

# Human Knowledge, Survival Values and Social Order

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Progressively human society is moving toward what can be regarded as a “knowledge” world. This is a world in which human beings will have to depend on knowledge in the determination of success, survival and failure. It can be indicated that evidence of this abound in various parts of the world, of which Japan and Switzerland are examples: both countries with little natural resources, yet having developed highly advance social, technological and political systems. Even with the global decline in trade, productivity, economic activities and standard of living, knowledge societies have the potential to weather the storm better than those which are not knowledge societies.

In this essay, I examine the concept of “knowledge society”, with a view to understanding not just the concept of knowledge and society as epistemic and sociological ones, but with a view to undertaking an analysis of the perpetual impoverishment of developing societies like those in the Caribbean, where absence of knowledge constitute a factor in the debilitation of all facets of human existence. I attempt to link the weak knowledge base to naïve survival values which pervade the human existence, impacting negatively on social order and cultural advancement.

## What Are Knowledge Societies?

It might be that we are entering a new era or we might just be living in a world that is changing so rapidly, that it is difficult to keep pace with the changes and developments taking place on so many fronts at the same time in the world. There are many terms used to describe this rapid change. Some of them are, ‘knowledge society’, ‘post-industrial society’, ‘global village’, ‘information society’, ‘globalisation’, ‘information technology age’, etc. Some of these terms at times are used synonymously while others might be interrelated but not considered synonymous.

For the purpose of the paper the focus will rest on “knowledge societies”. “Knowledge” can be seen as, “a set of organized statements of facts or ideas, presenting a reasoned judgment or an experimental result, which is transmitted to others through some communication medium in some systematic form.”<sup>1</sup> Knowledge can also be seen as subjective having direct bearing on the individual and objective, relating to the external world in general, the intellectual grasp of ideas and ideologies. Although human actions might be different we cannot ignore the fact that human action is knowledge based. To say that one is knowledgeable is to argue that one ‘knows’, as opposed to having an opinion or a belief. Dr. Bewaji [2007:29] puts it best when he argues that,

human beings have not only been concerned with understanding the nature of knowledge, but more importantly, with the important issue of demarcating

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<sup>1</sup> Bell, Daniel . *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society A Venture in Social Forecasting*. New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1973, p. 175.

knowledge from ignorance, mere opinion, conjecture, guess work and even blind faith.<sup>2</sup>

Any society striving toward greater productivity might need to move away from mere opinions and guess work and begin to make informed decisions based on a solid knowledge base. Applied to contemporary society and the framework of “knowledge societies” the question is,

Whether knowledge can provide the principle of social hierarchies and satisfaction for the formation of class structure, for the distribution of chances of social and political influence and for the nature of personal life and, finally, whether knowledge may also prove to be a normative principle of social cohesion and integration.<sup>3</sup>

If a greater acquisition of knowledge can fulfil all the above mentioned facets within social and political arenas, societies should seek to be more proactive in developing a knowledge base that will support this type of integration. Human beings have always been guided by knowledge in one form or the other. Each society should seek to identify which strategies work best by reviewing the old knowledge base while at the same time analysing and determining how to move forward in formulating new knowledge that will work to the development of their particular societies.

Robert E. Lane envisions a knowledgeable society as one in which its members:

(a) inquire into the basis of their beliefs about man, nature and society; (b) are guided [perhaps unconsciously] by objective standards of veridical truth, and, at the upper levels of education, follow scientific rules of evidence and interference in inquiry; (c) devote considerable resources to this inquiry and thus have a large store of knowledge; (d) collect, organize and interpret their knowledge in a constant effort to extract further meaning from it for the purpose at hand; (e) employ this knowledge to illuminate [and perhaps modify] their values and goals as well as advance them. The knowledgeable society then, has its roots in epistemology and the logic of inquiry.<sup>4</sup>

In coining this conception of knowledge societies, Lane also made reference to the increase in societal relevance for scientific knowledge. With this, it is inferred that our reasoning should be guided by scientific experimentations and explorations. This is the way modern society needs to move forward in order to maintain stable economy and citizenry.

Modern society was, until recently, conceived primarily in terms of property and labour. Labour and property [capital] have had a long association in social, economic and political theory.<sup>5</sup> The call now is for a wider use of scientific knowledge, where information is collected and interpreted by individuals, organizations and the groups involved.

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<sup>2</sup> Bewaji, John Ayotunde Isola. *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge A Pluricultural Approach*. Nigeria: Hope Publications Ltd. 2007. p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Bohme, G & Stehr. [Eds] *The Knowledge Society*. Reidel Publishing 1986 p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Stehr, Nico. *Knowledge Societies*. Sage Publications. London 1994 p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Stehr, Nico p. 7.

In the study of what modern societies should be, Daniel Bell sought to equate post-industrial societies to knowledge societies. As a matter of fact he argues that these two societies are one and the same. He chooses to label the new emerging form of society as a 'knowledge' society, because of the constitutive mechanism or the identity of modern society is increasingly driven by 'knowledge'. He argues that, the post-industrial society is a knowledge society in a double sense:

First, the sources of innovation are increasingly derivation for research and development; second, the weight of the society – measured by a larger proportion of Gross National Product and a larger share of employment – is increasingly in the knowledge field.<sup>6</sup>

It is true that contemporary society is driven by knowledge. This knowledge is about humans and about the external world in very profound ways. The more this knowledge is extended or projected outward, the greater it is for individuals and societies to grow and develop.

Lane talks about objective standards of development. It should be understood however that, each country's development or evolution into the 'knowledge' society will be different, as the existing environment and temperament are different. In some societies the existing knowledge base will have to be totally revised and new ones devised or embraced to take effect. This might mean re-training and re-education for some, while for others it might mean starting over completely in some instances. In order for this development to take effect, everyone within the different societies need to aspire or subscribe to attaining forms of knowledge that can be used to aid in this development process.

### **The Sociology of Knowledge**

From the inception of human communities known as societies, there have been various classes or social groups. The knowledge base of these groups vary, which produces a hierarchy of members and groups within societies; with those at the bottom having little by way of benefit from the network of social organization, and in many instances making little or no progress in their effort to reach the top, unless deliberate steps are taken by leadership to facilitate the reduction of the social, economic and political gaps in the society. This slow progression might not be from lack of resources to aid with the progression but a lack of motivation and innovation on the paths of those involved – whether at the leadership level or at the level of the general population of the poor.

Plato, in his *Republic*, attributed knowledge to one class of citizens, who, in virtue of this, are expected by him to constitute the rulers of society. In the Knowledge Society of the future, three classes of people are already envisioned: “the creative elite of scientists and the top professional administrator; the middle class of engineers and the

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<sup>6</sup> Bell, Daniel. *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society A Venture in Social Forecasting*. New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1973 p. 212.

professoriate; and the proletariat of technicians, junior faculty, and teaching assistants.”<sup>7</sup>

This division becomes problematic when, within each division, we begin to have subdivisions and the knowledge base is not as fully developed as it should be. In order to have a fruitful knowledge society, development has to take place at all levels. Education and training has to be at the utmost, so that everyone will be competent in their required fields. We cannot seek to develop the class of the scientists, for example, while the other classes remain stagnant.

In any society strides should be made to develop all spheres including, the social, political, technological, and economic aspects of the knowledge resources, as each impacts the other. Social groups and social roles of all types depend on, and are mediated by, knowledge. Although knowledge has always had a social function it is only recently that scholars have begun to examine the structure and development of society from the point of view of the production and distribution of knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

One facet in attaining knowledge societies is how far a society is willing to go in ensuring that each child reaches a certain level in all aspects of education, including attaining the highest possible level in higher education. In some societies compulsory education is taken out of context, as this is offered to no further than the high school level. Not only this, but some students can be absent from school for extended periods of time without parents and guardians being held accountable for this. We see children and adolescents being exploited by the same system put in power to protect them. This is evident in various forms of child labour.

The number of individuals trained at the professional and technical levels in society is key ensuring the building of the human capital on which societal development is to be anchored. In knowledge societies, there needs to be a vested interest in the most important resource [the people]. Knowledge societies cannot improve if individuals sit idle and continue with obsolete ways of viewing the world. It takes time to achieve such a society, so as a people in the Caribbean, we need to realize that these changes might be gradual and sometimes tedious, but the end result may be well worth it.

### **Example of Knowledge Societies**

The goal of achieving wholesome knowledge based societies is attainable, as there are some countries that have aspired to this state of existence and seem to have reached that level. Countries such as Switzerland and Japan have managed to use and develop the scarce resources that they possess in beneficial ways and as a result have created effective and efficient knowledge societies.

In order to create effective knowledge societies every facet of the society has to be covered such as, technology, education [to the highest level], entrepreneurship, tourism, imports and exports among others. All of these different spheres have to be developed with knowledgeable individuals working from the ground up. In Japan for

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<sup>7</sup> Bell, Daniel p. 214.

<sup>8</sup> Stehr, Nico p. 14.

example, Seven Eleven is one of the largest convenience store chains, with more than 10,000 outlets, and one of the most profitable firms in the country. The company has a knowledge creation system that utilizes and systematizes tacit knowledge from customers to create products and services that enables Seven Eleven to fulfil evolving customer needs and wants more efficiently than its main competitors.<sup>9</sup>

There are a number of interlocking components used to explain such knowledge based firms. These are: knowledge vision, driving objectives, dialogues and practices.<sup>10</sup> It should also be understood that this knowledge is created at the individual, group, organizational and inter-organizational levels, through the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge, as well as agents and environment.<sup>11</sup> Tacit knowledge, as used here, means personal [from each individual]; while explicit knowledge is more objectified, as it is linked to a group or organizational decision.

In order for any company to be successful there must be a long term vision on which strategies are propelled. Martin Heidegger [1962] proposed that the most important dimension of temporality is the future, as it presents the potentiality for being.<sup>12</sup> A present action is guided by past experiences, these past experiences, along with the present, should steer us toward the future with the intention that with these experiences our knowledge base approaching the future will be stronger.

In the same way, managers and business operators look to the past in creating future goals with the aim of not making the same mistakes in purchases and sales and capitalizing on the profit generating products. The vision is intertwined in the knowledge capability to predict, learn and respond to the needs of the customer. In Seven Eleven's in Japan, organization field counsellors, managers and general staff meet each week to share tacit knowledge. The main question that is asked at each meeting is, what does the customer want?<sup>13</sup> Outside of developing these companies the focus on tertiary level education is of utmost importance in the development of knowledge societies. Tertiary education should be focused on educating citizens to better function in a local workforce that will be able to fulfil their professional and economic needs substantially. This would prevent brain drain, as individuals would be better inclined to seek employment in their own country or region, as opposed to migrating to another country where standards of living are better.

With the onset of greater knowledge based societies Switzerland is a prime example where we see vast development in access to education at the tertiary level. Tertiary Education is expected to transmit, preserve and question established knowledge, as well as to generate new knowledge. It welcomes the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, yet also seeks to harness new knowledge for innovation and for relevant practical application. It must reflect culture, society's values and personal developmental interest on the one hand, and respond to technological advances and economic imperatives on the other.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Shibata, Tsutomu and Hirota, Takeuchi. [Eds] *Japan, Moving Toward a more Advanced Knowledge Economy: Advanced Knowledge Creating Companies*. The International Bank of Reconstruction & Development. Volume 2, 2006. p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Shibata, Tsutomu p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Shibata, Tsutomu & Hirota Takeuchi, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Shibata, Tsutomu p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Shibata, Tsutomu p. 16.

In Switzerland, a broad and strong system of vocational training exists alongside University Education. This is important, as this will offer access to occupations and incomes that are not much different from those of University graduates. Students will be able to use critical and practical skills acquired to question traditional ways of doing things and generate new ideas to keep pace in this changing world.

An approach was made for a “new world order”, leading to the end of the cold war. Countries of the world are entering a period of global transition that has created many problems, thus the call for a stronger knowledge based populace to help find solutions for these problems. Today, the growing disparity in wealth and access to resources are also the more reasons for societies to train individuals who can derive new ways of using and preserving the limited resources that they possess.

Knowledge society in Switzerland is understood to mean that knowledge has become more important in all spheres of life. The political realm is no exception, as it takes pride in its highly decentralized political system in which “cantons play a strong role and popular votes frequently resolve political issues”.<sup>15</sup>

As it stands; Switzerland is the closest country to a direct democracy. Any citizen may challenge a law that has been passed by parliament. Most importantly, the President has very limited special powers. Each year another member of the government team is elected Federal President in turn so that every government member assumes this role once in seven years. This sets the ground work for elimination of corruption that is so rampant in many democratic political systems.

### **Caribbean Societies as Knowledge Societies**

There is no doubt that the evolution and formulation of knowledge societies is spreading at an uneven rate. The growth in most Caribbean societies is moving so slowly that one might begin to wonder what the next decade will bring, as the very essence of human life begin to deteriorate. It is not the case that Caribbean nations lack resources, whether human or otherwise. The problem lies in having the know how to develop and utilize these resources. Current technology offers much more possibilities for sharing, archiving and retrieving knowledge.

Is Jamaica for example working to keep pace with this new trend? A draft productivity Summary Report [1972-2007] produced by the Jamaica Productivity Centre [JPC] indicates that over the 35 year period, output per Jamaican worker declined at an average rate of 1.5 percent annually. According to the report, “in 2007, output per worker was only 59 percent of that in 1972. That decline has not recovered since 2002.”<sup>16</sup> In the 1970s the average workers could buy more than they can buy now. This means that we have not progressed. The problem is not only that we are moving in the wrong direction but we are moving there at a fast pace.

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<sup>14</sup> The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. *Tertiary Education in Switzerland*. 2003 p. 130.

<sup>15</sup> The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. P. 134.

<sup>16</sup> Charles, Douglas Dr. In *The Daily Observer*. Increase Production, Improve Standards of Living, Workers Urged. Written By Alicia Roache. Tuesday November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009, p. 4.

It is true that each culture, each society, is different so the route to growth and development will also be different. This does not mean however that each society cannot strive toward a level of growth that will enable its citizens to exist, grow and survive.

Jamaica has a rich culture and an abundance of resources, but the escalating social issues [disappearing jobs, excruciating poverty, endemic crime and violence, etc] cannot be ignored. A long term economic growth for Jamaica is possible through the development of a knowledge based society, where skilled knowledge workers are trained in specialist's areas and placed in jobs accordingly. Training and retraining of public and private sector workers is necessary; for example, with the aim of generating higher income margins.

Also, Governmental bodies and other stakeholders need to review the lists of goods that are imported and identify which of these can be produced locally. It will cost a high capital to put the entire basic infrastructure in place, but the end result will mean a start in the development process. Jamaica cannot afford to stand by and allow all of its natural resources to go in the hands of private individuals who have no interest in the development of the Jamaican society. Jamaica can develop into a force to be reckoned with if the focus is directed on the development of individual and organizational knowledge base.

The weak knowledge base of Jamaica might have contributed originally to the creation of naive survival values inherited from the plantation slavery system from which Jamaica emerged, which pervade human existence and impacts negatively on social order and cultural advancement. It is true that some individuals and groups might have to adopt and use detrimental survival values in order to remain in existence. Yet it is arguable that individuals do not often voluntarily opt to use survival values, as it is often times thrust on them unconsciously, as they tend to choose them based on the circumstances that they are faced with. The fact is that when humans are faced with the reality of surviving or dying, they are not likely going to think twice about whatever means of survival is readily available to them at that time. It is not the opinion here that in making these decisions humans should overlook the moral values that are upheld by that society. The suggestion here is that humans, by nature tend to choose survival over death, even if certain moral values are sacrificed in the process. Survival values sometimes take precedence over other values. With societies gradually aiming toward a greater knowledge base it can only be hoped that the need to utilise these survival values will be less compelling in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Knowledge is power; it releases information about ourselves and others, which allows us to be better able to make informed decisions. A broad knowledge base can cultivate a level of social and economic development that we all lack at the primordial survival level. As societies in the Caribbean, we can learn from each other and from the rest of the world, as we navigate new strategies that will gear us toward a more knowledgeable environment and citizenry. These transformations rarely occur in spectacular leaps or in vacuums, but a gradual process will lead societies closer to the

goal where survival and existences are celebrated as compatible elements of cultured existence and development.

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