

FROM THE CAVE TO K-MART

Excerpt from AmeriKa Psycho (2003)

In December 2001, the newly installed defence minister of Afghanistan, Mohammed Fahim, announced it was time for the United States to stop dropping bombs on his country. A ministry colleague added that any al-Qaeda remaining in the land were few in number and of little threat, even “demanding” that the Pentagon pull back. The response of General Tommy Franks, emanating from the Texas ranch of President Bush, was worthy of Attila the Hun: “We will not be pressed into doing something that does not represent our national objectives, and we will take as long as it takes.” So much for the notion of an independent Kabul. (Six years later the Pentagon is still dropping bombs on civilians).

Immanuel Kant argued that time and space were not things found in the world, but were concocted by the brain to help humans organise impressions, “irremovable goggles” to give our thoughts structure. In our era, these goggles have been embellished with another lens, the lens of avarice, functioning as a distorting measure of worth – the worth of nations, objects and each other. The goal of life drummed into our heads without us even being aware of it, is to get as much as we can as fast as we can. Rarely discussed are the ethics of enough.

Wealth need not be expressed as money. The Tibetans, the Aztecs and the Balinese possessed rich and elaborate cultures without a monetary system – until the heroes of the West arrived. Socrates was penniless, Diogenes lived in a tub, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the most intelligent men in the world, inherited two fortunes and gave them both away. The artist, writer and anthropologist, Tobias Schneebaum, confessed to a documentary maker that he had lived “hand to mouth” for 50 years and loved it, “I wouldn’t have it any other way”. One of TV’s most radical confessions.

This book is not only about the war in the Afghanistan, it is about the war for the soul of the future. As we move through this millennium, we need to evolve a global ethic, and to ask – is it reasonable for the super rich to increase their wealth without limit, without putting a chunk back into the service of the globe, from which it was extracted? After the first \$50 million, say, how about the rest going into a global kitty for the underfed? The controversial Indian philosopher, P.R. Sarkar, puts it well: “When the

whole property of this universe has been inherited by all creatures, how can there be any justification for the system in which someone gets a flow of huge excess while others die for a handful of grain?"

It is argued that wealth trickles down, but piles of research shows that the opposite is true. Prosperity bubbles up. "Growth in national income does not necessarily lead to improvement in well being", the United Nations found in a 1995 study and later concluded, "nearly 90 countries are worse off economically than they were 10 years ago". Available indicators in the United States for the years from 1998 to 2000 point towards a further jump in incomes at the top. The wealthiest one percent in the last two decades have *doubled* their share of national household wealth, from 20 percent to close to 40 percent. In February, 2002, the *Financial Review* reported that the gap between rich and poor in Australia is widening, a disparity that offers bleak outcomes for health, crime and education. On the whole, Australians feel trapped in a paradox of needing less, and acquiring more; seeking simplicity and finding complexity, owning shares and out of a job. The myth of endless material progress has hit a brick wall.

I don't claim to possess the answers. I feel a dread, however, that the megalomania of high rollers and Western power brokers is driving us to the brink. An example: In June 2002, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reported that Uncle Sam's emissions of toxic gases – already exuding a quarter of the world's carbon dioxide – will have risen 43 percent by 2020. In face of this, George Bush wants to build dykes and encourage business to adopt "voluntary measures". Is he mad? How can the world's most powerful politician owe his primary allegiance to a single nation, at the expense of the whole of Earth. The age of unconditional sovereignty is surely receding.

Meanwhile, the journey to a whole Earth healing inches ahead, regardless of Uncle Sam and his adolescent delusions – Kyoto, the World Court, arms reductions, the rights of children, and one day, maybe, a global tax, a wealth cap, a commission on currency transactions, the cancellation of Third World debt. A proposed Earth Charter calls for the creation of a People's Assembly at the United Nations, one open to "systematic input from nonprofits and corporates", and for the bounty of bio-tech to be pursued on behalf of the Third World, for micro-credit to be made available to the poor and that all new weapons of mass destruction be criminalised. In the wings, no doubt, is a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic.

This is not the time to give up. It is not the moment to slink back into our shells, muttering that people are brutes, that we never change. Such worldly disdain faced

those who set out to abolish slavery, bear baiting and public executions. History resonates with success. Ethics evolve. The philosopher, Friedreich Hegel, hardly a hippie, regarded the dialectical sweep of history as humanity's path to self-discovery.

Some feel we are irredeemably shaped by hidden forces, victims of our genes, our upbringing, propaganda, tempting us to surrender our innermost being, to the "herd", to "them", to public opinion, like today's so-called leaders, timidly tiptoeing backwards in the shadow of the polls. Instead of protecting our cherished borders, whether of the nation state or our self-belief, we should expand them, to live in full pursuit of the edge of our freedom, our responsibility and our capacity to love. The world is our workshop, and the future is up for grabs. But who will do the grabbing? Sooner or later we in the West will be confronted with a damning choice. Can we bear to have a bit less, so that others can have a bit more?

Or will it be business as usual, winner takes all? So far, the official future seems to be a projection of the hopes and aspirations of the West. Scholars associated with the space industry have already unveiled a proposal for the U.S. Lunar Economic Authority, to oversee the "development and exploitation of extra-terrestrial resources", including mining, manufacturing, power generation, tourism, real estate and other "macroprojects on the moon", which could – wait for it – "employ three to 12 percent of the U.S. population in new jobs". Here we go again. Who wants the gold mines? Who wants Pizza Hut? Who'll get the casino?

And you thought the moon belonged to everyone.