

Essay

A Prophet for a Toxic Age

Jacobs shows what happens when moral syndromes are ignored.

MICHAEL VALPY

Dark Age Ahead is a jeremiad of monumental dimensions. With that title, and Jane Jacobs as author, it could hardly be anything else. It is not, though, the fetters of Jeremiah that Jacobs has donned before settling herself at her typewriter, but the rude shepherd's jumper of the cerebral, literary, conservative and self-effacing Amos, troubler of society and biblical prophet of ethics. Such are the echoes of Amos in Jacobs that he demands an ample introduction.

Amos exercised his ministry in Israel between 760 and 750 BCE, initially wagging his finger outside the tents of the mighty at a time of national prosperity unprecedented since the empire of Solomon. He rebuked all levels of society for moral laxity, but it was the elites on whom he focused, denouncing their corruption and opulent lifestyles along with their oppression of the poor. As year followed year, he widened his indictment, citing systemic dishonesty, spiritual apostasy, arrogance and violations of social obligations. He declared that the Israelite elites had breached the elementary and unwritten laws of natural humanity. He told them that they had forgotten what Yahweh had done to make Israel affluent. He preached, the first of the Old Testament prophets to do so, an ethic of social justice to the Israelite leaders, telling them that they were bound by *hesed*, the loyalty uniting those who belong together, and were therefore responsible as guardians for the welfare of each member of the tribe. He actually—listen to this, it's pure Jacobs nearly three millennia later—distinguished between the morality that should govern the Israelites and that practiced by the neighbouring mercantile Canaanites, and he decried a mixing of the two ethical codes.

He wrote, moreover, in excellent Hebrew. He had a scholarly knowledge of historical traditions, geography (especially of cities), and Israelite and regional cult practices. He used vivid imagery drawn from Nature—let's call it biomimicry. He was so Jacobsean, it's spooky. He could have written *Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics* (1992), or a version of it for his time. He in fact did, for his time, write a version of *Dark Age Ahead*. He is a darling of the Social Gospel Left (which Jacobs is not, entirely) and his best-known line—"Let justice roll down like waters"—is proclaimed in large letters outside a Bloor Street church a few blocks from Jacobs's house in the Annex neighbourhood of downtown Toronto.

Ten years of Amos's ministry. Ten years, roughly, between the publications of Jacobs's *Systems of Survival* and *Dark Age Ahead*.

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One is magnetically drawn to speculate on what transpired in Amos's mind over that decade. He was an amateur in the oracle business, "a dresser of sycamore trees" and "herder of flocks," a prophet neither by descent nor by profession. He spent his days roaming the country in search of fresh pasture and sycamore fig groves, doubtless observing closely the life that went on around him. Suddenly he got a call from Yahweh to go to the court of Israel's ruler, Jeroboam II, at Samaria and convey the Lord's displeasure with the degeneracy of Israelite society. There, in Samaria, he questioned the Israelites on how society could function when whole areas of public life were riddled with scandal and systemic corruption. He proclaimed a code of ethics for them to follow, appropriate to the land and culture in which they lived.

He maybe then sat back—this is the speculative part—and said to himself: "Well, let's give them time to digest this and make adjustments. Samaria wasn't built in a day." And he waited. And waited. And nothing happened. The ethical rot and social injustice burrowed deeper into Israelite life, readily excused as the necessary fallout from a high degree of civilization. Amos turned up the heat of his rhetoric. Nothing. The ruling classes declared that Israel's prolonged prosperity was a sign of the Lord's favour (and who was some dilettante seer, a tree-dresser with pretensions, to tell them different?). Perhaps the cultural memory of the circumstances that made Israel affluent was too faded to be recalled?

Perhaps greed and the aphrodisiac of power and control were too consuming to be set aside? Perhaps Amos got parts of his code of ethics a little wrong, a little skewed?

Whatever the case, as the ten years of his ministry drew to a close, Amos switched from prescribing corrective measures to pronouncing judgement, declaring God's wrath was on the way and predicting the Israelites' inevitable ruin. He then disappeared off the biblical stage. The dark age he foretold came to pass, and the Israelites went off into the Babylonian captivity, hoist on the petard of their own immorality.

There is nothing new under the sun (to throw in another biblical line). As with Amos, so with Jacobs. They share quite a bit of a history.

Jacobs, the watcher, the amateur urbanologist, the do-it-yourself economist, spends 20 years taking copious notes on ethical behaviour. She comes to moral prophecy as she came to her understanding of cities, by the brilliance of her Method: first recognize examples of behaviour; next look for patterns; finally make generalizations and draw conclusions.

She watches as the post-war Keynesian economic consensus disintegrates and collapses, as western governments flounder in confusion over what their role as social guardians should be and increasingly lie to their peoples about what they are doing, and as corporations cease being civil, peaceful traders and emerge as carnivorous free-booting pirates, squandering their energies on junk bonds, mergers and acquisitions in the

name of restructuring for global markets. All of it—this floundering, lying and cannibalizing—occurs against a backdrop of materialistic excess and an alarmingly widening gap between rich and poor.

With the maps lost [wrote poet Margaret Avison],
the voyages
Cancelled by legislation years ago,
This has become a territory without name

Looking out at this world in monumental flux, the old rules being swept away by an avalanche of new technology and globalization, Jacobs asks questions. When is it ethical to deceive? When does business enhance or subvert the common good? When is industriousness a virtue and when is it a vice? How can guardians preserve the commons and not contaminate it with commercial enterprise masked as public action?

She publishes *Systems of Survival* in 1992, a code—two codes—of ethics for the working world, one code for government-guardians, the other for commercial traders.

Magisterially, like Pope Alexander VI dividing the world between Portugal and Spain, Jacobs devises two parallel sets of ethical rules, two moral syndromes for the commons

and for commerce, that will guide humanity into a new age. Her prescriptions she proclaims to be organically anchored in human behaviour. Her ethical codes, she insists, must be watertight compartments: when governments practice the ethics of commerce, or vice versa, “monstrous hybrids” are created that trap human endeavour in toxic swamps. *Amos redux*, and not for the last time.

The moral syndrome for government she sees as the necessary, protective behaviour for the survival of hunter-gatherer societies from which the territorial state has sprung: shun trading, exert prowess, be obedient and disciplined, adhere to tradition, respect hierarchy, be loyal, take vengeance, deceive for the sake of the task, make rich use of leisure, be ostentatious, dispense largesse, be exclusive, show fortitude, be fatalistic, treasure honour.

The moral syndrome for commerce is rooted in that unique human practice of trading where men and women set aside mistrust and aggression in the interest of enhancing quality of life. Thus traders should shun force, come to voluntary agreements, be honest, compete, respect contracts, use initiative and enterprise, be open to inventiveness and novelty, be efficient, promote comfort and convenience, dissent for the sake of the task, invest for productive purposes, be industrious, be thrifty and be optimistic.

Systems of Survival had critics.

Alan Wolfe, then dean of graduate studies in political and social science at the New School for Social Research, puzzled in the *New York Times* over how, in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs could reject the jargon, the high theory and the imposed utopia of urban planners, but pull precisely that model off the shelf in prescribing ethical behaviour for governments and business. Too much of the book, he

wrote, “is devoted not to an explanation of morality but to a defense of the structure used to explain it . . . Real people do not live ethical lives by following the precepts of intellectual syndromes. Their worlds are built from experience up, not from abstractions down. The younger Jane Jacobs [in 1961’s *Death and Life*] drove this point home. The more mature one seems to have forgotten it.”

She cast *Systems* in the form of a platonic dialogue among a fictional group of sophisticated urbanites, originally gathered in Toronto but then transferred by the author to Manhattan. Jacobs explained at the time that their dialogue did not work in Toronto because Canadians are too polite and she wanted to hear New Yorkers roll around on the floor and scrap. I like to think a second reason existed: a gathering of Canadians, culturally, would not have arrived at the same conclusions about the hermetically separated ethical roles of government and private enterprise. Not in a country assembled across a continent because its first prime minister borrowed from the trader syndrome—well, more

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accurately, he did a kind of ponzi scheme—to build a railway, and several of its provincial governments, more ethically than Sir John A., did likewise to provide their citizens with efficient electrical power. Or in a country whose travelling inhabitants still ask themselves what beneficial purpose has been achieved by privatizing the formally functional state-owned airline that has since stumbled from disaster to disaster with unswerving diminution of service. In Canada, it is not a given that government-run businesses get “bogged” down in waste, inefficiency and disappointed hopes.”

Moreover, it became apparent, after *Systems* appeared, that the new praetorian ideologues of neoliberalism adored the book a little too much. As John Ralston Saul wrote about Jacobs in the *Toronto Star*, “if there is a tendency to lay more blame on one side than the other, my impression is that she lays it on government; she concentrates on the distorting phenomenon of runaway public administration, while dealing little with that of runaway corporate administrations.” But, of course, corporate administrations in 1993 were only just beginning to run away. And, concluded Saul, Canadian-polite as a beaver, her “constant insistence on ethics, particularly on ethical questions, is a valuable exercise.”

Which, of course, it was. And is.

So much of what she wrote made sense, makes sense today.

When today’s buzz words are substituted for her unusual language of the guardian’s syndrome (“dispense largesse” can be decoded as transfer payments; by “be ostentatious,” she means be transcendent, show that the whole is greater than the individual parts), one understands she is talking about the moral duty of governments to strengthen and promote social cohesion, social

capital, civic engagement, cultural unity, to identify and shore up societal values, to make full participation in democracy accessible to all and provide equal opportunity for all citizens to enter into the meadows of a good life. To serve those ends, wrote Jacobs, the guardians could deftly and sensitively patrol commerce, but they must never control or take part in it.

Indeed, what need would there be for anything other than a sensitive, arm’s-length patrol of the traders if they were being honest, civil, peaceful, respectful of contracts, open to competition and innovation and dedicated to enhancing true convenience and comfort?

That was 1993.

This is 2004, and here is Jacobs fresh in print, warning of a coming dark age for North America, for which read the United States with Canada inevitably sucked into whatever happens down there.

Five stabilizing pillars of North American society, she says, are showing ominous signs of decay, are becoming irrelevant, are dangerously close to the brink of lost memory and cultural

uselessness. Those pillars are community and family, higher education, the effective practice of science and technology, the regimen of taxes and government powers “directly in touch with needs and possibilities,” and self-policing

by the learned professions.

Decay? Irrelevance? In danger of being lost to cultural memory and discarded as useless? Under stress, maybe, under assault, perhaps, but surely if things get bad enough, a “fix” will occur—or, as Jacobs puts it, there will be “a reaction of beneficent pendulums.”

Don’t, she says, count on it.

When a culture is working wholesomely, beneficent pendulum swings—effective feedback—do occur. Corrective stabilization is one of the great services of democracy, with its feedback to rulers from the protesting and voting public.

Stabilization is also one of the great services of some commercial innovations which, in concert with markets, shift production and consumption away from resources plagued by the high costs of diminishing returns, to substitutes or other locales of production.

The key phrase is “when a culture is working wholesomely.” The corrective stabilization can be thwarted, she warns, when “powerful persons and groups . . . find it in their interests to prevent adaptive corrections.” And “a culture is unsalvageable if stabilizing forces themselves become ruined and irrelevant. This is what I fear for our own culture, and why I have written this cautionary book, in hopeful expectation that time remains for corrective actions.”

There is much in *Dark Age Ahead* about the alarming erosion of the pillars of social stability. There is remarkably little, certainly by name, about the prescriptive remedies from *Systems of Survival*, the who-does-what separation of moral syndromes that so charmed the neoliberal ideologues: get the state out of the nation’s business; point the state in the direction of what it should

be about, limning cultural cohesion; leave commerce alone with its ideals and principled behaviour in the marketplace; and everyone will march clear-eyed and equitably into a brave new world. Let me be clear, there is no recanting of *Systems'* moral syndromes in *Dark Age Ahead*. There is just little said about them, and a lot less cheeriness about taking *Systems'* yellow brick path into a now-made-sensible future.

Which brings us to speculate on what has transpired in the mind of Jane Jacobs over the past ten years.

One suspects that, like Amos, she sat back after *Systems of Survival* and said to herself, "Well, let's give them time to digest all this, and adjust." Certainly, the evidence of optimistic expectation was there (Jacobs has always described herself as an optimist of the heart, while tending to be a pessimist of the intellect).

In 1997, at the Ideas That Matter conference at which she was celebrated by her adopted city of Toronto and by great minds from around the world, she bubbled: "All these people, so intelligent. It makes me feel better about the future of the human race."

And three years later, in 2000, when Jacobs's *The Nature of Economies* was published, she said: "I think I'm living in a marvellous age when great change is occurring." She had praise for the advances of the life sciences and "the possibility of understanding all kinds of things we haven't understood before. I think it's very exciting." She had one of the characters in *Nature*, reconvened from *Systems of Survival*, speak confidently, optimistically about humanity's built-in "fix" for saving itself from disaster, certain human "traits that check habitat destruction"—among them fear of retribution (the wrath of Yahweh?) and "the capacity to feel awe."

But if one looks closely at that year, 2000, there is a new, dark bleakness of thought surfacing in Jacobs. Eight years have gone by since *Systems of Survival*. Like Amos, she has been watching, waiting. Like Amos, she has seen nothing change, except for the worse.

In a long interview with the *Toronto Star*, she reveals rabbit-punch bruises from the guardians. She is very depressed by Toronto's inability to acquire the political powers from the province and national government it needs to shape its destiny. She speaks of the city's leaden civic apathy in the wake of the Ontario Conservative government's dismissal of its citizens' objection to being welded into a despised megacity and the loss of control over its schools. She describes Toronto, the city she loves, as a potential creator of victims, the increasingly desperate homeless. She talks, not of an exciting future for the city she embraced as the ideal urban environment in the 1960s, but of trying desperately to hold onto what was once good about it.

She continues watching and waiting. Nothing happens. Four years later, in *Dark Age Ahead*, she reports on a world where everything is going terribly wrong. Like Amos at the end of his ministry, she is at the wall. There is no more talk about inherent human fixes. Her earlier excitement over the advances of the life sciences has given

way to worries about how much of science has been bought by business. Her enthusiasm for a "marvellous age" is now shadowed by the "serious cultural dysfunction" of racism, profligate environmental destruction, crime, voters' distrust of politicians and the consequent low turnouts for elections, and the enlarging gulf between rich and poor along with attrition of the middle class (some of this is more tailored for an American audience). Against the backdrop of pandemic corporate moral misbehaviour—no longer a few bad apples; now the orchard—her *Dark Age* plea for better self-regulation of the accounting profession sounds like a plaintive afterthought.

And really, what is left to say about the tattered rags of the traders' moral syndrome when corporations now hire psychologists to investigate the effectiveness of children whining on their parents so as to market goods more effectively to kids? What is left of the guardians' moral syndrome in the wake of Ontario's former Conservative government putting welfare recipients on three-quarter rations while the chief architects of the Tories' Common Sense Revolution rip off a Crown corporation for hundreds of thousands of dollars for a few e-mails on "policy advice"? Amos would know exactly what to say here: Time's up. Yahweh's judgement is comin' down.

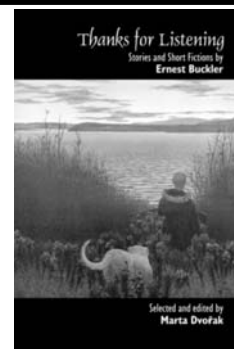
Which is the same space where Jacobs stands, almost. She has ratcheted up the rhetoric. Jacobs's language, so measured and dispassionate in her other books, is, in *Dark Age*, emotional. She maintains that *Dark Age* is still a hopeful book, but its Amosian warnings are very stern indeed: "Time for corrective action is finite," she writes. And once the cultural memory is lost of how things are supposed to work, it cannot be retrieved. "Culture resides mainly in people's heads and in the examples people set, and is subject therefore to natural mortality."

I give you an anecdote to illustrate how easily the cultural memory of democracy can get lost.

My daughter recently asked my advice on how she could get the Ontario government to issue a copy of her marriage certificate, which she urgently needed. After a five-month wait, she had been told there remained 80,000 requests ahead of hers to be processed by the province's denuded public service. We schemed for several days on how to convince the government fraudulently to jump her request ahead of the line. Only after we failed to enlist the needed help of others to pull off our deception did it occur to me to ask her elected member for help—which we did, and got the licence through legitimate means. The message: Once a system is believed to be derailed, you start forgetting how it is supposed to work. Once a system is believed to be corrupted, the honest person becomes the odd one out.

If Alan Wolfe, that harsh critic of *Systems*, comes to *Dark Age Ahead*, he will find an observant Jane Jacobs who has left abstract theory to return to the experiences of real people, and a prophetic Jane Jacobs whose finger-wagging outside the tents of the corporate and government elites has become very agitated indeed. ☺

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