



# laetus in praesens

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## Flatulence is a Problem Aired

### Resmelling the stench of past undertakings

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#### Introduction

Resmelling the stench of past undertakings -- review and commentary

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## Introduction

The third edition of the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential* (1990) was reviewed for *The Guardian* by John Vidal under the title **Flatulence is a Problem Aired** (*The Guardian*, 7 February 1992). The review was introduced by the phrase: *John Vidal finds the authors of a definitive guide to all the world's ills treading an ever thinner line between the sublime and ridiculous*. The author of the review is a renowned editor on environmental matters, most notably for *The Guardian*. At that time the review could be seen as a highly skillful journalistic exercise in what has since been recognized as characteristic of **negative campaigning** -- although the intention in so framing the undertaking was unclear at the time.

Twenty years later, following multiple global initiatives endeavouring to identify and address the "world's ills", it is useful to employ that review as a template to understand the nature of progress since that time with respect to remedial action on environmental and other matters -- considered by disparate constituencies to be symptomatic of those ills. Vidal himself has notably been an attentive and perceptive commentator on the succession of Earth Summits: **United Nations Conference on Environment and Development** (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), **World Summit on Sustainable Development** (Johannesburg, 2002), **United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development** (Rio de Janeiro, 2012).

The language typically used to identify problems, and to frame and comment on remedies, depends heavily on the "vision" metaphor -- as in "envisaging" the future and recognizing the contrasting "perspectives" in their clarification, or in use of "review". Other senses employed metaphorically are those of taste, touch, and sound -- used to a far lesser degree in strategic thinking, however important they may be to some, most notably in efforts by politicians to engage with the public (*Metaphor and the Language of Futures*, 1992). Vidal's chosen title offers the opportunity to explore a powerful alternative metaphor most commonly used with respect to the "stench" of corruption undermining so many initiatives. With respect to visions of the future, rather than any "review", is there not a case for a "resmelling", a "retasting", or a "rehearing"? If not, why not?

It is curious to recognize that the profession that could be considered most sensitive to "smell" is that of journalism. It is investigative journalists who are valued for their ability to "sniff out" corruption in the public domain. Indeed it is critical journalists who are most assiduous in indicating the existence of unusual "smells" -- as do **pointer gundogs**. The skill may be acknowledged as "flair". Ironically, given Vidal's chosen title, it is they who indicate the existence of "flatulence" in public discourse on any issue. In this sense Vidal effectively acknowledges a function of the *Encyclopedia* of which he is so critical. He fails to recognize that it is an exercise in what is effectively **investigative journalism**. The title of Vidal's review could even be construed as the slogan of investigative journalism.

Strangely, little use is made of the odour metaphor to frame a desirable future rather than to reject the "stench" of an undesirable past. It is however used to describe the task of public relations in offering a form of "deodorant" for questionable strategies. Curiously the **wafting** of odours, so well-recognized in chemistry, has not been adapted to identifying strategies through their "smell". How a suitably "aromatic" or "perfumed" future is to be understood -- other than through edenic intimations of fragrance -- is yet to be clarified. It is a challenge in use of language meriting the attention of *The Guardian* -- especially given the attraction of the provocative Islamic classic *The Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight* (cf. *Strategic Challenge of Polysensorial Knowledge: bringing the "elephant" into "focus"*, 2008).

The following exercise is produced on the occasion of a page-one review of the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential* initiative in *The Wall Street Journal* by Daniel Michaels (*Encyclopedia of World Problems Has a Big One of Its Own*, 12 December 2012). It would be a major understatement to say that that periodical is one whose values are shared by *The Guardian* to a relatively limited degree. Within the odour metaphor, it might be said that the two periodicals are each repelled by the "smell" of the other -- if not the "stench". This is but one indication of the challenges of care for the planetary body, as separately explored (*Epistemological Challenge of Cognitive Body Odour: exploring the underside of dialogue*, 2006).

## Resmelling the stench of past undertakings -- review and commentary

*The Guardian* review of 1992 by John Vidal is presented in full below in *italics* with comments interspersed. To increase readability, **subheadings** have been added.

**Flatulence:** *A man in a London bus broke wind yesterday afternoon outside Charing Cross station. There were a few clearings of throats and wavings of papers but it went entirely unnoticed that he had caused a World Problem. One of 13,167 to be precise that the international community is working to alleviate.*

Although it was furthest from his intention, this introduction by Vidal offers an admirable framing of the dilemmas of engagement with the "**global problematic**", as originally named by the **Club of Rome**.

- Most ironic, in the current period there is a worldwide preoccupation with carbon emissions -- of which flatulence is but one instance:
  - With respect to the latter, commentators have notably referred to the challenge of the flatulence of sheep and cattle -- exemplified in New Zealand by protests by farmers at government proposals for a "fart tax" (*Further rumblings over rural 'fart tax'*, *Business Day*, 31 July 2007). The quantity of "hot air" engendered in debate by this and related matters might itself merit recognition as an "emissions" problem (*Sins of Hot Air Emission, Omission, Commission and Promission: the political challenge of responding to global crises*, 2009).
  - The point could be made otherwise by rewriting Vidal's bus example: *A London bus emitted a burst of exhaust fumes yesterday afternoon outside Charing Cross station. There were a few clearings of throats and wavings of papers but it went entirely unnoticed that it had caused a World Problem. One of 13,167 to be precise that the international community is working to alleviate. True or False?*
- Vidal's framing raises the issue of how any one minor instance of carbon emissions "causes" a world problem. It is of course the cumulative effect of such instances which engenders a phenomenon which may be labelled as a "world problem". The exact nature of a "world problem" remains a matter of dispute, as currently exemplified in debate regarding climate change and its denial. How does a problem become a "world" problem? Or rather, to whom may any phenomenon perceived as problematic be considered a "world problem"? Clearly, for both farm animals and farmers, the contribution of flatulence to a world problem indeed goes "entirely unnoticed" to use Vidal's phrase. This may well be the case with many problems framed as being world problems by some concerned constituency.
- The highlighting of flatulence as ridiculous implies that there are far more serious issues on which attention and action is required. Little mention is made by him of these, or of the difficulty of reaching any agreement on what they might be, or of the nature of the action required. There are indeed many constituencies advocating or deprecating attention to particular phenomena as being problematic. The various Earth Summit's, and the desperate effort to reach agreement on climate change at the **United Nations Climate Change Conference** (Copenhagen, 2009), are an indication of the challenges of reaching any form of useful consensus on the issues which Vidal might himself favour as being other than ridiculous (*The Consensus Delusion*, 2011; *Ungovernability of Sustainable Global Democracy?* 2010).
- Vidal ends his introductory paragraph with the implication that the "**international community**" is supposedly "working to alleviate" issues such as flatulence. As many have remarked the existence and nature of the "international community" is cause for extensive commentary. Is the international community to be understood as any particular subset of the thousands of international organizations documented in the *Yearbook of International Organizations* -- the companion volume of the *Encyclopedia*? In partial response to the question, the problem profiles in one data set are specifically cross-referenced to the organization profiles in the other. It might then be said that any "international community" lies in the eyes of beholder or the associated belief system.
- Through the framing offered by Vidal, the implication is that the "authors" (in fact the editors) of the *Encyclopedia* were presuming to define what the problems are and how their alleviation was being undertaken -- or should be undertaken. As editors (rather than "authors"), however, their role was to offer a mirror -- in the words of the concerned parties, to the extent possible -- of what each constituency believed to be problematic, why it was important in their eyes, and how action could or should be taken to alleviate those concerns.
- One conclusion, with respect to the stance taken in the review, is that Vidal -- as in any **straw-man argument** -- has framed his view of the inadequacy of myriad constituencies (and the "authors") as justification for his own critical perspective. The implication is that his perspective is somehow appropriate to the times -- but without any capacity or need to articulate it -- or to consider how others might disagree with it. Switching from the vision metaphor, do these simply not smell right to Vidal?

**Internationalism:** *Human flatulence in public may not rank as highly as War, Corruption or Man-made Famine, even plain old Death.*

*But for internationalists it's in there with Wood Boring Beetles, Junk Food Journalism, Bullying Among Military Personnel, and more than 250 over categories -- from Overloaded Courts to Overvaluation of Art and Overheating Planet.*

This suggests that Vidal especially questions the role of "internationalists" and any initiative they might undertake -- presumably as a position in the global-local debate as promoted at that time, notably with respect to the environment, through the phrase [think globally, act locally](#). In contrast to his sample of what he implies as unquestionably worthy of attention and meriting consensual action, he offers (in addition to flatulence) further examples of what he implies are trivial. The difficulty with his selection is that it is in fact on such "problems" that significant constituencies apply major resources -- or which elicit major political controversy.

The point is usefully made in a comparison of the resources attracted by *rust*, *wrinkles* and *refugees* as "problems" for quite distinct constituencies. Would it be *wrinkles* that attracted the most from individuals, with *rust* of most concern to industry? It might be said that it is such trivial problems which attract far greater resources than those on which Vidal might prefer action to be taken -- as with the preference for *refugees* by many "internationalists"? The *Encyclopedia* was intended by its editors to offer a framework through which the possibility of reallocation of resources might be considered. The framework necessarily includes so-called "[wicked problems](#)", namely those that are difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements which are often difficult to recognize. Vidal would seem to imply that "thinking globally" is irrelevant to articulating a framework in order to enable his implied preference for "acting locally".

**Absurdity of the global problematique:** *The third edition of the Encyclopaedia of World Problems is awesome in its intention to be the most absurd book liberal man (not defined by the authors as a problem) has ever conceived; a classic thesaurus of woe, confusion and misunderstanding, wherein absolutely no social, intellectual, ideological, ecological or religious worry is seen to be ungrounded, no discord discarded, or paranoia faintly eased in two volumes and 2,200 pages.*

Here Vidal offers an especially valuable insight. Many have long remarked on the absurdity of the current condition of humanity faced with a "crisis of crises" and the inability to act effectively. History will no doubt offer perceptive analysis of that absurdity, and the lack of ability to learn from it, as discussed with respect to the UN Climate Change Conference ([Insights for the Future from the Change of Climate in Copenhagen](#), 2010). In framing the *Encyclopedia* itself as absurd, Vidal raises the question as to how to derive systemic insights into the absurdity of the current condition without endeavouring to profile the "woe, confusion and misunderstanding" with which individual and collective action is variously faced -- a stench with which many are variously familiar.

Vidal specifically deplors that "absolutely no social, intellectual, ideological, ecological or religious worry is seen to be ungrounded". This might otherwise be considered praise from the perspective of a survey for scientific purposes. The editorial approach to [problem inclusion](#) and to [problem exclusion](#) was discussed in detail in the *Encyclopedia's* methodological comments.

Vidal seems to have completely misunderstood the intention of documenting the perceptions and beliefs of constituencies with specific concerns and priorities -- irrespective of how absurd they may be to each other or to Vidal himself. He further questions why no discord was "discarded" nor paranoia "faintly eased" -- phrases typically used in other contexts to justify some form of censorship, redaction or statistical massaging to eliminate "anomalies" (processes notably profiled as problems). He fails to recognize that his own preferred preoccupations -- as someone who might be considered an exemplar of liberal man -- would be variously considered as absurd and worthy of redaction. Of what might his critics accuse him of being "paranoid" and where would he aspire to justify his perceptions? Where is the set of human preoccupations to be systematically profiled if the views of such as Vidal were to prevail?

**Unusual smells:** *Communism and Capitalism slug it out with Atomism and Scientism. But what should readers make of Instability In The Iron And steel Spare Part Trade, or Antiquated Intellectual Methods to Appropriate Human Depths? World problems? Oh yes. Even thinking about the Trade Instability in Halogen Salts or the Collapse Of Cultural Dreams could wreck a weekend.*

Presumably Vidal approved, to a degree, of the inclusion of the "problems" cited in the first sentence as being appropriate to his own understanding of the world -- irrespective of which smell he favoured least at that time. He is however naive in questioning the inclusion of the trade instability problems since these are part of an extensive set of issues which are of concern to the economic and financial system in relation to development -- and as such are derived from a "thesaurus" of such issues elaborated in great detail by a particular United Nations agency. Many deplore the "antiquated intellectual methods" brought to bear on the problems of the planet and argue for "new thinking" and a "paradigm shift" -- preoccupations which Vidal seemingly deplors in preference for his own understanding of the adequacy of business-as-usual, as has now been demonstrated by the work of three Earth Summits.

In his deprecation of reference to problems such as "collapse of cultural dreams", Vidal helpfully clarifies another role of the *Encyclopedia* in drawing attention to academic studies, as well as articles by insightful journalists, in naming as problems those issues which otherwise fall below the radar of collective attention. They smell something "rotten" which few are able to detect.

A fundamental purpose of the *Encyclopedia* was to include unusual perspectives of unexpected constituencies -- the "odours" with which they were preoccupied -- rather than to exclude the unusual, especially when articulated by the marginalized (possibly because of their "smell"). It was intended that the user should be challenged to discriminate -- and be challenged by the possibility that that discrimination might not be sensitive to the smells to which some others might be sensitive.

**Crisis of crises:** *While earlier editions have tried to identify the problems and heroically suggested solutions. the authors have now given up, discarding all pretence of finding ways out of what they call "the crisis of crises". The concern now, they say. "is to respond to the possibilities of formulating an appropriate meta-answer of practical significance in paradoxical circumstances."*

Here Vidal confuses several preoccupations of the editors (again not the "authors"). The *Encyclopedia* specifically elaborates distinct data sets of which the two to which he refers by implication are [World Problems](#) and [Global Strategies and Solutions](#) -- presented in separate volumes. In both cases the editors made every effort to employ the language of the constituencies concerned with problems or advocating solutions -- allowing in each profile for published arguments to the contrary and indicative of the misguided nature of the

perception profiled (from some other perspective). The approach might be said to be one of writing the best legal brief in support of the views of each constituency -- whether or not an opposing case could be made for the collective "insanity" of its advocates.

The editors did not have the presumption to find ways out of what was originally named as the "crisis of crises" by John Platt (*What We Must Do: science for survival*, *Science*, 166, November 1969). The moment has apparently now been recognized by the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon who recently declared:

We are living through an era like no other. There are multiple crises: a food crisis, fuel crisis, flu crisis and financial crisis... Each is a crisis we have not seen for many years, even generations. But this time they are hitting the world all at once. We have never seen any era when we have been hit by all these multiple crises at the one time... Peacekeeping has experienced serious setbacks. Today we face mounting difficulties in getting enough troops, the right equipment and adequate logistical support. This supply has not kept pace with demand. (*United Nations peace missions in peril*, *The Guardian*, 8 July 2009)

If civilization is indeed, in the views of some, faced by such a situation, the question variously raised in the very [extensive commentaries](#) to the sections of the *Encyclopedia* was how to approach the condition systematically -- how to think about that condition and possibilities of responding to it. Rather than presuming to advocate any solution for such as Vidal to deprecate -- in the demonstrably ineffectual process of public dialogue to which he presumably subscribes -- the editors endeavoured to gather references to arguments pointing beyond such limitations. The possibilities may indeed take the form of "formulating an appropriate meta-answer of practical significance in paradoxical circumstances" -- especially given the dynamics through which any "answer" is now called into question.

The weakness of Vidal's criticism is that he has seemingly nothing to offer in response to any "crisis of crises". He is, and seemingly remains, content in his role as an armchair critic deploring the action or inaction of others. Should one expect more from journalists? What are the "perfumed airs" he would favour for the future in contrast to the "flatulence" so widely evident in international discourse? How should the future "smell" in contrast to the only too evident stench of the present and the dubious policies on offer?

**Irrelevance:** *This is international speak (the encyclopaedia comes courtesy of the Union of International Associations) for noting every conceivable problem the international community believes is relevant and by extension, keeps them in work.*

Again, the nature and existence of the "international community" lies in the eyes of beholder. The means by which "relevant" is to be established is intrinsic to any systemic study and is always vulnerable to various forms of conceptual gerrymandering -- to some of which Vidal would presumably subscribe in promoting his various hobby-horses (cf. *Scientific Gerrymandering of Boundaries of Overpopulation Debate*, 2012; *Map of Systemic Interdependencies None Dares Name*, 2011). Is Vidal, or any one reviewer, to be considered the ultimate arbiter of relevance? What of "crowdsourcing" and "collective intelligence"?

As to "keeps them in work", this remark is of course valid with respect to many forms of employment -- including journalism and book reviewing. It is unclear what alternative Vidal might now favour -- given the dramatic challenges of unemployment.

The context of Vidal's reference to the [Union of International Associations](#) (UIA) is such as to imply that any such body could itself only be appreciated as ridiculous by readers of *The Guardian*. The *Encyclopedia* in fact came "courteous of" [Mankind 2000](#), which provided the initial funding as a contribution to [futures studies](#) -- in collaboration with the Union he mentions -- and as a [complement to the global modelling framework](#) initially offered by the Club of Rome (*Club of Rome Reports and Bifurcations: a 40-year overview*, 2010).

Sad to say, the above-mentioned review by Daniel Michaels in *The Wall Street Journal* offers a far more balanced appreciation of a nonprofit body founded in 1910 and long known to documentalists for its annual profiling of a multitude of little known international nonprofit organizations of every persuasion. These include bodies in which *Guardian* readers (and Vidal himself) might well be a member, directly or indirectly. Unlike many such bodies, it has been primarily self-financed through its information compilation initiatives.

**Mediocrity:** *Only for them is Existential Sacrifice relevant. Or Mediocrity. Only the international community sees everything in terms of problems. And if anyone doubts that Instability of Trade In Asses, Mules And Hinnies is really a world problem, then the authors are ecstatic: "The decision that that any class of information is irrelevant can be seen as raising valuable questions as to the nature of the assumption on which each such judgment is made".*

In the face of the challenges that humanity faces, to what extent is the demonstrable "mediocrity" of global decision-making and local action a matter of concern? Is Vidal effectively promoting the feel-good tokenism which characterizes so much "effective action"? Is Vidal mocking those who make sacrifices for reasons beyond his comprehension? Would he understand what others might mean by "existential sacrifice" -- perhaps a suicide bomber or a self-immolating monk?

Perhaps more relevant, at the time of writing, is the case of [Aaron Swartz](#) (Timothy B. Lee, *Internet pioneer and information activist takes his own life*, *Ars Technica*, 13 January 2013; *Aaron Swartz Suicide: Reddit Co-Founder Dead At 26*, *The Huffington Post*, 12 January 2013). He faced decades in prison for downloading academic articles and rendering them freely accessible to the general public -- ensuring access to the "problems" and "solutions" discussed therein. If the role of investigative journalism is construed as the airing of "flatulence", as suggested above, could the metaphor be extended to cover the role of information activists such as Swartz?

Widespread concern with "bullshit" in public discourse, as clarified by several philosophers of information, offers that possibility ([Harry G. Frankfurt](#), *On Bullshit*, 2005; [Stephen Law](#), *Believing Bullshit: how not to get sucked into an intellectual black hole*, 2011). Political activists can then be usefully recognized as "bullfighters", as separately explored (*Transformation of Global Governance through Bullfighting*, 2009). Swartz died as a "matador" -- whether gored to death by a "bull" or not. *The Guardian* qualified his suicide as "apparent" (*Aaron Swartz's family condemns MIT and US government after his death*, *The Guardian*, 13 January 2013).

As to the "asses", as an issue derived from a UN thesaurus, is Vidal advocating disrespect for the livelihoods of the rural communities dependent on such working animals? Where are their concerns to be honoured -- if his deprecation of them is to be considered relevant

and authoritative?

**Connectivity:** *Connections are vital for internationalists; it's important, say the authors, that the links are seen between all problems. So Punitive Amputations can only be understood in relation to Torture Through Mutilation and Unjust Punishments For Crimes. Bride Burning must be seen in the context of Violence Against Women.*

*No decision on Gastric Disorders should be contemplated without reference to Human Disease and Absenteeism. Think that Psychogenic Fugue (the inability to recall one's past after unexpected travel) is a simple world problem? Oh no, see also Neurosis and Alcohol Abuse. And back to farting in public; this must be seen in terms .of Unsocial Human Processes, Inadequate Personal Hygiene and eventually, through a maze of cross referencing. to the big one: Socio-Economic Poverty.*

This is a strange diatribe by Vidal. Does a systemic approach not call for recognition of connectivity, as argued in one methodological [comment](#)? Is clarifying the connection between "flatulence" (in the form of "carbon emissions") and "climate change" not a matter of a current concern? Is he revealing his professional journalistic bias for one-problem-at-a-time in the article-of-the-day according to the flavour-of-the-month -- to be forgotten thereafter? Is this an exemplification of the emerging "blip culture" criticized by [Alvin Toffler](#) (*The Third Wave*, 1980)?

How should the criticism now be appreciated given the explosion of significance attached to the connectivity of [social networking](#) and its professional variants such as [LinkedIn](#) (in which Vidal is himself presumably now profiled)?

**Collective impotence:** *Beneath the litany of issues, though, is the serious post-modern problem of working out why the international community is impotent in working out problems. We are in a Paralysed State, say the authors. Apathy, Defeatism, and Despair rule. The trouble. it seems, is that the more people try to agree, the more they can't because the only thing anyone can remotely agree on is that everyone disagrees. Well, it's a start. Moreover. the authors note, everyone is starting from a different perspective. There is information overload, helplessness in the face of complexity, arrogance of disciplines, and mental defences. In short we have the "global problematique".*

This is a brief, but useful, framing of the challenge. It figures in a formulation in 1991 by the Council of the Club of Rome in a report *The First Global Revolution* (edited by [Alexander King](#) and Bertrand Schneider). This first summarizes the world problematique and then presents the need for a "resolutique" in response, as indicated in one commentary in the *Encyclopedia* (cf. *Global Strategies Project: the resolutique*).

The nature of collective impotence under these circumstances would indeed seem to merit careful attention, as separately discussed (*Mapping Paralysis and Tokenism in the Face of Potential Global Disaster: why nobody is about to do anything effective and what one might do about it*, 2011).

**Questions and answers:** *"The ultimate question," say the authors, "is how to interrelate inherently incompatible answers without producing another answer to compete with them in a process which has proved unable to transcend itself."*

Setting aside this question, which Vidal usefully notes, potentially more interesting is why the *Encyclopedia* is to be upheld as absurdly irrelevant to exploration of that question. What is it that someone of Vidal's decades of experience has to offer in response to the question? What has he since learned from the UN Conference on Climate Change (2009) whose meager results exemplified the challenge?

*But there is no ultimate answer to this one, either. The authors dodge it by offering Volume 2, 950 pages of what the individual can turn to when confronted by Volume 1. The range of 1,292 concepts "found meaningful in the search for growth or fulfilment in life" include the I Ching. Saintliness, Crusades, Evangelism, Taboos, the 75 Dharmas, Deep Ecology, Restraint, Prudence and Archaic Ego-States.*

Here Vidal complains that the "authors" have not produced any answer to satisfy him -- and, by implication, *Guardian* readers. He rejects the embarrassing plethora of approaches to the question variously on offer in the volume on [Human Potential](#) and [Transformative Approaches](#). He rejects as meaningless that thoughtful constituencies endeavour to articulate and practice what these may imply according to their favoured belief systems -- potentially contrasting with his own. Granted, it is the plethora of such responses that exemplifies the challenge, especially since their respective advocates may be appalled by each others' "epistemological body odour" -- and that exuded by Vidal himself.

What then?

**Plethora of potential possibilities:** *Virgin Birth may not have seemed relevant to Boutros Boutros Ghali, director general [sic] of the United Nations, as he sped through London last month, but Mr Hurd and others in the Foreign Office might have turned his mind to the possibilities of Brain Building, Sleep. Remorse, Anger or the Zen method of Entering-City-With-Bliss-Bestowing-Hands-Awareness.*

Whilst the paragraph is designed to be ridiculous, even more ridiculous is that John Vidal himself would have had little to say that would have been meaningful to [Boutros Boutros Ghali](#) as Secretary-General of the United Nations at that time. Despite his experience, any discourse now between Vidal and [Ban Ki-moon](#) (as the current incumbent) would do little more than exemplify the empty tokenistic quality of such exchanges and of any agreement pleasantly achieved for public relations purposes.

What is to be learned from such a situation?

**Decision-making perfumery of the future:** *To end on an optimistic note, the authors consider an international meeting in the year 2490. Progress, hallelujah, has come, even if it's 500 years late. Gone is the poverty of imagination that bedevils present summits and meetings such as Maastricht; no more "war rooms" where the participants are unable "to interweave value-laden views that differ and cross-pollinate in realms beyond the quantifiable". In their place 25th century leaders engage in blissful "meaningful arts-inspired insights", "harmonically logical interplays of forms", "pro-active responses to dissonance" and "poetically moving agendas".*

*A report from the equivalent of Maastricht in 2490 might then start, it is suggested: "Leaders today used colours to encode the policy dimensions which needed to be held in balance in a complex social ecology. A credible policy was therefore designed and, represented by a painting with the colours and shapes indicative of the details necessary to the pattern of the whole. Delegates then discussed the aesthetics of the whole. so forming a meaningful global pattern" Crikey.*

Given his enthusiasm for the odiferous, Vidal and *The Guardian* might indulge in an imaginative "out of the box" article from that future time. Faced with the stench of the past -- whether consequent on corruption or environmental pollution -- what "aromas" would then circulate to inspire and frame decision-making in 2490? Such enrichment is already recognized in "extra-sensory marketing", otherwise known as [neuromarketing](#) (Martin Lindstrom, *Brand Sense: build powerful brands through touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound*, 2005; Vladimir Djurovic, *Sensorial Branding: the future of brand building*, *EzineArticles.com*. 15 August 2008).

If the merits of "harmony" are to be scornfully challenged, switching to a musical metaphor as he does, there is some irony to his citation of the *Maastricht Treaty on the Eutropean Union* (1992) in that the articles of the subsequent *Amsterdam Treaty* have been rendered into choral form by the long-established [Men's Choir of Shouters](#) (see [video](#)). Some effort was later made to render the concerns of the UN Climate Change Conference into song to engage wider appreciation.

Are there other possibilities to be explored by those aspiring to "think out of the box" -- a "box" which may indeed merit occasional "airing" because of the tendency for unpleasant smells to build up therein? (cf. *A Singable Earth Charter, EU Constitution or Global Ethic?* 2006; *All Blacks of Davos vs All Greens of Porto Alegre: reframing global strategic discord through polyphony?* 2007; *Clues to patterns of dialogue from song*, 2011).

**Blaming the messenger:** *World problem no PA6077, according to Volume 1, is Meaningless, cross referred to Apathy, Non-Existence, Impotence and Inappropriateness.*

This is the punch line of Vidal's review -- neatly using the title of a particular problem to frame the inadequacies of the *Encyclopedia* -- which one of its own [commentaries](#) specifically highlights. As with the general style of the review, the *Encyclopedia* itself is condemned because of the themes it endeavours to reflect that are of importance to disparate constituencies -- preoccupations Vidal considers absurd and ridiculous from his own perspective.

For many, life is indeed increasingly "meaningless" and the collective actions advocated to remedy that condition are themselves increasingly felt to be meaningless. The associated challenge of "apathy" is widely recognized -- most notably with respect to the democratic deficit. Reference is widely made to the experience of a sense of "impotence" and disempowerment in the face of these circumstances -- a sense echoed in many social change institutions, or in the appreciation of their efforts. The sense of "inappropriateness" of many initiatives is a common theme of discourse -- and of articles by other *Guardian* journalists.

## Conclusion

Aside from its "straw-man" style (as noted above), is the characteristic smell of the review one of "shooting down the messenger"? Curiously both *The Guardian* and *The Wall Street Journal* have been variously complicit in an ongoing high-profile case involving such a process.

If the *Encyclopedia* is to be compared to an exercise in pointing the finger towards a condition meriting attention, is Vidal's review an invitation to focus closely on the finger rather than on the direction in which it is pointing -- recalling the challenge for any dog owner in seeking to focus attention of the dog on some distant matter of concern?

Would Vidal now consider matters otherwise after the learnings of two decades of Earth Summits and other questionable global initiatives? Does their output have a "sell-by date" -- reached long ago in some cases? "Food For All By The Year 2000"? "Shelter For All By The Year 2000"? "Health For All By The Year 2000"? "Education For All By The Year 2000"? Do they start to "smell" -- if not to "stink"? Is progress then to be understood as a rejection of the stench of the past -- "moving on" to avoid it?

A more considered assessment of the *Encyclopedia*, prior to Vidal's review, was that of the [American Library Association](#) (ALA) for whom it was a "problematic monument to idiosyncrasy, confusion, and obfuscation" (*Booklist*, 83, January 1987, p. 698). Again this can be understood as an admirable description of the condition of the times which the *Encyclopedia* sought to mirror through the language of the constituencies contributing to the condition. Few would now deny the degree to which the terms "idiosyncrasy", "confusion", and "obfuscation" prevail in relation to global governance. In that sense the *Encyclopedia* was indeed an effort to articulate a "problematic monument" to the condition of humanity.

Like that of Vidal, however, the ALA assessment was primarily concerned with the scope and nature of the *Encyclopedia* and not with the conditions it endeavoured to encompass. The terms used by the ALA are however very helpful in framing the condition of any undertaking purporting to be a comprehensive reflection of human preoccupations. Any library is necessarily a "problematic monument" in that light, given the variety of mutually contradictory perspectives it is called upon to reflect for users of different needs and persuasions. A semblance of order is only achieved by "specialization", with the exclusion of materials contrary to that speciality or worldview, or the use of a particular classification system (such as the *Dewey Decimal Classification* or the *Universal Decimal Classification*). These have their limitations in reflecting the variety of dynamic considerations required for any **transdisciplinary systemic approach** to the global condition -- hence the [experimental approach](#) used in the ordering of the *Encyclopedia*, as described separately (*Functional Classification in an Integrative Matrix of Human Preoccupations*, 1982).

More perceptive expertise was applied to evaluation of the *Encyclopedia* in assessing a funding proposal to the [European Commission Information Society programme](#) (Info2000) which ensured its development within a consortium initiative through to 2000 (*Ecolynx: Information Context for Biodiversity Conservation*, 1997). An even more assiduous evaluation was later undertaken by experts of the World Bank's *InfoDev* programme, leading to approval for funding of an adaptation of the *Encyclopedia* -- deferred due to the priorities

of a regional conflict (*Interactive Conceptual Environmental Planning Tool for Developing Countries*, 1999). *InfoDev* is a global partnership programme to enable innovative entrepreneurship for sustainable, inclusive growth and employment in developing countries. In each case the *Encyclopedia* methodology and data were evaluated for the possibility of their improvement (through a consortium of three bodies, of which the UIA was the lead agency).

What then of the *Encyclopedia*, twenty years after Vidal's review -- with no thanks to *The Guardian*? Again a useful attempt at a summary of its condition is ironically provided by Daniel Michaels (*Encyclopedia of World Problems Has a Big One of Its Own*, *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 December 2012). A fourth hardcopy edition appeared in 1995.

Since the time of Vidal's review, the internet has rendered accessible valuable open source resources like *Wikipedia*-- and the various search engines now bypassing the limitations of traditional library facilities. The *Encyclopedia* could well have evolved according to the open source model, given its "crowdsourcing" from international constituencies. As it is, archival profiles from the fifth (online) edition have long been made freely accessible -- following the Info2000 funding through to 2000. This enabled experimental development of multimedia access to the complex networks of relationships (see [video](#)) -- beyond the facilities currently offered by *Wikipedia*. The online facility continues to integrate profiles in multiple data sets ([problems](#), strategies, [organizations](#), values, [meetings](#), metaphors, and the like). Clearly meriting updating, it could however be said, of the problem profiles at least, that the world's problems are very patient. They do not go away -- their "stench" persists.

Rather than the framing offered by Vidal, it could be usefully said that the *Encyclopedia* experiment constitutes a question rather than an answer. What form should the organization of knowledge take to enable the emergence of better answers in the future -- if indeed it is "answers" that are required? The question is consistent with the recent vigorous arguments of Nassim Nicholas Taleb (*Antifragile: things that gain from disorder*, 2012). If a condition of global sustainability were to be successfully achieved, what then would be the "sweet smell of success"?

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