Beyond the Culture of Contest: A Critical Juncture in Human History

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We stand at a critical juncture in human history. There are now 7 billion of us on this planet with technologies that increase our impact and our interdependence a thousand-fold. We’ve literally transformed the conditions of our own existence. But we haven’t yet adapted to this new reality. And we urgently need to adapt, because the scale of human suffering and ecological degradation are going to increase until we do.

In order to adapt one thing we need to do is move beyond what I call the culture of contest. The culture of contest organizes almost every social institution as a contest with winners and losers. Most of us live in such cultures today. We organize governance as a contest for power. We organize justice as contest of legal advocacy. We organize the market as a contest of capital accumulation. We organize education as a contest for grades and recognition. We even organize most forms of recreation and leisure as mental or physical contests.

There are two major problems with the culture of contest:

First, when you organize every social institution as a contest, you promote only the short-term material interests of narrow segments of society, who enter those contests with an inherent advantage, due to inherited forms of power and privilege. So, by design, the culture of contest increases social disparities. And the result is a perpetual state of social conflict, instability, and crisis in human affairs.

The second problem is that the culture of contest undermines our efforts to solve the increasingly complex problems we’re facing on this planet. Solving these problems requires the highest degrees of cooperation among people with diverse insights, experiences, talents, and capacities. The culture of contest sets such people against one another. In the process, it confounds our ability to solve complex problems together. So the culture of contest, for both of these reasons, is inherently unjust and unsustainable.

But how do we move beyond the culture of contest? First, we need to dispel several influential myths that help perpetuate the culture of contest.

The first myth is that human nature is invariably selfish, aggressive, and competitive. But this is just a myth. What the human sciences are beginning to demonstrate is that humans are wired for both competition and cooperation, egoism and altruism, and which of these are more fully developed depends on how we are raised, on our education and training, on our social environment, on our institutional structures and incentive systems, and on the choices we make.
as we navigate these systems. But within the culture of contest, the selfish, aggressive, and competitive view of human nature becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The second myth that helps perpetuate the culture of contest is the myth that excellence, creativity, and productivity are best promoted through self-interested competition. This is another myth. Self-interest is not the only human motivation, nor is it the most powerful. Excellence, creativity, and productivity can be intrinsic sources of motivation. In addition, we can be motivated by the desire to live a meaningful life, to align ourselves with a higher cause or purpose, to contribute to the betterment of the world, and to work with others, cooperatively, toward these ends. Tapping into these deepest well of human motivation is the surest way to promote true excellence, creativity, innovation, and productivity.

The third myth is that competition drives evolution itself. Again, this is another myth. What evolutionary biology is beginning to demonstrate is that mutualism is an equally powerful, if not more powerful, evolutionary force. Mutualism gave us the nucleated cells and multi-cellular organisms that are the foundation of all complex life. Mutualism gave us the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in our atmosphere that sustains all complex life. Mutualism between species confers powerful survival advantages. And mutualism within species – or what we call cooperation in human societies – also confers powerful survival advantages. This is one of the reasons humans have been so incredibly successful.

With these three myths out of the way, we turn to the practical question of how to move beyond the culture of contest?

There is one strategy that clearly won’t work. Every time the culture of contest perpetuates some injustice, we can’t simply response with a culture of protest. Protest and other oppositional strategies of social change have, without doubt, led to some important advances in the past. And it’s understandable that caring and thoughtful people today continue to confront social injustices with non-violent opposition. But in this age of global interdependence, oppositional strategies of social change are reaching a point of diminishing returns. There are many reasons for this, but the most important reason is that the culture of protest is, ultimately, merely an extension of the culture of contest. It is based on the same underlying myths that I just addressed. The culture of protest reinforces these myths and, in the process, it reinforces the culture of contest itself. This is why we can never move beyond the culture of contest merely through a culture of protest.

What we can do is strive to develop a more universal culture of constructive agency, in which bend all of our energies toward actively constructing the world we want to live in, even as the old world is falling apart around us. And we can do this by focusing our energy largely on three fronts:

First, we can focus on the education and empowerment of young people, so they can see that in an increasingly interdependent world, their own well-being is inextricably linked to the well-being of the entire social body that they are part of, and so they become fully empowered to contribute to the betterment of society. This process of education and empowerment has intellectual, moral, social, and spiritual dimensions. It has to begin during the earliest formative years of childhood, and continue through the critical periods of adolescence and youth, if we
want future generations to mature beyond the culture of contest in their hearts, minds, and actions.

The second thing we can focus our energy on is the development of more mature institutional forms, especially in the spheres of governance, law, the economy, and education. All of these institutions can be reconstructed according to mutualistic principles, that foster and harness our latent potential for cooperation and altruism, and channel these energies toward the well-being of the entire social body, while preserving the integrity, diversity, and well-being of individuals.

The third thing we can focus our energy on is the development of more mature models of community life, models that reflect our organic interdependence as a social body, models that are informed by an emerging consciousness of the oneness of humanity, models that nourish and value diversity as a source of well-being, and models that embody justice as a central organizing principle.

On all three of these fronts, if we look carefully, we can see signs that a culture of constructive agency is beginning to emerge in neighborhoods and villages around the planet. And we would do well to support, encourage, and actively participate in this process. But as we struggle on these fronts, our major challenge is that we still know relatively little about how to do these things effectively and sustainably, in the modern world, on a global scale. So the culture of constructive agency needs to be coupled with a culture of learning, characterized by the purposeful and systematic generation of knowledge on all three fronts; a culture of learning that involves the active participation of an ever-widening circle of protagonists, beginning at the grassroots of every society.

And again, if we look carefully, we can see signs that a culture of learning is also beginning to emerge in neighborhoods and villages around the planet. And we would do well to support, encourage, and actively participate in this process.

Now, cynics will say that this vision I’ve sketched is hopelessly naïve and unrealistic. Because that is how it looks when viewed through the interpretive lens of the culture of contest. But this is a deeply distorted lens that serves only the short-term material interests of narrow segments of society. If we set aside that lens, and take a sober look at the actual conditions of the world today, we can see that the truly naïve and unrealistic view is that the culture of contest can continue indefinitely. The culture of contest is causing us to destroy the earth that sustains us, and it’s keeping us in a perpetual state of conflict, instability, and crisis that prevents us from addressing the increasingly complex problems facing us on this planet.

Moving beyond the culture of contest has become an evolutionary imperative. It’s one of the most significant challenges facing humanity at this critical juncture in history. And we can move beyond the culture of contest. We’ve learned how to split the atom. We’ve learned how to map the genetic codes of life. We’ve learned how to send people to the moon. We’ve learned how to probe the most distant parts of the universe. Clearly, we can learn how to move beyond the culture of contest here on earth.