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Seeking Green Societies: From Expansionism to Holistic Ecology

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This essay opens the window to some of the economic, social and 'natural' components of the dominant ideology. It discusses these components as barriers that inhibit the creation of green societies, and proposes some solutions towards achieving a more preferable future. Specifically, it maintains that there is a need for expansionist (ever-expanding) societies to undergo a paradigm shift from the current industrial conception of nature to a more holistic and ecologically based interpretation of nature. It also argues that expansionist societies should renounce neoclassical economics in favour of ecological economics, as well as reject homogeneity and universalism in order to sustain cultural, biological and epistemological diversity.

II

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, expansionist societies began to perceive the world as a machine-like entity composed of physical properties and inanimate, dead matter. Life, consciousness, and humanity were to be explained, constructed, and examined as physical interchangeable parts. Organic ideologies which perceived the cosmos, nature, and humanity as a nurturing living whole embodying a soul, spirit, and emotions were to be suppressed by a dominant ideology that was overly linear in orientation. Economic life was to become mechanical in nature and disconnected from earthly processes. Nature and humanity (primarily along lines of race, class, and gender) were to be shaped by a mechanistic, 'scientific,' and 'rational' ideology. The dominant ideology with its associated values of power and control sanctioned the management of both nature and humanity (Merchant, 1990). Nature, women, people of colour, and wage labourers, to name a few, were set on a path towards a new status as natural and as human 'resources' for the expansionist system (Merchant, 1992). Moreover, consciousness itself had become just another 'resource' to be exploited (Tokar, 1987).

This history of control, manipulation and management plagues contemporary praxis (theory and practice). The dominant ideology is not only more evident, but it is more destructive than ever before. This active and tangible ideology supported and reinforced by key actors, institutions, and processes has, for example, dramatically reduced biological and cultural diversity; legitimized mass tropical, temperate and boreal deforestation; created and accelerated stratospheric ozone layer depletion; and polluted the earth's air, land and water. In order to achieve sustainability, the dominant ideology will

need to be challenged. It will need to be overcome by the strength of a more earthly praxis.

The contemporary dominant ideology's construction of nature threatens any movement towards sustainability. For one, it positions humanity outside of nature. It attempts to separate human beings from the natural world, and suggests that human beings are fundamentally different from all other creatures on earth, over which they have authority. Moreover, the dominant ideology gives the impression that relationships are largely human-centred and disconnected from the natural world. It suggests that human affairs are not reliant on the lives of plants, animals, and the soil (Zimmerman, 1997). The dominant ideology also reinforces the perception that nature can be managed (particularly by powerful actors) (Drengson, 1983).

Nature cannot be managed. Those who are in the position of power to manage are only managing their interactions with nature. Nature is not some static entity trapped under controlled conditions, but rather contains ever-changing self-organizing processes. Management goals that involve maintaining some fixed state in an ecosystem or maximizing some function (biomass, productivity, number of species) or minimizing some other function (pest outbreak) will always lead to disaster at some point, no matter how well meaning they are (Kay & Schneider, 1994, p. 37). Nature contains balances, optimum points of operation, and these balances are constantly adjusting to suit changing environments. Essentially, the contemporary dominant ideology creates a false impression that simple rules can be applied to inherently complex ecological systems. Nature should not be seen as a simple and predictable object, but instead recognised as a kaleidoscope of patterns and processes that shift over time and space. As James Kay and Eric Schneider point out:

We must recognise that ecosystems are dynamic, not deterministic, that they will exhibit phases of rapid change. This is not to say that ecosystem behaviour is chaotic or random and haphazard. Ecosystem behaviour and development is like a large musical piece such as a symphony, which is also dynamic and not predictable and yet includes a sense of flow, of connection between what has been played and what is still to come, the repetition of recognisable themes and a general sense of orderly progression. ... Our challenge is to understand the rules of composition and the limitations and directions they place on the organisation process, as well as what makes for the ecological equivalent of a musical masterpiece that stands up to the test of time (1994, p. 37).

Assumptions of open system dynamics, the principle of uncertainty, and a recognition of catastrophic, unpredictable outcomes radically depart from the overly mechanical frameworks of neoclassical economics (Faber, Manstetten, & Proops, 1998). The central principles of neoclassical economic theory are uninformed by holistic interpretations of natural systems and this in turn threatens sustainability efforts. Neoclassical economists function as if economies are somehow dominant over and essentially independent from nature. They have also adopted the circular flow of exchange value as the starting point for analysis rather than the one-way entropic throughput of energy and matter. They perceive the economic process as entailing a circular flow between the production and consumption of material goods.

By this perception, everything turns out to be just a pendulum movement. If events alter the supply and demand propensities, the economic world returns to its previous position as soon as these events fade out. Most important, complete reversibility is the general rule, just as in mechanics. Indeed, by inventing a perpetual motion machine economics seems to have done mechanics one better (Rees, 1991, p. 7).

Neoclassical economists also have an inordinate faith in human and particularly technological ingenuity. They believe that resources are a product of this ingenuity rather than an earthly creation. Professor William Rees of the University of British Columbia is a strong critic of the human ingenuity argument. According to neoclassical theory, rising market prices for scarce materials encourage conservation on the one hand and stimulate technological substitution on the other. It is part of the conventional wisdom of many economic planners that these factors have indeed been more than sufficient to overcome emerging resource scarcities. While standard neoclassical texts conclude, almost conservatively, that exhaustible resources do not pose a fundamental problem, the most ardent and influential disciplines of the substitutability principle are moved to idealistic, almost surreal, extremes (Rees, 1991).

Essentially, contemporary neoclassical economic theory is independent of natural processes, and embraces an economic construction of reality that justifies unlimited expansionism. Ecological economists on the other hand, effectively analyse the problems posed by neoclassical economic theory. They recognise the limitations of marginal analysis, the ethical dimensions of economic theory, and the folly of making irreversible decisions about the environment in the face of overwhelming uncertainty (Gowdy & Olsen, 1994, p. 170). They also question the dominant view that environmental conditions are predictable and resources manageable in terms of closed systems (Braidotti, Charkiewicz, Hauser, Wieringa, 1994). Moreover, they are fundamentally concerned with whether total remaining stocks of natural

capital are capable of sustaining the anticipated demands of the global economy (Rees, 1995). In response to this situation, they have done extensive work in correcting standard measures of economic activity (national income and product amounts) to take into account the draw down of green assets (Gowdy & Olsen, 1994). Overall, ecological economists unite ecology and economics to create green acts of production and distribution that respect complex natural systems.

IV

Like many forms of alternative knowledge, ecological economics has been suppressed by the dominant ideology. It has been suppressed through the politics of exclusion—the dominant ideology attempts to disregard or deny the existence of alternatives. It also attempts to eliminate alternatives by eradicating and dismantling the epistemologies that they embody. Alternatives are devalued and said to contain irrational, illogical, and unscientific forms of knowledge. Conversely, the dominant ideology is considered to embody 'scientific,' universal and therefore 'legitimate' forms of information. The prefix 'scientific' for the dominant ideology, and 'unscientific' for alternative knowledge has, however, less to do with knowledge and more to do with power. Those models of modern 'science' that have encouraged these perceptions were derived less from familiarity with *actual* scientific practice, and more from familiarity with *idealized* versions which gave 'science' a special epistemological status (Shiva, 1993, p. 132). Essentially, by positioning itself above alternative knowledge and by concurrently excluding this knowledge from the domain of reliable knowledge, the dominant ideology creates its exclusive monopoly. Paradoxically, it is the knowledge systems that are considered most open, that are, in reality, closed to scrutiny and evaluation (Shiva, 1993, p. 132). The uniformity and homogeneity of the dominant ideology is not to be questioned, but rather understood as 'truth,' 'science' and the only 'authentic' construction of reality. This reinforces intellectual colonisation and the elimination of non-modern cultures and their respective languages, mores, and science. Entire conceptions of what it means to be human evaporate. Moreover, the dominant ideology not only erases cultural diversity, it seeks to erase biological diversity. Nature is to fit within the limited framework of the expansionist lifestyle. If nature does not fit within this limited reality, then it too will be eliminated (often *it* is 'unessential weeds' or so-called pests such as insects).

In order to foster greener societies, there needs to be a greater appreciation of the diversity in nature, humanity, knowledge, and culture (Sachs, 1999). Indigenous peoples have much to contribute in this regard. They have a proven history of ecological knowledge, experience and wisdom, which by its

very essence, respects diversity and complexity. In contrast to dominant praxis, generally speaking, indigenous praxis does not draw a distinction between objects and subjects, natural and supernatural, body, mind and soul. Nature is vibrant, spirited and multifaceted. Indigenous praxis subscribes to a code of ethics that respects the web of life. There is an understanding of the tremendous significance of taking another being's life to feed one's people. Indigenous societies have a deep understanding of the world around them and of their relationship to the greater whole. They live with nature without destroying its bonds. By way of example, the Khasi of the Himalayan Mountains perceive nature as a temple. They worship trees, groves, forests, and rivers as deities, or as places in which God resides. Because of their strong beliefs in the sanctity of nature, the highest peaks of the Khasi land have been saved from the axe (the forests have been protected for generations). The Khasi people see their forests as sacrosanct. Because they have been sanctified, anybody who cuts a tree from these forests is severely punished (Skolimowski, 1993, p. 136). The Hopi people who live amongst the hills and mesas of North America's desert Southwest also embody ecological knowledge, experience and wisdom—leading them to a deep understanding of sustainability. They live a highly spiritual life, with ancient rituals and ceremonies to help them nurture the delicate natural balances that make human life possible in an arid land. Their villages, built into the sides of imposing cliffs, are each independent entities, thriving under the guidance of their traditional spiritual leaders. These villages are built in concert with the natural life that surrounds them. The Hopi are also wary of the imbalances that can occur in social life. The very idea of political power is, to the traditional Hopi, a violation of the patterns of nature (Tokar, 1987, p. 131). Essentially, each unique culture has its own ways of exemplifying their special relationship with nature and with each other. The following two indigenous voices are especially inspirational:

In the beginning, we were told that the human beings who walk about on the earth have been provided with all the things necessary of life. We were instructed to carry a love for one another, and to show a great respect for all the beings of this earth. We are shown that our life exists with the tree life, that our well-being depends on the well-being of the vegetable life, that we are close relatives of the four legged-beings... The original instructions direct that we who walk about on the earth are to express a great respect, an affection, and a gratitude toward all the spirits that create and support life. We give a greeting and thanksgiving to the many supporters of our own lives—the corn, beans, squash, the winds, the sun. When people cease to respect and express gratitude for these many things, then all life will be destroyed, and human life on this planet will come to an end ... [The Haudenosaunee Message to the World] (Andruss, Plant, Wright, & Mills,

1990, p. 147).

Dhyani Ywahoo, a Tsalagi spiritual teacher states:

My grandma ... talked to the rocks, the birds, the trees. All creatures, turtles, birds, deer would come to her when she sent out the message for them to come. She did it to show me that you are one, you are relative to everything that flies, crawls, walks, swims, creeps. In that she gave me a sense of comfort in the world, that I needn't fear. All of these things are your relatives and when you are in good relationship then even the animals of the forest will be friends to you and even the things that crawl will show you something wonderful (Tokar, 1987, p. 12).

V

This essay has identified the components of the dominant ideology as barriers that inhibit the creation of green societies, and has proposed some solutions towards achieving a greener future. Specifically, it has suggested that expansionist societies undergo a paradigm shift from an industrial interpretation of nature to a more ecologically based conception of the natural world. It is unjustifiable to treat nature as a manipulable material item stuck in time and space. Recent work in systems theory questions the essence of such thinking. This article has also challenged the dominant position that societies can have unlimited growth, use an infinite amount of resources, embrace linear definitions of economic values and maximization of profits, and can continue with an economic model which reinforces socioenvironmental degradation. Ecological economists indicate that in order to achieve economic sustainability (which is intertwined with socio-political, cultural and ecological sustainability) economic systems will need to be placed within the context of economies of nature. This is not an option but a basic requirement for the betterment of humanity and the natural world. Finally, the argument has been made that in order to move towards greener societies, homogeneity and universalism will have to be replaced by a recognition of the importance of cultural, biological, and epistemological diversity. Without such diversity, the options for life itself are removed. Indigenous peoples appreciate this diversity. Collectively, they embody cultural and epistemological diversity, and by their very character respect the importance of the diversity that exists within the natural world. Thus, there is a need to ensure the survival of indigenous praxis. Sustaining indigenous differentiation is essential for the survival of humankind and life itself.

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