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Breakthrough or Breakdown?

You Can Change the World

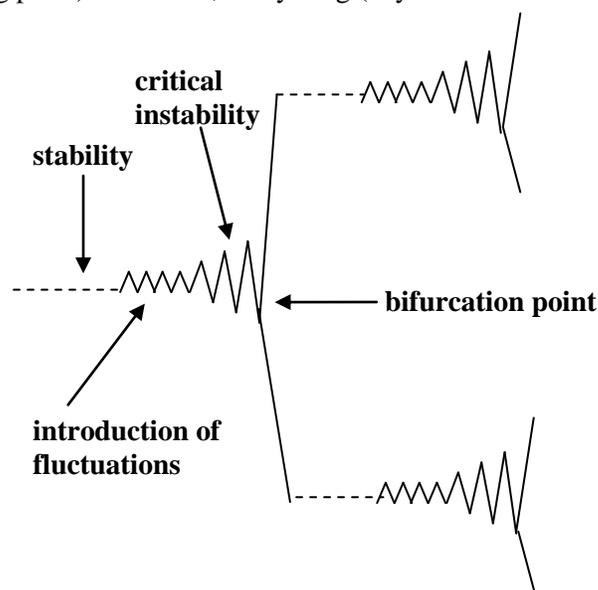
Synopsis of the March 18, 2004 WFS Washington DC Chapter dinner program presented by Ervin Laszlo. Founder and leader of the Club of Budapest; summarized by Dave Stein

“Do we have a future? Will human life continue to be possible for people now, and will it be possible for those coming into the world?” So asked Dr. Ervin Laszlo, the founder and leader of the Club of Budapest, when he addressed the National Capital Region World Future Society (NatCapWFS) at our March dinner program.

CHAOS THEORY

Beginning with the observation that “the future” is now in the present, Dr. Laszlo reviewed chaos theory, the unifying theme behind his overall presentation. In chaos theory, events proceed nonlinearly, and not everything is predictable. The future of a system is determined not by its past or by its environment but rather by fluctuations. Furthermore, small perturbations or fluctuations can create discontinuous changes leading to alternative futures that differ radically. *[Editor's note: an often-cited example is the “butterfly effect.”]*

Dr. Laszlo's illustrated chaos theory in a convincing way. Once the fluctuations reach a so-called bifurcation point (tipping point) is reached, everything (any alternative future) except the status quo is possible.



Continuing, Dr. Laszlo noted that if we live on the edge of sustainability, a small perturbation can have disastrous consequences. The bifurcation point represents a proverbial fork in the road, and the two trajectories of evolution lead to extreme alternatives – breakthrough and breakdown. Breakdown represents the wars and the breakdown of society that can result from increasing economic, political, and cultural polarization and the violence to which they lead. Conversely, in the view of Dr. Laszlo, peaceful and cooperative breakthroughs represent ecology movements and the spreading of peace, accompanied by the necessary institutional changes at national and global levels.

CHALLENGES

In addition to the increasing polarization of society along cultural and economic lines, Dr. Laszlo expects a scarcity of land and water by 2150. A sudden change in climate, perhaps global warming, can exacerbate the problem. He anticipates that even if the Kyoto treaty is signed and followed, the sea level will rise by 7 meters. This has implications for the Netherlands and for Venice, and even Hamburg will need to move further inland to survive.

Another possible outcome global warming is the shutdown of the Gulf Stream, which maintains the temperate climate in Western Europe. Without the Gulf Stream, Western Europe will undergo a new ice age.

Returning to polarization, Dr. Laszlo discussed the population explosion and noted that half of the world's population now lives on less than 5USD per day. The percent of the world population living in poverty is ever-increasing, and Asia now has more than 60% of the world's population. A concurrent increase is in the concentration of wealth.

Dr. Laszlo foresees that we are moving to a crisis (bifurcation) point. The “negative” branch of the bifurcation leads to epidemics, mass revolts, social unrest, increased terrorism, and ultimately to a complete social breakdown.

THE WAY OUT

The good news is that bifurcation also has a “positive” branch, which is characterized by peaceful cooperative breakthroughs that lead to lifestyle and governance changes. The key to getting there is to create fluctuations that move our social system in a positive direction. Also essential is acting on the fundamental causes of the issues that we are facing. The alternative is to treat the symptoms. For example, conflict can be suppressed, but it eventually explodes.

In Europe, there is already increased awareness that moving in a wrong direction can have disastrous consequences. One sign of positive potential is the empowerment of civil society.

CHAOS THEORY AND EVOLUTION

Dr. Laszlo discussed the connection between chaos theory and system evolution. The “positive” branches of bifurcations lead to higher levels of organization in a system. They impact system evolution, where “system” can refer to a biological organism or even human society, in which further evolution is socio-cultural. Evolution of a system is characterized by an increase in the level of organization, the structural complexity, the specific entropy, and in the case of human civilization, the ecological footprint.

Several vantage points from which to characterize the evolution of human society were presented. Dr. Laszlo first noted that human society evolved from the hunter-gather age to the agrarian-pastoral age,

followed in turn by the agricultural, pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial ages. Human evolution might also be characterized by a progression from the kinship system to the village system, followed by the empire system and now the nation-state system. . New technology is one of the forcing functions that drive evolution.

In parallel, belief systems have evolved from mythos to theos (“as above, so below”), followed by logos (thinking and rationality).

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

We are now moving beyond the nation-state system. Dr. Laszlo foresees that the next level may be a highly-interdependent planetary system with nobody in charge, as the Earth itself imposes limits on human evolution. At the same time, he does not foresee a continuation of the stable climate that has characterized much of the 20th century, and climatic changes may be a forcing function. Yet he doesn't see a collapse of human civilization as inevitable.

Dr. Laszlo compared extensive vs. intensive evolution. Extensive evolution, characterized by conquest and consumption, is zero sum. Often it entails killing and destroying. Intensive evolution, “vertical” where extensive evolution is “horizontal,” is characterized more by connection and communication.

Indeed, the Club of Budapest is already discussing the new consciousness. Among other things, it entails the need to replace greed as a system, and therein lies the challenge. Religions and ethics teach us how, but their teachings are difficult to implement on a large scale. Nonetheless, a sizeable portion of society is waking up, realizing that everything that we do affects us and comes back to us. Accordingly, Dr. Laszlo suggested that mythos, theos, and logos should be followed perhaps by “holos.”

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q. What is the relationship of between the Club of Budapest and the Club of Rome?

A. The Club of Budapest is active in the World Economic Forum, but this forum plays to vested interests. An alternative “World Spirit Forum,” is proposed. The Club of Rome predates the Club of Budapest, but it has suffered from “Monday morning syndrome.” In addition, it is limited to 100 members. The vision of the Club of Budapest cannot be implemented through the Club of Rome. While there is collaboration between the two groups now, the need for social reform requires a second organization such as the Club of Budapest. There is evidence supporting the idea that the civil movement for social reform will grow.

Q. You have not made the case that the potential problems associated with the negative bifurcations are not manageable. Can you provide additional detail?

A. We take a systemic view that does not regard poverty, health, climate, etc. as separate issues. Furthermore, “managing the problems” simply kicks the proverbial can down the road. The alternative to doing nothing now could be catastrophe.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER AND THE CLUB OF BUDAPEST

Dr. Ervin Laszlo is the world famous founder and head of the Club of Budapest, www.club-of-budapest.com. The club's logo – the chain bridge connecting the merged cities of Buda and Pest – symbolizes its mission of building bridges between generations and cultures. Each year the Club makes a

Change the World – Best Practice Award for projects that foster sustainable development and a Planetary Consciousness Award honoring individuals who have been most effective in exhibiting and promoting the universally required new consciousness. This year it will start Planet Life University, an institution that will train people in planetary consciousness and best planetary practices.

Carl Zails is the Executive Director of the Club of Budapest in North America, which is based in the greater Washington DC area. In addition to the United States, it includes Mexico and Canada.

Dr. Laszlo's latest book, You Can Change the World: The Global Citizen's Handbook for Living on Planet Earth, deals with the potential consequences of continuing to live in an environmentally unsustainable way and how we might avoid those consequences. Mikhail Gorbachev says in his foreword, "Read this book. It helps us to understand the current situation of our planet and to find the path we must take. The relationship between man and nature has become more and more complex and strained; the air has become poisoned, the rivers polluted and the forests decimated. Society is beginning to show the symptoms of sickness. You Can Change the World helps us to determine what we must do and how we must do it to ensure our common well-being. The future that confronts us is an open future and all of us can do our bit to decide it."