

The Pope and the Man from Mars

The (neoliberal?) Hero of his story: from electric car to free fuel in the form of solar energy; lithium-ion battery (goes from zero to sixty mph in less than five seconds); three hundred miles on one charge; now powerwall to change completely the energy infrastructure of the US. But then hedging his bets with SpaceX to establish a colony on Mars – but also simply because this is what humans should do; he likens it to buying insurance; we probably won't need it but we might; and he's talking about a colony of 80,000 people. This might be seen as the ultimate – or at least the latest – in neoliberalism and privatization because Musk is rushing in where NASA has stalled. Or it could be seen as civic virtue, as the aggressive assertion of self in the context of communal consciousness. In a 2013 interview he has he hoped to “spur the national will” by creating a picture of life on Mars – if only small greenhouse based on dehydrated nutrient gel. His “money shot.” He tried to get the Russians to sell him an ICBM but then figured it would be cheaper to build it himself, although he had no experience. He envisioned low-cost, regular ferry service, the Southwest Airlines of space, made possible by a lean private enterprise without governmental bloat and bureaucracy. The neoliberal theme might be extended by SpaceX's pushing of its subcontractors, its decision to build much of the necessary technology in-house, and especially its – Musk's – relentless pushing of his employees. Long-term, loyal employees might be sacked if Musk determined he could do without them; grammatical errors, failure to do anything “awesome” in too long a time were other reasons for termination. Severe rationality, emotional bankruptcy. An alien? Or just a classic narcissist? And why does this seem such an essential part of the techie stories?

“This is how markets are supposed to work.” But he is pointing the way toward a postcarbon future, a viable electric car, a solarization of the energy grid. Perhaps trivial but he does what environmentalists have failed to do: make the postcarbon sound less scary, perhaps even appealing. And he is pushing, inspiring, accelerating the market; other auto makers are following in making electric cars; he can't make his batteries fast enough; he's even made his patents open-source. He's even pushed government to reinvest in space exploration and he himself is attempting to put the internet in space with four thousand, small, low-orbiting satellites. This is practice for his communications network on Mars. And his hyperloop train is in response to what he sees as the state of California's absurdly retrograde bullet train (most expensive and slowest fast train in the world). He released his idea – as he was too busy to pursue it – and two private firms (one crowd-sourced, the other funded by a roster of VC all-stars) and taken up the challenge. His disruptive innovation is taking on some big cows and, who knows, maybe he'll have a man on Mars in ten years.

“a sweeping, radical, and highly persuasive critique of how we inhabit this planet”: On narrow grounds, the Pope's letter speaks from Rome to the developed world and from an Argentinian background to the impoverished, developing world. He reduces the space available to climate deniers. He reaches out to other faiths and other times. But more than all that, he

offered “a sweeping, radical, and highly persuasive critique of how we inhabit this planet” – an ecological critique inside a moral, social, economic, and spiritual argument.

The reductionism of infinite growth: Our environmental troubles are not technological at roots. Perhaps technocratic gets closer but he’s no Luddite – praises the beauty of aircraft and skyscrapers. But we equate an increase in power with progress. We reduce reality, goodness, truth to functions of technological and economic power. We take a subject – object approach to nature, confronting it rather “receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand.” Our ideology of infinite growth is based on the lie of infinite resources. But, more broadly, environmental degradation is one expression of this “reductionism” – it shapes everything. Against all odds, he proposes a new paradigm where technology serves the poor, creations, and the ethical and spiritual needs of the affluent.

So he jumps into several debates; automation and unemployment (“work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth”). GMO’s – maybe they don’t hurt us directly but they concentrate land in the hands of those who can afford the technologies. Small scale food production (instead of forcing peasants off the land and into cities; and the UN has issued many studies showing small farms are more productive of calories, if not profits, than megafarms). Consumerism vs. diversity of cultures. Links the disappearance of a culture to the extinction of the species. Defense of indigenous communities (contrast with tar sands). Beauty over ugliness, public spaces over development; priority to public transportation, as essentially a preferential option for the poor (bus rapid transit, esp. when it inconveniences cars, equalizing access of rich and poor).

The common good over individual advancement (against Thatcher’s “there no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.” Intergenerational solidarity – world belongs just as much to those who will follow us. Much we do now would have to stop if we took this seriously – opening oil drilling in newly melted areas of Arctic, for example). Such things have been said before, of course, as David Brooks complains “doom-mongering about technological civilization.” And on the left is Mark Greif of *n+1* who rejects the question of “who we fundamentally are” are quite beside the point. Focus on immediate and practical ends. Don’t talk of common good vs. individualism, talk of carbon credits. But a long line of spiritual leaders have asked exactly that. And sometimes we have listened. Late 70s surveys showed Americans 30 percent for growth, 31 percent against growth, and 39 “highly uncertain.” But then the transit from Carter to Reagan.

The magical conception of the market at the precipice: If it will be different this time, it will because we have indeed reached the precipice. The limits to growth are not theoretical. Water, for example. A universal right, yet stores are drawn down everywhere. Water losses on such a scale that gravitational pull registers it. That the Sierra Nevadas are actually higher (relieved of so much water weight). The supplies we tap now, so deep, have been there for 20,000 years (in California). Or biodiversity: extinctions at 114 times the normal (usual) rate. And inequality

reaching absurd levels: six heirs to Walmart fortune equal the assets of the bottom 42 percent in US; Koch brothers will spend more on the election than the major parties. But above all, climate change: who is the realist now with the latest, bad news? Brooks and his “over the long haul both people and nature are better off with technological progress”? Or Pope’s critique of “nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technological solutions” or the “magical conception of the market”

“a vast effort, rooted in pragmatic physics” He will probably lose, despite bringing spirit and science together; must still battle money. Congress just passed another round of trade legislation, what the pope called “rapidification.” Markets have a role to play and a carbon tax would really help speed transition to renewable fuels. But the case is clear; fracking and less bad fuels must give way to renewables and the price of that is coming down (circle back to Musk). “a vast effort, rooted in pragmatic physics, could ensure before the decade was out that there would hardly be a hut or hovel that lacked access to energy....” Fossil fuels haven’t done that. Can be done with the Pope’s small scale entrepreneurs. Building it would add the poorest and reduce the richest – but we would have to care about the people, transcend Brooks’s “low motivations of people as they actually are.” The Pope suggests the better thing we and our species could be.