

How to Hack Human History

By John Merryman

With all the massive cultural, political, technical, economic and environmental upheavals of recent generations, the trendlines for the future of humanity look volatile. While there is nothing which can forestall many of the consequences, the question of how best to adapt to these circumstances is one which has many people concerned.

There are some basic facts which have to be stated and accepted before these issues can be realistically addressed. For one thing, every person reading this is mortal and doesn't quite know what to make of that. That makes it likely that just about any action will be strongly motivated by some element of self interest. This is not necessarily a bad thing, since the larger interest is the collective self interest. It just limits some historically effective strategies, since there are limits on how many promises can realistically be made to engender cooperation from billions of people. Since people are led with hope and herded with fear and both are of limited effectiveness in such monumental numbers as we are dealing with, then some other method of resetting the general equation has to be considered.

First and foremost, this situation has to be addressed in a way that can be intellectually comprehended by vast numbers of normally intelligent people, not just those with select education in any of the various facets of society. What might seem viable to scientists, or politicians, or information technologists, economists, priests, lawyers, plumbers, or what have you, may well not make sense to the broader audience. So what I see as first being necessary is to lay out a very basic description of reality that is sure to irritate those with a professional interest in its description.

At its most basic level, reality is the dichotomy of energy and information. Like two sides of a coin, one does not exist without the other. Energy manifests information and information defines energy. Among those for whom this is a professional concern, information tends to be paramount because it is what is descriptive, yet in the absence of any form of energy, there can be no information. The void has no form. Sorry Plato.

Proof of the power of this dichotomy is that over the course of billions of years of evolution, we have developed as physical organisms with very distinct information processing functions, in the central nervous system and energy processing functions, in the digestive, respiratory and circulatory systems.

There are numerous physiological aspects of this dichotomy built into society as well. The two most apparent are government as society's central nervous system and finance as its economic circulation system.

The next basic issue which must be addressed is as to what is our primary motivating factor. For many people it is a variety of needs, desires, beliefs, assumptions, etc. I think there are ways to peel away some of the layers from these issues as well and find some common ground.

Usually religion is the area in which society collects its communal vision of what is important, but that has become a bit of a fallback position for significant unanswered questions and it is seriously fragmented. The central thesis for many people, monotheism, the premise of an all-knowing absolute being, is about 3000 years old. While it fills and fulfills a variety of emotional needs and some convenient political ends, many do not find it coherently logical. Since this essay is a search for basic logical objectives, then the notion of God should be examined.

Its most elementary description, that of an all-knowing absolute, is a bit of a contradiction. The universal state of the absolute would be a condition of overwhelmingly basic simplicity. One where all conflicts are weighed and balanced out. Neither good, nor bad. Up or down, inside or out. For example, a temperature of absolute zero is a state of no energy or action whatsoever. So if God were absolute, it would seem a rather cold and distant being. (Then again, that might explain alot.)

And what about 'all-knowing?' What is knowledge? What is 'meaning,' for that matter? Isn't it simply what is left when you have distilled away all that is meaningless? The signal extracted from the noise? But often isn't one man's noise, another man's signal?

The amount of information we are subject to on a constant basis is overwhelming and we have to edit much of it away. What must it be like for a being that has to know 'everything?' When we combine information, the energy carrying it tends to cancel out, creating just that static and noise we so carefully extracted the information from.

So it would seem there is a theological conundrum here. The absolute state is one in which all energy and thus information has been balanced out and canceled. Too much information overloads the circuits on which information depends. So knowledge is a function of the detail that is lost for the absolute.

In fact much of the process of existence is erasing old information in order to create new information, because the energy is apparently conserved, but the information surely is not. That which is present is the energy, while the flow of time is the constantly changing forms, as they coalesce out of possibility and recede into history.

So if God is in charge, she apparently doesn't want to know everything. Possibly a more reasonable theological proposition is the spiritual absolute would be the essence of awareness and beingness, from which we rise, not an ideal form from which we fell. In a sense, a spiritual energy, rather than the intellectual forms it manifests.

It would be analogous to the new born babe, not a wizened old man. Knowledge then becomes the experience of this elemental self pushing out like a sprouting seed and the feedback of that physical context pushing back.

Our goal then becomes just that experience. We are the product of literally billions of years of feedback leading up to this point in time and what matters is how well we pass that fragile baton of life and experience on to the next generation. Life then is a bit like a sentence. The end is just punctuation, while what matters is how well we tie together what came before with what comes after.

Information is dynamically complex and complexity tends to become unstable beyond a certain level, just as atomic structure tends to become unstable beyond a certain number of protons. We frequently build out levels of complexity and then struggle to maintain them and manage their consequences. Biology deals with this wave pattern of increasing and collapsing complexity by having individual organisms die and pass on their genetic code.

This is the immediate crux of our current problem; How do we maintain levels of social complexity, all of which insist on multiplying and creating conflicting interests. Otherwise known as the Tower of Babel syndrome.

The current panacea is supposed to be the burgeoning information and technology industries, yet it speeds up the processes, rather than resolving the underlying conflicts. Our ability to overwhelm our finite environment has become more efficient and implacable. While we progress linearly, nature responds non-linearly.

We are fundamentally linear creatures. As singular organisms, we experience this kaleidoscopic reality as a sequence of events and being generally predatory, this sense is further focused. Nature, on the other hand, is cyclical and any action ultimately is balanced by other, non-linear activity.

While we naturally push against all the obstacles and limitations on our lives, it is this push back which creates our reality. Science sees only what can be measured as real and measurement is just such push back of one entity encountering another.

So even issues such as mortality need to be understood in the context of what defines, limits and what limits, defines. If there is a spiritual beingness that is without form and shape, it would be equally nebulous. It is this physical need to deal with adversity that is the source of character and spiritual strength.

So many of our most intractable conflicts are opposing sides of fundamental dichotomies; Youth and age, conservative/liberal, socialism/individualism, even wealth and poverty are different aspects of larger cycles of creation and dissolution, expansion and contraction.

When these cycles get out of stable ranges, they start chewing up the landscape and machinery. Civilization is starting to push against those many aforementioned natural limits and the possible consequences are disturbing.

While our current civil, social and economic structures have been fairly stable, there is apparent decay in the financial apparatus and its regulatory agencies. I think a large part of the problem is a basic misconception built into the nature of the system. Money is essentially a contract, but the premise of capitalism is that it can be treated as a commodity.

Promises can be multiplied to infinity, but actual value is determined by a fairly broad range of conditions and circumstances. If there was a broad understanding that money is representative of a social contract and as such is a form of public utility, it would seriously change our attitude toward it. As an economic medium, it functions somewhat like a road system. Like blood vessels in the body, it circulates and supports the whole and any clotting, clogging, excess pressure, etc, is dangerous to the larger system. These are symptoms that could describe many of our current financial problems.

There was a time in history when government was by individuals, more so than institutions and as the need for institutional structure developed, this rule by individuals was institutionalized as monarchies. Eventually even that ran its course and now government has largely become a public trust, for better or worse.

In a sense, we are going through a similar process with the financial system. Like monarchs who could not see beyond their self interest to understand their larger role and function in society, those running the financial system have lost sight of their larger role in efficiently circulating the flows of value around the economy and are simply hoarding it. What they do not seem to appreciate, like the kings of old, is the extent to which they are cooking their own golden goose.

Given the larger issue is the extent to which the overall economy is using up finite resources at an ever faster rate, the fact the financial circulatory system is building towards a form of massive coronary, that will effectively seize up much of the economy, is not an entirely bad thing, on the broadest scale.

These two issues feed off one another and possibly offer a glimmer of hope as to how our economy can be brought into a more stable rhythm with the planetary environment.

Much of basic human desire is for security, prestige and many of those products our economy creates. This makes money the common denominator of conventional desires. The financial system caters to this powerful impulse by manufacturing as much money and money equivalents, as it can. Yet money is an obligation, a promise, a contract, a debt. The result is so many resources are used simply to perpetuate this illusion of wealth, while destroying actual value.

All that public debt which is so often decried, is the basis, the other side of the contract, of much private wealth. Yet the primary way government has to make a profit on its investments in public infrastructure, is to tax revenue streams in the economy made possible by those public investments, but that gets treated as an economic drag.

There isn't the capacity, throughout the entire economy, public and private, to invest and thus store the amount of wealth which society collectively desires. Much of the financial complexity introduced in recent decades has largely been to create vessels for storing massive amounts of notional wealth, which the real economy could not otherwise support.

Money is not value, so much as it is a bookkeeping entry. One's asset is another's debt. We tend to forget that because we are linear, object oriented thinkers, while the larger reality is one of balance and process.

On a very basic level, if people understand converting value into currency entails a form of taxation by those managing this system, then they would start to be more careful what value they take from communal relations and environmental resources and understand the community and the environment are themselves viable stores of wealth.

Also that contracts and promises are only as valuable as the integrity of the system on which they are based. This will open up the space for varieties of exchange and reciprocity, that are not primarily obsessed with accumulating notational chits.

Obviously this would lead to a different economic system than we have now, but the current system is on the verge of blowing up when those running it can no longer extract sufficient debt from everyone else to keep the wheels of this process sufficiently greased. It will be a crisis too large to waste.

Just as democracy tries to push power down to the level it is most effective and accountable, a public banking system would also be bottom up. With local community banks channeling profits into the communities creating those profits and forming the basis for regional banking consortiums. These then would be stakeholders in a national bank to issue the currency.

There are a variety of methods for building and sustaining currency systems and debt based currencies certainly have their advantages, if the potential pitfalls are kept in mind.

Such as when the basis of the currency is government debt, there is an inherent bias toward creating a lot of public debt. The current system is effectively designed to do so. Budgeting is to list priorities and spend according to ability. Instead the legislative leadership bundles up these enormous bills, then adds whatever necessary to collect enough votes. Which the president can only pass or veto in whole. The result naturally leads to overspending. If the government actually wanted to budget, these bills could be broken into all their various items and have every legislator assign a percentage value

to each one. Then reassemble them in order of preference and have the president draw the line at what is to be funded. As Truman might have put it, "The Buck Stops Here."

This would create a system of actual budgeting, as well as distributing more power over the entire legislature, rather than having most of it accumulate at the top. The percentage voting would also allow legislators to tune their responses to various constituencies and other pressures, better than does a simple yes/no system.

This would result in far less national money going to local projects, but if there was a public community banking system, which funneled its profits back into public projects within its own community, rather than having it siphoned off by big banks, to be lent back to the various governments, it would be result in a more stable and sustainable civic foundation.

I realize this essay has likely scraped more than a few feelings and ruffled enough feathers, but the status quo has its limits and we are reaching them. When it crumbles, many of us will be on our own. If others have plans that don't primarily involve walls and guns, I'm all ears.

Regards,
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