

The Great Disconnect

Have you ever felt that at some level you're 'out of sync' with the mainstream? By that I mean you're aware of the aridity of the political scene, the shrinking of the public sphere to entertainment, consumption and sport, the never-ending din from commercial interests and the way that the central issues facing humankind are constantly evaded and denied.

If so then you may also have felt some degree of perplexity about why so many people and organisations, so much money and talent remain devoted to denying the reality of the global emergency, the huge question mark over humanity's entire future. In that case, and should you feel the need for nourishment and inspiration, you may like to consider Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory*. I'd read some positive reviews and yet when I first saw the 600+ page small print paperback I nearly walked away. Two weeks and 600 pages later I'm glad I didn't. In fact I was hooked on page 4 when I read the following:

That's the problem with people, their root problem. Life runs alongside them, unseen. Right here, right next. Creating the soil. Cycling water. Trading in nutrients. Making weather. Building atmosphere. Feeding and curing and sheltering more kinds of creatures than people know how to count.



One of the deep features of Western civilisation is its apparent distance from natural process. It has developed over centuries with what's become a boundless ignorance about how all life, including ours, is grounded in natural process. It's well known in the history of science how Francis Bacon and others developed the scientific experiment as an act of those who felt themselves to be 'outside' of nature. In so doing it presupposed that the latter was little more than an array of objects ripe for exploitation. Most undoubtedly saw this as an advance since it revealed what appeared to be a new universe of material riches. But others saw beyond this

rather facile conclusion. In 1768, almost a century before Thoreau wrote his classic *Walden*, Joseph Wright of Derby painted *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*. It now hangs in the National Gallery, London. It shows the helpless bird expiring in a glass container as the air is withdrawn. A small group is gathered around. Apart from the scientist himself are two young girls who are turning away in distress and an older man deep in thought clearly pondering what all this might mean. Others are preoccupied with other things. It's a moving yet dismal scene. Wright clearly understood that the natural world was going to pay a heavy price for what became known as 'progress'.



Two and a half centuries later many people have devoted their lives and careers to understanding and protecting natural systems, their organic and inorganic dimensions, the great cycles of energy and matter. Yet attempts to bring the rest of society with them have been moderately successful at best. It's not that we don't broadly understand how the parts fit together or how human impacts have steadily compromised the entire global system. There are reams of scientific data on all this and plenty of informed commentaries about what it means for humans and their likely future. It's beyond obvious that we should be devoting vastly more time, money and effort into what's been called the 'great transition.' That is, the transition away from high-energy use, rapid exploitation of natural resources and the primacy of old-style economic growth.

But humanity is nothing if not stubborn and it is common knowledge that people will not change unless they are faced with drastic and immediate consequences. You take out the risky loan recommended by the shonky salesman. You don't check the spare wheel before a trip. You don't like to insure too heavily against things that may never happen. You'll just 'wing it'. Consequences that are not close by in space or time are interpreted as 'non-urgent'. We'll just wait and see. We saw that in the 2019 Australian election – a vote for a problematic

continuation of an increasingly unequal society as opposed to embracing the burdens of change. We see it in the Queensland government's decision to allow the Adani mine to proceed. You'd think that the Great Barrier Reef was on the other side of the world, not right next to the extraction and export zone on the very same map.

When it comes to the genuine global emergency facing humanity there's simply insufficient traction to drive decisive action. Here's where the underlying disconnect between people / society and the natural world really comes into play. The term 'cocooning' is a term invented by American trend reader Faith Popcorn (sic) some years ago. It captures the sense of cosy isolation that has become standard in wealthy nations as people retreat *en masse* from the public sphere, close the doors, pull down the blinds and lose themselves – often quite literally - in high-tech diversions. The fact that a stream of writers from H.G. Wells and E.M. Forster onward warned us not to go there cuts little ice with anyone, especially today's high-flying executive or affluent consumer for whom the world is just fine as it is.

Like it or not, I think we have to conclude that global heating, sea-level rise and the collapse of natural systems may perhaps be moderated here and there but they will certainly not be halted – let alone reversed – by the current half-measures now being discussed. Greater use of renewable energy sources won't compensate for the inevitable decline of fossil fuels. Affluent populations are not well known for readily changing their habits and giving up their comforts. Nor will the advertising industry find more acceptable ways to deploy its power and influence.¹ The rise of protest movements such as Extinction Rebellion is a positive sign but no one can say if it will catalyse the necessary deep changes of purpose and attention. Humanity is falling into 'progress trap' of its own making because the celebratory story of human development and advance has thus-far prevailed over a clearer and more honest accounting of the costs that attended these developments every step of the way.²

Works like *The Overstory* do, however, show that there are worlds of reference and meaning grounded in deep time that can evoke and sustain a very different sensibility.³ It's one in which human existence is consciously related to, and mediated by, age-old systems that underly and penetrate our lives at every level. As a futurist I don't know how long it will take our species to get through the coming upheavals or what will be left on the other side. But if there are future people who look back on our mistakes they might possibly identify some of the seeds of their own reality in works such as this. In the meantime, their best use, perhaps, is to provide sustenance and encouragement to those working for change in a time of hazard, contradiction and missed opportunities.

Images: National Gallery, London.

¹ A pointed reminder of the sheer uncompromising negative power of the advertising industry occurred when my wife and I took our two grandkids to see a new movie for their age group. It was preceded by no less than 21 ads for cars, travel, shoes, clothing, household appliances, dog food and the like. What better, and more destructive, way to 'construct' future consumers than to repeatedly and routinely normalise affluence?

² For a fine account of human microhistory over millennia and the reality of 'progress traps' see Lewis, S. & Maslin, M. (2018), *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*. London: Pelican Books.

³ Powers, R. (2019). *The Overstory*. London: Vintage.