

## "Faced with today's food and energy crisis, how can society improve its well-being?"

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### Summary

Asking the right question can trump looking for the right answer. What do we mean by 'society improving its well-being'? Do we really mean to attribute agency primarily to society, and thereby subordinate individuals as mere epiphenomena? Who, as it turns out, begot whom? This first conception of the problem, as it happens, underlies the vast majority of social initiatives, that attempt to change the world from outside in. I outline a different prospective; improvements in society proceed from improvements in individual selves. Paradoxically, it is when we focus our energy inwards that we inspire the greatest change.

### Main Essay Text

My physics teacher in high school, in outlining the history of his field, would often emphasise that questions turn out to be far more important than answers. It took me a while to fully understand what he meant.

Language is invisible – we take it for granted as the neutral mediator of our thoughts – and because of this exercises a subtle influence over us, of which we are often unaware. When we use uncritically, as Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated, a world like 'globalisation', we are unconsciously persuaded into seeing changes happening around us as inevitable processes, unstoppable like natural evolution, rather than as conscious efforts driven by human action. For this reason, as Barthes, Derrida and the whole French structuralist school have taught us, any analysis of a problem must always begin with a deconstruction of the way that problem has reached us. For it may be the very frame in which a problem is cast that prevents us finding the 'right' answer.

Terms of debate commonly reach us courtesy of the media. We sit passively in front of newspapers and television screens and receive the world anew each day. So naturalised are these daily rituals, that we forget the media not only presents us with reality but also *co-constructs* reality, as a wise woman asked Socratically: amazing isn't it, how the news happens to fit so perfectly into the newspaper each day?<sup>1</sup> We may then, before jumping so enthusiastically to tackle the problems of the day, first ask ourselves who is it that has determined the agenda and do we agree, and – if we are really sharp – do we even agree with the whole concept of "a problem of the day"

Around about the same time McLuhan was shouting *the medium is the message*, a young French man had already seen the woods for the tree. For Guy Debord, the modern media, or spectacle as he called it, represents more than just a series of images and text, but rather the concrete realisation of a whole way of life. We can perhaps better understand what Debord meant through the lyrics of an African American poet, who though orbiting a different cultural universe, understood intuitively what Debord had philosophised.

You see, the press *follow* events. In our obsession with news, therefore, we become transformed from conscious agents actively creating our own reality, to passive observers of a reality that unfolds unstopably before our eyes. To make news – in the sense of making concrete change -, we must first leave behind the domain of its consumption and for this reason Gil Scott Heron warned us: '*The revolution will not be televised!*'

Having seen the circus for what it is, we may just escape our passive entrapment in an a-historical world of constant crises, interlaced with celebrity nonsense, to realise the long historical roots of the problems we are currently facing. We might also realise, to our surprise, that others had long anticipated and long attempted to address these very same issues. You see, Gil Scott also sang that every generation faces its turn '*to try and save the world*'. The problems of mankind are archetypal, in the sense that every generation, in a manner peculiar to itself, faces the question of how to avoid its self destruction; isn't the first great literary piece of Western civilisation, after all, about this same dilemma?

In our own attempt to save the world, we face – like all the people who lived before us - two options, and there are only ever two – the introverted or the extroverted. The extroverted perspective, specifically because it makes its presence so outwardly felt, is perhaps what we are most accustomed to. This is the arena of UN politics, large scale campaigns and publicised initiatives for change. The problem is out there and exists independently of us.

This outwards looking perspective is undoubtedly necessary, and thanks to it we have eradicated polio, increased awareness about the importance of fair trade, and are now pressuring industry into using greener energy. Yet, are there not always two dimensions to any problem. Isn't outward decay, - as the historian Edward Gibbon explored - reflective of an inner loss? Don't markets collapse, only because we allow them to? Is it not vanity to buy fair trade bananas and carbon-offset products when our most fundamental attitudes mirror those driving the world's current food and energy crisis?

Think about it, do we not in battling to get into that exclusive grad school or ruthlessly outracing our peers to promotion partake in the same winner takes all mentality? Isn't the monster that threatens us – as so cleverly symbolised in M. Night Shyamalan's latest fable – much closer to home? Is not the macrocosm a reflection of the inner one, and if Western civilisation's most influential moral system focused so much attention on the status of the neighbour, isn't it because this domain, most clearly and concretely, reflect our whole attitude to the world, and isn't this what we really should mean when we say "*think globally, act locally*"?

Of course, by no means do we lock ourselves indoors and self flagellate; both outwards and inner perspectives are necessary. We must march when it is time to march, and shout when it is time to shout – without forgetting that a person might vainly spend their lifetime trying to convince others to do, what could have more successfully been proselytized through personal example. Society is us, and if in the course of our short lives, we can, in our own biography and network of relationships, reflect all that we hope others would do, - we will have succeeded and through this come to influence society in the most concrete way a human being can. Yes, there may be no bright lights and no crowd to cheer our silent efforts, but then remember what is implied in the subtler undertones of the poet's revelation: "*the revolution will be no reruns . . . the revolution will be live*"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from a quotation on display in the British Library restaurant in the summer of 2008. A similar quote is attributed to Loesje International and the television character Jerry Seinfeld.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from the same song mentioned previously: '*The Revolution will not be televised*'. From Gil Scott Heron's debut album: *Small Talk at 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox*.