

From the Family to Humanity – “The Family of Man”

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- 1 “In the beginning was the family.” As Charles Darwin recognized, going into much detail in his *The Descent of Man*, homo sapiens is a social creature. In the eighteenth century imaginary, Robinson Crusoe represented an ideal of individualism, not a reality. Humans need connections to other humans, starting in the family.
- 2 Connections grow and expand, and at times collapse, or give way to new ones. History is to a large extent the story of how this takes place. Post-WW II developments bring globalization onto center stage. We need to inquire into globalization in the context of the connections problem.
- 3 For most of Homo sapiens’ existence, the species were hunter-gatherers-scavengers, existing in groups numbering around 30-40 members. Families gradually evolved into clans, claiming common inheritance. Eventually, clans saw themselves as members of a tribe. Probably the most persistent and widespread form of human connection, the tribe is still with us. Empires and nation states might be developed as larger forms of connection, but tribes are still omnipresent.
- 4 And at the kernel of all these larger linked groups is the family. Much debate has taken place over the exact nature of the family. Is it nuclear or extended? The answer seems to be that it is like an accordion, swelling and deflating as grandparents live with their children and grandchildren and then die off. As the saying goes, home is where they have to take you in.
- 5 Family offers nourishment, protection, and support. It points people in the direction of a job: generally, for women this has often been as homemakers. For men it is more diverse. For example, Welsh coalminers inherit their position from fathers and family members. In loftier circles, men inherit land, trades, or businesses. Members of a family are connected to one another so as to be given a leg up in their chosen pursuit. A wealthy member may pay for the education of a poor-off but promising nephew. The so-called self-made man of the nineteenth century lacked these advantages. He would make sure to give them to his children and relatives.
- 6 The nature and function of the family and its shifting dynamics are as diverse as the cultures anthropologists and sociologists study. The family is the kernel of connection. For probably 98% of homo sapiens’ existence, it is the seed upon which evolution, natural and cultural, could work. It is, in a sense, pre-historical. It is the other forms of connection with which history concerns itself.
- 7 In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment philosophers thought in stadial terms. This was especially true of Scottish thinkers, such as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and John Millar. To their minds, societies moved through stages, from the family to the clan, the tribe, and empires or nation states. Obviously, this development was compatible with the idea of progress.
- 8 As we know, the nineteenth century in Europe was marked by nationalism and the growth of the nation state. Face to face encounters within the family continued, but now connections extended beyond the tribe to a larger entity. Benedict Anderson has brilliantly captured what is involved when he coined the phrase “imaginary community” to describe what was happening. People in a given territory were linked

by such an imaginary, made visible by rituals, monuments, holidays and so forth. They were even prepared to die for such imaginaries.

- 9 Nationalism and the nation state was the dominant form of connections in the period of Modernity. Originating in Europe, it spread across the world. As of today, there are something like 192 nations represented in the UN. To govern their relations with one another, international institutions and conventions were devised. After WW I, a League of Nations was established; after WW II, the United Nations. All this is a well-known story.
- 10 Yet where does this leave us today? The problem is that more and more matters are of a global nature, transcending national boundaries. 1945 witnessed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, exploding the notion that there could be old-fashioned national security. It also witnessed the Nuremberg Trials and the novel charge of “crimes against humanity.” It ushered in an era marked by threats such as climate change and ecological exhaustion (water being of special concern).
- 11 Where are the global institutions to deal with these problems? The IMF, the World Bank, the UN, these are fingers in the dyke. They are aided by the extraordinary growth of NGOs, matching the J-shaped curve of multinational corporations since the 1960s. At the moment, these are stopgaps. It is not clear what institutional shapes on the global level can or will develop in time to shelter humanity from a perfect storm.
- 12 What should be obvious, though, is the necessity to inculcate a feeling of ties to humanity, transcending while retaining lesser national loyalties. What are the chances of this coming about? What are the means by which it might occur?
- 13 In a path breaking article, “Pananthropoi—Towards a Society of All Humanity,” Martha Van Der Bly (*Globality Studies Journal*, issue no. 37, September 8, 2013) offers seven theses arguing the more or less inevitability of this development. She believes that “the quintessence of human nature” is the “ambition to always cross borders, tear down walls and go beyond” (3). Her argument is in abstract terms, as befits a sociologist.
- 14 I would add another argument. It stems from the work of the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking, to be found in his book *Historical Ontology* and various articles. He suggests that once a category is set up—the instance he gives is homosexuality—people rush in to fill it. Clearly, we can see the applicability of Hacking’s idea to humanity.
- 15 Does history actually show that we are moving “beyond thinking of ‘us’ and ‘them’,” as Van Der Bly puts it in her abstract? (It is exactly this question that I have addressed in *The Idea of Humanity in a Global Era*, 2009). Many factors enter into this fractal, ranging from the nuclear bomb to the Nuremberg Trials. The step from these trials to the International Criminal Court is one giant step in the story of humanity.
- 16 We will recognize that further steps are being taken when, for example, we have a “Humanity Day,” similar to Earth Day, statues throughout our cities celebrating Humanity (rather than Civil War statues, though these will remain), parades dedicated to Humanity, speeches devoted to the theme, web sites where people can discuss the idea, and so forth. Our imaginations must be challenged. The future is ours to help shape.

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Note: *Family of Man* was the title given to the exhibition at MOMA in 1955 of 503 photos taken in 68 countries by Edward Steichen to illustrate the universality of human experiences. As the title shows, sensitivity to gender issues was less prominent in the 1950s than it is now.