

The Physiology of the Noosphere: Segment 7

David Sloan Wilson: Well, let's talk more about the global commons, your concept of the global commons. And a point that I'd like to begin with—I think that you'll agree with it, and you can say—is the necessity of a whole earth ethic. Part of our story needs to be the recognition that it's the whole earth system that we need to be working towards. And if we don't do that, then we're not going to get there. And so, this story in my life, requires a whole earth ethic. I think that's what you mean by the global commons, but I'd love to hear more about it in your own words.

John Arquilla: Absolutely. I think that's precisely the point, is to think of ourselves as, all the seven billion of us humans as, if you will, individual cells of one great living organism. And I think that certainly was Teilhard's view of humanity, the biosphere that grew from the geosphere. And if we don't take such a view, we risk the destruction of the biosphere. And I think many realize that there's, to some extent, denialism that's going on. But I think certainly among the scientific community, this tie, this understanding that the whole system must be seen as integral in nature.

And that, I think, is something that...it's a view that cannot be reached or sustained if your fundamental paradigm is that of realpolitik, of hard power politics. You're going to look at the high north, which is opening up more because of climate change. And you're going to see it in terms of territorial disputes and resource extraction, rather than as something that has to be treated with great, great care, lest global consequences, dire consequences unfold.

And the same, I think, Antarctica, we are a little better about being less territorially and resource competitive over the high south, if I can call Antarctica that. So we see these things. We know that the world is integral economically. 90% of the goods that people buy, enjoy, et cetera, are moved by water, and often over great, great distances. And unless this commons is treated with tremendous respect...and that means in military sphere, this commons is often talked about in terms of areas where you can deny access to others or to control.

This truly has to be seen as a shared commons if the whole world system is to continue to have any kind of economic viability. And looking at the atmosphere, that's another commons that we need to think about. Orbit, what we call outer space, which is mostly in a low Earth type orbit, it's a commons where we have a treaty that speaks against the militarization and weaponization of space. And yet the realpolitik paradigm is driving many countries toward an arms race so that they can destroy or seize satellites.

And the problem there, of course, is with the commons, is that if you begin a war in space, which would go against the treaty that we all have virtually every nation has signed, if you do this, you will create debris fields that will orbit for decades and decades and really degrade the communications of the world overall.

DSW: That's the ultimate tragedy of the commons, to have done that.

JA: Absolutely. And there's a deep commons as well in the roughly 400 fiber optic links at sea that move about 97% of all the information internationally in the world today. And yet, we have the example of Russia developing robotic mini-submarines that can go to the depths that their regular submarines can't. These things deploy from a regular submarine. And they're artificially intelligent and able to locate where these fiber optic lines are. To some extent, they have an ability to tap into them to spy, but they also have the ability to destroy them.

And it seems to me that is another of those things that's highly inimical to the interest of this notion of a whole connected Earth, of a Noosphere. And it seems to me that there is room for a kind of arms control that is behavior based, not just in terms of we're going to reduce the number of missiles. That's a structural basis of arms control. We need to move more in this area of behavior.

And we've seen, to my mind, there are examples of Noopolitik in play in arms control with things like the chemical and biological weapons conventions. Where nearly 200 countries have all agreed they won't...most of them have the capacity to build chemical or biological weapons, yet they agree not to do so. And the world has been largely free. 100 years plus ago in World War I, there was a lot of use of chemical weapons. Since then, chemical weapons used by militaries against other militaries have very, very little of that. And even just a small amount of the use of chemical weapons against civilian populations, excluding, of course, the Holocaust where they used a lot of chemicals to exterminate people.

But the fact of the matter is, there are examples, hopeful examples of behavioral-based controls, and the only way to protect the high commons, the deep commons, the freedom of the seas, and the effects economic, environmental, and strategic. The only way to do this is through Noopolitik-based form of behavioral arms control. And I think that is a central challenge for statecraft today.