

Peter Seidel

Uncommon Sense: Shortcomings of the Human Mind for Handling Big-Picture, Long-Term Challenges

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In this bold new book, Peter Seidel takes a sober look at environmental conditions and asks what – if anything – can be done to change the trajectory of destruction. The author’s answer is clear: change ourselves, starting with beliefs and behaviours that lead to environmental degradation.

During decades of practice in architecture, planning and sustainability, Seidel has developed a masterful ability to think and write about complex systems. Complementing Pope Francis’s (2015) call for integral ecology, this book encourages readers to think of themselves as part of nature, and to learn through sensation, cognition and imagination: ‘Imagination plays an important part in civil society. It allows us to empathise with other people. We can picture people in far-off places or in the future. We can visualise different possible futures’ (p. 39). The book also urges attention to scientific facts, presented with exceptional clarity in spotlight boxes on biocapacity, ecofootprint, wealth footprint, population growth, inequality, ocean acidification and extinction.

Seidel began his long career building environmentally damaging buildings, but then designed sustainable communities, and led energy-conserving urban infill projects. Having seen environmental troubles ranging from Love Canal, the oil crisis and ozone holes to biodiversity loss and climate change, the author is appalled by society’s failure to respond rationally by curbing economic growth:

Still at every waking hour, business, governments, and many of us as individuals call for more growth. To get out of recessions and return to this excessive and detrimental growth, businesses and governments believe they must lay people off from commendable occupations such as education, scientific research, environmental protection, the arts, and health care – the core civic aspects of our society that are essential in keeping us healthy and engaged with one another (p. 15).

The book’s warnings against tendencies that increase societies’ vulnerability to crises in healthcare and food systems shed light on COVID-19.

Seidel is right that we humans can change ourselves. Historical, archaeological and ethnographic records document a stunning range of possibility: humans can be socialised to share everything or to hoard privately, to live as altruistic communitarians or self-centred individualists, to always want more or do well with less. Which potentialities get cultivated and which ones constrained depends on social and historical context.

The 95 years of Seidel’s life correspond with an era that scientists call ‘the great acceleration’, marked by a sharp upturn in human impacts that had been

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relatively flat for centuries (global water use, carbon dioxide emissions, waste dumping, deforestation, ocean acidification, etc.). Scientists agree that this last century marks ‘the most profound transformation of the human relationship with the natural world in the history of humankind’ (IGBP 2015). Observing human behaviour that accompanied this extraordinary transformation, Seidel writes: ‘We spend most of our lives in artificial environments, see attractively packaged food coming from supermarkets, and are oblivious to the places and people who produced it’ (p. 4). ‘Our human nature has us thinking in the here and now’ (p. 25). Although the book’s generalising language suggests claims about all humanity, Seidel’s ‘we’ speaks most directly – and quite effectively – to and about his contemporaries: fellow residents of wealthy nations, who live relatively urban, white, well-off lives.

The book’s strengths shine in Chapter 4, ‘The Psychology of our Modern Society’, which addresses trends in ethics, values, religious and other beliefs. Its weakness shows in Chapter 3, ‘What Comes with Being Human’, which projects troubling characteristics of current societies (competitiveness, selfishness, avarice) back hundreds of thousands of years as necessary elements in the evolution of *Homo sapiens* and the survival of hunter-gatherers. Seibel’s origin story diverges from anthropological consensus that what has allowed *Homo sapiens* to survive and thrive are uniquely human capacities for communication and collaboration. Biological evolution fashioned brains, mouths, hands, eyes, that enable human communities to develop culture: shared systems of language, kinship and knowledge through which we collaboratively (re)produce and adapt biocultural environments.

The idea that behaviours in question are determined by the human genome is at odds with empirical evidence of their irregular distribution throughout today’s world. During decades of research among Andean and Amazonian communities, I observed attitudes and practices that do not correspond with Seidel’s ‘we’ (e.g., ‘We are part of nature; yet few humans feel like a part of nature, much less live accordingly’ [p. 3]). On the contrary, people invest enormous energy in communal socio-ecological management with the purpose of sustaining thriving worlds for their great-grandchildren.

Interesting lessons of *Uncommon Sense* emerge from tensions between the author’s awareness of diverse cultural realities and his urge to portray modern man as a model of all humanity. Seidel taught in China and India, studied Jain traditions of respect for all life, and learned from visions of the Dalai Lama, Ghandi, Jesus, and Chief Seattle. With astonishing perspicuity, he articulates modernist tendencies of privileged westerners to generalise their own cognition and experience as that of all humankind:

I live among a very small percent of humanity that became extremely wealthy in a tiny fragment of time. This seems normal to me. I am an honest person and although I know better, I am, like many others, subject to the false-consensus bias: The impression that others think like I do. (p. 28)

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Attention to such cognitive disconnects empowers Seidel's critique of common sense, which is portrayed as logical reason, yet motivates decisions and behaviours that he finds illogical and irrational, such as the drive for constant growth on a finite planet.

Kallis et al. (2020, p.14) show that crises can destabilise these established assumptions, opening transformative possibilities. Amid climate change and COVID-19, for example, decision making may provoke tensions between common senses of individual achievement, rivalry and domination cultivated in the marketplace and the quite different common senses of modesty, charity and compassion established in Christian teachings, as highlighted in Pope Francis's *On Care for Our Common Home* (2015).

Seidel's concluding chapter urges readers to change course. Starting with primary school, he argues, humans must be educated to understand their interdependence with other nature and trained to exercise big-picture, long-term thinking. Scientific knowledge will be necessary for facts-based debates and decisions, together with changes in institutions that empower certain actors and knowledges over others: 'Ecofeminist scholars have raised the prospect that traditional hierarchical structures of male dominance, patriarchal religions, and crony capitalism factor into the imperilment of our planet, and our unjust global society' (pp. 94–5). Seidel's solid proposals aim to reorient macro-economic policy; guarantee full sustainable employment; eliminate subsidies for destructive enterprises; and levy fees and taxes on carbon emissions, resource use and other costly ventures. To measure impacts of those policies, he points away from GDP toward more comprehensive indices. Finally, Seidel ends the book by calling readers to join others in political actions and organisations forging healthier futures.

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