowledge conventions that provided descriptions of existence. Rather than viewing human knowledge as models of variable reliability used to describe and predict human observations, it assumes that models reliably characterize the intrinsic existence from which those observations emerge.

This reflects an obsolete metaphysical view of reality, which natural science emerged from in the early twentieth century. Around the same time a new perspective was being formulated in the crucible of an intense debate about how to interpret quantum mechanics in natural, non-mathematical, classical physics language. Niels Bohr articulated a interpretation of quantum mechanics which argued that quantum physics can model material world in a manner that usefully described and predicted observations, while discounting the usefulness classical concept of 'intrinsic properties' as independent a physical system's interaction with an experimental apparatus.¹

Jeff Foss calls this approach of contemporary science, "metaphysical modesty," which is really in the businesses, as he puts it, of modeling the extrinsic properties, and essentially doesn't attempt to explain the intrinsic nature of nature.² This is a powerful statement of ontological agnosticism, but which leaves room for a robust epistemological convention

¹ I am here referring to Niel Bohr's Complementarity Interpretation of quantum mechanics. Faye, Jan. Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2008 <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qm-copenhagen/>

² Foss, Jeffrey E. Science and the Riddle of Consciousness: A Solution. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000. Ch. 3, p. 23.

for the human observation of nature. Social science apparently did not benefit from the realization that natural science arrived at in the early twentieth century until much later.

My recollection of early social science paradigms is that most staked a claim to truth in the domain of intrinsic properties of existence. Marxism was perhaps one of the most powerful social science paradigms, and was explicitly ideological. As can be seen in such Marxist concepts as 'false consciousness,' the ideology asserts a truth claim within a domain that is prior to perception. Marxist class analysis is the true representation of your interests, regardless of any other analysis, or what you may personally perceive. Marxism claims its truth pertains to the domain of infrastructural material existence, thus trumping your own distorted super-structural knowledge. By claiming to reliably re-present existence, ideologies become weapons in the struggle over absolute Truth.

It would take until the 1960's for what we now label as the postmodern critique of social theory to emerge to challenge these sorts of claims. Reading the postmodern critique charitably we must view it within a historical context and assume it to be logically coherent. We must also acknowledge that many of the so-called founding thinkers distance themselves from the term 'post-modernism' as a description of their philosophy.

From what I have gathered, and I stand open for correction, the postmodern critique of social science, taken here as the general intellectual movement, challenged the notion that any human narrative could *a priori* be considered to have primacy over any other. For postmodernists, all knowledge claims are centered in human values, which are necessarily subjective, and laden with power dynamics. Those who cannot enforce their values, cannot create knowledge, and are thus disempowered. Marxist knowledge is knowledge for the benefit of workers, structural functionalist knowledge for the benefit of social conservatives, and so on. Knowledge was admittedly, and now inescapably, political, as well as personal.

As far as I have been able to see, the originators of the ideas that facilitated the postmodern critique, Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard, preferred to be observers of society and theorists. However, their ideas were championed by another group of academics, who took them as doctrinal prescriptions. To address the knowledge-power imbalance, one had to now have Third World knowledge, Black knowledge, Women's knowledge, Gay and Lesbian knowledge and so on. Within this context it is not difficult to see how my generation can easily dismiss as merely particular, 'history' knowledge, 'war' knowledge, 'science' knowledge or 'nuclear war' knowledge. The tendency towards cultivated ignorance was pre-programmed by our educational context.

The postmodern critique pluralized epistemologies of social knowledge, contesting the supposedly universal human narrative as politically repressive and retrograde.

Unfortunately, this intellectual strategy of discrediting self-proclaimed universal narratives, also has the effect of discrediting the idea of a shared human narrative.

Without a shared human narrative, human history itself becomes just so many quaint stories, to be ignored for the more fundamental explanatory power of whatever social theory is in fashion. Within this educational context it is easy to understand why even those who have engaged in the study of society and practice of governance have scant knowledge of history at the End of the Age of Agriculture.

Towards a shared human non-prescriptive narrative

Notwithstanding what I have described as the postmodern critique, the proliferation of global normative regimes is a testament to the fact that for many decades narrative based on widely shared human values has been actively sought.

What is meant by narrative are the conventions of human knowledge by which mental pictures are made meaningful to others. These conventions refer to super-ordinate values, to which the individual narratives must cohere.

What is meant by non-prescriptive narrative, is a process which allows one to judge the content of individual narratives, as well as the set of values by which narratives are judged to be knowledge. Knowledge is assumed to cohere with a super-ordinate set of values, either or both of which can be agreed or disagreed with.

Within this perspective, the prescriptive narratives of social science attempt to deny the subjective nature of the values that underlie its knowledge conventions. It either asserts them to be universal *a priori* truth, or based within an authority outside the domain of human values. By fusing the yardstick and content of knowledge, prescriptive narrative implies its claims refer to the intrinsic, non-subjective, properties of entities rather than fallible human meaning given to human perceptions.

This has the effect, as mentioned, of stifling the evolution of narratives, as new perceptions challenge the values that underlie the extant conventions of knowledge.

The postmodern critique is well taken, if its point is that the a priori assertion of universal values upon which to base a convention of social knowledge would inevitably be contested. However, it doesn't follow that human values can never obtain some degree of shared agreement.

The postmodern critique may have rightly discredited the 'grand metanarratives', which generate the kind of absolute Truths almost pre-programmed to conflict.

Notwithstanding, I argue that efforts to identify shared human values, upon which to build non-prescriptive narrative, are still highly useful. This process generates narratives which

are self-admittedly fallible, 'truth by convention', but nevertheless strives to be based on broadly shared human values.

The role of art in cultivating cognizance

If art were merely in the business of re-producing perceptions that are removed in time and space, it would be a dull affair, and most likely have already been fully supplanted by various recording technologies.

In my admittedly limited experience, serious artists strive to make statements of value, statements by the virtue of the identity of their originators are necessarily statements of human values. These statements can be highly articulate, or be limited and boring.

But for those serious artists attempting to create art of lasting value, these statements emerge from and address the human soul. This emergence is a result of their awareness of the collective memory of humanity, and within that awareness coming to terms with the nuanced tensions between human values therein illuminated.

The language in which this is expressed is the language of metaphor, which relies on, but does not necessarily prescribe, a frame of reference that is shared between the artist and the perceiver. Metaphors, as with any form of knowledge statement, requires that both artist and perceiver consciousness have grappled to a comparable degree with the collective memory. That condition being met, the perceived truth-value of a metaphor thus rests on the internal resonance between the artist and the perceivers most sacred values.

Thus art can escape becoming prescriptive form of narrative, while offering a powerful means to communicate highly nuanced value statements. That is not to say that artists cannot create propaganda art, which asserts a shared frame of reference backed by the threat of physical or spiritual violence.

Rubinoff has stated that art is the “means to experience the sacred beyond prescriptive narrative.”³

I interpret this statement as Rubinoff’s ambition for art and artists to help humanity earn itself a shared frame of reference by their disciplined exploration of the collective memory and a coming to terms with the value tensions within the human soul.

Concluding thoughts

The age of agriculture ended by reaching the strategic limit, of an intellectually and spiritually obsolete state of human consciousness.

Absolute truth by reference to supposedly transcendent values has been used to induce and rationalize the mass industrial slaughters of the twentieth century. We are indeed lucky to have avoided a repeat performance for over half a century. However, both the machinery of slaughter and the self-destructive habits of thought remain very much intact.

Avoiding these negative consequences is not only a matter of dismantling the obsolete machinery of slaughter, but also dismantling the obsolete machinery of thought.

If this can be accomplished, we will likely reap as yet unknown positive consequences of the End of the Age of Agriculture, as well as merely avoiding the negative ones.

Artists who choose to take themselves seriously, are able to offer metaphorical knowledge, knowledge formulated in uniquely powerful language with which to address the question of shared human values. The truth about the human soul is something that essentially must

³ Jeffrey Rubinoff, Insights, www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/coi.php, 2009

be evaluated experientially, and one highly effective method is being confronted with the intellectual and emotional reality of an artistic statement.

However, that is not to discount the need for a rigorous and disciplined study of social facts, and history as the basis for evolving insight into our evolving species.

If we are to move toward shared values upon which conventions of truth may be ever more broadly accepted, we in the disciplines addressing social issues must make greater efforts to foster the auto-illuminative intellectual habits. This may start with a renewed emphasis on cultivating the joy of direct engagement with the current and historical facts, unfiltered by theory. As well we may redouble our efforts to equipping students of society, social policy practitioners, and the general public with the intellectual tools to evaluate the epistemological and ontological basis for knowledge claims.

What is important in our search for a flexible and rigorous basis for understanding our own evolving nature, is that we strive to earn shared human values, not by decree, but evidence of their benefits. We must also realize that human intelligence extends far beyond what is readily observable and articulatable in words. This vast other realm is of vital interest to the majority of human beings, within which truth claims are intuitively evaluated. Art provides one possibility of a metaphorical language to explore this realm, one which can escape the prescriptive narrative of absolute Truth.

Ultimately both these approaches can serve not to oppose, but to transform by enlarged understanding, past religious, political, or other ideological narrative, while not discrediting the content of their narratives out of hand. Human knowledge becomes open then to insights from whatever source, so they may be woven into the tapestry of shared human values.