

Limited civilization based on beauty (a vision)

“Someone’ll come along someday with imagination and patch it up. [...] Someone with a soul for pretty things [...] Might give us back a kind of *limited* sort of civilization, the kind we could live in peace.”

(Bradbury, 1952)

“At times, you shouldn’t speak at all of the lofty and the beautiful, unless you have shown, as clearly as daylight, the ways and paths to it, for each and everyone.”

(Gogol, 1937–52, 8: 298)

Recently, *Salvator Mundi*, a masterpiece by Leonardo da Vinci, was sold at Sotheby’s for the unbelievable sum of US\$450 million (Helmore, 2017). I do not have any clue as to the motive of the buyer, and would like to believe (perhaps, naively) that he or she did so to save the painting for future generations. Immediately, I thought of another Leonardo masterpiece, *Mona Lisa*, which has tantalized humanity for generations, and which has again sparked my imagination after reading Ray Bradbury’s short story ‘The Smile’ (Bradbury, 1952). I was particularly delighted to find there a line mentioning *limited civilization*, an idea which resonates with my vision of the future.

First, the gist of the story. The scene unfolds in the post-apocalyptic future, with “cities all junk, roads like jigsaws from bombs, and half-cornfields glowing with radio-activity at night.” But what amazes most is the aptitude of the explanation that one of the characters gives: “It has to do with hate. Hate for everything in the Past. [...] You hate whatever it was that got you all knocked down and ruined.” Then,

the hungry people with “guts plastered to their spines” are left with nothing except festivals dedicated to the destruction of that Past. Books are burned, motorcars smashed, paintings torn, etc. When the time comes to spit on *Mona Lisa*, a boy who stood in the line of those eager to do so fell in love with her smile and saved a small piece of the painting from the destruction. Ultimately, he managed to carry the piece with the painted smile – all that was left of the painting – home, and then it continued to live on, quite independently. As Bradbury ends the story: “He shut his eyes and the Smile was there in the darkness. And it was still there, warm and gentle, when he went to sleep and the world was silent and the moon sailed up and then down the cold sky towards morning.”

The story echoes my idea of ‘poetic economy’ (Postnikov, 2011). Along with conservation efforts directed at saving the beauty of wildness and species from extinction, we should start building, or rather re-building, a limited civilization. Not destroying indiscriminately the ‘Past’, as in the Bradbury story, but instead saving the beautiful things that inspire and elevate the soul.

Next, or in parallel, we need to stop doing unnecessary work, and the sooner the better. As Leo Tolstoy once remarked, most modern work is unnecessary, if not outright ruinous. Everyone needs to invoke an inner artist to begin the dismantling and transformation of the wasteful globalized economy and its infrastructure into his or her personal work of art. Shift to manual craftwork. Avoid and boycott complex machines. And smile, while sending the pressed cars to the dump.

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“Is this utopia attainable? I do not know. But would I hate to see the alternative.”

That could signal the beginning of a great limited civilization built on the premise of beautiful simplicity.

Why simplicity? Because it is essentially a way to leave the world alone. A way to curb the demons in humans so that they cannot ruin the world. In other words, it is a return to what, actually, humans are: one species, with its peculiar characteristics (some pleasant, some not), sharing equal rights with other species, on an equal footing. The paramount right of all species is to enjoy life and beauty in its fullness. This return is vital to the whole family of species, but humans need it most.

But what is being offered to all those sophisticated people, vying for new technologies? Cheerful and healthy simple life. In the open air. Simplicity means not only a calm and modest life, it also means creativity *par excellence*. But the nature of creativity will have to change. Now, it will be channelled into saving nature's beauty and rectifying past human damage (cf. Tompkins, 2013). The time has come to rehabilitate and renew ourselves as a species, and to remember the skills of our ancestors. It is crucial that we stick to our immediate cultural environment, defining our preferences and methods (Dodge, 2015).

Simplicity means renunciation of 'specialists' and 'experts' of all kinds, and a reversion to the creativity of our own hands and minds. It is the revival of our ability to work manually. It is William Morris and John Ruskin, Tolstoy and Gandhi (Coates, 2001). It is artists and craftspeople. It is a return to the beauty that reigned before industrialization took over. It is renunciation of machines, except those which are safe, elegant and easy to repair. (A scythe, a bicycle, a sewing machine: aren't they marvellous?) It is also the resurrection of an artisan life: growing vegetables, baking bread, making linen and cotton fabric, simple and comfortable furniture (Brown, 2013). From now on, every activity will be viewed as an artistic act (Lubarsky, 2017).

Surely, the revival of these forgotten skills would be a tremendous task. Many of us are so weakened morally and physically by civilization that, as Robinson Jeffers suggests, we would rather “passively go [...] to the grave / ask[ing] only a pinch of pleasure between the darkneses” than agree to change our lifestyle (Jeffers, 2002). Yet, co-creation with nature and friends – directly, not via screens – should help us survive and even bloom.

Is this utopia attainable? I do not know. But would I hate to see the alternative. ■

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