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The intergenerational contract has been cancelled

Parents in general love their children. They want them to be happy and to be able to lead a secure and meaningful life.

Parents also tend to want their children to have a better life than they had, especially as human history is also a history of poverty, war, famine, disease, suffering, destruction and catastrophe – maybe more than of fulfilled lives and happy relations and partnerships. Parents also tend to expect their children to take care of them when they get old and when their power and abilities fade.

The family clan has always served as a buffer against individual hardship. You got older and your abilities shrank, but there was always a role for you to fulfil within the larger family. Functions, essential to the group, that you could not fulfil anymore, were taken over by younger members of the family, usually coupled also with an increase in their prestige, standing and power.

In wealthy OECD countries, the security provided through the family clan has been replaced through a system of mostly state-run retirement and social security schemes, where you pay into the system while you are part of the workforce, and then draw from it in

times of need and age. This resembles an intergenerational contract not unlike the family clan system that it has largely replaced.

Over the last 65 years, we have seen increasing wealth accumulation and a rise in opportunities and expectations, coupled with unprecedented social mobility on a global level. We enjoy today the multiple benefits of our advanced technology, which enable us to produce food, energy, goods and services for billions of people, allowing many of us to lead a life largely independent from the harshness of nature, weather and climate, and from regional and local limitations.

Human society has managed to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty; it has provided access to mass education and has greatly improved health services. Democracy (in different shapes) has become the rule rather than the exception.

It seems that we are in a position to leave behind a much better, healthier, wealthier, educated world for our children with more security, freedom and opportunity than ever before. But is this really the case?

Let us look at the world as if it were a farm. A farmer would aim to leave his children a farm in better condition than when he took it over from his parents. So if the world was a farm and the generation born in the late 1940s and 1950s were the farmers in the process of passing on their farm to their children, what does this farm look like today?

It is highly indebted for one. The farmer does not own his farm; the banks and their shareholders do. Its ability to produce (eco-services) is greatly reduced, as is the diversity of plant and animal life and indeed the diversity of any other system humans have laid hands on. Not to say anything about eroded soil, depleted groundwater reserves and the accumulation of toxic substances in the farm environment. And not to mention our tinkering with the one system that is most important for a functioning farm: a moderate and largely reliable climate.

To add insult to injury, we are asking the next generation of farmers to fix the mess we have created over a period of only 60 years or so, and in addition we expect them to send us the monthly cheque to our retirement home in the Balearic Islands.

A couple of generations have had an excessive party. We are now in the early morning hours and it is becoming evident that there will be the mother of all hangovers, but we still want to continue partying, because we do not know anything else anymore and there is still somebody selling us booze, telling us, "It is all fine, we've only just started, there is no limit to partying".

Our way of managing the planet and its resources generates increasing inequality and with it instability and insecurity for a growing number of people. We have driven young people into higher and higher education, but our economic system does not offer them appropriate jobs, while the economy's understanding of efficiency and profit has destroyed manufacturing jobs.

The consumer society has led to a fragmentation of society. The single person household is the dream of all marketers and producers, especially if the individual is frightened, isolated, problem-laden, egoistic and narcissistic. People living together and sharing is a nightmare for producers of fridges, cars or any other material goods.

Our consumer society raises the level of material expectation without providing the opportunities to live up to it. The world is becoming more stressful, less healthy and more uncomfortable for more and more people. The line dividing the population into haves and have-nots is moving upwards through the social strata and if this trend continues, then we will return to a feudalistic system, where very few own it all and the rest work to just keep on living. Many who once felt part of a comfortably secure higher middle class now feel like a hamster in a running wheel, having to run faster and faster just to remain in the same place.

If you were successful in the 1960s and 1970s, then it was not that difficult to save money and buy yourself a nice apartment or house and a decent piece of land outside the city. Jobs were secure and plentiful. Companies hired talents before they had even finished university and, as a university graduate, you had the passport to becoming part of the wealthy middle class. This has changed significantly: in southern European countries, a large number of 35-year olds live with their parents, not because this is what they dream of, but because it is so difficult to get a well-paying job with the level of security that enables them to rent a decent apartment or start a family.

So this is the world we intend to pass on to our children and grandchildren, and it is no wonder that people of all age groups feel pessimistic about the prospects of getting out of this mess. Pessimism, however, is an attitude that can serve as justification for inaction and for looking away. It is not a mirror of reality. It is an attitude we simply cannot afford.

If we are serious about the intergenerational contract, then we will have to look beyond the simple deliverables that characterise our post-Second World War worldview. We live now in a truly global world and our impact as a global society has, due to our numbers and our technology, become global in all respects. If we take the intergenerational contract seriously, then we cannot waste natural resources like fossil fuels and high-grade ores, which have been accumulated over millions of years, in a giant 100-year party as if nobody intends to follow us. We cannot risk the future of our grandchildren by leaving them a climate that might turn the planet into largely uninhabitable territory without them having the slightest chance of interfering with non-linear processes which will then be outside human control. If we want to have a future as a species on a finite planet, we will have to become able to live within its physical boundaries; to understand the principle of physical limits; and to adopt a timescale, which looks forward at least hundreds of years and not just until the next gratification, election or quarterly report. And we have to learn how to build our society on respect – for fellow humans, other species, nature and the planet – and responsibility.

If we take the intergenerational contract seriously, then we will develop an economy that provides the kind of jobs needed in the numbers needed. If we take it seriously, then we hand over a world of opportunities for all.

In reality, humanity finds it hard to see beyond the rewards and pleasures of immediate gratification, while finding itself more and more in the position of the sorcerer's apprentice. We claim to care for future generations and while this is probably true for our children on an individual level, it is not true for us as society. As a society we do not care for the long-term future of humanity nor about the well-being of future generations. At least, our actions do not show this.

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If our current system does not have an inbuilt ability to adjust itself and change course where needed, those who will increasingly be disenfranchised will do it themselves. Historically, this is how fundamental change tends to take place: in jumps and leaps, not linearly. A system that cannot solve the problems it has created and, quite the opposite, drives the cart deeper and deeper into the mud, cannot survive.

Those that have caused a systemic problem are usually not the ones who can find and implement the necessary systemic solution. They are too much part of the problem with the underlying wrong belief systems and paradigms. They usually also benefit the most from the problems they have generated.

The change needed will have to come from others, and in this case probably from the generations following those born in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. But is there any indication, that whatever we call “today’s young generations” will be able, willing and capable of creating this kind of fundamental turnaround? Are they not caught in the same superficial consumerist world? Is an iPad not more important than the climate when it comes down to it? Is my world today not more important than everybody’s world in 20 or 50 years? Are we at all capable of caring for people we have never met; for generations we have no clue about; for our species?

Superficially, young people might be caught up in the same consumerist world as their parents, but digging deeper, we see a very different young generation emerging, one that is international, educated, interconnected, political, global and, in principle, perfectly capable of taking things into their own hands.

Change originates from individuals and small groups. In the beginning, their message is not heard, they are ignored, ridiculed or even prosecuted. But if the idea is right, then the message will reach more and more people and slowly a critical mass builds. Once this critical mass exists, it needs a spark and the time for change will come. It is possible to understand the inevitability of a critical mass building behind a certain need for change and to anticipate it, but it is not possible to really see the moment of “eruption” coming. We can feel the rumbling of the volcano, but we do not know when it will erupt and when its top will blow off.

We tend to understand change as something linear and gradual, finding it difficult to comprehend exponential developments or change coming in leaps and bounds. We also tend to see the future primarily as a continuation of the present. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the media and most politicians foresaw it being replaced by a Western capitalistic democracy. Very few could foresee new types of political regimes emerging. Today we have any kind of hybrid between Stalinist communism, capitalism and democracy.

We might today be undergoing a similar change, without yet understanding the true nature of what is already happening. Political systems have started to fluctuate a while ago in many if not most countries. One election a “left-wing” party wins with a landslide, the next election it will be a right-wing party getting the mandate to form a government. New parties and movements flare up overnight, become hugely popular and then fade away as fast as they appeared. These fluctuations might already be a sign of an imminent change into some other political order. It is in any case likely that these fluctuations will become larger when the current

governments and political systems cannot cope with the problems global society is facing. One day not very far away, these fluctuations might drive us out of our virtual democratic stability into a new kind of political system, one more capable of dealing with the challenges facing humankind and the young generations. This can happen overnight and it will be the young generations who will decide what this political system will look like and not the retired ones – despite their so-called consumer power. It will also not be the 1%, as the current system is already rigged in their favour and indirectly a main driver behind many of the movements that demand change.

By and large, politics has lost its way and is now an obstacle to change instead of being its driver. There might have been days where politicians had visions for society, but today they look at polls, which tell them what the people think and feel. They view change as a direction wise to take to win the next election. The political class understands its job as mediating between interest groups and special interests. It functions as the prime tool and agent for maintaining business as usual, allowing corrections on the fringe, as long as they do not question the system as such. Will this be enough? No.

Humanity has essentially two options: to remain in a hole, without realising it, digging itself deeper into the hole. This is a path which will likely lead to higher inequality, social unrest, rising prices of natural resources, resource constraints and uncontrollable climate change. The other option means daring to face the situation we are in and being clear about the kind of changes needed. If we choose the second path, we will be able to understand humanity in the context of global, 21st century technology and limitations and we will be able to face the magnitude of change needed.

Pessimism is an attitude and not the mirror of reality, so the glass is either half full or half empty. Humanity can and will rise to the occasion, and we will find the clarity of mind and the guts to face the challenges. Change will come from those born from the 1980s and 1990s onwards. They will prove to the older generations that it is indeed possible for the human species to fundamentally change its ways.