Management, Ethics, and Democracy in a Society in Crisis

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I read *The Limits to Growth* Allen Schaefer's environmental science class in my

freshman year of Cherry Hill High School East in 1975. The book documents an early

use of the emerging computational power of computers to model large, complex systems

on a global scale. I still remember the impact on my young psyche of the book's

conclusion that due to the inherent delay of negative feedback loops such as pollution of

the environment, depletion of nonrenewable resources, and famine, economic and

environmental loads on our planet would likely overshoot their sustainable levels with

disastrous consequences (Meadows, D. H., 1972, p. 156).

During the Fall after I graduated high school four years later, the election of

Ronald Reagan marked the beginning of an unchallenged forty year reign of a neoliberal

ideology that worked actively to ignore and suppress discussion of the impending crisis

presented by the environmental movement so as not to face the required collective human

actions needed to address it. We now find ourselves mired in the middle of that crisis,

with the likelihood that we will only be able to do too little too late to mitigate the time of

troubles ahead.

According to Wikipedia, the task of management" is "setting the strategy of an

organization and coordinating the efforts of its employees to accomplish its objectives

through the application of available resources" (2021). The textbook, Business Ethics,

defines doing business ethics as "providing reasons for how things ought to be in the

economic world (Brusseau, J., n.d., p. 8). It later makes a distinction between institutional

and personal business ethics, with the former addressing the broad, general questions of

organizations, and the latter the particular decisions made by individuals (p. 32). An

investigation of business ethics that is both meaningful and useful will require a thorough

investigation into both how businesses are managed and the ideological reasoning used to

frame the decisions they make.

As Leigh Phillips and Michal Rozworski point out in *The People's Republic of*

Walmart, economists tend to avoid discussing what happens inside the firm because "it

holds capitalism's dirty secret", that firms in market economies are rife with

"authoritarian planning that concentrates economic decision making in the hands of

wealth owners and keeps workers in line" (2019, p. 50). In the irreverent tone that

characterizes the book, they describe Amazon owner Jeff Bezos as the "the bald,

moustache-less Stalin of online retail (p. 78). What is important for our discussion of

business ethics is that the powerlessness most workers face in the undemocratic,

tyrannical landscape of the privately controlled business prevents them from having real

input into the crucial decisions made there. We can not cooperatively address the crisis

we face until together we have the power we need to make change.

I am greatly looking forward to our Business Law, Ethics, and Social

Responsibility class this term since through it I will be able to explore this issue in depth.

There is no question more important to me than how we humans can create a social

reproductive system that is just, equitable, and sustainable. I was delighted to see the

learning resource center unit on sustainability that we were asked to review this week. I

was not aware of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and I

was happy to see how forthrightly it lays out much of what needs to be done to address

the profound crisis we face. Organizing our actions around the five P's of people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership and working toward the seventeen sustainable goals provides a helpful framework to guide us (General Assembly resolution 70/1).

Part of our call to action, and the one that most immediately relates to business ethics, is the need to democratize the workplace. Frederick Douglas said back in 1883 that "experience teaches us that there may be a slavery of wages only a little less galling and crushing in its effects than chattel slavery, and that this slavery of wages must go down with the other" (1883). We ended chattel slavery in the nineth century. Now we need to end wage slavery in the twenty-first. Only then can we have the collective power we need to make the changes that must be made to transform the *what* and *why* guiding our business decisions to survive the time of troubles ahead of us.

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