

“The ability to govern without overt coercion depends largely on the ability of those in power to exploit systems of belief that the larger population shares.” — ANTONIO GRAMSCI

ALTRUISTIC ECONOMICS

The gift culture and end of the culture of extinction

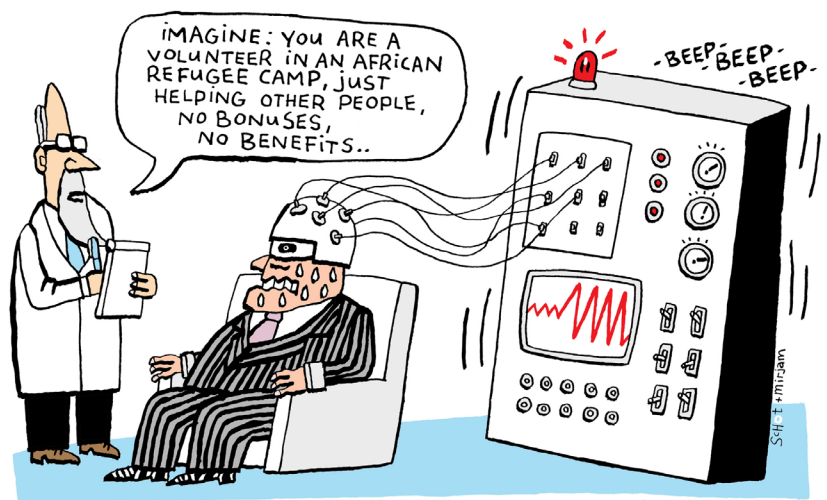
With serious global crises appearing on many fronts it's clear our current alienated, resource-wasteful economic activity and antiquated banking and money systems are inadequate, and the source of our problems, writes **JONATHAN M NEWTON**. To solve the life-threatening problems we face we must reconnect with nature and the life of all to create an inclusive economics for the wider good. Kindness and selflessness in human economic communication is an ancient part of our history without which we cannot survive.

At the 2007 Soil Association Conference in Cardiff, British writer, Jonathan Porritt said the 21st Century could become an “age of chronic famine.”¹ A year later in 2008 the United Nations reported a global food crisis with food riots now occurring regularly across the world. In 2009, the transition period of climate change and global resource depletion is clearly here and the industrialized world's current economic model and its myths face a rude wake-up call. The quaint economic assumptions of “the selfish pursuit of wealth”² on a planet with infinite resources for infinite growth, and infinite sink capacity for wastes, along with dominance of the market as arbiter of human affairs now face increasing criticism from within the ranks of the economic profession itself. Such criticism is timely and welcome, given international markets face yet another grave financial crisis and the world's precious ecological stability is visibly fraying. It is finally becoming clear on several fronts that our current resource-wasteful economic activity and its antiquated banking and money systems are inadequate.

American researcher Richard Heinberg estimates the total value of

American-based mortgage bonds is \$10.4 trillion with 30% or \$3.2 trillion of this expected to be eventually lost in property defaults and devaluation. Trillions more are likely to evaporate from related derivative markets, totalling \$540 trillion.³ To put these enormous figures into perspective, US GDP is \$15 trillion; and total world GDP is estimated at \$48 trillion. There is a possibility the world is teetering into another great Depression, resulting in bank and currency failures with enormous social repercussions. American Economist, Marcellus Andrews believes the market fundamentalist ideology of Friedman and Hayek will: “soon slip into oblivion because climate change will push all of us to understand that unlimited capitalism is, in the end, inextricably connected to the disposability of

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STRESSTEST BANKS

human beings”,⁴ and the ecology of the planet.

The dominant economic system is one of systemic, pervasive eco-toxicity and social divisiveness with an innate tendency towards creating monopolies and inequality. Consequently our most fundamental understandings and expectations of what an economy is actually for must be revisited. English Economist James Robertson believes as time goes on it will become “increasingly obvious in fits and starts to more and more people around the world that we are blundering headlong towards a ‘combined system collapse’ of climate change, over-population,, food supply, energy, etc which will continue to gather interactive momentum for some time longer.”⁵ Robertson believes a small, but growing number of people “see the need and possibility for a ‘combined system renewal,’ which will be a process of re-orientation of all the collapsing systems for a new direction.” This will encourage autonomy and better treatment of the ecological commons.⁵ But to achieve community renewal and restoration of the biosphere requires an honest assessment, evolutionary change and a revolutionary willingness to tackle root causes of our problems.

Social pathologies of modern life

These causes are systemic as analyst Steve Welzer notes: “our lifeways have become unmoored from the community/nature matrix,”⁶ framed within an ugly monetary and socio-economic paradigm embodying and developing a pernicious system of patriarchy, artificial scarcity, competition, domination, and anthropocentrism. This system came from historical developments seen as dating back to the rise of significant warfare which resulted from the climate changes and desertification which occurred around the 4th Millennium BC in the Middle East, Mediterranean and Northern Africa. This paradigm author David Korten has termed “Empire.”⁷ Continuation of these unpleasant aspects with repression of feminine, nurturing archetypal qualities into the present day have shaped and brought about a culturally immature society, lacking in empathy.⁸ This inherent inability to connect or empathise with others creates a social world without meaning, and the sense of an “empty self.”⁸ Stephen Belgin and Bernard Lietaer argue this has led to adoption of “super materialistic and environmentally unsustainable consumerist lifestyles.”⁹ Psychological issues as a consequence of this lack of empathy or disconnection can be understood as “sacred wounds,”¹⁰ bringing the socio-pathologies of modern life, including narcissism, consumerism, and fundamentalism, causing widespread depression, anomie, addiction, and other public health and social problems.

Our industrialised societies are thereby lost in a confused miasma where “want” has replaced actual need, where cosmic place and social purpose have been subsumed to mean one’s position in “the economy.” An empty dialogue of technocentric and anthropocentric commodification is constantly fostered by mainstream media/business/educational worlds, as well as by certain sections of the philosophical and scientific communities. Absent is a socially celebrated sense of the joy of life and a reflective consciousness on this planet, and recognized rites of passage, particularly in the secularized, emotionally stunted west. The actual meaning of “work” for many people is a degrading survival issue in the monetary economy, engaged in processes and tasks which have little real meaning or satisfaction.

Historically, when cultures “fail to provide appropriate tutoring, testing, and ceremony for human development, a slide into adult infantilism” occurs, wrote Frederick Bender, Professor of Philosophy at Colorado University in 2007.¹¹ He says our “culture of extinction” with its drastically shortened, earthbound sense of time; denial of death, and our rationales for refusing to live in harmony with nature, are all symptoms of our arrested development.”¹²

The alienation produced by this culture has engendered irresponsibility to the plight of “the other” and the wider biosphere. This is a pathology which large-scale government programmes are unlikely to come to terms with through the function of the state and its maintenance of an intellectually bankrupt orthodoxy. Russian thinker Pitirim A. Sorokin (1889–1968) believed until society had a leadership process melding an implicit understanding of science with the wisdom “of the sage,”¹³ deep problems would remain.

New economic models

Thankfully, 40 years after his death there are now internationally significant numbers of people and groups with different philosophies actively pursuing the spirit of Sorokin’s work, creating new economic models based on need, some with altruism at their core. The Global Ecovillage Network is a global confederation of people and communities¹⁴ dedicated to restoring the land, exchanging ideas and technologies and living “sustainable plus” lives. The breadth of this multi-hub network is enormous, spanning the world with thousands of communities involved. Such communities formed for resilience in the transition period to sustainability will become models for surrounding societies as the status quo increasingly fails to provide

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for basic needs.

Vandana Shiva speaks of how today's movements against "neo-liberal insanity, planetary reach and embrace, have just begun to tap their potential for transformation and liberation."¹⁵ She gives numerous examples of living economies across India where small self-organizing systems network to create very complex levels of organization. Shiva acknowledges the patriarchal nature of the dominant system and its illogic in commodifying the world as "raw material," with acts of domination, destruction and exploitation portrayed as acts of creation.¹⁶ She says these values have led to the destruction of households, local economies and entire ecosystems, with the destruction counted as growth and "dispensability interpreted as liberation." Appropriate agriculture across India and other countries is forming the basis of wiser economic thinking with the Slow Food movement leading the way, its core themes based on democratizing access to land and investment resources, and re-linking city and country with urban agriculture.

Another example is the Transition Towns network which originally started in Ireland around 2003. It is now an international grassroots movement working to achieve a sustainable way of life, acknowledging the reality of fossil fuel depletion, resource dissipation, and climate change.¹⁷ The network aims to be resilient in the transition period we are now in and to demonstrate how a low-energy world can function, with the intrinsic understanding we are part of nature's matrix but not masters of it. Main methods for achieving this are by setting up community-based groups with an ecological vision to design and use appropriate technology and other solutions to create resilient bio-

regions. The Transition network has used alternative currencies, for example the Totnes pound in the UK town in Devon to promote localization and other positive economic ideas. Similar alternative currencies are being set-up around the world. Transition Towns are inclusive and try to work with government as the state holds enormous resources though is ossified in its attitudes. Interestingly, they appear to be working with smaller, more progressive authorities, but the network continually faces the ubiquitous problem of most national and local governments being in deep denial about the reality of our multi-dimensional crises, and too heavily tied to vested interests and ancient political power structures to act more wisely.

The culture of politics today could benefit greatly by at least having an understanding of Cuba's response in the early 1990's when their supplies of fossil fuels collapsed; it could also learn from the honourable exceptions, the post-carbon cities with energy descent action plans, like Portland, and Oakland in the USA. Most national governments however continue to behave in "Empire" mode, vainly seeking to prop-up ailing banks and automotive industries with tax-based capital. In the UK the highly risky "quantitative easing," is also being considered.

Issues to be addressed

Given fossil fuel depletion, the speed of climate change, biodiversity destruction, great inequity and the inability of most political players to deal properly with our problems, these alternative models while encouraging leave key questions unanswered. What will be the role of the nation state, the economic and philosophical orthodoxy, which is not responding to the depth of our problems? Is life to be left to the hegemony of the market or is the role of capitalism itself with its profit motive and need to create scarcity actually totally redundant? Economist Richard Douthwaite says "our current (securitized) monetary system is coming to the end of its useful life. Its radical reform has become necessary as well as desirable."¹⁸ Will the role of central currency, fractional reserve banking, and the abstraction of money itself stay central to our lives? In the wake of the current monetary instability and enormous, unmandated, tax payer-funded bank bailouts by desperate governments, concerned communities themselves may need to critically review the efficacy and sense of the entire monetary system in the near future.

Economic thinking and its activities obviously must radically change. The very existence of a counter movement across the world demanding true sustainability instead of the vacuous notion of it is encouraging. New thinking and understanding about altruism

and its ancient links to human existence encourage a fundamental redirection of our economic system, its ideas and dynamics. The concepts of altruistic economics have emerged over the past 25 years. Italian theorist Ezio Manzini discusses different levels within industrial economies, which despite making profits, already have a 4th layer of the gift economy within them.¹⁹ Manzini's ideas revolve around happiness, affinity, and material needs satisfaction within "the sustainability of the everyday."²⁰

American linguistics theorist and gift economy advocate Genevieve Vaughan says it's important to examine gender relations and use of language in order to develop altruism at the centre of our daily activities. She believes our current way of socializing young male children is inappropriate, discouraging nurturing behaviour so they go on to embrace and perpetuate the patriarchal dominator paradigm.²¹

Vaughan suggests: "we eliminate the linguistic distinction of gender for all young children and socialize them all as gift-giving or nurturing humans like their mothers." This would mean the next generation of boys who grow up to be fathers would have nurturing as part of their identities.²² Changes in patriarchal institutions are an essential part of this process and men who have not rejected their nurturing human identity can express it in their relationships with children, providing role models, so changing the patriarchal paradigm and its tendency to normalise violence and domination. Vaughan believes the market economy supplants the gift-giving which is omnipresent in human interaction. We are, she says, "primarily *Homo donans* rather than *Homo sapiens*."²³ By examining positive human behaviour as the result of this practice, we can "identify not only the economic structure which we need to implement for a truly ecologically centred and compassionate society but also the ideological superstructure which will make it possible."²⁴

In 2001, Dr Robin Upton, mathematician and economic theoretician began altruists.org, a substantial resource on altruism. It disseminates his altruistic economics model and theory, specifically based on moving away from money. Unlike most progressive economic theorists, Upton does not believe our current economic ideas, particularly the money system are reformable. He feels traditional money has relative, not absolute value and it's inherently wrong to try to "embed the selfish metaphor and in allowing self-maximisers at the lowest levels to exist across the system."²⁵ Upton believes, like Vaughan, the modern money system is responsible for an "unnatural transactional mentality," as it establishes "zero-sum (competitive) relationships between people and organizations, so those who help others necessarily disadvantage

themselves."²⁶ It places a destructive over-emphasis on self. Upton's main project currently is in helping to develop a semantic code-based software as an alternative to centralised money. It uses the mathematical logic of multipliers for effort exerted with peer ratings as a result. He believes a decentralized peer-to-peer internet-wide gift economy could be fertile ground for the growth of altruistic norms.²⁷ The website will be launched in June 2009 at www.gifteconomy.org.

Upton feels the software will allow people to transcend language barriers: "Many people would love a chance to ignore money and concentrate instead on helping others. We just need a way of joining everybody up."²⁸ He feels animosity to the money system is building up "like a pressure cooker with no valve," referring to the recent near collapse of the banking system and the "ridiculous house prices in the UK." "Altruistic economics as an organising principle is much closer to how people like to operate, whereas the current system has made selfish people's actions coherent. Those among us who would like a more mature and dignified way of doing things have previously not had such an easy time."²⁹ Altruistic Economics is also much closer to "the actual spirit of democracy," and like other analysts he feels it's high time human beings as a species went about finding its "adulthood."

American theologian Matthew Fox calls this new vision a kind of metamorphosis "a change of heart/change of ways."³⁰ At the same time, the latest neuroscience is telling us with evidence in 2007 that human beings are neurally hardwired for altruistic and empathic interaction. American-based researcher Professor Marco Iacoboni believes these findings "will seep into public awareness and this explicit level of understanding our empathic nature will at some point dissolve the massive belief systems that dominate our societies and threaten to destroy us."³¹ Evolutionary biologist Elisabet Sahtouris points out, "predominantly competitive behaviour is a characteristic of a young species during its first forays into the world. Species that do not cooperate with the others they are codependent on invariably disappear."³²

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Economics for the greater good

As the different strands of altruistic economics and green principles merge and develop, the vision is of a world that runs on a far more natural form of communication, based on actual need instead of want, where cooperation is the norm. Richard Heinberg, in a 2008

address said we should “accept the current challenge, the next great energy transition, as an opportunity to re-imagine human culture from the ground up, using our intelligence and our passion for the welfare of coming generations and for the integrity of nature’s web as our primary guides.”³³ Useful economic work must be redefined with an ecocentric horizon into what serves the greater good and reject that which does not.³⁴

Matthew Fox asks for an active effort in “opening the human heart” and specifically for elders allowing themselves to be vulnerable with the young. All men must make great efforts to bring about a better future, he says.³⁵ Can we find the space and courage to expand our concern and responsibility for “the other” and our surrounding biosphere and reject consumerism and the commodification of life?

Kindness and selflessness in human economic communication is a very ancient part of ourselves as shown from 60,000 year old archaeological evidence,³⁶ however alien this is to the current dominant economic mode of thinking and to hard-hearted *Homo economicus*. With kindness we may find the space and courage to expand our concern and responsibility for “the other” and our surrounding biosphere. This could provide the conditions that will allow sensible and timely policies such as a “powerdown” strategy to be implemented,³⁷ away from fossil fuels and the ecocide of consumerism. The fossil fuel platform that sustains modernity will certainly collapse. Is this an opportunity for new thinking to blossom?

Whatever we decide to do, as NASA scientist Jim Hansen tells us, we now have perhaps less than five years to take radical action to mitigate dangerous

climate change.³⁸ It is surely time for the new thinking provided by altruistic economics to be applied internationally by all concerned citizens and networks in a conscious deindustrialization process. But as 14th Century Sufi mystic Hafiz once said: “it is a naïve person who thinks we are not engaged in a fierce battle.”³⁹ Our struggle is against ingrained cultural prejudices, an insidious imbalance in gender relationships and an evil philosophy of reward from domination. This battle within ourselves must be won by changing course for good to restore the very biosphere that nurtures us and to realize once again an economics of well-being and a world of the gift in abundance. ■PE

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Many monkeys teeter on brink of extinction