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# Toward Sustainability in Business, Industry and Community: Empathy Tempered Choices

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# CORNHUSKER ECONOMICS

## Toward Sustainability in Business, Industry and Community: Empathy Tempered Choices

In today's world of 24-hour news service on the internet, youtube, facebook, twitter, electronic newspapers, etc., there are many sources of information constantly seeking our attention, triggering our response and affecting our psyche. Where are such habits of tuning into internet services, mobile services, etc., leading us? Jeremy Rifkin in his new book, *The Empathic Civilization* talks about the dawn of a new Third Industrial Civilization. The main feature is the sharing of information among millions of people, which is shaping the spatial and temporal orientation of human civilization. This also leads to greater differentiation of skills, greater connectivity, extension of empathy and expansion of consciousness about the Earth and nature. This is the era of distributed communication and energy systems leading to a distributed capitalism. It is ever more possible for individuals to collaborate with others in shared interest, and not only seek self-interest. Individuals can now potentially celebrate the shared positive outcomes of "the digital commons" rather than the self-interest only driven "tragedy of the commons," which is Earth's history as related to the use of natural, environmental and ecosystem resources.

The overall economic progress on Earth is quite laudable. But at what costs? Are we moving too fast? Is it sustainable? Can we continue to make profits in our businesses, live our lives happily, and still enjoy the same progress in the next few decades? Our ever increasing love for gadgets, information and communication are increasing the linear throughput, causing more demand for energy, and increasing stress on Earth to provide the balance. Societies have always been organized and maintained through communication, facilitated by using energy to sustain human existence. This convergence of energy and communication

Market Report	Yr Ago	4 Wks Ago	8/20/10
<b><u>Livestock and Products,</u></b>			
<b><u>Weekly Average</u></b>			
Nebraska Slaughter Steers, 35-65% Choice, Live Weight. . . . .	\$82.47	\$94.86	\$98.85
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame, 550-600 lb. . . . .	110.62	137.25	133.00
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame 750-800 lb. . . . .	100.39	117.95	119.86
Choice Boxed Beef, 600-750 lb. Carcass. . . . .	142.15	154.94	158.47
Western Corn Belt Base Hog Price Carcass, Negotiated. . . . .	46.80	77.63	80.90
Feeder Pigs, National Direct 50 lbs, FOB. . . . .	*	*	*
Pork Carcass Cutout, 185 lb. Carcass, 51-52% Lean. . . . .	52.31	83.83	93.85
Slaughter Lambs, Ch. & Pr., Heavy, Wooled, South Dakota, Direct. . . . .	91.25	122.00	134.00
National Carcass Lamb Cutout, FOB. . . . .	250.27	310.37	303.02
<b><u>Crops,</u></b>			
<b><u>Daily Spot Prices</u></b>			
Wheat, No. 1, H.W. Imperial, bu. . . . .	3.94	4.45	5.25
Corn, No. 2, Yellow Omaha, bu. . . . .	3.11	3.37	3.77
Soybeans, No. 1, Yellow Omaha, bu. . . . .	10.48	9.94	10.08
Grain Sorghum, No. 2, Yellow Dorchester, cwt. . . . .	5.12	5.64	6.71
Oats, No. 2, Heavy Minneapolis, MN, bu. . . . .	2.09	2.54	2.62
<b><u>Feed</u></b>			
Alfalfa, Large Square Bales, Good to Premium, RFV 160-185 Northeast Nebraska, ton. . . . .	*	150.00	135.00
Alfalfa, Large Rounds, Good Platte Valley, ton. . . . .	*	*	77.50
Grass Hay, Large Rounds, Premium Nebraska, ton. . . . .	*	72.50	95.00
Dried Distillers Grains, 10% Moisture, Nebraska Average. . . . .	81.00	85.50	99.00
Wet Distillers Grains, 65-70% Moisture, Nebraska Average. . . . .	32.50	26.50	30.50
<b>*No Market</b>			

technologies continually reconfigures society, our roles, relationships and human consciousness. This consciousness in turn aids people from diverse backgrounds to bind together. However, it is increasing our entropy. We are moving rapidly on a path to maximum entropy...the “entropic abyss” as Rifkin refers to it (p. 476), which means ever less useful work can be extracted from the old carbon. This path needs to be tempered soon, with renewable energy sources, else we risk catastrophic consequences in our economic livelihoods. Arguably, the recent financial crisis and near economic collapse starting in 2008 reflects this reality. We need to keep in mind that the “house of cards” in the financial world collapsed as oil moved toward \$150 a barrel.

How are we going to accomplish the move onto a more sustainable path? Rifkin argues that the key idea is that of “empathy.” This idea brings us to the main point of the book: “The underlying dialectic of human history is the continuous feedback loop between expanding empathy and increasing entropy (p. 26).” There is a “dialectical feedback between extended empathy and greater entropy (p. 40).” What is a dialectic? From Websters: “(a) method of logic... based on the principle that an idea or event (*thesis*) generates its opposite (*antithesis*), leading to a reconciliation of opposites (*synthesis*).” This is to say, entropy (i.e. ever more use of old carbon and using more energy, generally) makes empathy possible (i.e. walk-in-the-shoes of others and ask “how would I wish to be treated”). Ironically, empathy holds the potential to temper the self-interest driven (i.e. seeking ever more profit and wealth) move to higher states of entropy. Through empathy, Rifkin argues, we come to realize that survival by humans as well as all other living creatures is “a fragile affair, made possible by the continuous flow of energy (p. 41).” So, through “walking-in-the-shoes-of-others” (empathy), while asking ourselves “how would I want to be treated in that situation” (including access to energy), we may then enter into shared cause with these others, especially as represented in renewable energy systems.

Rifkin traces the evolution of this empathy-entropy tension at work in the rise and fall of many of the world’s great civilizations. The Roman Empire is one of the stops in the book, with its decline often attributed to political failure, which is also a popular theme currently here in the United States. Was it really only political failure? Rifkin argues not: Rather, it was a failure to adequately deal with the problems of empathy, energy and entropy. In particular, Rome ran largely on slave energy, which was not adequately maintained with appropriate food, nutrition and other kinds of support,

i.e. a lack of empathy to the slaves who did the work. It also ran on forestry and agriculture, but not a conservation based forestry and agriculture; rather the land was denuded of trees and soil erosion was rampant, again a lack of empathy. The resulting collapse put Europe into the Dark Ages. As we run out of oil, are we looking to some kind of a Dark Age in our near future, as well? The answer is straightforward: The empathy-entropy dialectic was never resolved in Rome; we need to resolve it to avoid such a collapse.

Rifkin’s overall point is this: The dialectic between empathy and entropy may have finally played out. As we move into the Third Industrial Revolution, the focus is shifting to maintaining a dialectical balance between the energy powered self and other (shared)-interest. This is only made possible through empathic expression of shared interest and formation of a shared vision of sustainability. Empathy is the thread that weaves an increasingly differentiated and individualized population into an integrated social tapestry, as we evolve a new biosphere consciousness. The new information and communication technologies, powered by new, distributed and renewable energy systems, leading to a new distributed capitalism, will make this possible. Rifkin provides hope for a more satisfying, different kind of world of sustainable business, industry, economy and community, with empathy playing a key role in bringing renewable and sustainable energy systems on-line.

#### Reference:

Rifkin, J. *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009, 674 pp.

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