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Ecological Sustainability
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Assignment #3: Towards a Practice of Sustainability

As a future designer of social change, as a change agent, I have been exploring

design principles that would assist me in helping myself and others transition toward a

paradigm of interconnected, interdependent and sustainable political and economic

activity. As Kuhn (1996) suggests, new paradigms come to understand the phenomena of

life in ways that are incompatible with old paradigm understandings. The nature of the

paradigmatic shift, whether it is an entirely new paradigm or if it is the re-awakening or

re-valuing of a long extant paradigm, is such that new explanations for the way the world

works will make old explanations obsolete. A whole systems, compassionate paradigm

offers to interpret the meaning of political and economic activity in new ways because the

old mechanistic, hierarchical paradigm in these areas fails to explain and respond to the

desperate need for sustainable practices, or what I will come to characterize as

"sustainability plus" practices.

Rabbits on Turtle Island

The theoretical framework that I have been using to understand the way that

humans behave within their environment is one that I have previously articulated, namely

that humans are a niche animal that have essentially been transported by advances in

technology to an environment to which they have not adapted and in which there exist no

natural predatory or environmental controls on expansion.

I suggest that humans have a psychological and cultural relationship to their

environment that appears to have developed in response to an environment in which

significant mortal threats actually existed. Like rabbits placed in a new environment such that the transition was beyond their natural ability to adapt or notice, humans have suddenly transitioned into a world where their ability to expand and use environmental resources far outstrips the environmental checks on them. The time scale of technological intensification of human effort has accelerated to the point where the horizon of effect has moved beyond human ability to recognize or predict.

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This quarter I have come to realize this niche expansion model is similar to the systems archetype Tragedy of the Commons. One expression of this archetype is in economic externalities, where corporations are, as described in the film *The Corporation*, (Akbar, et al., 2004) "externalizing machines" designed to displace as much of the cost of their products to the whole system as possible in order to reduce the price of the means of production in part to lower the price of their goods, but primarily to increase the difference between the asking price and the internal cost of production to derive a profit.

A response to this archetype is oversight of one kind or another. One example is government regulation such as environmental legislation, economic incentives or other means to fold the cost of externalities back into the market prices of goods exchanged. This is a form of "collective agreement" which is mentioned by Herasymowych and Senko (2004) as a positive archetype that answers the essentially negative archetype of the Tragedy.

I feel compelled toward answers, as if this were a problem to be solved. I tend to imagine the need for an evolution of culture and consciousness as being essential to resolve this dilemma of resource overuse. My personal response to this need for an evolution of consciousness is recognition of what I've called being comfortable with the uncomfortable. Having an uncertain future is a function of crossing a threshold from a place where a community and individual do not challenge conventional wisdom. Moving from one paradigm, or mental model, to another is a place where one is not fully in a new understanding and one is no longer comfortable with the old understanding. Further, merely manically switching from one certainty to another is counter-productive, because it is the certainties that act like a soporific to ongoing critical inquiry. Being comfortable with the borderlands, between certainties and answers, is a space of maximal critical flexibility. In other words, moving from certainty to another certainty is merely first order change in a system that requires purposeful and creative second order change.

If a cultural transition could be made such that uncertainty was not both uncomfortable and unacceptable, then future predictions that are at essence uncertain would not be as easily ignored. Further, unless this transition of consciousness is made, then awareness of resource peaks and an impending whole system failure is less likely to result in sudden reform as a rush to get what can be gotten before someone else does first – a mob akin to the violent rush to the last toy on the shelf during consumer holidays.

In order for wider awareness of resource peaks to be met with conservation, sustainable practices and anything other than more depression driven over-consumption, a transition at a broad whole system level must be made toward being comfortable with the uncomfortable. In the past, I've seen this transition primarily as a way to produce a culture more likely to desire and enter into dialogue. This course has helped develop a broader implication for this model as being essential to sustainable practices in general.

Reframing

Working to reframe discourse in the public sphere is one particular focus that I take as an opportunity within the larger dialogue and deliberation movement. Reframed discourse has the further opportunity to bring up issues of sustainability. *Cascadia Scorecard* (2004) is an example of an attempt to reframe economic indicators in order to develop a larger cultural level transition; a change in how people think about their relationship with their environment. There are several examples, and specific areas of interest I have which can be reframed: the status of combinations, the nature of profit, the market and externalities, cultural attitudes toward unsustainable practices, conservativism and protest. Each of these areas represents a possibility within the larger system to create a transition to sustainable practices at a fundamental level, culturally as well as on the level of personal practice.

More than merely a statement of personal practice, on a political and economic level, reframing the cultural understanding in several key areas I mention below seems to be an opportunity to develop models that are more community based, rooted in recognizing inescapable interdependent relationships that span neighborhoods, cities,

countries, continents, the globe and further. This becomes an important component in any future design statements for my work as a change agent in to the world.

Corporations are collective bargaining units

One of the conceptual models that appears contradictory to me is the condemnation on the one hand of collective bargaining and combinations and on the other hand praise of corporate and global capitalistic economic activity. There is a related position that also appears to be contradictory: many conservatives focus on individual rights as being better than collective rights but celebrate the collective rights and activity of corporations. Where there are capitalists, they operate politically as the representative of the investors and of the employees as stakeholders of the corporations. Further, this is doubly true for cases of absentee ownership by shareholders.

Boards of Directors and CEOs act as the collective voice of the stakeholders in the corporations, and are therefore just as much a combination as a worker's union. The distinction between these two appears to me artificial and precious. If the discourse in the public sphere could be reframed in this way, then one would need to either denounce the collective voices of corporations or support the equal weight of collectives like unions and public collectives.

Another angle on this is simply if corporations are artificial persons, then so can other collective interests be persons. Instead of fighting against corporate personhood, there may be an opportunity to fight for artificial personhood for entities like national parks and natural resources. By framing the debate this way, one would either need to

denounce corporate personhood or take in to account the self-interest of natural entities and collectives as equals to the interests of corporations.

Reframing the relative self-interest of all combinations as equal brings the legal standing of corporations as artificial persons further under control and in balance with other concerns that would otherwise become externalities. This reframes government regulation and oversight into a more positive light as protector of those that need protection. This is a suggested political design outcome.

Further, one of the primary current critiques of governmental entities as implementors of progressive issues is that governments move too slowly in comparison to corporations. (Senge, 1994) If governments responded to the self-interest of other combinations, being structurally similar in ability to recognize and respond to change as corporations, in equity to the response to the corporate voices, then this might also address that criticism.

Corporate profit is an unregulated consumer tax

Many fiscal conservatives, with whom I have spoken, are concerned with over-taxation; some with any taxation at all, but most with making sure that the level of taxation neither over-burdens the population and the level does not stall economic activity. Taxation beyond spending, or surplus, is likened to stealing money. However, the system they decry has many of the same features as the system that surrounds profit that they support. Excess profit is celebrated, instead of seen as waste or appropriation.

I propose reframing corporate earnings as a tax and profit as surplus taxation on consumers. This tax is not, for the most part and especially after decades of deregulation, subject to the democratic voice of the people. Corporate profits and earning are

determined by the corporation, and in response to the voice of the market. If the market is

the voice of those external to the corporation that has any influence on the determination

of corporate profits, then only those with money have a voice. This is the opposite of an

oligopoly – an oligopsony, (Hannaford, 2004) a market where there are few buyers. In

this case, the oligopsony is comprised of those with money, and

as such, is clearly in a state of imbalance. Therefore, corporate

earnings are taxation without democratic representation.

Reframing corporate economic activity in this way offers a link

to a particularly strong current of US individualism and core values of independence and

democracy to the effort for corporate reform.

If I can include reframing corporatism in this way in my future projects, I may be

able to highlight the dangerous over-consumption inherent in current notions of western

style progress and pursuit of profit.

Externalities: price versus cost

One point made very clearly during the presentation by Eva Otto was the

distinction between market prices and actual costs. Much of this difference is exported

from corporations as externalities. This difference is in both the price of goods to the

consumer and the price of the means of production, such as natural or labor resources.

There is a mirror of this in discussions over the difference between minimum wage and

living wage. The fundamental similarity is in whether whole system conditions and

externalities are taken into account.

The struggle to reframe economic discourse in terms that include whole system

conditions is evidence of the need for more widespread system thinking skills. Friedman

argues that thinkers that can grasp whole systems, what he calls "globalists," are necessary in order to balance the skills and benefit from having specialists. (2000, pp17-28) Friedman is specifically talking about new skills necessary for those in power to understand and benefit from Globalization economically and politically. I would suggest that these skills are not needed in merely one or a handful of professions or merely by those in positions of power, but rather that the widespread cultural shift toward systemic thinking is a paramount foundation to an approach to sustainability on any level from global to local. Friedman's notion of a globalist seems to be curiously myopic about real whole systems and becomes a willful apologist for global economic injustice. I think it's possible to do better.

Unsustainable practices are violent practices

Generally speaking, violence can be agreed on as an undesirable act for most societal purposes. Clearly there is controversy over issues such as determination of just war, but for the most part, and especially on a personal and intra-cultural level, acts of violence are derided and abhorred. There is a stigma attached to personal acts of violence, even if there is glorified violence in the media and elsewhere. One way to stigmatize practices that are unsustainable in the public sphere is to reframe them as violent acts. If unsustainability is based on motives that derive from the base psyche, such as greed or fear, then they can be logically typed as similar in many ways to violence that is also derived from those base sources. Selective sustainable practices and voluntary simplicity ameliorate the effects of systemic environmental violence but do not address the core issue of whole system level environmental abuse. If one can speak of abuse of natural resources, then one is already framing some activities as violent. Unless the core issues

are addressed, local acts of sustainability and simplicity will merely act as exemplars, and not as dire necessity. Unfortunately, while local and limited implementation of sustainable practices does address part of this core issue, they also make those practitioners even more vulnerable to those that wish to affect and effect abuse.

A paradigm that the world is a violent place that must be conquered and subdued with a violent command is atavistic recidivism. Much like the niche behaviour already mentioned above, violence toward the environment was a necessary response to a world in which we had little or no control, but now as we are increasingly able to influence and change the world, our ability to affect the world has outstripped our emotional security about our place in the world. This has made us all full of fear and easy to manipulate, like a herd of cattle, we can be spooked by one small sound and stampede to violence.

Reframe "conservative"

On a more philosophical level, the words "conservative" and "protest" both should be reframed from the way that they are used now.

Firstly, the word "conservative" itself should be taken over to mean a kind of Muirian conservation of the environment. In 2003, I was in a dialogue with Dan Swecker, a conservative Washington State Senator, where he defined a conservative as someone that has something to conserve, and the web of nature is certainly something worth of a Muirian conservative attitude. There seems to be a strange disconnect in my mind between complaints of over-taxation often made by self-identified conservatives when they then implement the same condemned relationship with other resources. The only difference appears to be whether the resources are their own or those of another. This seems to be a systemic trap. The system one is in determines one's behaviour and is hard

to keep in focus. It seems to me that, baring hypocrisy or my inability to understand, if self-identified conservatives could be shown the systemic similarity between what they claim to condemn on one side and their abuse of the natural or collective resources there would be a chance to redefine sustainable practices as something near and dear to their hearts.

Secondly, the idea that a "protest" movement is defined by what it is against doesn't match the word itself. The word "protest" is in the dictionary (Houghton Mifflin, 2000) as "to object to" and "to promise or affirm with earnest solemnity" which is a clear confusion. The archaic meaning was "to proclaim or make known." The root is from Latin meaning "to testify forth" and goes back toward Indo-European for "witness." Clearly, the word needs to be reclaimed as a systemic proclamation of what is wanted, not what isn't wanted.

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If over-consumption is in some sense a response to a cultural depression about the future resource limit, then a movement that is 'for something' as opposed to 'being against' is more culturally appropriate. This also holds if one takes into account the western cultural pattern that requires happy endings. Whatever cultural shift occurs that supports ecologically sustainable practices should be a celebration or it will itself not be a sustainable shift.

Personal

Personally, on many levels, my recent trip to Ireland was transformative. One of the memories of that trip that has returned in the context of Ecological Sustainability is the way in which the ancient population of Ireland actually created what fertile ground

there is in the coastal areas by actively terra-forming rocky land using seaweed. By gathering seaweed deposited by waves along the coast and laying that out on the rocky land, the ancient Irish people created soil on which to grow crops.

The use of seaweed to create soil goes further than simple soil replenishment to actual soil production. The transition from simply living within the limits of the environment to actually creating more abundance than previously available is a step beyond mere sustainability. Progress is in many ways antithetical to sustainability, but progress is not antithetical to an ever-increasing abundance. The point, echoed by McDonough & Braungart (2002) as well as Fuller (1981), is that progress should be about producing more good effect than about producing bad effect more efficiently. Further, the common perception of sustainability as a goal that aims toward living within existing environmental means undershoots the possibility that humans could contribute to an ever increasing abundance if human culture and infrastructure are redesigned with abundance in mind.

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Perhaps, to coin a term, I might call this "sustainability plus" to indicate that the point is develop processes that are not just depleting resources, but producing surplus from which the whole system derives benefit.

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