

A General Theory of Everything

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Preamble

I am a member of a group of five people in their seventies. All of us were at some time in our lives employed by the Australian Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA). We are also all members of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). We meet and plot how we can reform the ALP. We exchange short papers or long emails, and we call ourselves "The Tilters" (after Cervantes). We also lunch well and drink (a lot of) wine. We meet at a harbourside rowing club [in Sydney] which has an adequate restaurant attached and a deck with views over the water. This is not irrelevant, comrades, because the scene helps create a climate conducive to learning (to quote the egregious Malcolm Knowles). We seek meetings with various MPs, Union leaders and academics, and we even think that we have seen a change in the discourse of the Leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party that we think comes from us. We have recently decided that there is a need for a new General Theory, and are tackling that challenge in, for example, this mini-paper in which I seek to replace capitalism, socialism and the rest of it.

All right. I dare not suggest too much about a new general theory of employment, interest and money. But the outrageous idea of trying to develop a new general theory of everything is attractive and just the thing to fuel a number of Tilters' lunches. So we want to develop some thinking that is post-enlightenment, post-capitalist, post-socialist, post-neoliberal, and post-postmodern. None of the above theories, with the exception of socialism in its theoretical form, envisaged fairness as an essential principle. That was where we Tilters more or less started, so I suggest we restate the need for a general theory to have as its major aim the creation of a **fair society**.

What is sadly lacking now is honesty. We are treated daily to stories of corruption and crime. Our banks forge signatures and cheat their customers. Failed states seem to proliferate, with so-called "kleptocratic" governments in which those who are in power, or have seized power, amass wealth for themselves. Politicians lie. Business people lie. Advertisements lie. So I suggest that we state the need for a general theory that has as a major aim the creation of an **honest society**: honest politicians, honest managers, honest police forces, honest bureaucrats, and honest citizens.

With dishonesty comes a lack of trust. We can no longer assume that a stranger will treat us well. It is all too easy to become guarded in our daily encounters, and assume the worst. So I suggest that we state the need to create **a society based on trust**. But I want a form of trust that is more compelling than the soft idea of trust that underwrites a lot of theorising about civil society. Perhaps I am shifting to the idea of solidarity, which implies a commitment to support others when their case or claim or cause is right, even to our own detriment. Solidarity is the polar opposite of treachery.

With lack of trust or solidarity comes a loss of community. 'Community' is a devalued word which has been leached through over-use of its original meaning. But I experienced what I mean by it in the 1980s when I ran a training course for job reps from the wages division of the Metropolitan Water and Sewerage Employees Union (MWSEU). The reps were cheerful. There was a lot of talk before we started the

course, and lots of banter and laughter once the course was underway. But it was more than just good humour. There was a sense of companionship. Working several metres underground keeping the city's water and sewage moving, or staffing the treatment plants, had a levelling effect. And there was a sense of solidarity. Working in a potentially dangerous job meant everyone relied on everyone else. I was briefly welcomed into a community based on fairness, honesty and trust. So I suggest that we state the need for a **society that promotes and supports proactive kinds of community**. Within this kind of community there will be respect for individuals, egalitarianism, and solidarity.

I may be romanticising them, but those MWSEU members had an **openness** about them. Too often today people have become enclosed. We keep information to ourselves. Fraud has made us distrustful. Governments, in their turn, have become the hoarders of information and the keepers of secrets. So I suggest we envisage a society in which the balance between individual rights and the rights of society are constantly under review, with the aim of making society, and particularly government, as open as possible.

Finally in this list is **work**. But I am using the word in its widest sense. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, wrote that we are not built in silence but in word, in work, and in action-reflection. We become who we are through language, through our active encounter with the social and material world, and through our informing that encounter with analysis and evaluation. So we need a society in which everyone can 'work'; that is engage effectively and rewardingly with her or his social and material worlds. For some this will be in paid employment, for others it will be in family. But there will be some deprived of this company and this ability to act in and upon their environment. Our society needs to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to 'work' in this Freiran sense. Years ago, when I was working in inner London as an outreach adult educator, I teamed up with a colleague working with young people, and together we established an advice centre for 'alternatively occupied people'. We need a less

clunky descriptor, but the idea was to find a concept that gave people the same status and engagement in life that a satisfying job can do.

Of course we should not simply throw out previous general theories.

We can keep the **enlightenment's** idea of the rational human being. We can celebrate our ability to think, to theorise, to argue and to challenge superstition and ideology. We can continue the enlightenment's attack on poor thinking.

We can keep capitalism's entrepreneurship, but only if we exercise a democratic socialist **management of the economy**.

We can keep socialism's ideas on consciousness and being. Freire was drawing on Marx who argues that our consciousness is constructed in a dialectical relationship with our social and material worlds:

The phantoms formed in the brains of human beings are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life process ...

Our actions come first.

... [H]uman beings, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking. *It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.* (my italics) (Marx and Engels, 1988, p. 42)

We need to envisage a society in which we promote a form of consciousness constructed on work in the sense that Freire uses the word: an active engagement with our social and material world.

I can see little that we would want to take from **neoliberalism**. Its adherents' reverence for an anthropomorphic concept of the market is a modern form of naïve and stupid superstition. The market does not have a life of its own. The market does not react, people do. The market is not a force of nature. It is a reflection of human activity, and so can be, and is, manipulated.

And we can keep the **postmodern concept of the grand narrative**. Some postmodern writers see our current condition as an ending and a fragmentation. The grand narrative of the enlightenment (which includes both the sub narratives of capitalism and socialism) is coming to a close. The world and society are dysfunctional because there is no new grand narrative to take the place of the old. This lifts from us the responsibility of creating a new and coherent theory. That is the enlightenment way. The postmodern way is to tell stories and go on telling stories, until these fragments begin to coalesce. Up to us!

I want to finish on a potentially mawkish note, and that is, as you would expect from someone who spent the 1960s kicking around London, **the phenomenon of love**. Any general theory of everything must have as a central aim the encouragement of love. One of my favourite writers is a South African philosopher Rick Turner. He was assassinated by BOSS in 1978 because he was seen as capable of uniting the liberal elements of the white society with the radical opponents of apartheid, including those training in the border countries. Here he is writing about love. As you will see, his concept of love amounts to a definition of critical thinking:

We have seen that love requires understanding of oneself and of the other.
But it is not possible to understand myself or the other without the use of

reason, without thinking about myself and society. Unless I can see the way in which social forces impinge on me and structure my relationships with other people, I cannot escape from mere role-playing, from patterned responses to the other. The stereotypical reaction of white to black is only the most obvious expression of a society in which all relationships from courtship to commuting, become stereotyped. All relations become rituals. (Turner, 1980, p. 92).

Love, and the freedom from role, ritual and stereotype that comes with it, form the basis for people-in-community as opposed to people-in-competition. ‘Community is a good in itself and not a way of attaining other goods’, Turner says. ‘It is a basic mode of human fulfilment.’

I will end on this from Zygmunt Bauman. He describes love in terms of an encounter, if needs be an utterly selfless one, with ‘the naked face’ of the other. There are echoes of the concept of solidarity in his idea of sacrifice:

To love means to value the other for its otherness, to wish to reinforce its otherness, to protect the otherness and make it bloom and thrive, and to be ready to sacrifice one’s own comfort, including one’s own mortal existence, if that is what is needed to fulfil that intention. (Bauman, 1993, p. 247).

References

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