



TRANSCRIPT

400 years ago, Thomas Hobbes proposed that man's nature was that of a war of all against all, and that people were naturally brutish.

For the most part people still believe that for some to win and get ahead, others have to lose.

What if ... you could have everything?

All one has to do is look at the most popular television programs gracing the airwaves. The sole point is to win and rise to the top.

You see what happens is, we all get good at playing the game we're presented.

The game that boys often play, which is King of the Mountain – where there's only one on top and he has to defend his position and the others are trying to push him off.

Survival. Win. Defeat. Rise to the top.

It's all around us and it seems completely normal.

Everyone's pushing themselves to the winner. To be the survivor.

"It's hard to see them walk away with everything when we've got nothing."

Robin Hood.

The haves and the have-nots. The winners and the losers. We learn about them from childhood fairy tales, but grow up to learn that they're based on the way the world is run.

Long ago, the king of Britannia journeyed to the holy land on a crusade. While he was gone, his horribly greedy brother the Prince stole his crown.

We have a world where a small class of people exploits the rest of them. Now, it may sound shocking for an IMF economist to talk about exploitation, but I think that's the reality.

The bigger you are, the more money you have, the more control you end up exercising.

Now that is a problem – for the small and not-so-powerful that is, who make up 90% of the world's population.

One of the problems is that we've inherited notions of power that are all rooted in competitive and conflictual understandings of power. And so when we set up –you know– democratic institutions around those notions, they become contests of power.

Democracy, as we know it, has really taken a dominant Western definition, which means it's good to have a few parties, to have a dog fight about what's the best government...

If you look back to the emergence of this model of Western Liberal Democracy, it was a remarkable historical accomplishment, really, compared to the systems of government that it replaced!

“Perhaps we will be arrested, that's always a possibility. We've always accepted that. But that is not going to make us give up.”

The simple act of voting was symbolically important. Because it affirmed your right and your dignity as a human being. It said I am entitled to vote, because simply I am a human being.

But like many great ideas that inspire, the reality of competitive democracy can be a sobering experience.

If we look at these models and ask what are the results of structuring governance in this way - competitive systems of democracy – one of the results is that it invites the corrupting influence of money.

For 200 years, political parties have been the target of business people.

We just had local elections in Bulgaria, where I'm living now, and people were spending a lot of money on colored posters and so on. It's a very clear sign that if people are willing to spend a lot of money on an election, they must be expecting to get a lot out of it.

People who are engaging in those contests have to draw on sources of wealth and affluence and money in society, to finance their campaigns, to manage public perception, to shape public opinion; to do all the things it takes to win and then maintain political power.

The Center for Responsive Politics reports that over a billion dollars was spent on the 2008 US presidential campaign alone.

I think most of us watch the American electoral process with some kind of sense of awe at its sophistication, and some kind of sense of astonishment at its simplicity. Because it's driven by the money. And a lot of the electoral campaigning is: Can you last for 4 years of campaigning and can you get the money?

You know politicians will serve a term, and do they really care beyond that horizon? And why should they?

You're trying to entice people to vote for you by offering them short-term, material, visible benefits.

And we know this! It's not like we don't know it. We clearly know that the kinds of short-term solutions that we're putting into place are going to have long-term adverse consequences.

Change the politics. Save the climate.

And in environmental issues, particularly, and in others such as capacity building or in investing in things that take years to make a return, like education – in time-based competitive politics, there tends to be less of it (far-sightedness).

One of the ways democracy tries to leverage short-term planning horizons is by creating opposition.

We know the language of contestation, so we can contest everything. And the danger is that too much competition causes "folly". And folly is when you unintentionally act against your own interests.

Contestation doesn't necessarily mean that either the process is fair or that all of the players are playing it in a fair manner and with the right objective at hand.

Contests of power that use for instance adversarial models of debate for decision making, they have to simplify issues into gross caricatures of what is actually going on.

- Let them stay.
- Send them home.
- For some in California and Texas, they didn't cross the border, the border crossed them. Besides, our culture is becoming richer.
- Our culture is becoming divided. The melting pot has been replaced by the Tower of Babel.
- You are cynical and frightening.
- You are naïve and a foolish Pollyanna.
- Can you substantiate your claims?
- Can you substantiate your claims?
- Shut up! Shut up!

We line up on opposite sides and we try to prove that our perspective is correct and the other person's is wrong. And your goal is to win and to defeat the other person.

Underneath somewhere, there is usually a selfish motivation, or a motivation to help a particular group, or clique, or tribe, or whatever it may be.

If you're competing for votes, then your constituents, those people who are voting for you, are those people who live within the voting boundaries that you're serving – whether that's a locality or a state or a nation-state. People outside those boundaries, whose interests you really might want to take into account, if they're not voting, then you don't have any incentive, and you often have a strong disincentive to take their interests into account.

And these days, most issues spill beyond national borders and constituencies.

Unfortunately, it's often when the cost has been incurred – and the cost is often tragic – that people then come to realize that they have to consider the interests of other people as well.

The kinds of challenges that we have constructed –that we are now confronted with– are of a global character. And nobody can tell me that this is their national sovereignty so that they can decide on an energy policy that destroys the environment, because their neighbors are going to pay the price for it.

Country First. – Austria for Austrians. – Our Land. Our Sovereignty.

If you look at human history and you see how we've gone from very small groups of people, to communities, in a way ending up as nations, we've calculated that our (collective) human relations with each other is a critical part of our own interests.

But I think we must be careful to assume that even if we transcend national boundary, that we don't forget the issue of power. Because even on the international plane, there are concentrations and stakeholders of power.

Although we've come to realize the necessity for international collaboration, we still go about it with a win/lose mindset.

In the 20th century we built very big institutions – whether it's the Red Cross or the United Nations – we established these global forums. The problem for emerging countries is that global forums were established by the world powers from 50–60 years ago and they tend to still dominate them. If you look at the IFC or the World Bank, you'll find that's the case.

And we're so stuck in this mindset that the best we can think of, even on a global level, is wrestling for a new "king of the mountain".

One impulse might be, "Okay, we've got to organize and defeat the people, who have historically been winning at this game, at their own rules."

We must reflect in the most important organ of the United Nations –in the Security Council– the new balance of power, of economic influence, of resources that exists in the world. We must find a way.

If you actually did it on the basis of economic shares, the US share would go up in these institutions. I'm not sure if that's what people want.

Readjusting shares and so on, in my mind, is like rearranging the chairs on the Titanic while it's about to sink.

The problem is the game doesn't change. The best you can do is –kind of– create new winners and new losers.

So where did we get this idea that democracy is one big competition?

Competitive democracy is based on three assumptions, among others. One is that –you know– human nature is fundamentally selfish, aggressive, competitive; that we're all only out for our own interests.

Closely related to that is the assumption that –you know– humans invariably organize into groups and develop common interests within those groups, but that between groups, interests will conflict and diverge.

And then the last assumption is –which flows from the first two– because of the problem of human nature, and because of the problem of diverging interests among different social groups, the only best way we can organize society is by harnessing all that self-interested energy in competitive social structures.

The problem with those three assumptions is that the systems we construct on them, are proving dysfunctional. They're proving maladaptive to the needs of the age that we're now entering in.

This system of Liberal Democracy was a great advancement over what it preceded and it was reasonably well-adapted to the conditions under which it first emerged.

The birth of this model occurred at a time –you know– before the invention electricity, before the invention of the internal combustion engine, let alone air travel and the Internet. Not to mention the population explosion that's occurred in the meantime, the emergence of –you know– a global free-market, capitalist economy; appetite for mass consumption, world wars, terrorism, global health pandemics, I could go on... None of these things existed –certainly not at the scale that we face them today– none of these things existed when Western Liberal Democracy was born.

In a world that has become so interdependent, what alternative assumptions might we try out?

Well those assumptions might be that, while we can acknowledge competitive impulses in human nature, we can recognize cooperative capacities as well.

Humanity is not always predicated on selfish interest.

In fact our own interests are served better by communal relations.

We wouldn't be here if human beings didn't have that kind of consciousness about the existence of others, about our interconnectedness. We would long have perished.

I would say it's idealistic and naïve to think that we can continue to organize human governance through this contest of power and expect it to start solving our problems. We can look around us, actually the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that this "contest-of-power" model fails to address our problems.

World Bank. Hands Off Of Philippines Forests.

It's a process of consciousness-raising, really. It's a process of always saying to our children that they should think about the collective implications of individual actions.

What we need is a really hard look at how do we balance two things. Don't scrap the entire system overnight. That's not what we're saying. We need to make the best of a system that is imperfect and I have faith in some of the folks around here who are trying to do that and we will support them to do that. However, simultaneously, we have to ask the question, how can we actually look at the macro-structural changes that are needed to ensure that the world (works) as a genuinely democratic, efficient global governance system that can deliver to all citizens of the world, not just those that may reside in rich countries.

What we need to look to is this other dimension of human nature: the capacity for cooperation and mutualism and altruism. We need to recognize though, that the expression of those capacities is not automatic. It takes work, it takes education, it takes training, it takes effort. We have to cultivate that in ourselves.

And history is not void of examples that show how humanity aspires to cultivate its higher nature again and again.

Nelson Mandela: "We are going forward. The march towards freedom and justice is irreversible."

If you take someone like Nelson Mandela as an example. And you ask yourself, why is it that this individual has such global attraction? Why is it that people all over the world will flock to him? It tells you that there is a basic instinct among human beings, which is not necessarily selfish, but it's an aspiration to something good. Because he represents a collective aspiration.

What these pictures demonstrate is that we do feel the pain of others, however distantly. What I think these pictures demonstrate is that we do believe in something bigger than ourselves. What these pictures demonstrate is that there is a moral sense across all religions, across all faiths, across all continents – a moral sense that not only do we share the pain of others and something bigger than ourselves, but we have a duty to act when we see things that are wrong and that need righted, see injuries that need to be corrected, see problems that need to be rectified.

We can organize governance, we can create social institutions that actually build on and draw out those cooperative capacities for the maximum collective benefits.

So the great project of our generation –it seems to me– is to build for the first time, out of our global ethic and our global ability to communicate and organize together, a truly global society built on that ethic, but with institutions that can serve that global society and make for a different future.

We need to rethink power as mutual capacity. How do democratic institutions promote the expression of collective capacity – the mutualistic expression of power?

Going from adversarialism to mutualism might seem like a daunting task meant for idealists and dreamers, but given the current state of the world and everything we've just heard, it seems a vital step in the evolution of democracy and getting beyond the King of the Mountain mentality.

Democracy is a system of governance that is as inclusive –and participatory and just– as possible. Nowhere in that definition is the idea of a contest of power.

People are good. And we need systems that can bring out that goodness.

I think it is time for new ideas.