FORGET OBSOLETE BELIEFS

Ervin Laszlo

Club of Budapest

Budapest, Hungary

Perhaps the first of the new imperatives of our time is to forget obsolete beliefs. To make room for the new, we must do away with the old. Of course, forgetting is not an easy task; in some ways it is even more difficult than learning. But if what we have in our mind conflicts with what we should get *into* it, selective forgetting becomes necessary. This is the case in regard to a number of present-day values and beliefs.

1. The Principal Malign Myths

We begin with five "malign myths" that we should promptly forget. Though obsolete and now even dangerous, they still command attention and determine behaviour.

1.1 The first myth: "NATURE IS INEXHAUSTIBLE"

The belief that, for all practical intents and purposes, the environment around us is an infinite source of resources and an infinite sink of wastes is a persistent myth. Its origins go back to the archaic empires. It would hardly have occurred to the inhabitants of ancient Babylonia, Sumer, Egypt, India, or China that the environment around them could ever be exhausted of the basic necessities of life – edible plants, domestic animals, clean water, and breathable air – or fouled by dumping wastes and garbage. Nature must have appeared far too vast to be tainted, polluted, or defiled by what humans did in their tiny settlements, and on the lands that surrounded them.

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The myth of an inexhaustible environment inspired a millennia old trend. In many parts of Africa, Asia, and pre-Colombian America human communities had a deep respect for the environment and used only as much as nature could regenerate, but innovation-oriented civilizations tended to overexploit their environment. The Mycenaean and Olmec civilizations and those of the Indus Valley are notable examples. In the Fertile Crescent this has had long-lasting consequences. Here, at the cradle of Western civilization, humans were not content with the perennial rhythms and cycles of nature but sought ways to harness nature to serve their own ends. The land, though hot and arid in spots, appeared amenable to exploitation. In some places, such as ancient Sumer, flash floods would wash away irrigation channels and dams, leaving fields arid, but elsewhere, as in the Nile Valley, the environment was relatively benign. Great rivers irrigated the land, brought in silt, and washed away wastes. Not surprisingly, the archaic civilizations were riverine civilizations, built on the shores of the Nile, the Tigris-Euphrates, the Ganges, the Huang-Ho, and the Yellow rivers.

The naive, if at the time comprehensible, belief in the inexhaustibility of nature made much of the Fertile Crescent of biblical times into the Middle East of today – a region with vast areas of arid and infertile land. It did not, however, produce entirely catastrophic consequences. People could move on, colonizing new lands and exploiting fresh resources. Today there is nowhere left to go. In a globally extended industrial civilization wielding powerful technologies, the belief in the inexhaustibility of nature is not only patently false but extremely dangerous. It gives free rein to the overuse and thoughtless impairment of the natural resources of the planet and the unreflective overload of the biosphere's self regenerative capacities. If we persist in this belief, we will end up with an impoverished environment incapable of supplying the resources required by our rapidly growing populations.

1.2 The second myth:"NATURE IS A GIANT MECHANISM"

The second malign myth dates from the early modern age, a carry over from the Galilean-Newtonian view of the world, where simple causes have direct and simple effects. The idea of nature as a giant mechanism is well adapted to creating and operating medieval technologies such as watermills and windmills, pumps, mechanical clocks, and animal-drawn plows and carriages, but it fails when it comes to jet turbines, nuclear reactors, networked computers, and genetically engineered plants and microbes. Sophisticated technologies do not work like Newtonian machines, and they do not have directly calculable effects.

> *~ Twentieth-century industrial civilization persisted in treating both its technologies and its natural environment as a kind of mechanism that can be engineered and reengineered. The result is the rapid and largely unforeseen degradation of water, air; and soil and the progressive impairment of local and continental ecosystems. ~*

Yet, when all is said and done, the belief that nature can be engineered like a machine persists. The basic notion is that doing one thing can always be relied upon to lead predictably to another thing – as pressing a key on an old-fashioned typewriter causes an arm to lift and print the corresponding letter on a sheet of paper. On the modern computer, however, sophisticated programs interpret the information entered on the keyboard and decide the result. The mechanistic concept works even less well when man-made technologies interface with nature. The way a transplanted gene is expressed in one plant is foreseeable as regards that plant, but it is problematic when it comes to the interaction of that plant with its environment. The same gene that produces the foreseen and desired effect in the transgenic plant can produce unforeseen and undesirable effect in different species. "Horizontal gene-transfer" is always a possibility, and its long-term consequences for the wider ecosystem are unpredictable. These consequences may prove disastrous for the integrity of nature as well as for the yield of agricultural lands.

Nonetheless, twentieth-century industrial civilization held to the rationality of modern-age Logos and persisted in treating both its technologies and its natural environment as a kind of mechanism that can be engineered and reengineered. The result is the rapid and largely unforeseen degradation of water, air, and soil and the progressive impairment of local and continental ecosystems. The myth of nature as a mechanism, though only centuries rather than millennia old, is obsolete and is already clearly counterproductive.

1.3 The third myth: "LIFE IS A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL"

This myth dates from the nineteenth century, a consequence of the popularity of Darwin's theory of natural selection. It claims that in society, as in nature, "the fittest survive". This is taken to mean that if we want to survive we have to be fit for the existential struggle – at least fitter than others around us. In the context of society, life is considered a competition for precious and sometimes scarce resources where fitness is not determined by the genes but is a personal and cultural trait, such as smartness, daring, ambition, and the political and financial means to put them to work.

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Transposing nineteenth-century Darwinism into the sphere of society is dangerous, as the "social Darwinism" embraced by Hitler's Nazi ideology has shown. It justified the conquest of territories in the name of creating more *Lebensraum* (living space) and the subjugation of other peoples in the name of racial fitness and purity. In our day the consequences of social Darwinism go beyond armed aggression to the more subtle, but in some ways equally merciless, struggle of competitors in the marketplace. Carried out mercilessly, it produces widening gaps between rich and poor and concentrates wealth and power in the hands of corporate managers and international financiers. States and entire populations are relegated to the role of clients and consumers and, if poor, dismissed as marginal factors in the equations that determine success in the global marketplace.

1.4 The fourth myth: "THE MARKET DISTRIBUTES BENEFITS"

The fourth malign myth is directly related to the third – indeed, it serves as its moral justification. Unlike in nature, where the consequence of "fitness" is the spread and dominance of the fit species and the extinction or marginalization of the rest, in society there is said to be a mechanism that distributes the profits instead of having them accrue uniquely to the "fit". This is the market, governed by what Adam Smith called the "invisible hand". It acts equitably: if I do well for myself, I benefit not only myself, my family, and my company but also my community. In the economy as a whole, wealth "trickles down" from the rich to the poor. A rising tide, said John Kennedy, lifts all boats.

> *~ The myth of the market leaves out of account that the market distributes benefits only under conditions of near-perfect competition, where all players start with a more or less equal number of chips. . . . in the real world the playing field is never level and favors the winners at the expense of the losers. ~*

The myth of the market is comforting; not surprisingly, it is often cited by the winners. Unfortunately it leaves out of account a provision already noted by the classical economists: that the market distributes benefits only under conditions of near-perfect competition, where all players start with a more or less equal number of chips. Nobody has, or ever had, first-hand experience of the market working

equitably for all. Unlike in theory, in the real world the playing field is never level, and favors the winners at the expense of the losers. This is evident in the income distribution of the contemporary world where the poorest 40 percent of the population is left with 3 percent of the global wealth, while the wealth of a few hundred billionaires equals the revenue of half the world's population.

1.5 The fifth myth: "THE MORE YOU CONSUME THE BETTER YOU ARE"

This is the myth that there is a strict equivalence between the size of your wallet – as demonstrated by the size of your tar and the size of your house, among other things – and your personal worth as the owner of the wallet.

The equivalence of human worth with financial worth has been consciously fueled by business. In former years companies did not hesitate to advertise unlimited consumption as a realistic possibility and conspicuous consumption as the ideal. Victor Lebov, a U.S. retailing analyst writing shortly after World War II, put the consumerist philosophy in terms reminiscent of a myth. "Our enormously productive economy", he said, "demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption. The economy needs things consumed, burned, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever-increasing rate". The consumption myth was, and to some extent still is, extremely powerful. According to some estimates, the modern world has consumed in constant dollars as many goods and services since 1950 as in all previous generations put together.

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Not only are there more people who consume in the world, on average they also consume far more. This trend cannot be sustained. The consequences and side effects of consumerism were not known in the 1950s, but they are widely known today. Overconsumption affects physical health and mental equilibrium alike. Yet the myth that one is a better, indeed a more superior person when one owns more and uses more is persistent. This is not as frankly admitted today as it was in the past, but in many ways the marketing of houses, cars, and consumer goods is still counting on it – and with good reason.

2. Lesser Beliefs Best Forgotten

In addition to the five malign myths, a number of less entrenched and dangerous beliefs are equally ripe for the dust heap. Here are a few of them:

Order through hierarchy: Order in society can only be achieved by rules and laws and their proper enforcement, and this requires a chain of command that is recognized and obeyed by all. A few people on top (mostly males) make up the rules, legislate the laws, give the orders, and ensure compliance with them. Everyone else is to obey the rules and take his and her place within the social and political order.

The ideology of Westfalia: The formally constituted nation-state is the sole political reality. It is the only entity that has true sovereignty, as the legal conventions coming into force at the Peace of Westfalia specified. These conventions confer on nation-states the "inalienable right" to have an independent government, internationally recognized boundaries, a national currency and a national army, diplomatic relations with other states, and action free from fetters within their own borders.

Everyone is unique and separate: We are all unique and separate individuals enclosed by our skin and pursuing our own interests. The same as our country, we have only ourselves to rely on; everyone else is either friend or foe, at best linked to us by ties of mutual (but alas mostly short-term) interest.

Everything is reversible: The problems we experience are temporary interludes of perturbation after which everything goes back to normal. All we need to do is manage the difficulties that crop up using tried and tested methods of problem solving and, if necessary, crisis management. Business as unusual has evolved out of business as usual, and sooner or later will reverse back into it.

These beliefs are obsolete and they, too, can turn dangerous. The reasons are not difficult to perceive. Male-dominated hierarchies do not work well even in the Army and the Church, much less in business and society. Leading managers have already learned the advantages of lean structures and teamwork, but for the most part social and political institutions still operate in the traditional hierarchical mode. As a result, governments tend to be heavy handed, and their workings are cumbersome and inefficient.

Admitting nothing but our own nation-state as the focus of allegiance is a mistaken form of patriotism. It can lead to chauvinism and intolerance and to periodic excesses by dictatorial regimes characterized by armed aggression and ethnic cleansing.

Seeing ourselves as separate from the social and the natural world in which we live could convert natural impulses to seek our own advantage into a short-sighted struggle among ever more desperate and unequal competitors. This is a dangerous path to follow, both for individuals and for the country in which they live.

No experience of shocks and crises can change our perceptions if we remain convinced that the problems we encounter are but temporary disturbances in an unchanging and perhaps unchangeable status quo. This obsolete belief can constrain innovative change that would have broad benefits throughout the world.

Underlying these persistent beliefs are a number of flawed conceptions. Let's examine six of these widespread assumptions.

My country, right or wrong. Come what may, we owe allegiance only to one flag and one government.

The cult of efficiency. We must get the maximum out of every person every machine, and every organization regardless of what is produced and whether or not it serves a useful purpose.

The technological imperative. Anything that can be done ought to be done. If it can be made or performed, it can be sold, and if it is sold, it is good for us and the economy.

Newer is better: Anything that is new is better than (almost) anything that is last year's.

Economic rationality. The value of everything, including human beings, can be calculated in money. What everybody wants is to get rich. The rest is idle conversation or simple pretense.

The future is none of our business. Why should we worry about the good of the next generation? Every generation has to look after itself.

Why these conceptions are misleading can also be spelled out. The chauvinistic assertion "my country, right or wrong" plays untold havoc both domestically and internationally, calling for people to fight for causes a new government later repudiates, to espouse the values and worldviews of a small group of political leaders, and to ignore the growing cultural, social, and economic ties that evolve among people in different parts of the globe.

Efficiency without regard to what is produced and whom it will benefit leads to mounting unemployment, catering to the demands of the rich without regard to the needs of the poor, and polarization of society into "monetized" and "traditional" sectors.

The technological imperative results in a plethora of goods that people only think they need; some of them they use actually at their peril.

That newer would always be better is simply not true. Often, the newer is worse – more expensive, more wasteful, more damaging to health, and more polluting, alienating, or stressful.

The naive reduction of everything and everybody to economic value may have seemed rational during epochs in which a great economic upswing turned all heads and pushed everything else into the background, but it is foolhardy at a time when people are beginning to rediscover deep-rooted social and spiritual values and to cultivate lifestyles of voluntary simplicity.

Finally, living without conscious forward planning – though it may have been fine in days of rapid growth when each new generation could ensure a good life for itself – is not a responsible option at a time when the decisions we make today will have a profound impact on the well-being of those who come after us.

Forgetting these and related beliefs does not mean giving up all myths and beliefs. Myths themselves are cultural beliefs, and they can orient human aspiration. As anthropologist Joseph Campbell pointed out, myths can explain the world, guide individual development, and provide shared direction. But myths can also turn sour, outliving their usefulness. When that happens, it is in society's interest to forget them. Countless myths have become obsolete. In Central America dozens of Mayan temples lie abandoned; in Peru countless Incan monuments are scattered in ruins. Celtic cairns in Wales, Khmer statues in Kampuchea, Sumerian ziggurats in Iraq, and giant stone heads on Easter Island are all mute witnesses of once flowering systems of belief that have disappeared either because they misguided their people or because more viable systems appeared in their midst.

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The first of the new imperatives of our time should now be evident: Forget the beliefs that are not "in sync" with your world – beliefs that no longer serve your life, and the life of others around you.

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