

**Schafer, D. Paul, *Revolution or Renaissance: Making the Transition from an Economic Age to a Cultural Age***

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**Reviewed by Dr. George F. Simons at [www.diversophy.com](http://www.diversophy.com) September 29, 2008.**

No book could be more relevant to the world situation at this moment. Like prophecy unfolding into reality, as I was turning the pages of Schafer's opus, the greatest financial meltdown in living memory was taking place.

In short Schafer contends that the *Economic Age*, the paradigm that has dominated the thinking and behavior of the "haves" for over 300 years, certainly since formulated by Adam Smith, has run its course, despite its many reincarnations. It is both moribund and deadly. Despite its accomplishments, it has driven, colonization, industrialism imperialism and materialism, and people viewing people as "human resources."

Testament to this mentality is the need to economically rationalize all activities, including arts, spirituality and social initiatives. In my own field of diversity and cross-cultural practice, I find it instructive to note how quickly diversity activities in the USA stopped being promoted as "the right thing to do" and had to be sold with a "business case." The economic age promotes itself today in market globalization. But if it is at its end, it needs to be replaced. The problem is that there is no evident replacement. Therefore it is impossible to conceive of any other way of thinking, and hence economic age culture will set about reinventing itself until there is no environment left to sustain it.

*Revolution or Renaissance* is not light reading but well written instruction. The first half of the book is in itself a crash course in economics from before Adam Smith to the functions of globalization. The evolution of economic theory and its impact on the world is documented a stage at a time. Solid scholarly reflection is carefully presented. Schafer is both meticulous and fair in his assessment of our present condition, the material, technological and social achievements of the economic era as well as the limitations.

Like North Koreans we will be kept long wondering whether, like Kim Jong-il, our economic age is dead or not. Though he writes with patient urgency, if I read Schafer right, I am ready to conclude that the economic age actually died in the financial meltdown of mid-September 2008. Will this superannuated world view will be enshrined in a mausoleum for the public to respectfully visit and revere. Will the embalmed system live on, honored in private enterprise ceremonials, with choirs of economists chanting litanies for and against government intervention? Or (unlikely), will someone confront the family and the heirs with the need to bury the stinking corpse, and compel them to review the meaning of the patriarch's life and their squandered inheritance—apologies to Garcia Marquez? Heaven



forbid we made be responsible for our own minds hearts, our fellow human beings, and our credit cards now that the patriarch has apparently succumbed. The bailout has occurred as I write...

Am I stretching it to suggest that it was indicative of US culture (speed, take control and above all, capitalism) that the US congress took a working weekend to create a trillion dollar Band-Aid ("plaster" for non-USian English speakers)? It promised a solution before Monday's bell would ring at the NYSE. Whatever the consequences of this instant transplant of cash, we will, most likely, be dealing with a zombie-vampire economy until the anemia kills us all, or... we wake up to ourselves.

And, the wakeup call is what Schafer attempts to deliver in the second, "renaissance" half of his opus. He suggests that we, in fact, do have the perspectives and resources for a more holistic, human and ecological paradigm to guide our future. They are sprouting up everywhere like the bamboo in my front yard, but the interconnectedness of the root system is not evident. The self-styled paladins of the defunct economic age view these sprouts, as one often sees bamboo, as dangerous weeds to be resisted and rooted out from what they believe to be their well-tended marketplace garden.

The best way to describe this interconnectivity, according to Schafer, is the term *holistic*. He cites its patches as holistic medicine, holistic education, ecological and environmental awareness, etc. etc., in brief, the bigger picture thinking about human needs and the needs of the planet that is emerging from many quarters. Greed and need are two sides of a coin. In the economic age they play off of and reinforce each other and underpin the mentality which creates them. The perception of insufficiency leads to a Spenserian "survival of the fittest" attitude which continues to buttress itself in language and behavior. Your kid cannot *survive* at school without the latest iPod!

The challenge of course lies in unanswered questions, "Can humankind be reprogrammed?" Can we define what we mean when we say "life style" and "quality of life" in their many cultural manifestations? How can we maintain identity and diversity at the same time? This may be the greatest challenge, as Schafer astutely notes,

"...there can be no identity without maintaining specific differences, for too much sameness can obliterate identity by destroying its distinctive character... A slip in the direction of too many similarities can cause people to rebel, or only to protect themselves from the numbing effects of uniformity. A slip in the direction of too many differences can be equally dangerous, since people mistrust and fear what they are unable to understand."

Getting a holistic view of culture, managing it, and tapping its creativity may then be our most salvific undertaking and the steepest hill to climb. Culture is *Source* (here Schafer quotes Nigerian Nobel laureate Woye Soyinka) "from which all things flow and to which all things return." The book then goes into detail about the role of culture in each of the areas

mentioned and the contributions already made to it. This leads to the final challenges that Schafer tries to address: How would a cultural age function? What would be its priorities?

Shafer proposes the development of a “global federation of world cultures” engaged in both preservation and encouraging development of the cultural sphere, of the human patrimony. The reader asks if this is a pipe dream or a possibility, and, if so, what would it take to get there? Where is the model to build upon?

There may be several, but Shafer directs our attention toward France in this regard. France has cherished and promoted its distinctive *terroirs*, despite or perhaps because of strong central administrative bureaucracy. It has taken pride in, documented, supported, and, yes, controlled and even engaged in protectionism regarding its cultural development and the quality of its cultural products. It may surprise many that popular resistance to the Bush-aping of Nicolas Sarkozy is based to a great degree on what his policies would do to French culture. The key is local control and indigenous development, whether in France or elsewhere.

Can we get enough perspective on ourselves to jump off the runaway train? Can we extricate ourselves from the ultimately self-destructive side of the economic age’s penetration into everything? It feels like creating a new world religion, and is in fact akin to that because it entails conversion from the old faith of economic crusades and jihads to renaissance at a time of diminishing resources. Can there be a conversion of hearts and minds in the face of fear and insecurity deliberately fostered by the political and economic intimidation that is being directed at one’s own people as well as leveled against outsiders? And, one does not, in this day and age, expect a messiah, prophet or enlightened one to appear in the flesh. Rather it is us, all of us, who need the courage to pull up stakes from our economic age homestead and set ourselves on the spiritual quest for the future. This is neither easy nor evident. Shafer tellingly quotes Ruth Benedict in this regard, and her words are worth repeating here:

"There is...one difficult exercise to which we may accustom ourselves as we become increasingly culture-conscious. We may train ourselves to pass judgment upon the dominant traits of our own civilization. It is difficult enough for anyone brought up under their power to recognize them. It is still more difficult to discount, upon necessity, our predilection for them. They are as familiar as a well-loved homestead. Any world in which they do not appear seems cheerless and untenable. Yet it is these very traits by which the operation of a fundamental cultural process are most often carried to extremes. They overreach themselves, and never more than any other traits, they are likely to get out of hand. Just at the very point where there is the greatest likelihood of the need of criticism, we are bound to be least critical."