

# **The 21st Century Global Crisis: Laying out the Foundations for a New World Civilization**

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## **Abstract**

The article focuses on principal traits of modern culture, i.e., on what we term *the foundational cultural myths of Modernity*, and to examine the role these myths have played in the contemporary crisis. A set of new epistemological insights is outlined that would be needed to understand and to act upon the root causes of this crisis, such as the oneness of Reality, the diversity within the oneness of Reality, the impermanency of all phenomena and the relativity of time and space. In this context, the actual functionability of modernity's myth is questioned (*the Myth of Eternal Progress*) and its concrete manifestation as a model of social development based on the perennial increase of economic growth, i.e., industrial production and consumerism, in detriment of fundamental values, which we believe are the origin of both that existential system and the current global crisis. As a substitution, a model of development, *Optimizing Homeostatic Paradigm*, is proposed. This implies dismantling all policies of unrestricted economic growth and the replacement of Gross Domestic Production (GDP) as the standard measure of social development and human progress. The criticism that limitation of economic growth would reduce economic activity and would foster loss of employment, therefore more poverty, is refuted. In this theoretical framework, the concepts of human freedom, development and technology are revised, and new ones are proposed. Finally, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) index is shown as an example of alternative model of development, and inspiration for a new kind of world civilization.

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## **1. Introduction**

We have long claimed, that if the world is to avoid the predicted catastrophes that may arise as a consequence of our contemporary global crisis - in particular as a consequence of global climate change, and more recently of new pandemics and the social, economic and political calamities associated to these event - the modern world would have to get free from the old cultural myths upon which modernity is founded, and generate a new set of cultural foundational concepts.

From an anthropological point of view, the paper focuses on the principal traits of modern culture, i.e. on *the foundational cultural myths of modernity*, and to examine the role these myths have played in the contemporary global crisis. In this short article, the paper will not repeat the theoretical arguments that support what will be exposed, as this has already been done in a previous publication (Armand, 1998).

What follows is a very rough and straight forward outline of the new epistemological insights that would be needed to understand and to act upon the root causes of what can be labeled as the worse existential crisis encountered by humankind since Pleistocene times.

## **2. From Dualistic Science to Holistic Science**

In the fundamental sphere of Philosophy of Science, it would be necessary to revise the *Cartesian* conception of reality, which for 250 years has been the dominant general theory and replace it with a *holistic* conception of reality based on (or inspired by) insights derived from the so-called New Physics or Quantic and Relativity theories. This replacement would have to be based equally on an anthropological theory that envisages humanity not as a separated phenomenon, as is conventionally the case, but as an element of a larger reality that comprehends Nature and the totality of Cosmos (Bateson, 1972).

For the purpose of this article, a holistic conception of Reality implies, among other premises:

- a) The essential Oneness of Reality.
- b) The Diversity within the Oneness of Reality
- c) The Interconnectivity of all Phenomena.
- d) The Impermanency of all Phenomena
- e) The Relativity of Time and Space

### **3. From Maximizing Growth to Optimizing Homeostasis**

The aforementioned new epistemological conception of reality must be adopted - first, by main world academic milieu and particularly by philosophers of science; and second, by scientists in general, whose new ideas should eventually permeate all institutions, particularly political, financial and educational institutions. If this is not done, it would be very difficult, if not impossible for humankind, to undertake the other essential changes discussed below, to survive present global crisis.

In the first place, these academic milieu and institutions would have to abandon modernity's foundational myth, which was named the *Myth of Eternal Progress* (Armand, 2014), and the modern practice of *over-emphasizing the economic and technological variables of human existence* to the detriment of fundamental values, which is the origin of both the disruption of that existential system and the current global crisis.

Modern approaches to social evolution would have to be replaced by a more appropriate approach, the *Myth of Eternal Return*. This "new" cultural myth leads to the replacement of the dominant *Ever increasing Economic Growth Development* paradigm, by an opposite development paradigm, the *Optimizing Homeostatic Development Paradigm*.

The changes that have been mentioned, as well as the other changes will be elaborated below, represent a mutation in the same improbable sense of a biological mutation; hence the chances for them to occur are extremely few. However, mutations, both in the biological and cultural realms, have occurred many times in the history of life and in the history of humankind (Morin, 1980). In both cases, mutations appeared

because of the imperious need felt by a particular biological or social group of avoiding extinction, having arrived at a certain ecological and - or social dead-end.

Now, due to an unprecedented global climate crisis of predictable serious consequences, human civilization in general is facing a threat of collapse for a relatively long time. Hence, if it is going to survive, present world civilization would have to mutate, in this case culturally. This mutation has a name: the emergence of the *Optimizing Homeostatic Development Paradigm*.

A Homeostatic Economy, and in general a Homeostatic Society, does not necessarily imply a stagnant system, as it can optimize itself permanently. Instead of *maximizing* its variables, this type of economy and society tends to the harmonic development of *all* the variables that compose the socio-ecological system. A *homeostatic social system* is the opposite of a modern social system in the sense that this last tends to *maximize* a set of selected variables, particularly industrial production and consumption, in detriment to other variables. Hence the propensity of modern society to permanently generate crisis; a tendency that has been named as *cysmogenesis* (Bateson, 1974).

To implement the novel economic paradigm here described means dismantling all policies of unrestricted economic growth, and the replacement of Gross Domestic Production (GDP) as the standard measure of human development and progress. As suggested, the peculiar cultural trait of modernity in over-emphasizing some particular variables of the socio-ecological system represents the root- cause of our contemporary global crisis.

The expression “social and ecological global crisis” means that our global crisis has both an ecological face (as manifested in climate change); and a social face, as reflected - to mention one example - by the massive human migrations from rural to urban areas during last 250 years, which have resulted in the

hypertrophied and highly polluting modern cities. After our systemic approach, these two faces of our global crisis are connected to each other through a feedback relationship<sup>1</sup>.

Now, in the Biosphere - as in any other system, no cell, individual, or group of individuals, can increase indefinitely in size or intensity, without the system becoming hypertrophic, maladjusted or affected by disruption, which ultimately may destroy the system. Therefore, the modern pursuit of economic growth conceived as a process unlimited by time and space, is to be regarded as an aberration. The new development paradigm is founded on a holistic vision of reality and is the only perspective that is compatible with the historical imperative of survive the current ecological and social global crisis.

Notwithstanding, critics of the concept of economic homeostasis, and of *de-growth economy* (Martinez-Allier et.al 2010), including especially those adhering the neoliberal theory, argue that any limitation to economic growth would reduce world business activity, and would foster loss of employments, therefore in more poverty. This is false. In fact, we should instead be rejoicing, for in a world of homeostatic economy there would be greater opportunities for businesses and jobs, although of a different nature. These new jobs and business can be created by developing, for instance, public mega- projects aimed at restoring the hundreds of millions of acres of forests destroyed during last 250 years; this is something that would lead to relocating today's overcrowded urban populations to smaller and less polluting cities. These

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<sup>1</sup> A team of scientists from Sun Yet-sen University, China, undertook an inventory of the amount of greenhouse effect gas emitted by 157 cities distributed around the world in 53 countries. The study shows that just 25 megacities are producing 52% of all world greenhouse effect emissions. According with the results, the three major sources of emission are: generation of energy, industry and transport. The main conclusion of this study is that though the investigated cities cover just 2% of Earth surface, they are the main contributors to climate change. <https://www.elconfidencial.com/medioambiente/ciudad/2021-09/2021/megaciudades-gases-efectoinvernadero-52-3193100/>

mega-projects would require millions of jobs and businesses over several decades, which would compensate for the loss of employment resulting from the introduction of the new economic paradigm. And what is more important: these projects would significantly halt the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions causing climate change, as forests are the main natural absorbers of CO<sub>2</sub>.

Other examples of opportunities for private corporations and governments in the context of a homeostatic economy are the following projects: removing the plastic contamination of the seas, restoring the depleted planet's aquifers, developing massive organic urban agricultural farms and cottage industries, manufacturing eco-technological devices, sustainable tourism, and many other types of green enterprise.

Given this broad understanding of the concept of homeostatic economy, one can realistically expect that the new paradigm can be undertaken and funded by an ample spectrum of political and economic interests.

Some readers may think that this scenario can be easily misunderstood or dismissed by vested interests, in order to keep the world economy growing as usual. This possibility does exist. In fact, authors have been proposing a so-called "modernization of ecology", which in reality means nothing but making money from taking advantage of the increasing concern for climate change crisis (examples of this trend are Gouldson 1996, Redcliff and Woodgate, 1996; Moll, 1996).

What it is being proposed in this article is a *Recuperating and Preserving Type of Economy*, which is qualitatively different from the modern economic model; in the new economic paradigm economic growth, production and consumption are kept at the level of the actual needs of people, and at the level of tolerance of natural environment. On the other hand, it goes without saying that in a homeostatic world the size of the planet's population should be too kept in homeostatic condition.

#### **4. From Freedom to Have to Freedom from Need**

All the foregoing discussions lead to rethinking the notion of freedom as assumed by modern Western societies. In practice, most persons sharing the culture of modernity understand freedom as *freedom to have* (goods, money and power). This materialistic conception of freedom has become the psychological substrate from which arises the typical consumerism of modern world.

The eagerness to reach freedom by means of increasing possessions incessantly whetted by commercial advertising is, by its very nature, insatiable. The ordinary modern individual comes to live in a permanent vicious cycle of frustration-satisfaction-frustration, and in conspicuous chronic state of anxiety, which is however considered normal in this culture.

To better understand the social behavior of individuals sharing the culture of modernity, we make a distinction between the *needs that are natural or innate* to all human beings, irrespectively of their culture; and the *needs that are artificially created or induced*.

Human beings' natural or innate needs are usually divided arbitrarily into *material and non-material needs*. However, both groups of needs are connected. The most important material needs are of course food and protection from the elements (shelter and clothing). How these needs are satisfied depends basically on the climate. These needs, called *primary needs*, are oriented towards guaranteeing the physical survival of the individual and his social group.

It is generally assumed that human's principal non-material needs are security and group membership. The need of love, or of appreciation, is implied in the latter. However, Ethnological and Paleo-Ethnological evidence show that humans in general need a socially established set of beliefs concerning the transcendence of their physical existence. In other words, people need some kind of religion. In fact, designs to eradicate

religion in largely constitutionally atheistic states such as in Marxist Russia, Cuba, China, etc. have failed.

Freedom is not a need in itself, but rather the result of needs being satisfied, or more precisely the absence of needs. This implies that the more we satisfy our needs the freer we shall be. In the same line of thinking, one might say that the richest person is not the one who owns most, but that one who needs less (Thoreau, 1854). This idea points out at an actual opposition between accumulation of wealth and freedom, since wealth creates new needs, like the need to preserve wealth, to guard it, and usually the desire to increase it. This is why the Chinese mystic and philosopher Lao Tzu (550 B.C) said: “He who accumulates much loses much...”

However, freedom is relative, and never absolute since needs are part of the human condition. Absolute freedom could only be possible if psychological factors underlying human needs are transcended, which is an idealistic state of being known in Buddhist philosophy as *Nirvana*. Thus, one might say that true freedom is freedom from need, or simply freedom *from*. Freedom *to* is exactly opposite of freedom *from*, since the *to* implies a desire and thus that something is missing, that there is a need to be satisfied. Modern culture conceives freedom as freedom *to have*, and its corresponding economic system, capitalism, is based on the exponential production of ever greater variety of goods, whose sale depends on people’s desires. Hence the constant creation of artificial needs and desires typical of modern civilization. This is made possible through the manipulation of human impulses by advertising techniques. In fact, the conception of freedom as *freedom to have* and the capitalistic socioeconomic model are two sides of the same social *gestalt*. This is one of the main reasons why in the West the ideal of freedom has in practice resulted in its antithesis.

If the permanent creation of ever greater variety of needs leads to a chronic feeling of emptiness and anxiety in the majority of modern individuals, especially in the comfortable and well-to-

do classes, among economically and socially marginalized individuals, the same leads to frustration and violence, one of the causes of the steadily increasing crime rates over the last decades in the world.

In relation to the actual human needs, meaning those that are not created by advertising, to feed the world population does not require new technological innovations or more economic growth. Indeed, experts consider that current food production is sufficient to feed all the inhabitants of Earth. However, hundreds of millions of human beings continue to suffer from hunger (UN, 2017, 1994).

The fact that roughly 86% of world's goods is consumed by scarcely a fifth of the world's population, and the well-known fact that a large part of these goods is produced using raw materials and labor from the poorest nations of the world (Credit Suisse, 2012), proves that the origin of world hunger and poverty are not to be found in the population explosion. Nor they are due to lack of efficient technologies, much less to lack of economic growth. They are the result of a rather unfair and grossly non-equitable distribution of the fruits of labor between the Western rich countries and the non-Western poor countries, and between the rich and poor in each nation.

To overcome the chronic hunger in the so-called Third World, and poverty in general, including the large pockets of poverty existing in countries like the United States of America, and in some European countries, international financial organizations like IMF and World Bank have proposed more economic growth and increasing international trade. However, this strategy has not worked. Its most obvious consequence has been a worsening of the environmental crisis, with little or no improvement in the misery of the people in the way of compensation. What has finally resulted is an economic expansion growing at the same rates as the world unemployment and the global climate crisis. This is another example of modernity intrinsic tendency to maximize selected variables instead of optimizing the whole system. It destabilizes

other variables and invariably creates new crisis (*cysmogenesis*).

The current strategy of international financial institutions like IMF and World Bank, of encouraging economic growth and international trade, does not consider the medium and long-range global effects of their policies. This too represents an example of the modern Cartesian-originated mode of thinking, which tends to divide reality into a series of unrelated compartments. One more example of the same is the process whereby industrialized nations relocate polluting factories in ecologically permissive countries like Mexico and Bangladesh. They should know, however, that nothing is gained by this, since sooner or later they may also suffer the effects of pollution, as in the Biosphere phenomena are all interconnected.

A homeostatic society's way of life is the antithesis of modern way of life. The best prototype of the latter is known as the "American way of life", which is regarded as a model in most Latin-American, Asian and African societies, particularly by westernized middle and upper social classes. But it is to expect that different social values would spontaneously emerge from a homeostatic society and economy. In the first place, as opposite to the American way of life, frugality, simplicity and leisure as a way of life would tend to be socially regarded as virtues, contrary to the current modern mentality. Besides, the development of new sources of psychological wellbeing, corresponding to a new set of social values and ideals, would reduce the consumption of hard drugs, tranquilizers and alcohol abuse, stress and other mental and physical disorders associated with the modern way of life. These new sources of psychological wellbeing would be, for instance, working and living close to nature, spending more time with friends and family, participating in communal activities, sporting in Nature, having time for self-education and artistic activities, and for aesthetic and spiritual practices.

## **5. From Alienated Development to Self-Development**

Semantically, the word *development* means simply *unfolding*. In fact, the meaning of development is the unfolding of the potential characteristics of an individual, species or group. It follows, that in the case of a nation, true development means the unfolding or deployment of one's own culture. Hence, the kind of development adopted by a given nation is relative to that nation only. Therefore, for development to be socially functional and satisfying to the members of a nation, it could not be the imitation of other nation's model of development. This commonsense notion was distorted by 19th century social evolutionist theory, and it is unfortunate that it still prevails in the modern social and economic sciences.

Development conceived as the imitation of the Western model has proven to be a goal that the majority of nations have not achieved. Throughout the last century, and particularly after World War II, when the idea of development started to be a world concern, humanity has become increasingly divided into opposite camps: on the one side, a few so-called "First World" or "developed" nations, which grew richer as time went on. On the other side, the overwhelming majority of humanity, composed of non-Western or so-called "developing" nations, and previously known as the "Third World", grew poorer and more dependent on the Western nations. This negative balance, for which the extinct Soviet socialist model and today's neo-liberal model bear equal responsibility, has created in the poorest nations of the world a frustrated feeling and a skeptical attitude towards the idea of development.

From our point of view, this failure has its roots in the innate incapability of peoples in general to internalize the cultural myths and social values of other nations (in this case, the myths underlying Western conception of development), since to assimilate other nations' cultural myths and models of development implies losing their own cultural identity and sovereignty. From this arises the persistent resistance in the majority of nations (excepting their westernized social elites) to follow the Western model of development.

Self-development, on the other hand, implies - apart from building the material structures for the satisfaction of the actual material needs of the people - preserving the national culture and the natural environment. Moreover, self-development means preserving humankind's rich cultural variety and heritage, which is as important for the future of humankind as it is to preserve biological richness and diversity.

## **6. From Raping Nature to Seducing Nature**

According to Morris Berman (1987):

...when a member of an indigenous group does the rain dance, for example, he does not expect an automatic response. This is not failed technology; rather he is inviting the clouds to join him, to respond to his invocation. In effect, he is asking them to make love to him; as with any normal lover, they may or may not be disposed to do so.

This is the way nature works. With this approach, the native learns about reality of the situation, the moods of the earth and the sky. He surrenders himself: Nemesis, orgiastic participation. Western technology, on the other hand, sows the clouds from airplanes. It takes nature by storm and dominates it. It has no time for moods or subtleties, and so, together with rain, we get noise, pollution and the possible destruction of the ozone layer. Instead of putting ourselves into harmony with nature, we seek to conquer it and the result is ecological destruction...

Of course, there is a tremendous difference between the way of producing rain by "seducing" the clouds and the modern rain inducing techniques. Or say, between the blowing empoisoned darts of Amazonian tribes and the missile recently dropped by Americans in Kabul.

The myriads examples in fields like communication, medicine, food production, civil engineering, computing technologies, astronomy, etc. show the amazing advances of modern science and technology. Yet, does technological advance really mean human progress? Humans are not machines, but creatures that also require psychological wellbeing and spiritual fulfillment, which modern technological civilization has failed to provide. This failure has become more evident after the horrors of World Wars I and II, such as the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombardment, the never- ending chronic hunger of millions, the current climate crisis, the new pandemic, etc. All this despite the so-called “progress” of humankind.

To go to the root of the problem, technology does not exist in the real world in isolation, for it is a variable within a complex social and environmental system. These interact multi-directionally with the remaining variables composing the system. Thus, going back to the example of the empoisoned darts of the Amazonians compared to the Americans missiles, if these two types of weapons are isolated from their respective contexts, their real meaning and function will be difficult to grasp, since they are not mere technological devices, but parts of a system that includes elements from a variety of spheres such as economics, cultural values, social myths, religious beliefs, and the natural environment.

It follows that to divide human societies into primitive and advanced societies based on their different technological development, apart from being simplistic and ethnocentric, is not a scientific way to approach the study of human societies. Moreover, technology is not neutral or innocent as many people believe. Each civilization or culture develops a particular kind of technology, in accordance with its specific foundational myths and cultural values. Hence, technology is also culturally relative. As an example of this relativity there may emerge in future a new type of technology emerging from a post-modernity civilization.

A holistic conception of reality leads to an approach to nature that differs radically from that of the Cartesian dualistic conception of reality that identifies modernity. If a given human culture conceives human beings as part of nature it will spontaneously tend to develop a kind of technology respectful to nature. The opposite is also true: if a given society conceives human beings as inherently separated from nature, it would generate a kind of technology that will tend to abuse nature or at least to ignore it.

At the practical level, a holistic conception of reality leads to the development of technologies of little ecological impact, like for instance the so-called *soft technologies* and *intermediate technologies* (Schumacher, 1973). The expression “intermediate technologies” means man-powered equipment and machines that require no large capital investments or highly sophisticated manufacturing or repairing procedures.

In addition to the obligation of all true ecological governments to promote low ecological impact technologies, anti-ethical practices such as “built-in obsolescence”, non-repairable, non-reusable, or non-biodegradable articles, as well as products that represent a direct damage to the environment, are to be legally banned or discouraged through heavy taxes.

Besides soft and intermediate technologies are particularly good at generating jobs. To solve the social and political problems derived from increasing unemployment due to the current robot industry and so-called artificial intelligence, technologies in a sustainable civilization should be evaluated according to their potential to provide jobs for the greatest number of people. Therefore, handicrafts and small-scale industries must be revived, which also would bring about a spontaneous movement from overcrowded cities back to the rural areas. Additionally, this would bring about decentralization at the political level, and thus a more democratic global society (Gandhi, 1927).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to Daniel Susskind, a professor of Economics at Oxford University, new breakthroughs in artificial intelligence mean that all kinds

Nuclear energy is the opposite of soft ecological impact technology, and the paramount example of an ecological hard impact technology. Nevertheless, if CO2 sources of energy, like oil, gas and carbon, are discontinued as it seems will be the case during next decade, nuclear energy will be the only source of energy left for satisfying the unbelievable power demand of a world conceived to remain in perpetual economic growth. However, it is generally accepted that the planned massive construction of nuclear plants all over the Earth represents a serious threat to the natural environment, people's health, and world peace. This is so because so far no one has been able to guarantee the full safety of nuclear plants and of their radioactive waste disposal systems.

### **7. The Crucial Lesson of the Corona Virus Pandemic and Bhutan's Revolutionary Social Experiment**

The Corona virus pandemic has driven the reduction of the GDP index, thus a decrease in general economic growth. Correlatively, as shown by satellite images, there has been a considerable, though temporary, decrease of CO2 and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The photos taken by NASA has demonstrated empirically that the present abnormal amount of CO2 gas in the atmosphere, which are the main cause for current global climate crisis, has been a result of human economic activity. This is a fact of tremendous importance, for it shows us the actual causes of current climate change. More importantly, it is also pointing out at its remedy. In other words, Corona virus has given us a crucial lesson. And the lesson is that to stop the ongoing process of global warming, a new economic development paradigm must be developed, which will have to be well away from present sort of

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of jobs are increasingly at risk. Machines no longer need to think like humans in order to outperform them as once widely believed. As a result, more and more tasks that need to be far beyond the capability of computers - from diagnosing illness to drafting legal contracts, from writing news reports to composing music - are coming within reach. The threat of technological unemployment is now real (Susskind, 2020).

“GDP Cult”, and far from the cultural premises that underlies the conventional measure of human progress.<sup>3</sup>

The case of Bhutan serves as an example of a nation whose new constitutional desideratum goes beyond modernity’s development paradigms, meaning that for the first time in recent history a nation has put into practice, politically and as a fundamental constitutional premise, that human progress and development does not consist in the accumulation of material wealth, but in achieving happiness through the harmonious fulfillment of both material and non-material needs, and by safeguarding world cultures and the natural environment (Armand, 2019). This is the meaning of the Bhutanese concept of Gross National Happiness or GNH Index of Development (Ura, 2015).

The impact of this revolutionary idea has been so great, that governments of countries like Holland and New Zealand did not wait long to implement in their nations a kind of Happiness Index to measure their own development. Various adaptation of the Bhutanese index of happiness has been elaborated in these countries to help counteract the effects of Gross Domestic Product (Sellsmoor, 2019).

In addition, as early as 2012, a group of 62 countries at the UN approved the Bhutanese Gross National Happiness Index (GNH), as a valid path for their own development (Ura, 2015.) It is therefore to be expected that with the current worsening of world climate conditions, particularly in Western Europe and in Northern America (unexpected floods, fires, heat waves and stronger hurricanes), more countries will be soon

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<sup>3</sup> According to a BBC News report (May 11, 2020), in last 100 years several crises have meant a decrease of greenhouse effect gas emissions, as result of a decreased consumption of oil, gas and carbon. That occurred during Spanish Flu Pandemic, the Great Depression and the end of World War II. However, the greatest fall has been caused by the Corona virus pandemic in just a few months; a fact that NASA has detected from the space. On the other hand, the International Agency of Energy EIA estimated that the consumption of energy fell by 6% during 2020, which led to a further decrease of CO2 emissions.

implementing such progressive changes in their economic and social policies.

## **8. Conclusion**

In the present article, the epistemological basis of modern science and the fundamental concepts of Human Needs, Development, Technology, and Freedom was revised, upon which modern civilization has been built. The author's theory of modernity (Armand, 1998) was used as a framework to approach the root causes of the 21st century global crisis. Some aspects of the Coronavirus pandemic, as well as of the implementation in Bhutan of the Gross National Happiness Index (and of similar development index in an increasing number of nations), are used as an illustration of a socio-economic and political new world trend which support our main conclusion that humankind could eradicate the root causes of the current global crisis, and this implies a deep cultural mutation leading to a new World Civilization.

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