This paper is one of a series of individual essays written within the conceptual constraints provided by "Forms for a Future." The collection of essays will become the individual episodes of the podcast.

'... Forums for A Future...'

Part 6: Review and Transition
Podcast **(#19)** <u>The Age of the Millennials</u>

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Prelude

I am Ed Renner. Welcome to my Podcast, "Forums for a Future."

Forums for a Future is based on a university honors course I taught at the University of South Florida in 2007-2008. Three textbooks provide background reading for the individual episodes. They are:

- Thomas Friedman's <u>The World is Flat</u>
- Jarred Diamond's <u>Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed</u>
- Gwynne Dyer's <u>Future: Tense. The Coming World Order</u>

The syllabus for the podcast series, text copies of all of the individual podcasts, and directions for subscribing to the series, either directly or through iTunes, are available on my web site at: kerenner.com, that is: <u>www.k-e-r-e-n-n-e-r.com</u>.

The first 16 episodes are in audio format. They provide an academic conceptual foundation for the series. After having taken nearly a one-year break to teach "Forums for the Future," I am now ready to continue the series, but this time in both audio and video formats. As a way to get started on the continuation, I have created a three-part transition. Episodes 17, 18 and 19 provide a brief introduction of the conceptual foundation for those new to the series, and a quick review for the original subscribers. Starting with Podcast #20, the continuation of the podcast is an open-ended series of positive approaches for addressing the many specific contemporary economic, social and political issues that challenge our capacity for making the necessary changes for having a future in the 21st Century.
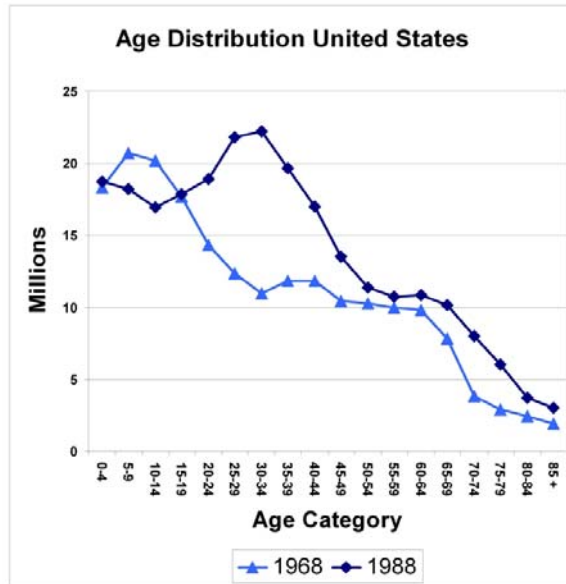
The Key Concept

Humankind now has the knowledge to make the choices required for creating a sustainable life on this planet. What is in question is the human capacity for doing so.

The Boomers

In 1988 the age distribution of the United States was on the eve of a great demographic divide between the "Millennials" and the "Boomers." On the one hand, in 1988, the first of the Millennials were born. They were to become the first group of teenagers of the 21st century. On
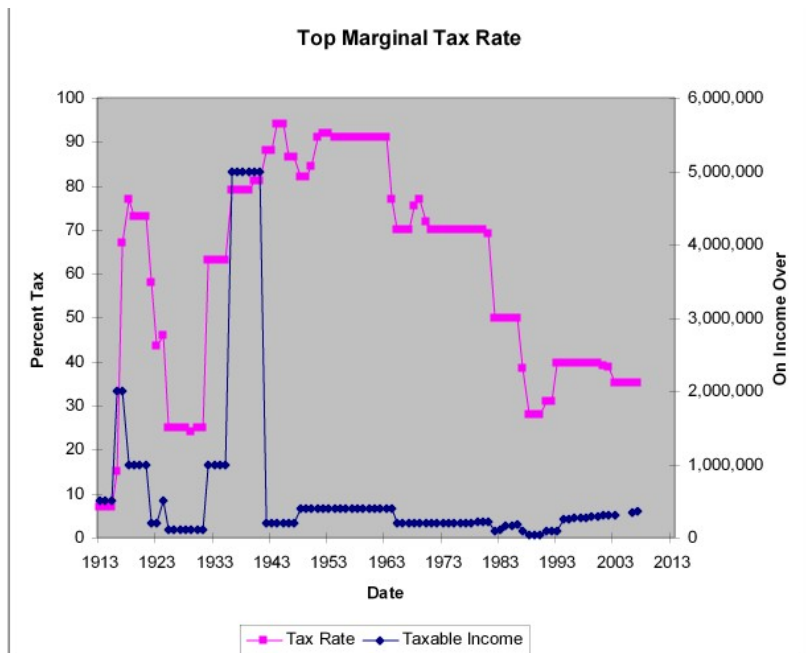
the other hand, the last of the Boomers were on the eve of graduation from college. Twenty years earlier, in 1968, the Boomers had just come of age – as have the Millennials in 2008. However, for the Boomers, from 1968 on there has not been a large older generation in front of them to be replaced. They have had a clear path into the future as the unchallenged numerical majority for the last 40 years, with another decade or more to go (Note 1).

But 1968 was a remarkable date, not just because the Boomers where about to lay claim to next 50 years or more, but because it was at that point, unaware as we were at the time, that we had also reached the beginning of the end of the Modern Era.
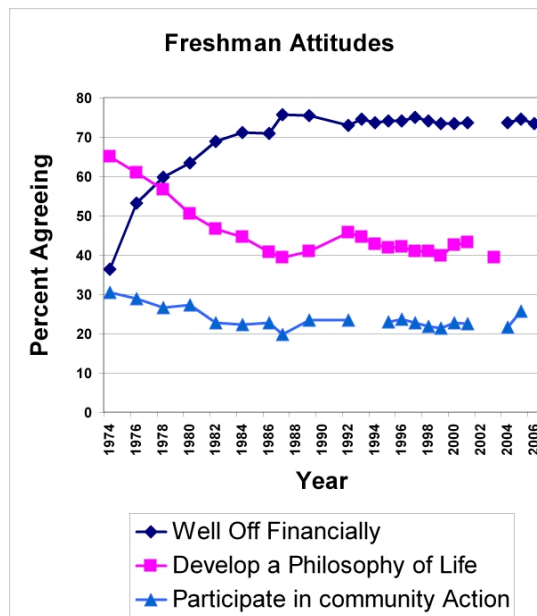
The promise of the Modern Era was the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow of science and technology. The industrial and scientific revolutions were to bring greater universal prosperity, health and happiness to everyone. The destiny of the Boomers, it seemed then, was to deliver this contribution to human progress. In the United States, by 1968, minimum wage was close to being a living wage at the official poverty line, and we had reduced income inequality to its lowest level in our national history. We achieve this because we had our highest maximum marginal tax rate of 91% (Note 2). We had taken to their final limits the progressive principles that got us out of the great Depression, led the economic recover of the Western World after WW II and had given us national prosperity. As it turned out, this was a good as the Modern Era was ever going to get.
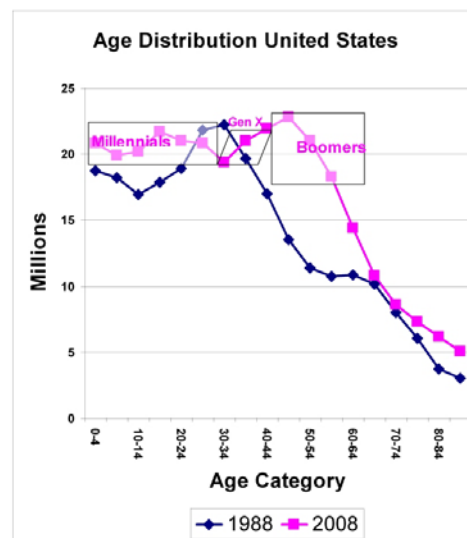

In the 40 years since then, there has been a steady transition, as the Modern Era receded to become fully replaced by the Post-Modern Era by the year 2000:

- The "progressive" attitudes of the late 60s and early 70s has steadily given way to more conservative views. In the annual survey of college freshmen the percentage saying it was important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life declined from 65% to 40%, and those saying it was important to be well off financially increased from 36% to 75% (Note 3).

Freshman Attitudes

Percent Agreeing vs. Year

Legend:
- Well Off Financially
- Develop a Philosophy of Life
- Participate in community Action

- The maximum marginal tax rate was reduced from 91% to 35% by 2008, to be one of the lowest rates in our national history (Note 2).

- Although the Boomers profited from massive government subsidization of education, and particularly of higher education, public financial support has steadily declined since then, relative costs have increased, student debt level has increased and the emphasis has shifted toward training for jobs.

- Increased levels of unsustainable consumption have left a human footprint never before match in history of the planet in the face of unprecedented population growth.

- And finally, the large budget surplus -- the peace dividend -- that marked the beginning of the 21st century has been transformed to an $11 trillion national debt, largely due to the Iraq War, the economic damage of which has been transferred to the future of the Millennials by the Boomers, as their legacy.

Age Distribution United States

Millions vs. Age Category

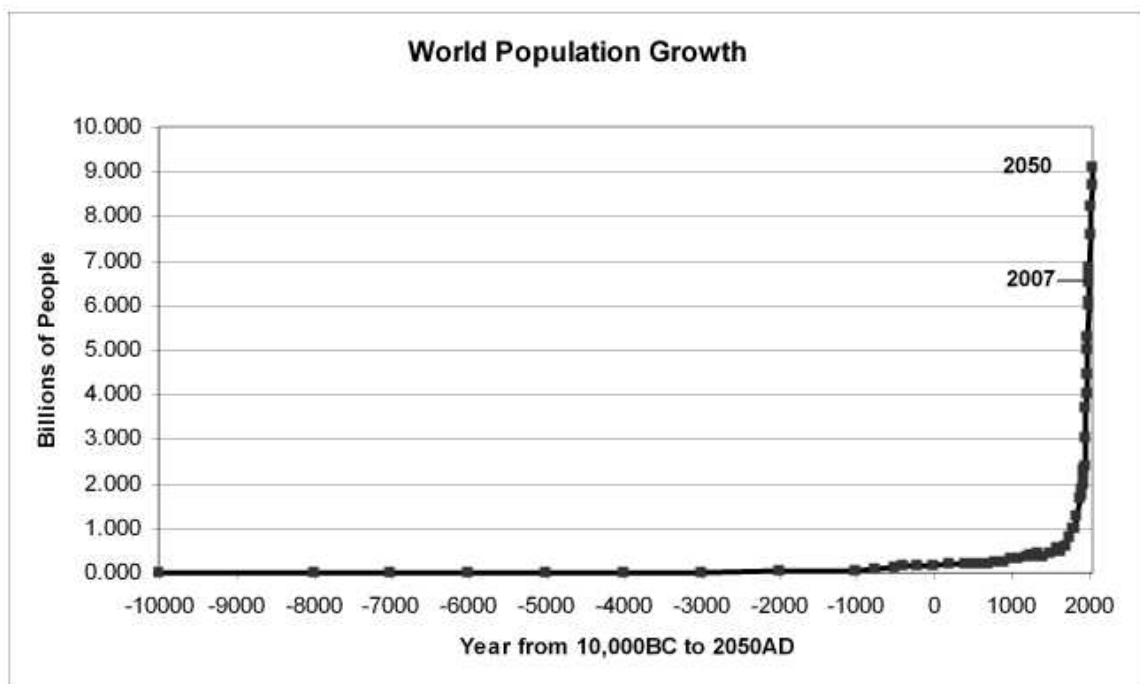Labels: Millennials, Gen X, Boomers

Legend: 1988, 2008

But, unlike the Boomers, the Millennials -- who in 2008 are in the same demographic position as were the Boomers in 1968 -- do not have a clear path in to the future. Their path is blocked by a demographic wall which will still take another 10 to 20 years to recede (Note 1). The culture the millenniums will inherited is one of over consumption, environmental degradation and a loss of the civic foundation for the democratic process of our government to respond decisively and quickly in the current geo-politics context of the world, Yet, what we

know for certain is that these challenges are on a very short fuse -- one of potentially 20 years or less. They include:

- Population growth (Note 4)

So far in my life time the population of the world has tripled, adding over 4.4 billion to the 2.2 billion when I was born. In the 20 years since the first Millennial was born, the World population has increase by 1.6 billion people (a 32% increase and counting). This population growth has increased the demand for natural resources, food, and water to the point were we face declining supplies due to the destruction of the capacity of the planet to replenish itself, thus challenging the capacity of the earth to continue to carry the population (a quantitative ecological construct known as the "carrying capacity," Note 5). The current symptoms we feel of that stress are:
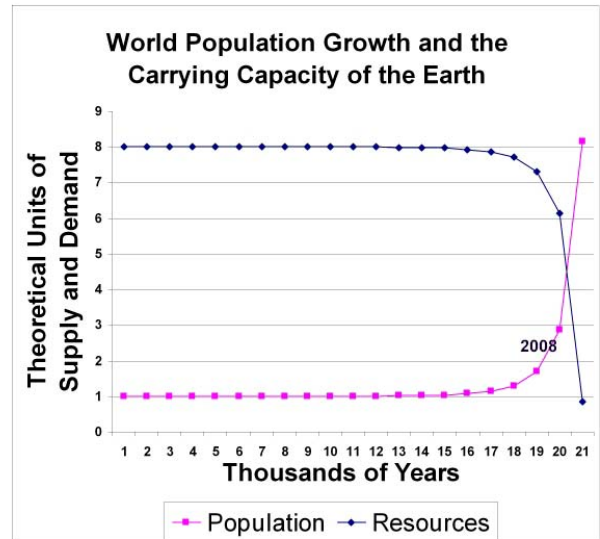

- The energy crisis,
- The beginnings of world food shortages,
- Economic free market globalization which depends upon unlimited continued growth,
- Global warming, and
- The essential constraint of maintaining a sustainable planet in order to avoid collapse.

To have a future, the Millennials are faced with two huge challenges. The first is the conceptual challenge of finding feasible national and international solutions to these contemporary social issues, issues that define the new realities of the 21st century. The Modern Era – the age of science and technology under the control of the nation-state – is over.
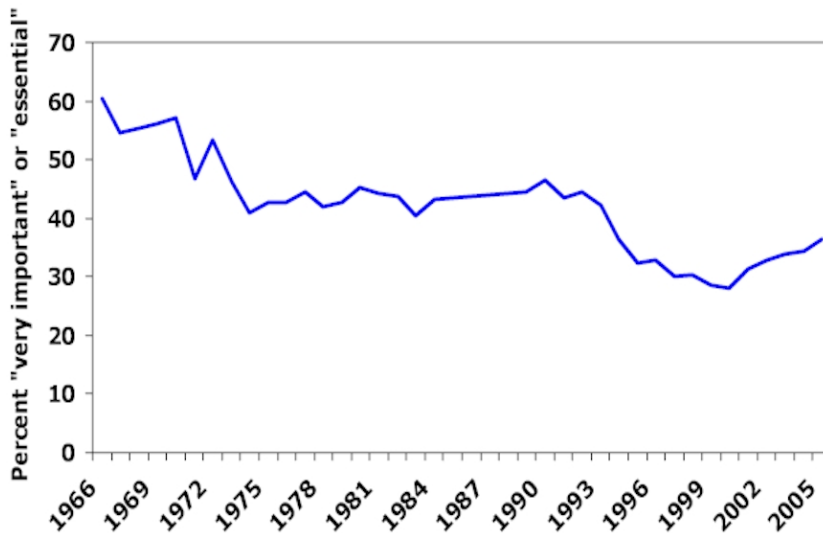
The second is the practical challenge of making these feasible economic, political and social solutions acceptable to those who control the wealth, power and ideology that produced them in the first place.

As intractable as the contemporary social issues may appear to be, finding feasible solutions is the easy part, by far. The social, behavioral, biological and natural sciences have given us most of the scientific and technical information we need. Unlike the collapse of past societies, we now understand the mechanisms that challenge the capacity of the 6.7 billion people currently living on this planet to continue to do so. Perhaps surprisingly, the more difficult challenge may well be the wall of resistance to change. Jared Diamond in Collapse called the human capacity for making difficult social choices the decisive factor separating success and failure among past societies that faced similar challenges.

Attitude surveys show that the Millennials have, perhaps, started to reverse the 40-year decline from the progressive beliefs and values that defined the Great Society, to the neoconservative values that shepherd in the transition from the Modern to the Postmodern Era over the past 40 years. For example, there is a slight increase from the all time low of 28% in 2000 in "keeping up to date in political affairs" as an important objective, to 36% in 2005; but this is still far from the high of 60% back in 1966. Since the turn of the century there has been small increases in such issues as more tolerance for same-sex marriage (61% in 2006), greater control of handguns (74%) and for socializing with someone from another ethnic or racial group (65%, 2005).

But even as late as 2005 "becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment" was one of the least endorsed important objectives at 20% (Note 2).

However, these attitude shifts are relatively small and insignificant because they are *quantitative* changes along existing conceptual distinctions. These are still the public, non-personal constructs

that were the defining issues of the previous Modern Era. What has yet to emerge is *qualitatively* different conceptual ways of thinking.

What we know, for certain, is that it will take major shifts in core beliefs and values to accomplish the kind of transformations that are called for. Even neoconservatives, such as Thomas Friedman, have emphasized that economic globalization has fundamentally altered the nature of work and how business will be done in the Postmodern Era – explicitly *qualitativel*y not *quantitatively* different. Likewise, Jared Diamond and Gwen Dyer have convincingly documented how our social and political institutions and structures must change if we are to have a viable future. To borrow Al Gore's title, the "Inconvenient Truth" is that the redefinitions required are of the magnitude of what was once called a paradigm shift. In short, conceptual ways of thinking are required that are *qualitatively* different.

The conceptual solutions are not difficult to understand. We know the technical answers for which there is broad scientific consensus. The practical problem is that these feasible solutions are simply not acceptable, given current core social and personal beliefs and value. Only a change in these fundamental assumptions will lead naturally and directly to the required solutions. The three core values proposed in the podcast from which feasible solutions can be derived are:

- ***Building and strengthening world citizenship not citizenships of the world.***
- ***Achieving and respecting the power of balance, not the balance of power.***
- ***Establishing and enhancing knowledge as public domain, not a commodity for financial gain.***

Thus, finding a path to a viable future is a practical one of redefining a qualitatively different way of thinking. It is not a problem belonging solely to the Boomers or to the Millennials. Neither generation has broken away from the core beliefs and values that have defined the Modern Era. It is time for fundamental change by both the youth and the adults of today. It is a cross-generational task.

The Boomers do not understand the wired life style of the Millennials who act, learn and think differently than did the Boomer of 1968. Communication is different, time is different, and, perhaps most important, the connection of the present with the past is different now. The continuity of "now" is largely with what will be, not with what has been. The Modern Era is over. The age of science and technology has made its contribution to human progress by providing the knowledge humankind needs to understand the choices that need to be made.

For their part the Millennials do not like the future they are being given; but, although impatient, they are not yet outraged. Unfortunately, time does not pause. Unlike the past, the youth of today cannot simply wait for their turn. Unlike the past, the Boomers, entrenched as the last surviving generation of the Modern Era, cannot treat time as an unbroken continuum for which "now" is their very own moment to enjoy the unequally distributed dividends of the Modern Era. ***Rather, "now" is a single moment in which both the legacy and the future will be simultaneously determined.*** It is a joint responsibility for the youth and the adults to begin a cross-generation dialogue on having a future. It is time for public civic discussion about a new set of core beliefs and values appropriate for a new era.

Lets now begin this journey into the practical solutions to our contemporary challenges. Solutions based on an alternative set of core beliefs and values.

What an exciting time to be alive.

Notes

1. U. S. Census Bureau: Statistical Abstracts of the United States, Population by age and gender; and, Current Population Report, Series PL5-1092, Population projections of the US 1992-2050'.

2. UCLA, Higher Education Research Institute. The American Freshman: National Norms, administered in the fall term and published annually in January or February of the following year. Also reported annually in the Chronicle of Higher Education following release of the data.

3. Marginal tax rate data: National Tax Payer's Union, http://ntu.org/main/page.php?PageID=19 ;Truth and Politics, http://www.truthandpolitics.org/top-rates.php; and, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Income_tax_in_the_United_States

4. http://en.wikipedia.org/worl_population; graph and raw data at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Population_curve.svg; see also: U.S. Census Bureau, Historical estimates of the world's population, www.censys.gov/plc/www/worldhis.html.

5. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carrying_capacity