

"If one door closes, another opens"

## Othmar Hill

By Piotr Dobrowolski

The business and work psychologist Othmar Hill criticizes the behavior of some managers, seeks the individual chances in the current economic crisis and argues for an economic life based on humanism.



"One requires a certain measure of existential relaxation" – Othmar Hill in conversation with the "Wiener Zeitung"-employee Piotr Dobrowolski. Photo: Michael Hetzmanseder

**Wiener Zeitung:** *Mr Hill, many people see managers as the main culprits of the current economic crisis. You too have also voiced the word "robbers" in this regard.*

**Othmar Hill:** It's not about making a sweeping attack on managers. The term "robber" refers to the extreme excesses: totally excessive salaries, incentives, bonuses. These can certainly be called "stolen property", especially when absolutely no sustainable company success is evident. I don't say this due to aggression. As a psychologist I see an unbelievable level of despair on the side of the managers. And I ask myself: how badly must someone be doing in order for him to become so greedy? There must be an unbelievable, unfulfilled need for something else standing behind the greed. I see this acquisitiveness therefore as a defect, as an illness, another one upon which most of the affected managers do not reflect.



Othmar Hill. Photo: Michael Hetzmanseder

*The fact that it is precisely people with such defects who reach the pinnacle must however demonstrate that the usual personnel selection measures have been faulty.*

In the finance sector, the proper people have probably not been found. Which is no great surprise: in Germany, for example, over the years we have seen that headhunters in the banking scene have passed on the same people time after time. They have also thus continually increased the salaries. If one only ever searches for people in the same biotope, then it all becomes extremely incestuous.

One must say here: the managers which were chosen met the requirements profile presented to them: they attempted to attain a maximum profit in the minimum time with minimum expenditure. However it was a purely selfish, purely owner-oriented, and thus ultimately a destructive profit.

*And nobody stopped them.*

The more incestuous the circle, the more detached is the behavior of the people. They ultimately receive hardly any feedback on their decisions. There is nobody there to ask



questions or to say to them: "Excuse me, what? What did you say there? Repeat that again". No, everyone acts in a friendly fashion, even when they have serious doubts.

*That will probably also remain the case in most companies in the future.*

Yes, as long as the conditions remain the same. That is why it is very much high time that we introduced other values into the economy besides material ones. The only alternative that I can see is humanism, is the discontinuation of this unbridled onwards-oriented frenzy. One must say: hey people, what is wrong with you? Stop for once! In the end we are all rolling forward into nothing. Even the most devout fall to dust. It is an illusion to believe that by clinging to material we can change anything about that. Thus seen, the materialistic world design is not only naive, but also dubious. We must also question democracy, as like the economic competition it is based on a repression in which the majority represses the minority.

*And what would be your alternative to democracy?*

Consensus. The European model is for example based on consensus. The following maxim should apply to the economy as well as to politics: create the maximum common benefit from the minimum expenditure. That can only be done when one is laid-back; for this one needs a certain measure of existential relaxation. And an accepting and understanding societal attitude. We can achieve this by dealing with unpleasant facts, accepting them and integrating them internally. In coaching, for example, this occurs in dealing with unpleasant feelings.

*The question remains: who defines what common benefit is?*

I think that that will be defined by society. I recently worked with a cyberneticist who no longer creates job descriptions for individuals, but rather defines collective performances which the entire team should produce – and he does this with this team, this collective.

This is by no means communist, but rather a relaxed approach to challenges. I think that when we combat our own existential angst, we can arrive at such a relaxed composure. Which is also urgently necessary. From what I see of managers or company bosses – most of them drive themselves, from pure strain, to their limits, kill themselves, wear out their own and external resources, endanger themselves. That is self-harm up until suicidal risks. Is that really our success model? It can't be!

*What do you do with such a person when they come to a coaching?*

Give no advice, but rather think with him, reflect with him, be an echo. People really already know everything that they must change. But if one gives concrete instructions for change, one achieves the opposite. I often recommend managers and company owners to create a strategic plan for change in addition to the coaching, so that it becomes clear where they want to go with their company and also with themselves. That often opens up great space to be oneself.

*That is however a program for company bosses. As a rule, on the lower and middle levels economics reigns, not psychology.*

Yes, but the question is, for how long more? Look at the current crisis: the classical management consultants, the financial acrobats are remaining monosyllabic. And do you know why? Because they stand on the side of the, I don't want to say culprits, but in any case of those responsible. They built castles in the air- absolute profit maximization- for people through rational arguments. What people really want, however, is feelings. Custody accounts sometimes create less happiness than a slice of bread with dripping consumed at a mountain hut. We need far more relaxation for this whole discussion of the crisis, in order to set ourselves the correct goals. Who says that everything must grow forever?

*If someone is under severe pressure of losing his job, do you also say to him: enjoy your bread and dripping, relax?*



Yes, exactly. If one door closes, another opens. Therefore my compassion is limited, when a 52 year old comes to me, at his wits' end because he has been laid off. The comprehension of one's own value and of career potential is often lacking. Career coaches help to inventory these, in order to situate chances on the job market. For the most part the only option is self-employment. Only then can things really get going.

*But there are also people who need job security. Not everyone wants to found a company at 50.*

That's not easy, of course. But in the future there will be even less jobs than today. There will be a completely new world of work. You can forget full employment, in any case. There will be, unpleasant as it is, many more precarious working relationships, many, many, disappeared jobs, any number of project nomads, new self-employed people, temporary workers, private service providers, even private secretaries etc. The home office will be the rule. Changes everywhere one looks- and no end in sight.



The "home office" will be the working method of the future – which has both good and bad sides. Photo: Bilderbox

*And is that supposed to be so great? For example, home office means hardly any separation of the job and private spheres.*

Yes, but on the other hand it is also a great chance: men can participate in housework, be there more for the children. From a home office, women can perform a high class job during pregnancy or maternity leave, which otherwise would not be possible. They can for example live in Graz and work in New Zealand. But naturally there are also disadvantages. The phenomenon of "Man-Back-Home-Syndrome" is known in Japan: the men are unemployed and the women divorce them. They can't stand him being at home all day complaining. He can't cook or iron and he doesn't want to do housework. Nevertheless, I believe that nomadization and globalization will represent an unbelievable advance of the jobmarket. The only negative aspect I see is the loss of values. Old values are sacrificed and nothing replaces them.

*What values will be sacrificed?*

Political, moral, ethical, religious, family values. Today there's hardly a political party with a clearly profiled ideology. Only the extreme right has one, and that is out of the question. Political life is full of populism calculation and media devotion. But also family values are being lost. The attention time devoted to children by parents is today eleven minutes per child daily. Previously they were together for five hours! Today the orders are issued in the evening for the next day and that's it! The children are raised by Sylvester Stallone and Madonna. And the parents never understand this, because they are never in the nursery. That leads inevitably to socialization deficits.

*The loss of values which you deplore is possibly however a direct consequence of globalization.*

I believe that we can counteract this if we develop a multicultural attitude towards life, in the sense of the nomads. To survive in inhospitable regions, one requires easily mobile hardware – previously this was tents and camels, today laptops and plane tickets – as well as social engagement and integrity. And if I apportion these nomadic values to our weekly-commuting managers, then empathy, intuition, respect, appreciation become second to none: then all distances can be overcome and one can exist anywhere.

*In any case, today every manager speaks of respect and appreciation. In reality however that is often only verbiage.*



Yes, because everything is based on struggle. Not only the economy, but also politics. But the current crisis cannot be overcome with more struggle, more money. The change in the economic basis is already too large. Communist materialism is dead, capitalist materialism is also difficult to maintain. Hardly anyone will invest in some financial affair that could emerge as a fabrication! Can you imagine that in two years people will begin again to invest in opaque financial instruments? I can't. The trust is gone. Today one can't obtain a safe-deposit box in a Zuerich bank anymore, because so many people are hoarding their gold there.

*So after the financial crisis the real economy will return?*

Yes, but the question is: where should one invest? In a second factory, when the first is already suffering from overproduction? I think that after the information society, with all its excessive demands, now the time of psychosocial services is coming. Investment will be made in people. For this, however, we require new education and career consulting concepts.

*And these would be?*

For Austria, comprehensive career guidance between the ages of 15 and 16. Not by any means in school, but rather organized outside of this. The school system must also be reformed. Today we have a system where children must decide at the ages of 13 and 14 what they wish to become. They can't do this because at this age their interests are insufficiently developed. That first takes place between the ages of 15 and 16. Only then should career guidance take place. The price of a lack of such career guidance can be seen in the drop-out rates of the universities. That takes place because nearly everyone studies the same things: management, law, medicine.

*Your system also advocates comprehensive school, then?*

Yes, that would be a good idea, and also until the age of 15, with a certificate, a kind of small Matura (A-levels), and then either an apprenticeship or further study would follow. However we will also require other socialization measures, for example camps, because the socialization of children is no longer being carried out adequately by parents.

*Socialisation camps: that sounds like George Orwell and the GDR.*

No, no, it merely means that children and young people should have more interaction with different people. It's not exactly optimal to look at the same two faces of their parents year in year out. The tiny family seems to be obsolete. By the way, socialization work can and must be performed by the so-called psychagogues also within the comprehensive schools. In addition, well socialized people could be employed in these camps or in the all-day school to raise the young people.

In general, we should also fall back on the experience of older people to a much greater extent. We have two million pensioners in Austria, who on average over 35 years of work experience. That makes a total of 70 million years of work experience which we do not draw upon. That's crazy! Even if we could only use a fraction of this experience, it would be fantastic.

*But that too cannot solve the problem of educational policy.*

Therefore we need a masterplan for every region, for every province, in which it is established: what are the challenges of the next ten years? How should they be dealt with? What skilled professionals do we require for this? Such a masterplan can facilitate targeted training. In addition, regions must make increased efforts not only to be more attractive for investors, but also to actively transport this image

*Your ten year masterplan reminds one somewhat of the five-year plans of the old communist planned economy.*

In any case, I prefer a clear plan based on humanistic – not communist! foundations to a planless muddling about.



### **About the interviewee**

Othmar Hill, born in 1948 in Vienna, is a doctor of psychology specializing in business, work and test psychology. In 1975 he founded the personnel consultancy company Hill International, which is today among the most renowned in the field. Hill International maintains 30 offices in 20 European countries.

The central areas of this company include economic psychological consulting and management accompaniment in the so-called "Human Resources" field. Hill accompanies multinational concerns as well as small and medium companies in their strategic orientation in the countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. As a specialist in "intercultural management", he assists the Austrian chamber of commerce in questions of international know-how transfer. In addition to his function as consultant he has developed numerous structured potential analysis procedures, for example HILL\_BEST FIT and the "career compass". He is the inventor of "humanistic management", "management on tour" as well as the "HILL Window" for company cultures.

Othmar Hill is the author of the books "Das Ende der Massenmenschhaltung: Humanistisches Management in Zeiten rasender Gesellschaften" (The End of Mass Treatment: Humanistic Management in Accelerated Time) and "Das Mittelmäßigkeits-Kartell: Die Verschwörung der Kleinkarierten" (The Cartel of Mediocrity: the Conspiracy of the Narrow Minded). In addition he has published numerous contributions on the themes of career planning, reform states, new worlds of work, economic psychology and strategic planning.

### **The interviewer**

**Piotr Dobrowolski** works as a journalist and is a lecturer at the universities of Vienna and Graz.

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