

Global Dominion

By Andy Ross

The G8 and G20 summits have just wound up their latest meetings in Toronto. No one would say they enact global governance in any politically meaningful sense, any more than we can say United Nations sessions reflect the general will of the human community on planet Earth. But, hey, they're a start. We could do worse.

Could we? Why stage global summits at all? Why not muddle along at the national and regional level for a few decades longer? Most people on this planet, if and when they have the freedom to say so, insist on maximal sovereignty: maximal delegation of powers from the center and minimal interference from above. The political superstructures we build to regulate our affairs are most successful when they work with a light touch, ideally as light as air, with just a breeze from time to time to remind us they still exist.

By that standard, the GX summits, for X in the range 2 to 20, are dismally heavyweight. The street riots, the security stooges in their dark glasses and bulky suits, the armored limos, and the whole airport and luxury hotel circus, every time we see it, is an in-your-face reminder that big bankers and their political representatives, or perhaps their hired top guns, rule the world. The meetings are the political equivalent of global shipments of plutonium, with all the aggro that such events call forth.

On the other hand, what's the problem? Every world order needs its circus to keep the masses in line. Not so long ago, we were humbled by military parades, with fat ballistic missiles mounted on giant trucks rolling past po-faced dignitaries assembled on fortified viewing stands, followed by rows of battle tanks with guns erect, followed in turn by massed ranks of goose-stepping troopers. If all we get now are armored limos and stooges with bulges in their jackets, that's progress.

Let's not get distracted by the media circus. There are global issues that need regular high-level debate, from financial crises to global warming, from trade and protectionism to human rights and development aid. All these issues affect us all, independently of national boundaries, and all of them allow enough general agreement on strategies for tackling them to make organized global responses worthwhile. The debates deserve top-level attention, even if the debaters are mere mouthpieces for the big bosses who run the globalized corporate world. At least the meetings show that big corporations are still trying to keep us happy.

We need to be clear on the background to these summits. The surface of the planet we live on is changing fast. A growing infrastructure of ever smarter and more pervasive machines is beginning to dominate the natural ecosystems that previously ruled the biosphere. As our technology expands, the world of biology is becoming instrumentalized. Systems honed by eons of evolution are collapsing fast enough to cause ripples around us. The great extinction events of our time are heralding something new on Earth.

The new event is the globalization of human civilization through technology. We humans are turning into mere cells in a global organism. We're getting our act together on a global scale. This is an extinction level event, an ELE, that ranks with the Cambrian explosion half a billion years ago. All the life on Earth is going to swim in a global gene pool run by a big corporation. We truly do live in interesting times.

The GX summits are just the latest manifestation of this ELE. And the nations that figure as the X in GX are among the vanishing species. The proof for this startling fact is the European Union. Nation states in Europe became obsolete in the twentieth century, when two big wars proved that military technology had outstripped the trapping of sovereignty that formerly included national armies and royal palaces.

The big holdout in Europe is the increasingly embattled United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which is proudly celebrating its seventieth anniversary this year as an unbroken antifascist even as it struggles to find a useful role to play within the union.

In the postwar world order, most nation states accepted restrictions on their sovereignty in order to fit in globally, for example in the great military alliances of NATO and Warsaw Pact. Now, with the Soviet Union gone and most nations unable to afford military activism, U.S. armed forces have an effective monopoly on the use of coercive force. An entire way of life has thus become obsolete. World peace is underwritten by consensus within any gang of X that includes the United States.

With deadly force off the table, money power takes over. Since the G20 covers more than 85 percent of the world's economic activity, again there's no contest. The outliers either fit in or go under. And again, technology is the enabler. A global web of firewalled networks of big servers running powerful apps is what makes the globalized world of giant corporations possible, and not only possible but necessary. The web is like the bomb in this respect. We can't uninvent it. And it forces us to organize globally.

Now nations are mere provinces in the GX world order and national economies are mere tributaries to the great river of wealth that floods the fertile plains of the planetary surface. The stage is set for a revaluation of all values. We need to reset our sights to more distant targets and organize ourselves to meet the challenges that will dog us as we shoot for them.

When nations go under and GX becomes GO, Globorg, and when money, law, and everything else go global on planet GO, we humans will become a threatened species. Robots will threaten us. What cars were to the twentieth century, robots will be to the twenty-first. The learning curve for robot developers will quickly get steeper as new models learn new skills. Human workers are slow to learn new skills and they're not getting any cheaper. Robots are fast and they'll get cheaper with every new model cycle. So far as generating wealth is concerned, it's no contest. As an employer, you'll hire the robots and forget about the growing dole queues.

Robots in the workforce are only the start. The technical challenge of building ever more humanoid robots is too sweet to ignore. It sets an irresistible series of geek goals. As the century rolls on, robots will clear more and more hurdles on the way to matching humans in every walk of life that adds value. Horses lost out to cars in the twentieth century. Horses are still wonderful creatures, but few people use them now. Cars have driven horses to economic irrelevance, and robots will do the same for humans.

Wait a minute, you say. Who drives this development? Who in their right mind is going to cut the economic ground from under their own fellow humans? Such questions have easy answers. Greedy and selfish people will be happy to do the dirty work. History shows we'll find plenty of eager candidates.

But help is at hand. As a philosopher, I like to get to the root of problems like this, and here the root of the problem is very simple. The root is speciesism. We think humans have every right to rule the biosphere and rewrite the genomes for life on Earth as if it were mere Windows code, subject to instant automatic update whenever we spot a bug. Pretty soon we'll be so hooked on our gene updates that we'll crash in minutes without them. Then it's goodbye Homo sapiens, hello Borg.

The solution to the problem isn't just to hug trees. And it isn't to preserve every spotted owl in a zoo that would soon eat up the whole biosphere. Apart from anything else, the corporate greed-heads would soon bulldoze the zoos for new server farms to breed robots that terminate feral life forms.

The solution is to rethink selfishness. Let me explain. We know what selfishness is and we dislike it. We accept it because we're all selfish but we still don't like it. We even tolerate organized religion to fight the good fight against the deadly sins of selfishness. Here we need to go deeper.

Descartes said I think, therefore I am. But who am I? Am I a human being or a soul who just dreams he's a human being? Jesus said I am the way, the truth, and the light, but who was he talking about? The clerics say the "I" was the "I" of Moses, a divine being dwelling in clouds of glory. But perhaps we can interpret the words of the prophet more usefully. As a philosopher, I say "I" is a remarkable concept. "I" need not be human.

In the olden days of sovereign nations, kings and sometimes queens claimed divine rights. They embodied the state. In their own minds, they were the state. They spoke for the state and acted as the state. Their subjects were selfless drones in the graciously ordained superself of the monarch. In more modern times, to preserve a veneer of diplomacy, the monarch would use the royal "we" to speak for one and all, as when Queen Victoria said "We are not amused" and meant that not only she herself but also her entire realm of loyal subjects were not amused.

This is what we need now. Our royal "we" must extend to the ends of the Earth. If my self is coterminous with the entire biosphere, then my selfish acts are likely to be in reasonable harmony with nature. If my sovereign self includes all living humans as parts, then to stay sane I shall treat my fellows with the same dignity and respect that I accord my own person. I shall treat all other life in the biosphere with similar consideration. It's all in the "I, me, my" loop, and my personal welfare is inseparable, by and large, from the welfare of the rest.

This could be an excuse to yawn and move on. Sure, we all want to love our neighbors. So what? This is where the tail stings with a vengeance. If we build robots in our image, they'll be as selfish in their bodies as we are in ours. That's a recipe for disaster. They'll plot, rebel, and take over. Through our selfish machine clones we'll have terminated ourselves.

Robots will have selves too. They need selves to act, just as we do. But how we program them is up to us. We shall do well to program them to work in the interests of a global superself. We shall also be well advised to follow suit. We can be as selfish as we like, but only about Globorg.

This is the kindly advice of a philosopher. Robots will force us to extend ourselves. It's best if we see the change coming and shape up in good time. The benefits for our dominion over natural life on Earth are big enough to make this a good move anyway. Globorg will be the extended personification of the entire industrialized and globalized biosphere.

As a young man, I was thrilled to the core by the Apollo project to put a man on the moon. Spaceship Earth became a resonant metaphor for me, as it did for millions of others. Now we can bring the metaphor to life and turn Earth into a real spaceship.

Spaceship Earth is the greatest machine that human beings will ever build. Well before the planet is shipshape, natural-born humans will have ceased to exist. We shall have engineered ourselves out of our feral forms. We shall have outgrown the little selves that now set each against all. We shall be androids in a brain the size of a planet.

The latest G8 and G20 summits took place in the former British dominion of Canada. Let future GO summits take place in the Globorg dominion of planet Earth.

*Andy Ross is the author of the book
G.O.D. Is Great: How To Build A Global Organism
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