

Clean People in a Clean World

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ABSTRACT Bathing is here treated as an exemplar of the widespread profligacy of prosperous people and of the continually expanding expectations for all on this overloaded planet. I place cleanliness in a wider context, not merely of animals but of all living organisms. With this in mind, it is possible to consider, in a wider than usual manner, our responses as the possessive market society turns into something else.

"**Consider the lilies** of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." This passage is justly celebrated, for its idea and beautiful expression - to the point of being hackneyed. Yet, like many enduring quotations, it repays attention in the light of new circumstances. The start of being gloriously arrayed is being clean and no doubt Solomon indulged in luxurious bathing as indeed have a few privileged individuals at most times throughout history. Today, however, there are some few billions of privileged people on earth whose bathing adds up to a large collective burden on the earth's resources of energy and clean water and on the sinks for CO₂ and grey water. There is also a spreading and strengthening ethical *belief* that all seven billion humans have an inalienable right to a range of basic needs which include energy and water, although, working against the realisation of this, there is an *actual* increase in inequality between rich and poor. The earth's ecology is already overloaded by human activity yet public discourse is still dominated by the assumption that further economic growth is necessary and desirable.

It is now forty years since the publication of the controversial report *The Limits to Growth* [1] and the occasion has been marked with an article by Debora MacKenzie [2]. The projections (*Limit's* authors deny making predictions) under the 'standard' assumptions of *Limits'* computer model, dubbed World3, turn out to have been remarkably accurate over the last forty years. The only significant inaccuracies are underestimates of the increase of human longevity and of birth-rate decline. These two errors however fortuitously cancel each other quite closely so that world population growth to the present was predicted accurately. Still in the future - about a quarter of the way into the present century - the standard assumptions project a general collapse of industrial civilisation. One of the most important findings of the *Limits* team is that this collapse is not modified significantly by tinkering with any single element of the input assumptions. In the 1972

report some combinations of growth limiting assumptions did project a stable outcome. During the last forty years, however, we have not merely wasted time, we have made matters worse. Neo-liberals, indeed, have done so with gusto. Now, according to the text of the Stabilised Scenario box on page 41 of MacKenzie's article - and endorsed in a subsequent letter by one of *Limits'* original authors, Dennis Meadows [3] - "no realistic assumptions produce this [stable] outcome".

The *meanings* of a collapse of civilisation cannot be conveyed by scientific analysis alone, nor by our knowledge of the many historical precedents. One vivid image of what it *might* mean can be found in Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* [4]. "He steps under the shower ...When this civilisation falls ...this will be one of the first luxuries to go. The old folk crouching by their peat fires will tell their disbelieving grandchildren of standing naked mid-winter under jet streams of hot clean water ..."

Bathing is indeed a wonderful exemplar of a widespread general profligacy and of continually expanding expectations for a better 'standard of living'. In *The CO2 and H2O Costs of Bathing* [5] I compare the main environmental impacts of a bath, a shower and a basin wash. Even the language for the last of these has practically fallen out of the English language. I have found that young people, even those very seriously involved in environmental activism, can barely understand what is meant, so powerfully has the mantra *take a shower instead of a bath* been internalised. In fact showering as practised in industrialised countries often uses considerably more water and energy than a bath, although it is true that a short, low flow-rate shower is fairly economical, if the heating arrangement, including plumbing, is efficient. But it has at no time been a matter of a straight comparison between a daily shower and a daily bath, except in the stories of A A Milne and P G Wodehouse with their privileged class settings. An historically more accurate representation of the change of bathing practice is from daily basin wash plus weekly bath to daily (or even more frequent) shower. Like all questions involving human behaviour, bathing is found to be immensely variable when one looks into it closely, allowing for different cultures and practical circumstances. There is a fascinating literature, including numerous academic studies, for example Virginia Smith's *Clean : a history of personal hygiene and purity* [6]. A vivid informal summary of attitudes in the UK is captured by John Rumm [7] in a DIY discussion forum - "Peoples expectations of 'good shower' vary wildly. 5 lpm [litres per minute] is down in electric shower land and many find these disappointing. Most mixer showers will work in the 7 to 15 lpm sort of range and are acceptable to many. Shower that have extra body jets or drencher style heads may require much bigger flow rates to work well". My own investigations, conducted over several years, agree with this summary. I have also found that mindful bathing can be hygienic, pleasurable and several times more

economical than the 'standard' promoted by commerce. It involves a mix of basin washes (if necessary with a bowl for the feet), showering and the occasional bath (for pleasure and relaxation, not cleaning). Going beyond these modest variations on normal practice, one may note the huge range, quantitative and qualitative, between the most profligate bathing (power shower twice a day) and the very simple but effective methods of keeping clean used in wild camping. Between, there lie many options.

In considering adaptations to new circumstances, our imaginations should not be limited to mere quantitative adjustments. Rather, we may (re)consider the lilies, thinking however not of lilies of the field but of water lilies, or, to be exact, the lotus, a genus formerly thought to be a water lily but now known to be similar only by convergent evolution. This genus has given an informal name, *lotus effect*, to the phenomenon of superhydrophobicity. The surface of the leaves repels water unusually strongly and particles of dirt are carried away within the water droplets. This is only the most spectacular of self-cleaning processes which are widespread, indeed normal, in nature. In general, all living organisms in an environment to which they are well adapted are, one might say *by definition*, clean. Plants toil not, either to be clean or to grow, though they do what they have to. The lower animals behave in a similar unconscious way - consider the worms of the earth. Higher animals exhibit conscious, purposive behaviour and in some cases give a lot of attention to cleaning and grooming. Humans, if in a suitable environment, also care a lot about cleaning and grooming and in a new situation, with water and energy much scarcer than now, could manage perfectly well with a small fraction of what is currently considered normal in rich industrialised countries. The scandalous effects of not being in a suitable environment are brought home in a startling manner by Jacob Riis's celebrated photograph, in his 1902 book *The Battle with the Slum*, of a single bathtub hanging in the airshaft of a New York tenement block housing 2781 people. The people there were evidently revoltingly unhygienic but through no fault of their own. Rather, one may hold responsible the *possessive market society*. (This powerful analytic concept was developed by the political theorist C B Macpherson.) Today, one could say that the 'cleanest' people are also the dirtiest, because their excesses contribute to the befouling of the planet, primarily through CO2 emissions.

In this general situation we need to consider education, by which I mean much more than what happens in educational institutions but rather the life-long 'leading out' of a person from a solely instinctive state at birth along a continually changing cultural trajectory. This leading out is effected by a person's milieu and includes influences from parents, siblings, peers, elders, the mass media (especially e-visual media and advertising). The deep penetration of education in this generalised

sense is captured by the end of Timothy Burke's *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* [8] "Consumer needs are no less real for having a history, no less deeply felt for having been part of the world that global capitalism and colonialism have made. Needs, once made, do not casually go away and cannot be legislated or ordered out of existence. Their making and unmaking is beyond the capacity of any one institution or power."

This last sentence implies that *policy* is less effective than policy-makers, and indeed most of the rest of us, like to think. This conclusion is confirmed by events in the spheres of finance and the (as conventionally understood) economy during the last few years. Knowledge is gradually spreading that the possessive market society in its present form relies on growth; that this growth feeds on the creation of money, which can be converted into almost everything we need or want and is necessary for almost everything; that nearly all money is created, with minimal effort or public constraint, by banks; that these banks lend and trade recklessly; that these activities benefit the banks and harm many other institutions and people; and that the growth that is the beginning and end of all this is very rapid. (2% growth per annum, for example, does not sound much, and indeed is regarded by most leaders as insufficient, yet if maintained without crashes for a century it translates into a seven-fold increase.)

Bank crashes starting in 2008 appeared alarming at the time but the banks, with governments under their control, were able to 'stabilise' the situation quickly - with huge bail-outs. By 2010 'bonuses were back' with a vengeance. Virtually all political leaders continue to agitate for more growth. The grim projections of *Limits to Growth* look likely to become a reality and perhaps sooner rather than later. Katherine Ashenburg ends her 2007 book *The Dirt on Clean: An Unsanitised History* [9] with "A century from now, people will look back in amusement if not amazement at what passed for normal cleanliness at the beginning of the twenty-first century." Now, just five years later, a century looks like a distinctly conservative estimate.

Contrary to the impression that some may gain from the argument so far, this essay is not meant to predict doom and instil gloom. I believe in strategic optimism. The end of the possessive market society would in itself be good. The challenge is to shrug off Hobbesian pessimism, to learn quickly, *now*, from the history of earlier revolutions and counter-revolutions and to make a Great Turning (a term used by Joanna Macy) to a peaceful, cooperative society, modest and pleasurable. My response to Debora MacKenzie's "no realistic assumptions" is - Be realistic! Imagine the impossible. Perhaps the subspecies that names itself *Homo sapiens sapiens* could recognise and

admit the early signs of the demise of the possessive market society and respond with wisdom.

Notes

[1] Donella Meadows et al (1972) *The Limits to Growth*. New York: Universe Books.

[2] Debora MacKenzie (2012) Domsday Book *New Scientist* 213 (2846; 7 January) 38-41

[3] Dennis Meadows (2012) Domsday... *New Scientist* 213 (2848; 21 January) 28

[4] Ian McEwan (2005, p. 149) *Saturday*. London: Jonathan Cape.

[5] Alan Cottey (2008) The CO₂ and H₂O Costs of Bathing *SGR Newsletter* (Issue 35) 13. The newsletter may be downloaded from www.sgr.org.uk/publications/sgr-newsletter-no-35 Retrieved 29 January 2012

[6] Virginia Smith (2007) *Clean: a history of personal hygiene and purity*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

[7] John Rumm (2007) New Boiler Help www.diybanter.com/uk-diy/221754-new-boiler-help.html
Retrieved 28 January 2012

[8] Timothy Burke (1996, p. 216) *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe*. Leicester, UK: Leicester University Press.

[9] Katherine Ashenburg (2007, p. 297) *The Dirt on Clean: an unsanitised history*. New York: North Point Press.

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