

Basic Human Needs and Ecological Balance

An Interview With Johan Galtung

by Sohail Inayatullah (1989)

INAYATULLAH: We are interested in your views on the present crises facing humanity, your vision of the future and on your perspectives of the long waves of social change, of macrohistory.

GALTUNG: Let us first start with some of the basic issues facing the world. To answer this question, we should always have as a point of departure two simple points; one is basic human needs and the other is ecological balance.

Now human needs can be divided into four categories: survival, well being, freedom and identity. Survival is a question of avoiding big wars. This means that the basic issue is the struggle against weapons of mass destruction, specifically against Star Wars, which has now taken over nuclear war and nuclear weapons as the primary global threat to peace. The struggle against nuclear weapons has in a sense been ended as nuclear weapons are now generally seen as useless--they are too dangerous to the sender.

When it comes to well-being it is essentially a question of avoiding mass ill health and starvation, and that is basically a question of economics for the people; local people not being penetrated and exploited from outside. When it comes to freedom, it is a question of human rights. This is going to be an increasingly important issue as the struggle for survival and well being is going to, if you will, make the conflicts with the elites even sharper. The elites will then clamp down on those oppressed people who are trying to improve their conditions--so the human rights issue will become even worse. The oppressed will respond with terrorism and civil disobedience and less and less with apathy.

The fourth, identity, is the one that we are least accustomed to talk about; it is the spiritual death of considerable millions around the world and fundamentalism is an answer to this. Unfortunately this fundamentalism, whether Christian or Muslim very often carries in its wake so much belligerence and so much infraction of human rights that I would hope we find some better answers. Ecological balance, the second point of departure, will probably have more disastrous consequences in the 1990's.

INAYATULLAH: Do you think that it is possible to design a society with those five attributes, positively put?

GALTUNG: I think it is even easy! To give one example: In the past few weeks, I have had a small personal experience which tells me more than anything else. I am changing diets towards becoming a vegetarian. My son and my daughter are already vegetarian. They have greatly influenced me in this direction. Because of this change, I will probably live ten to fifteen years longer. Most of the data point in that direction. It increases my chances of survival and improves my well-being. It also increases my freedom and the freedom of others

by making for less dependent economies. It is a spiritual experience... that it contributes to ecological balance is obvious.

What we do in our culture is feast everyday. Then, when our health becomes a problem,, we hope to find a remedy. We look for a therapy, a cure, rather than prevention. Our usual food habits are indicative of how we approach the rest of the world. All it takes is a little bit of self-restraint, as with issues of peace and development. A little bit of self-restraint and we are amply rewarded. Unfortunately the capacity, particularly of western countries, for self-restraint is very limited.

INAYATULLAH: On a general level however, if you try to have people practice self-restraint, then you need some principles or laws that control the accumulation of wealth. Right? And the whole western sense goes against such a basic right.

GALTUNG: Surely, but not the whole western sense. It is the American sense, in particular. In the social democratic countries, we do have those laws. They are well respected principles of society...in PROUT terms, there is a ceiling and there is a floor. We can discuss how far the ceiling should be from the floor. And there is also the problem of permitting individuals to have more than one job, and accumulating riches along several dimensions at the same time. I think people should be encouraged to enrich themselves spiritually without limits; materially is another matter. That is what the socialist countries had hoped to do, and they have done it much more than people are aware of.

INAYATULLAH: Art, literature, sports?

GALTUNG: Precisely, leisure, free time. The amount of time the Soviet citizen spends on playing chess, reading excellent books, playing music ... where the corresponding American citizen is simply in a rat race running after money: reading, viewing and eating junk.

INAYATULLAH: What do you think are the actual prospects for peace and justice for the short and long term?

GALTUNG: I mentioned the need for survival, the need for freedom, the need for well being and for meaning. These dimensions are part of the larger concepts of peace and justice.

I don't know. I was much more optimistic in the 1970's than now. I am almost surprised by the extent of reactionary right-wing forces, extremist forces, a specific example being Reagan; fighting every hour of the day to get more money to kill pregnant women and children in Nicaragua. And totally ignorant, like most of the American people, of the real issues ... not so easy to be optimistic. On the other hand, I have a feeling that the U.S. is on a losing track and is being beaten. That will help. I am encouraged by seeing in so many parts of the world what it means for a former colonial territory to become free, in terms of releasing creativity. Not all the creativity is for the good, but on the whole liberation liberates.

INAYATULLAH: You must be optimistic. Most of your work is trying to find ways to deconstruct the present system and alternative societies. How do you stay inspired personally?

GALTUNG: You can stay optimistic with your heart and , yet be somewhat pessimistic with your brain. You can say at the same time that the peace forces will win out in the longer run, but we must be very Much aware of the negative forces.

INAYATULLAH: Do you take a world systems perspective, or a larger historical, cyclical view to keep your optimism, intellectually speaking, even when the short term trends seem negative?

GALTUNG: One certainly needs a world systems perspective. I am right now completing a book from a world systems perspective that looks at cyclical patterns. I think one can only have a world systems analysis; it must be global. And we can only have a wholistic one that tries to make sense of quite a lot of variables at the same time. The world is so indivisible that we need global and wholistic approaches, but rooted in basic human needs and ecological balance.

INAYATULLAH: What are the key driving forces that cause social change?

GALTUNG: I think the Indian macrohistory P.R. Sarkar is very helpful here, he is touching very real things in his cyclical -spiral theory. However, I think his theory, as all theories, can be improved. He essentially sees some kind of circulation of elites. I would also see it as a change of paradigms; one elite comes into power, has a certain paradigm, it exaggerates and drives itself out of Power. The next one is knocking at the door. And in this whole process there are brief interludes where people matter, and that is important. There are cyclical elements as well as other elements. Now the elites select the technology that fits into their worldview. Thus, if it is a military elite, you can easily predict what type of technology they would use . Economic elites, for example, would be interested in computers and banking technologies, that is what makes them (technologies) important.

INAYATULLAH: So technology is part of the system but it is not the key driving force. Some futurists argue that if you look at technology you can find out what is really happening in a culture.

GALTUNG: I would never say that. You have to look beyond technology. You have to look at the cultural and structural forces shaping technology. Society always has a wide range of technologies available; however, it selects only a minor portion. That selection is crucial. And some stage there, if you know the choice of technology, you can predict what comes later...you can then predict the range of technology from the phase in the social cycle.

INAYATULLAH: How do you see the role of the return of the mythic, of the spiritual today?

GALTUNG: I am in doubt. I really don't know. Spirituality in the first world is concentrated in the U.S., if there is something threatening to bring about a basic change, there would be some

murders and killings. In other words, basic change is much less feasible in this country. And given that, I see the return of the mythic, the mystical and the spiritual as, in a sense, natural. The Green movement in the U.S. is more spiritual. In Europe it is a concrete political movement. It writes up proposals in the shape of legislation, works in Parliament, in addition to other things. Basically, I see spirituality as escapism, but there is also so much spirituality lost in our civilisation.

INAYATULLAH: Maybe people are trying to get in touch with that. It just comes out in perhaps strange forms sometimes as we have seen the past few years, but everyone is searching for that deep connection.

GALTUNG: Maybe, if some of those military individuals...businessmen in this country become more spiritual and the Green people more political that would be better. The green political energy gets lost in some of that mysticism.

INAYATULLAH: Well, the bourgeois way of life is their life, they try to adopt alternative ways of life; they practice a twenty-minute meditation but then go out and continue to exploit. The meditation serves as a way to feel better about their actions instead of looking at the root of their ideology.

GALTUNG: Yes, it is something like that. Again that makes me sad ... it makes me modest in my expectations. I do not expect elections to change much. Somehow the Green people have to become more visible, like Greenpeace.

INAYATULLAH: When Sarkar, for example, talks about spirituality, he talks about an inner awakening, but it doesn't become real until one deals with suffering. Otherwise it is just a good feeling. Real spirituality is actually working with people and dealing with human and that is part of one's inner change. Otherwise one is simply having a good experience, whether in a cave or in some church. Spirituality only comes through loving humanity.

GALTUNG: I can certainly agree with that. But I am not sure that is what spirituality means in California. What I find looks more like "ego-tripping".

INAYATULLAH: Much of the American spiritual movement is like that. But dealing with human suffering is...almost the test of it. It is more than a fast food technique.

GALTUNG: A technique would be the American way. We should make a distinction between changing the world and changing America. The latter may be more difficult. Changing the Soviet Union may be a relatively easier task than changing America. America is saturated with self-righteousness; it has the inability to see its own problems because life is good and easy for many and others somehow think it is their fault if they are not part of that good and easy life.

America is now going into a type of isolation. This will accelerate as America steadily declines economically and culturally. So maybe I would be more optimistic about the rest of the world than about America. We are probably heading for an American military withdrawal,

something corresponding to the British East of Suez policy. But there is the problem of how the American people will react. I am afraid they will withdraw into bitterness and self-righteousness and be attracted to some kind of theocracy.

INAYATULLAH: But the basic American ideology is expansion.

GALTUNG: "Global responsibility" is what they used to call it. In any case, they can't beat their basic enemy, Japan; the one that they are on a real collision course with. The U.S. runs a considerable risk. They had better adjust to the fact of being a declining empire.

INAYATULLAH: Wallerstein, in his writings in the late 1980's argued that world socialism will come about in 100 or 150 years, one or two more long waves ahead; while Batra argues that we are in the midst of a transition which may lead to a new system within 5 or 10 years. What is your own sense of it?

GALTUNG: Wallerstein appears to believe that socialism must follow capitalism. I don't believe that. Also, it depends on what you mean by socialism. What is much more likely is some type of Green emphasis. I have a feeling that the fatigue with socialism in the form of big government is found all over the world. No one is very enchanted, very impressed with this type of system. I doubt very much that will be the future in 50 or 100 years. However, we are in the midst of a world society, not in the limited sense that the decline of one stock exchange follows another. That the stock exchanges are connected is obvious since they are buying and selling the same goods. It would be very strange if they were not connected. But the important connection is at the level of basic needs and ecological balance. The basic needs of one person are related to the basic needs of another; ecological balance here means ecological balance there. At the basics we find significant integration, not at the celebrated level of stock exchanges.

INAYATULLAH: The socialism that I am referring to is the notion of self-reliance, of cooperatives. It refer to a people's economy, not a state or capitalist economy.

GALTUNG: Yes, self reliance on regional, national and local levels. We will also see much more mixed forms of the economy. The American way of thinking is capitalism or socialism, most of the world has left that type of dichotomy behind. The Green emphasis is on neither one nor the other. The social democrats are 50/50 (they use state planning to soften market forces) and the Japanese emphasise all aspects (state and capital; bureaucracy and corporation). As the Japanese say, "there is so much to choose from."

INAYATULLAH: Sarkar talks about extra-cyclical leadership. Leadership that is spiritual in the deeper sense of the word, trying to move the social cycle onwards. What is your sense of leadership?,

GALTUNG: I never liked the word "leadership". It is only in this country that leadership is talked about so much. The thing to discuss is not leadership, but accountability. How do you set up a system so that those who are the executors, the CEO'S, are accountable? The way it is done in this country is so primitive, accountability only to the board of trustees, to the

stockholders. But the way it is set up in Yugoslavia with manager., being accountable to the workers is also primitive. No capitalist economy has managed the problem of accountability. The idea that people vote with their money, with what they buy is also a very crude concept of democracy. The consumer union movement, however, is an effort in a positive direction. What is needed is a broad dialogue and confrontation about what kind of products we need.

Any leader. is impermanent. The leader, of course, has to have some qualifications: foresight and compassion, to begin with. More importantly, real dialogue with the people is crucial for leadership. But I would agree with Lao Tze in the idea that the best leader is the one who leads least.

INAYATULLAH: Do you think there are real possibilities, real alternatives, or is the future simply the continuation of the world capitalist system?

GALTUNG: No certainly not! But that does not mean that it is so obvious that the future is what Sarkar and others would like it to be. Everything comes to an end. What goes up, comes down. What goes down, comes up. So that doesn't trouble me. The steering of the dialectic in a direction that takes care of basic human needs and ecological balance is the key to the future. I insist on that. Those are absolutes. Basic human needs and ecological balance; the rest are abstractions. Then, in a sense it is an empirical question; whether the nation-state system or some other system is better or some mix; whether capitalism or socialism or some mix, or other alternatives. That we can discuss. But we cannot quarrel about basic needs and ecological balance. Hang on to those!

INAYATULLAH: Those values are much more important.

GALTUNG: They are not even values. They are simply basics. "Values' imply that one can choose them; not to choose in favor of basic human needs is fascist. And not to choose in favor of ecological balance is some type of nature-fascism. So we are up against very important things. I think the consciousness about these things is increasing. And that the world movements fighting for these things is also increasing. That is a very optimistic sign. I would build on that one!

A version of this interview originally appeared in Prout Journal (Vol. 4, No. 1, 1989), 16-20.