

The Biosphere's de Chardin?

Pierre Levy, leading edge cyber-philosopher, is less known for his support of the Biosphere's natural worlds. Here he raps hard on trees', elephants' and ecosystems' place in any emerging cyber-democracy with fellow digital denizen, **Paul Ryan**

In the Spring of 2001, Pierre Levy taught an Internet course through deCentre, an experimental project in collaborative learning at the New School University in New York City. Organised by Professor Paolo Carpiagnano of Media Studies and Sociology, the course was presented on line simultaneously to students in New York, Budapest, and Rome. Both the content and form of the course engaged Levy's notion of Collective Intelligence. In preparation for the course, Pierre Levy lectured at the New School in the fall of 2000. He and I used that occasion to have the dialogue below for *Fourth Door Review*.

Pierre Levy reminds me of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the author of *The Phenomenon of Man*. Levy's notion of collective intelligence echoes Chardin's Noosphere. Chardin's extraordinary vision emerged from the despair of World War I. Chardin refused to despair. He cultivated the virtue of hope. So Levy refuses to despair at the end of the same twentieth century that has seen another world war, nuclear weapons and accelerating ecological destruction. He cultivates the virtue of hope and he shapes that hope into a utopian vision for humanity via the collective intelligence possible over the Internet. One cannot but respect Levy's vision as a thing of hope. As Emily Dickinson tells us (I'm quoting from memory)

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all
And sweetest in the gale is heard
And sore must be the storm
That could abase the little bird
That kept so many warm.

Hope is not the only virtue Pierre Levy cultivates. Last fall, after he gave his talk at New School University, a group of us went for dinner. The conversation took a distinctively non academic turn as one graduate student delighted the table with stories about growing up in a commune. I found myself saying that her description of the commune reminded me of some religious traditions which insist you cannot really understand anything unless you first love that which you hope to understand. Nodding his head in full agreement was Pierre Levy.

Pierre Levy is trying to understand our emerging world. Beside a brilliant mind, he brings both love and hope to the task.

Paul Ryan: I'd like to ask you what questions you're asking yourself now. And I'd like to talk about things that are of concern to me, which I believe are also of concern to you. I may be cheating a little bit, inviting you to be a consultant on my concerns. (laughter)

Pierre Levy: This is good because these are your real questions. So, perfect! It's like a dialogue.

PR: So what are the things you're trying to think through now?

PL: The question of global governance. And I think it should be one of the most important questions discussed by people around the globe. Because there is one single biosphere, because there is one single economy. Because there is one single network of technical networks. Just an example: when the US Federal government began this process against Microsoft. Why is it just the US Federal Government, because everybody around the world is using Windows, not just the Americans? So it is the problem of a global justice, not just an American justice. And there is one single list of human rights, and so on. You can make a very long list. So there is a need for a global government. And I think there is a great tension and contradiction between the fact that there is one single ecology and one single economy, and one single technical system and so on and so on. But there are many laws, many justices. So the justice is not at the same level. Justice is supposed to be above all. In fact it is just the opposite... it's fragmented. I think that the real problem of globalisation is not that the economy is global. The real problem is that the justice is not global.

PR: So how then do you approach justice without imposing some transcendent Platonic, Western idea of justice. I agree with you that there is one biosphere, one economy. But how to come to justice in an immanent way becomes a serious question.

PL: Exactly. I think that the question of justice must be seen in the context of its historical development. Justice is linked to the state. There is no justice before the state. There are procedures to cope with injustice in

primitive oral societies, but one of the main procedures was vendetta, I'm afraid. Endless conflicts. And inherited conflicts, generation after generation. So justice is a construction of a transcendence to stop this endless cycle of violence. This is the good side of justice. Of course there is a bad side. And the bad side is precisely this transcendence. The people who have the power to dispense the justice, are above others, and generally they are members of the ruling class. Or the servants of the ruling class – in ancient Mesopotamia and China, the first states – the class of scribes. So they are from the writing side. And the law is written. There is a very close connection between the law and the written word. When you invent alphabets you allow the possibility of democracy because everybody can have access to the law as it's the same writing system. I don't say that everywhere you have writing systems you have democracy. But it's a co-condition. And then this is a more civilised justice. Maybe now we will have a new type of writing, maybe the law will become increasingly balanced.

Maybe we can imagine a hyperlaw, like there is a hypertext. Let's take an example from my own experience. I had a problem with my tax and with my alimony (laughs) in France, and the tax I paid in Canada, and things like that. And someone said to me, 'oh you just ask the search-engine your problem' I made this search and I have found the exact pages of legal texts. Two hours research. For free! And I stayed at home.

PR: I agree the way you're moving with this. But the law in your example is already written and inscribed. We need the generation of new laws that insure respect for the biosphere. Whether it's possible to read the biosphere and articulate from that reading what is lawful for the human species becomes the question. How to do it without going to transcendence or without imposing some idea of the laws of nature onto people that is mistaken and/or fascistic.

PL: Okay. There are two points. The first is global governance and global justice. This justice is applying a law and the government is executing the law. So the law is the most important part. And of course in the contexts of global cyber-democracy where and when people discuss the law is the most important thing.

I think it's possible. This is the first point, that it's in the context of a cyber-democracy and in the very transparency of the social processes and with a real deliberative process among people to improve this law. It should be a living law, not a fixed law. A law that evolves almost automatically with the interaction of the people. We can imagine something like this, emergent law. The second point is about the biosphere. Because now nature is in our hands. Every time there is a species that disappears on Earth it's our fault. Every time there is a new species created it is our creation, just now. So we are the main factor in the evolution of ecosystems, of

