



The Way Forward

There is something missing in the morally outraged narratives that have defined my thinking as a left leaning social critic. Take, for example, attitudes to racism and capitalism: the black historian Gerald Horne has written an essay that well captures outrage about being black in the USA. There can be no denying the importance and relevance of a black historian writing about life in the USA. That is, Horne's social justice commitments and the necessity of telling black history in America are critically important. However, as one commentator puts it, 'Horne files his detailed briefs with an urgency that match his commitment to a Black anti-capitalist internationalism' (David Waldstreicher, 'The Long American Counter-Revolution', *Boston Review*, 1992, online). Racism and capitalism have always been a toxic combination requiring a sense of urgency and commitment in social movements, such as the black lives matter movement, as a counterbalance. But does commitment to a cause guarantee a successful outcome – say, an increase in social justice, or action in time to avert a climate change catastrophe? More fundamentally, does standard critical analysis do justice to the tenacity of capitalism, colonial and post-colonial history and culture, racism and sexism, and to draw a longer bow, to history and human nature in general? In this essay I will argue it does not. To be specific, I am arguing against many of the assumptions of left leaning critical analysis, whilst agreeing with many of its critical goals.

Left social justice analysis has a genuine desire to right historical wrongs and deliver justice to oppressed peoples all over the planet. And, at least, left analysis does not have the meanness displayed by the analytic approach of free market advocacies such as neoconservatism, or the insane brutality of fascism. In most cases the left has provided analyses far superior to those generated from the right. Nonetheless, old Marxist (and 'post-Marxist') analyses can be very sterile - and, in every case, Marxist anti-colonial and anti-capitalist rhetoric has taken us down roads to tyranny. How can it be that a desire for social justice and egalitarian ideals can lead to a sterile and counter-productive analysis? Perhaps our assumptions about human nature, human purpose, and social structure are lacking. The importance and fragility of civilisation, and the problem of living on an ecologically declining planet do seem to require serious rethinking of how human civilization will progress - but it is probably sensible to start with very basic assumptions. Indeed, at the eleventh hour of humanity's tenure on planet Earth some issues ought to be more highly contested; for instance, it is time to appreciate that humans are animals, nature is not moral, and that there is no 'manifest' human destiny or purpose. There are other considerations, such as the centrality of the role of the United States in global politics and culture, and the evolution of history and all things. We also need to come to terms with the insignificance of life in a vast universe. Indeed, life without God, gods, meaning or purpose, is a difficult conundrum for herd animals, such as human beings. To be clear, all this is not a nihilist argument – there are values and activities that are important for humans to strive towards (such as civilization, social justice, quality of life, and survival). Most fundamentally, the ideas that humans can no longer assume a centrality in all existence, and a moral superiority over all other life forms, need to be considered more sympathetically.

The facts are that we are all human, no matter what colour, race or culture, and have been engaged in continual warfare, plunder and conquest since the time of the Neanderthals. For at least the last 100,000 years humanity has struggled to answer the questions of our existence. This search is now very contested, but only about the science, and certain aspects of historical interpretation. For example, I used to believe in the 'noble savage' - but not anymore. That was just a fantasy - probably a white European middle-class fantasy. Further, even if one avoided the nets and snares of religion, the sense that humanity was destined to be the centre of existence was emergent in the development of western Christian culture. The human-centredness of Earth's ecology was just taken-for-granted. That is still being revealed as another fantasy.

The cruelty of war and slavery also has a very long history. These have been in existence well prior to the Babylonians – slavery was widely practiced by the Arabs in Africa, the Romans throughout Europe, and the Chinese throughout Asia, to mention just a few. Even isolated islands such as Tonga had tribal wars! War and slavery should remind us that humanity has arisen out of an extremely violent history – to pretend otherwise is simply utopian, and wrong. The ideas of civilisation and basic human rights are historically recent, and worth protecting. Nonetheless, violence and warfare persist and shape our humanity, even today.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Europeans who eventually codified a system of law and democratic process. The United Nations formulated the Bill of Human Rights after the horrors of the world wars. These are evolutionary leaps forward towards building a civilised world. Civilisation as we value today is very recent, very fragile, and well worth protecting.

So far, what is being developed is, I hope, a very post Marxist, ecologically centred analysis. And there is more.

At the risk of critical outrage, it needs to be said that the USA and American culture, with all its faults, needs defending against the claims of some of its most strident critics. There can be no denying the excesses of the American military-industrial complex, and ongoing violence against women, people of colour, and all other ‘minorities’- inside and outside the boundaries of the country. And transcending the excesses of this latest dominant superpower, the eternal march of left-right-left-right continues. The current form of demarcation between left and right may be culturally modern, but the tendency of states, cities and tribes to rise and fall in their dominance seems eternal.

I hope it is apparent that this view, which accepts that humanity is just another animal species on a small and fragile planet, is not a standard critical narrative about history and culture in which the bogies of war, class struggle, capitalism, racism and patriarchy play starring roles and can deliver us to better times. It might be just too late for any of that. Nonetheless, this essay is about humanity’s long painful march towards a truly ‘civilised’ world.

At this point a quote from Monty Python is relevant: “What did the Romans ever do for us”? Or, to put it in other words, what did the Americans ever do for us? The short answer is that if we took away all the contributions the Yanks have made to the modern world after WW2 we might very well still be living in ignorance and tyranny. There should be no denying some of the facts of cultural dominance by a superpower.

The Americans helped create a prosperous and stable Europe (“The Marshall Plan was an American initiative enacted in 1948 to provide foreign aid to Western Europe. The United States transferred over \$13 billion in economic recovery programs to Western European economies’ - *Wikipedia*). Today, American spending on foreign aid is approximately \$(US)50 billion, more than any other country’s spending (*Wikipedia*). It turned Japan from a brutal feudal society to a modern and stable democracy – however there is no such thing as a free lunch, and today Japan has become a close ally of America. Not much has avoided the long reach of American cultural influence. Scientific research has long been dominated by Americans – a simple count of Nobel prizes awarded in scientific fields easily demonstrates that fact (America has 403 Nobel laureates, followed by the UK with 137, followed by many other countries with less than 100 Nobel laureates – according to a Google search on 14 January, 2022). Likewise technological innovation is dominated by Americans. The list of American cultural achievements goes on and on, despite a long list of negatives associated with American cultural influence.

Nonetheless, the most important fact is that American society, building on the rationalistic and anti-religious traditions of the European Enlightenment, has given humanity the tools to finally free

ourselves from the darkness of ignorance. For that we should thank science and technology: specifically interplanetary exploration and orbital telescopes. Voyager's image of Earth as a 'little blue dot' was the first revolutionary moment. Then the Hubble and the James Webb Space Telescopes finally allowed us to fully comprehend our utter insignificance in the universe. We also know more fully how we are in a great cosmic dance. No longer do we need to be shackled to religious doctrine and dogma. This vital new perspective of Earth's insignificance is an unparalleled gift to the world, and one that is just at the beginning of its future effects on civilisation.

A post Hubble world

The greatest gift that the Americans (as well as other European nations) have given us are these tools to see that God is not a necessary cosmological explanation. Science and the latest telescopes have added to the work started by Galileo. Now we can be sure that the universe is vast, that stars come and go, that the Earth and humanity is not at the centre of all things, that we inhabit a solar system that is billions of years old, and that we, as intelligent and evolved life, are probably alone for the foreseeable future. None of those truths require God, or position humanity at the centre of the world; nonetheless religions still play a significant (albeit logically unnecessary) role in the affairs of humanity. Religion, in this expanded view, is just another institutional game - played by priests and other believers. The fact that most of the world's population are religious and still believe in God or gods, is beside the point in this 'new' science-based cosmology. After all, we have only begun to see humanity's insignificance since the time of Galileo and Copernicus - about 400 years, a mere blink of the eye in cosmological terms.

Ever since the sight of Voyager's 'little blue dot' (that is, the sight of Earth from outer space) we have known with ever greater confidence that there is no 'Planet B'. The insignificance of humanity in the bigger picture also lends weight to the argument that humanity be decentred in ecological terms too. It is now definitely time to revalue our Earth based ecology. Prioritising humanity over all other species has not worked; the only way to survive with any quality of life requires the survival of as much biodiversity as possible. Many ecologically minded people have argued this at least since the 1960's, but now given a belated mass acceptance of the reality of anthropomorphic climate change and the need to scale back consumption (including that of fossil fuels) it is well and truly time to act.

In our quest for advancing civilization and survival we need to question a great deal. We certainly need to give up on ideas about the inherent morality of the universe, and the natural superiority of humanity. To assume otherwise will only lead to more tears.

Tom Jagtenberg
30 December, 2022



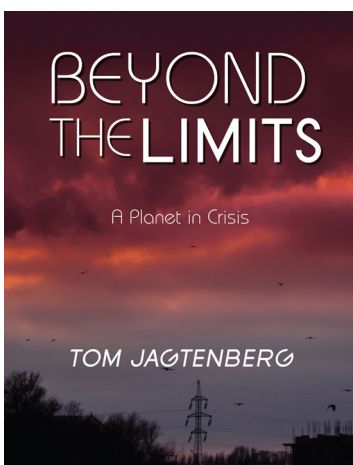
About Tom Jagtenberg

Tom has a longtime interest in the natural world and concern about its decline. His interests, whilst being inter-disciplinary, have always had a focus on nature and the environment.

He worked as a sociologist for thirty years at Wollongong University (where he was a Senior Lecturer) and Southern Cross University (where he was an adjunct research fellow). He is a published author of books and articles about the environment and related cultural fields. Tom has qualifications in science, engineering and sociology – a BE (Chemical and Fuel Engineering, Hons 1, UNSW), an MSc (Liberal Studies in Science, Manchester University) and a PhD (Sociology, University of Wollongong).

Since Tom's student days he has been concerned with the representation of nature in disciplinary fields as diverse as science, sociology, cultural studies and communication studies, natural medicine and political life. He has been a strong critic of the exclusion of non-human interests from academic fields and political parties. As his latest book suggests even Green political parties are limited in the extent to which they can be advocates for other species, their habitats, and even human environments.

Tom retired from academic life to live in Northern New South Wales with his partner. They chose the Northern Rivers region because of its strong ecologically focused community and beautiful environment.



Beyond the Limits

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No matter how hard politicians try to broker agreements about curbing greenhouse gas emissions there are deeper obstacles that would seem to guarantee Planet Earth's ecological decline.

Beyond the Limits is a hard-hitting and probing analysis of the underlying problems that define the possibilities of any response to the problem of climate change.

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