

PART I: OUR CONVERGING CRISES

Belief Systems

Every human society has a shared set of beliefs to encourage cooperative behavior. These beliefs may be religious or secular in nature. In either case, they provide what many anthropologists call the **superstructure** of society—as distinct from the **structure** (the means of making decisions and allocating resources) and the **infrastructure** (the means of obtaining food, energy, and materials). These three spheres overlap, but they're nevertheless distinct. As we saw in video 6, every society's superstructure and structure tend to adapt to fit its infrastructure.

Because early humans' infrastructure consisted of hunting and gathering wild foods and collecting natural materials, this meant that everybody interacted constantly and directly with the natural world, and nature served as the screen on which human minds projected meanings. The result was that, as far as we know, people in nearly all hunting-and-gathering societies believed in **nature spirits** that could be contacted in dreams or ecstatic states of consciousness. People believed that such contacts helped them fulfill their responsibility to maintain the balance of nature. The **shaman** was the only specialist in the matters of the sacred.

As we've discussed before in this video series, agricultural societies emerged in the Middle East and elsewhere starting around 10,000 years ago. Wherever agriculture appeared, there is historic evidence of the emergence of a belief in **sky gods** existing above and apart from nature.

Since agriculture permitted full-time division of labor and the accumulation of surplus food and other goods, agrarian societies tended to be hierarchical. At the top of the social pyramid was the king, who communed with the sky god, whom he represented or embodied on Earth. Below the god-king were

ranks of religious functionaries. Religious beliefs--purportedly handed down by the sky god--provided social cohesion for expanding, hierarchically organized, and partially urbanized societies.

As agrarianism gave way to fossil fueled **industrialism**, the belief in sky gods largely persisted, but a new superstructure gradually began to assert itself. In many countries, science and secularism came to hold sway in public affairs. But it would be wrong to say that science itself was the new religion.

Instead, the mass of humanity came to be motivated by a belief so pervasive that it's very seldom held up for careful examination. That's the belief in **material progress**—the notion that life itself is getting better, is **meant** to get better, with every passing year, with every new generation. As time goes on, technology improves, scientific knowledge accumulates, and we get richer. There is nothing to stop us; our destiny is to expand into the universe, mastering worlds as we go.

It's important to understand that this *wasn't* a common belief before the industrial period. Most people believed in cycles of time, and they thought that humanity has a limited place in the cosmos. What happened to change that? With the scientific revolution, the energy of fossil fuels, and the invention of new technologies to put that energy to work, many things became possible that weren't before. Progress was *real and tangible*. It was only natural to project it far into the future and assume that change for the better was the new normal.

But how, in more specific terms, did the experience of improvement in incomes and scientific understanding become the organizing principle of modern societies? The religion of progress needed prophets and priests. Scientists and engineers were its first prophets, working at the infrastructural level of society to alter methods of production to take advantage of new energy sources. But the religion also needed functionaries to work within

society's structure—the sphere in which we make decisions and allocate resources.

The priests of progress in this sphere were economists. Gradually at first, but with increasing urgency throughout the twentieth century, economists cobbled together a widely shared set of assumptions:

- that goods are best distributed throughout the economy by means of markets;
- that nature is essentially a meaningless heap of resources to be transformed into manufactured products as quickly as possible;
- that the old sky gods are irrelevant within the practical sphere of economic relations; and that
- the optimal benefit to humanity is to be obtained through perpetual economic growth—the expansion of production and consumption.

Again, this set of assumptions was largely rooted in experience. Industrial overproduction had caused the Great Depression, and the solution to overproduction and unemployment had been to stoke demand through advertising and consumer credit. A constantly *growing* economy came to be seen as the solution to all practical problems. Politicians of all stripes quickly took up the banner, with each promising more **growth** than rivals could deliver. To question growth or progress was to risk accusation not just of heresy, but of insanity.

Seen in historical and anthropological perspective, the belief in progress and growth was a *superstructure* suited to a particular kind of *infrastructure*.

As our energy sources—and hence our *infrastructure*—change throughout the remainder of this century, the most fundamental assumptions that gave meaning to life during the fossil fuel era may cease to do so. We may then need a *new* superstructure to guide us—a new set of universally shared beliefs based in shared experience. If our future is tied to renewable sources of energy, if climate change is shaping the world around us, and if amounts of energy

available to us are limited, it is possible that our new beliefs will once again be ones that place humanity within, rather than outside of, nature. Instead of seeing our destiny in the stars, we may once again come to see our role as serving nature rather than mastering it.

More than that, it may be too soon to say.