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Is coercion necessary for mitigating climate change?

by

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Abstract

The changing climate cannot be mitigated by a swarm of technologies. Because, every new innovation in energy supply and every increase in efficiency of energy usage encourages even greater use of energy. If technology cannot be our saviour what can? Two leading thinkers of our age, Garrett Hardin and Kenneth Boulding, suggest coercive governance of the common space. Boulding gives the analogy of a closed spaceship which can only survive if it has one captain, a clear direction, and a well defined destination with little discretion to the travellers. Hardin brings parallel with a bank robber who is unlikely to listen to the fervent pleas of the bank depositors to refrain from robbing the common money. No society has compunctions about placing handcuffs on the hands that rob. But that is because there is a clear consensus on what constitutes robbery. Something which is yet to be developed for those who corner our common space.

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Every generation produces a book, sometimes just a short essay, that forces the world to stop for a while and begin thinking afresh. These books are events rather than mere publications. Adam Smith's classical work of 1776, *The Wealth of Nations*, was one such event that influenced economic activity around the globe for over two centuries. He argued that a rational human being, seeking only his own good, is led by an invisible hand to economic actions that result in public good. Stated otherwise, economic decisions even when taken individually tend to benefit the entire society. What was universally condemned as greed earlier found justification to exist and prosper.

And greed prospered in ways Adam could hardly have approved. Advancing technologies in ship building extended economic boundaries to distant shores, among cultures that allowed extreme profits through their own lack of sophistication. Businesses arranged permanency for themselves through war, coercion and negotiations and exotic colonies sprang trading cloths where natives lived naked, feeling little need for covering themselves in equatorial warmth, before soulful heads accompanying businesses convinced them of the need to be decently clad. And wear factory made imported cloths bringing good to the larger society back home.

But even in this greed there was often some semblance of public good for the colonized people, too, in terms of rail and road networks, urban habitations, education, health and sanitation that the benevolent invisible hand could not be totally denied.

Adam Smith lived in times of population kept low by war and disease. And Malthus's worries of an exponential population growth were still half a century away. The invisible hand that brought public harm with individual's greed would begin appearing only much later when population began growing as fast as the greed.

Huge industrial production for the burgeoning population produced waste that was difficult to flush in the flowing rivers without turning them into poisonous outlets. Pollution was the public harm that individual greed brought which had never entered Adam Smith's arithmetic. That was left to the eventful nineteen sixties of Woodstock, the peak of cold war and amidst an unholy struggle for supremacy over an earth that was presumed to have no limits when two works of unparalleled insight appeared one after another.

Both these offered insights into the earth's limits, in their own ways. The first to appear on the horizon in 1966 was the "The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth" by economist Kenneth Boulding that questioned the notion that the earth had boundless resources that would last as long as the man lived. For centuries past the dominant human imagination was of an earth spreading into eternity, too big to be exhausted of its bounty. The knowledge that earth was spherical, on which every starting point of journey was also its end, was known to science but the human spirit was still far from absorbing the limits of the earth. If things appeared to end at some place there was always somewhere else to move to, a new frontier. The colonization of

Americas and the departure of a countless millions from the hungry shores of Europe to the Wild West into riches and glory further reinforced this notion of limitlessness.

In his gentle language Boulding forced the realization that the earth is not a limitless cowboy ranch but a small closed entity, like a spaceship, with limited resources for inputs and with rapidly diminishing sources of energy but with a humongous appetite for output for its ever increasing billions. And a spaceship does not have the luxury of a sewer; it must learn to recycle its effluents if it is not to submerge in its own waste.

Around the same turbulent times another thinker, this time a biologist, Garrett Hardin, spoke of the “Tragedy of Commons” which has, to this day, remained a classic work of insight into what ails the world. The common space attracts the aggressive that maximize their gains at the expense of the rest till the space gets so eroded with excessive usage that it can serve none. The advent of private property over the long period of human social evolution was in some ways a response to this dilemma. But not everything can be privatized for more efficient management. By their very nature the all important atmosphere and oceans can only be a common space and, yet, by the inexorable logic of the use of common space, they cannot escape ill and excessive usage as already evidenced by the changing climate.

In the introduction to his essay Hardin refers to the arms race between the two great powers of the day, USA and USSR, both vying to be more powerful than the other through technological innovations leading to “the dilemma of steadily increasing military power but steadily decreasing national security”. Every technological advance was countered by another by the rival power and the result was neither was more secure than before. The national security could not be advanced through improvements in the techniques of science but only through fundamental changes in human values or ethics. Ever since warfare began as an instrument of statecraft technological innovations had been helpful to kings achieve victory but the innovations were secondary to the fighting spirit of soldiers and the leadership of the generals. However, the giant technological leaps that nuclear bombs provided on both sides of the divide had changed the equation at its most fundamental level. Security was in pressing the nuclear buttons first so that the other had no chance to exercise option but both had become equally adapt at that. A new way had thus to be found that ensured there was no need to press the button at all, a shift in thinking rather than an advance in technique.

The same principle applies equally forcefully to the ruin the world faces today. The changing climate cannot be mitigated by the swarm of technologies on the way. Because, every new innovation in energy supply and every increase in efficiency of energy usage encourages even greater use of energy, some of it legitimate because a large part of humanity today is still deprived of what is expected as the basic need. And a lot more would be illegitimate, occasioned by greed for more and a sense of entitlement that accompanies wealth. Because, any common space vacated due to a technological innovation would be immediately occupied by those already in queue getting longer by the moment with increasing population.

Hardin lays the primary blame on the population. There is a homeostasis in wild ecosystems that brings excessive fecundity of wild animals under quick control through increased predation, lowered food availability and higher disease mortality. Human parenthood is often an economic decision in poor households but Adam Smith's invisible hand, Hardin argues, cannot bring public good because the larger society cannot allow lowered survival rates of new born in poor households due to famine and disease. The common good of higher care for the young is a human ideal that cannot be abandoned whatever be the cost.

If technology cannot be our saviour what can? Both Hardin and Boulding suggest a coercive governance of the common space. Boulding gives the analogy of a closed spaceship which can only survive if it has one captain, a clear direction, and a well defined destination with little discretion to the travellers. Hardin brings parallel with a bank robber who is unlikely to listen to the fervent pleas of the bank depositors to refrain from robbing the common money. No society has compunctions about placing handcuffs on the hands that rob. But that is because there is a clear consensus on what constitutes robbery. Something which is yet to be developed for those who corner away our common space.

How far would coercion need to go for it to be effective in the short time that we have at our disposal? Would it be consistent with the aspirations for participative democracy of the people across the globe? Would it require a centrally planned economy, with global allocation of resources in accordance with needs? Perhaps Marx may find some relevance at last. But who will allocate the global resources? One hopes they are wiser than the industrial proletariats of the past to whom coal was meant to be sent up in fumes, as they did all over Eastern Europe with impunity for as long as they could.

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