

Lesley Newson and Peter Richerson with David Sloan Wilson, Part Four

David Sloan Wilson: I'd like to finish up by just looking into the future. Now, everyone knows we need to expand cooperation to the global scale, that's not new with us. But we might have, I hope we have, maybe something to contribute knowledge-wise as to how that might happen. We now have the technological ability to create a global brain, for example. We're talking, for example, as if we were by each other's sides. So we have the technological ability, but that doesn't mean it's going to self-organize, surely it's not.

And so how can we use this knowledge as provisional as it is? We need to be humble about what we know, we've already said that, we know it's a story, it's not the story. But despite that, how can we use our provisional knowledge in order to build the scale of cooperation still higher to that final rung, basically, to global cooperation? Lesley.

Lesley Newson: So I think that something extraordinary has happened that we aren't really appreciating enough. And that is that people are no longer competing for reproductive success. Now, I don't think that humans ever competed as individuals for reproductive success because we're cooperative breeders. But what's happened in the last couple of hundred years is that people are no longer having as many children as they can afford. The family, which was the main driver, I think, of reproduction is now very weak and so individuals are choosing not to have very many children. So we're no longer competing in the fundamental Darwinian way.

So in the future, there's going to no longer be this competition, that we're still experiencing now, for resources. In the lifetime of today's children, probably the world's population is going to start to diminish. Not because of war, not because of toxicity, but just because people aren't having that many children. And I don't think that we've really grasped that. And we haven't really grasped what that means. What do you think about that?

DSW: I think that's a great point and the point that not many people appreciate. So, yeah. Peter.

Peter Richerson: Well, it seems to me that the history of the last century or so already points to a lot of progress on this project of creating a global social system. The necessity for this has been obvious to people since the creation of weapons of mass destruction before World War I. In the aftermath of World War I we created the League of Nations. Now, the League of Nations was a feeble thing by comparison to national political institutions. And even to this day, nation-states are the most powerful, single political force in the world. And they often have behaved very badly with respect to global commons problems, ranging from controlling nuclear weapons to global warming, to the extinction crisis and so on.

On the other hand, we've made a tremendous amount of progress and the United Nations is an improvement over the League of Nations. The United Nations has done really stalwart work with respect to the global climate problem. The IPCC for example, won the Nobel Peace Prize, right? For its contribution to turning basic science, basic atmospheric science into recommendations for policy. Now, this is all really great stuff. It's not good enough, but it seems to me that we just have to keep rolling the rock down the same road that created the IPCC. There's no magic in it, it's just plain brute political work.

So the world's biggest stumbling block, not the only one, but the world's biggest stumbling block to making progress on climate change is the Republican Party of the United States. And so if we're going to make progress on global warming, we've got to crush the Republican Party and Exxon oil company. It's just political work, right? It's just the same kind of thing that we've been struggling with for forever. But particularly, as problems that were once local have become global, the global commons problem, that really became manifest in the last century or so. We know how progress is made, we just have to do it and we need to push it faster because the rate we've been doing it in the past isn't good enough.

LN: But I think we also have to be patient because there's cultural lags, right? I think those require a certain amount of-

PR: Well, cultural lag is something to fight not to use as an excuse. Cultural lags should be a goad. We need to know how to reduce cultural lags not just use them as an excuse for doing nothing. So my thought about the future is the future is an adventure. We have no idea what the future will be, much of an idea about what the future will be like. And so it's just putting one foot in front of the other and trying to do the right thing and make improvements as best we can in the circumstances of the moment.

LN: But do you remember back in the 60s, the late 60s, early 70s, everybody was talking about the population explosion. And tons and tons of money was spent on trying to convince people to take birth control pills and things like that. And it turned out that none of that was necessary. It turned out that people... It was just a cultural lag in that within a half a generation or so people were reducing their fertility without birth control. They were actually choosing. You just had to wait until they kind of got it.

PR: That's fair enough. On the other hand, the decline in the birth rate has not resulted in a relaxation of the impact of humans on the environment because each individual aspires to affluence, that is characteristic of the west. And it's the number of people times their consumption that creates the impact. And consumption desires can increase without any known upper limit. I mean, we all might want to live like Saudi Arabian princes and princesses, and that would be extremely destructive.

DSW: Well, let me add just a couple thoughts of my own to finish up. One is that even without planning, I mean, the unplanned out of control globalization has still had the effect of making it easy to think of the whole earth as a single group. And that idea was, I think, unimaginable even 200 years ago. But it's only in the 19th century that the the whole universalist sentiment, as you were saying, Pete, that the first religion to be truly universal was the Baha'i Faith really, that was 19th century.

But now the more things are truly global in terms of economic processes and just the massive mixing, I like to say that in my tiny city of Binghamton, New York, such a small city and its public school, over 20 first languages are spoken. That's how much mixing has taken place. The average kid in Binghamton, New York, their friends come from 20 different places on earth, different primary languages. And so with all of this technology, it's almost like so reasonable to think of the whole earth as something that needs to be cooperative, whereas before it was unimaginable. So that's encouraging.

But then secondly, I think back to our particular ideas of cooperation and evolution—are that they're scale independent. And so the same dynamic that's needed for cooperation in a small group is needed for cooperation in the global village. And the more we actually convey this worldview, make that sensible to people, as opposed to other narratives, such as the narrative of laissez-faire, that the pursuit of self-interest just automatically permeates to the common good—that our narrative and our worldview, actually, if it could become more pervasive than... even the leviathan organizations that are currently part of the problem, the nations, the corporations, the big tech companies, if they actually had a change of perspective, they could actually become part of the solution not part of the problem. And we wouldn't just have to endlessly oppose them politically, we could actually win them over conceptually.

And I think that that is not naive. I think that, that actually is possible. And so I think that's why our knowledge, as provisional as it is, can play an important role, just conceptually. And that's one of the things that keeps me motivated. So any final thoughts, my friends? Final thoughts, and then we'll end this.

PR: Well, I agree with you, David. It's just that the nation-state and these other parochial kinds of attachments are hard to overcome. And so it's a struggle to do it, that's all. And we need to engage in the struggle, is my only recipe. You're right, people can manage to get along in spite of a huge cultural diversity. My favorite examples are some of the great cities of the world like, well, Singapore is a spectacular example, New York City, Los Angeles, the Bay Area, London, these polyglot cities.

I mean, they're just Binghamton, as you describe it, on steroids, right? And yet they're rich and they work pretty well by and large. And all of those parochial divisions exist, but the politics of those great cities manage those divisions fairly well. I mean, we saw the conflict in New York City between the Hasidic Jews and the rest of the city over COVID restrictions. So there certainly is plenty of conflict in those great cities, but by and large, the problems get solved.

DSW: Yeah. Yeah, thank you. That's great.

LN: I just think we need to put our heads together and make up some stories that people can buy into. It will be a lot easier for them to see a better future if we can create many stories of better futures. A world that our children can live in. Our grandchildren can live in, our great-grandchildren can live in.

DSW: Yeah.