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Transformations to Sustainability: Why integrated social change requires a political process based on inclusive communication

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1. Introduction: Ecological and Social Dimensions of Sustainability

Contemporary societies and their economies must undergo a transformation to sustainability without further delay if we are to avoid an ecological and socio-political disaster. To achieve a rapid transformation, principles consistent with sustainable ecosystems and social systems need to be identified, and then applied systematically across all sectors. What are these principles in their most fundamental form, and how can they be applied?

To answer this question, we can draw on the insights of anthropology, a bridging science dedicated to the holistic study of humanity across the entire span of its evolutionary development (physical anthropology) and across the full breadth of its cross-cultural diversity (cultural anthropology).

The professional practice of ethnographic fieldwork in anthropology is designed to produce a high level of self-critical, meta-cultural awareness, revealing that our taken-for-granted way of life is just one cultural option. Meta-cultural awareness lays bare the extent to which the social behaviour of human beings is culturally learnt and hence adjustable if need be. As a side effect of globalisation, furthermore, exposure to other cultures is now also experienced at a popular level, opening up the possibility to utilise meta-cultural awareness for the purpose of societal change. This new awareness can make us feel dis-embedded, enhancing the appeal of fear-based populist identity politics, but it also can boost self-reflection and thus liberate us from blind adherence to destructive cultural practices, potentially producing an ‘anthropological moment’ in the history of human consciousness.

Anthropological study of human societies has revealed that the health of human societies and ecosystems rests on the same two key elements: a high degree of diversification and a dense web of cooperative interdependence relationships that capitalise on this diversity. These system requirements are not recognized within prevailing economic narratives, whose proponents have instead promoted a naïve Darwinism to legitimize and promote self-serving and monopolistic behaviour. The false premises of this cultural narrative need to be challenged and its negative consequences charted. A new narrative is needed, promoting human wellbeing and responsible environmental stewardship.

Social and ecological sustainability are both based on diversification and interdependence, and hence we have a dual crisis with a common cause and similar solutions. The same strategy of unrestrained profit maximisation that drives escalating inequality also drives ecological destruction. Once the torch of reflexive, meta-cultural awareness is pointed at this destructive cultural practice and its supporting cultural narratives, particularly in economics, an opening is created for real change.

2. Unsustainability: The demand end of transformation

The current social crisis is caused by escalating disparities between rich and poor nations, as well as rich and poor citizens of particular nations. An [Oxfam report](#) notes that “eight men possess the same wealth as half the world’s people.” Middle-class people in affluent nations are also disadvantaged by these developments, as the research of Senator [Elizabeth Warren](#) has revealed. At the extremes of disadvantage, we find that some 795 million people went [hungry](#) in 2014, and more today in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the extremes of affluence, the meaning of wealth is disconnected from individual consumption and becomes primarily a quest for power. Such concentration of power works to perpetuate and institutionalise inequality through lobbyist influence on national and international policies.

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The current ecological crisis has been much discussed in academic literature, including [anthropology](#), but even experts struggle to picture the full extent of the challenge. Non-renewable resources are peaking, and renewable resources are extracted above their renewal rate. Biodiversity loss occurred at a rate of 52% between 1970 and 2010, according to the WWF 2014 [Living Planet Report](#). A less well-known ecological threat is the fact that half of the life-supporting and irreplaceable [topsoil](#) of the planet has been lost in the last 150 years.

3. Transformation: The supply end of sustainability

There is now a widespread academic consensus that deciding exactly what to do, locally, regionally, and globally to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be a complex task requiring a multidisciplinary and cross-sector approach. The scientific community can contribute factual analyses, but policies involve values and interests and are thus political. The lack of a process for achieving commitment to mutually agreed multi-scalar crisis action plans remains a major political obstacle to a rapid and integrated response.

Transformation to sustainability plans must first of all acknowledge the depth of cultural change that will be required. Increasing product life, repair, reuse, upgrading, closed loop recycling, resource (rather than labour) taxes, and a major redirection of investment flows and reallocation of labour are some of the key measures needed. Excessive per-capita consumption needs to be curbed, while the supply of essential items must be secure. For investors and consumers alike, modesty and restraint will be more palatable when there is a guarantee that reasonable profit expectations and basic needs will be satisfied. This will be the message of the new cultural narrative.

The prevailing assumption has been that technological innovation will solve all problems, notwithstanding the fact that the entire dilemma we now face is due to the inappropriate use of modern technologies. A sixth Kondratiev wave of innovation may well be sustainability-driven and delivered in part by the spontaneous efforts of inventors, entrepreneurs and investors, but there is a risk of further unintended environmental and social consequences. The high-tech, big industry perspective must thus be tempered by looking at what is already sustainable right now, or what was traditionally sustainable. We may rediscover that very often ‘small is beautiful,’ as Ernst Schumacher pointed out in the 1970s. A stunning contemporary example of this principle is the [fisheries](#) industry, which is heavily subsidised to destroy biodiversity, create enormous waste, consume large quantities of fuel and threaten the livelihoods of 12 million small fishermen, even though the latter are more efficient, have less impact on biodiversity, use less fuel and produce less waste. Similarly, local traditional agriculture tends to be more organic, diversified, sustainable, and socially responsible than the industrial variant. A fusion of sixth wave technology and small-scale diversified local solutions may be our best hope, based on a cultural critique of the modernist, science-based technological problem solving from a perspective of sustainability and social inclusion, along with a greater appreciation for local knowledge of sustainable living and on a cultural critique of the modernist, science-based technological approach that has been the source of all unsustainability.

“Unity must not be thought of as synonymous with sameness. Respect for the value of diversity and commitment to open information flows are the psychological and social foundation for reaching a shared and truly rational understanding of how we can build a socially and ecologically sustainable future together.”

4. Toward a Plan of Action: The Power of Diversity and Open Dialogue

Transformations to ecological sustainability require us first to change the way we deal with one other, our ‘social ecology.’ A political process is needed to generate the necessary shared commitment to sustainability. The key ‘social ecology’ principles of diversity and cooperative interdependence teach us how such a political consensus can be achieved: we need to enact values that reflect these principles.

Some of these foundational values include: Presence, Acceptance, Openness, Courage, Compassion, Imagination, and a Collective Sense of Responsibility. The value most evident from an anthropological perspective, however, is: Respect for Cultural Diversity. Unique personal and social histories and the associated diversity of personal and cultural knowledge are the greatest resources the world possesses. Ideally, if one person or culture was to discover an effective solution in a crisis, all would recognize and adopt it. In reality, we do not yet appreciate and respect diversity fully, despite much lipservice. What is needed is a dialogical

process that will free conversations about a shared future vision and action plan from the blinding effects of exclusion and domination.

Effective solutions often stem from the imaginations of people at the social margins who are not so invested in the prevailing order as to be blind to its failings. Unfortunately, they tend also to be the most ignored and excluded from important conversations and decision-making processes. Even in relatively open societies, marginal voices often are mistrusted and silenced. Knowledge and imagination are distorted or colonised by power. Quite apart from the injustice of it all, such colonisation of knowledge and imagination leads directly to an impoverishment of public discourse and practice.

On the other hand, humans also have shown a tremendous capacity to share knowledge and values and to engage in the collective imagination and joint action. We are endowed with a unique ability for language-based communication, which has enabled unprecedented social cooperation. Communication helps us unite, but unity must not be thought of as synonymous with sameness. Communication is only meaningful between those who are diverse and hence have different things to say. Respect for the value of diversity and commitment to open information flows are thus the psychological and social foundation for reaching a shared and truly rational (free knowledge exchange-based) understanding of how we can build a socially and ecologically sustainable future together.

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