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### Ideology and Politics: Essential Factors in the Path toward Sustainability

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With the Kyoto protocol coming into force we can expect media attention to focus on governments' efforts to reduce global warming. While some have questioned how effective such efforts will be due to the number of countries who have not signed on (notably the USA), the potential effectiveness of efforts to combat climate change, and more generally to achieve a sustainable society, can better be understood in the light of ideological and socio-political contexts. This paper argues that ideology and socio-political structure are essential considerations in the path toward a sustainable society. Four models are discussed in terms of their potential to achieve sustainability.

The review of ecological devastation, much of it occurring in the past 100 years, exposes our economy to be an "extractive economy" (Berry, 1997). An extractive economy depletes non-renewable resources, exploits renewable resources beyond their capacity to survive, and causes irreparable damage to land, sea and air (see Coates, 2003a; Foster, 1999; McLaughlin, 1993; Trainer, 1985). Further, the production of toxins along with industrial and domestic effluent greatly exceeds the healing and regenerating capacities of the Earth (see Colborn, Dumanoski & Myers, 1997). The Earth cannot cope with such excesses as human activity has changed the chemistry of the planet and altered the eco-systems upon which modern civilization depends. In fact, no eco-system on Earth is free from the pervasive influence of chemical discharges (Vitousek, Mooney, Lubchenko, & Melillo, 1997). Accompanying this environmental impoverishment has been human exploitation and impoverishment (see Chossudovsky, 1998; Kassiola, 1990; Korten, 1995; Latouche, 1993). Despite considerable information and public attention to environmental concerns, people at large and many businesses and governments have not been motivated to take these issues seriously and have not engaged in effective action toward sustainable practices.

It is our contention that the major reasons for this lack of concern and action stem from Western society's embeddedness in a particular set of values, beliefs and assumptions, and a socio-political structure, which are at the foundation of public and individual action. It is this embeddedness in the assumptions and beliefs of modernity, which Spretnak refers to as the 'denial of the real' (1997), within the context of liberal capitalism that stands in the way of people and governments developing effective responses to, and also becoming involved in, the promotion of environmental and social justice. This system of beliefs, referred to as modernity, places absolute confidence in technology and science, and has unquestioned confidence in consumer-oriented and market-driven growth and development. Paul Hawken captures this when he states that modernity has "quite naturally produced a dominant commercial culture that believes all resources and social inequities can be resolved through development, invention, high finance and growth - always growth" (1993, p. 5).

Exploitation and destruction, along with development, are the outcomes of modern society and in particular, its values and beliefs, and political structure. While this belief system has had many achievements it has also had its "dark side" (Capra, 1982) - environmental and social injustice. However, many people are so embedded in modernity that they are incapable of recognizing that it is "the structures and processes of everyday life that cause environmental destruction and social injustice" (Coates 2003a, p. 27). Sadly, most people have not explored the assumptions and beliefs which inform their own, and their society's actions. Successful environmental and social justice initiatives will not be forthcoming in the absence of a critical examination of foundational beliefs and socio-political contexts. It is essential to recognize that "Environmental issues are ... social and cultural issues" (Rogers, 1994, p. 1). Only when the foundational ideologies and structures are critically examined will society be in a position to adopt an alternative worldview and socio-political structure that are capable of supporting the emergence of a sustainable society.

#### The Dominant Worldview - Modernity

An exploration of the root causes of the environmental crisis calls into question the values, beliefs and assumptions that inform modern society. Baudrillard (1987, pp. 63-64) views modernity as an ideology which, over recent centuries, has become a "characteristic of civilization" acting as a "regulatory control function." In the absence of an alternative vision the belief in human privilege, progress, and technological innovation contributes to a society complacent about ecological and social exploitation. Catton and Dunlap's (1980,

pp.17-18) analysis of this “Dominant Western Worldview” can be summarized as:

1. People are fundamentally different from, and superior to, all other creatures.
2. People are masters of their destiny, and can use the rest of nature in any way they choose.
3. The world is an endless resource, and thus provides unlimited opportunities.
4. Human ingenuity will solve all problems, and progress need never cease.

This innate bias reflects the beliefs that have informed colonization, industrial and economic development, as well as the response to social problems. Humans (and in some historical contexts Caucasians) thought themselves to be the end and purpose of creation. As a result, the predominant criterion to evaluate not only industrial and agricultural practices, but also the value of plants and animals, was their perceived “use value” for human endeavours. Such anthropocentrism has contributed to a shortsighted, exploitive and unsustainable criterion for progress. Within such an anthropocentric foundation the Earth was seen to be an abundant and unending source of commodities; and progress focussed blindly on converting natural materials (through technology) into consumer goods and very quickly into waste. In fact a healthy economy is seen as “an expanding economy, in which more and more material goods are produced, consumed and discarded” (Clark, 1989, p. 30). Human ingenuity through technology was considered capable of solving all problems that would enable progress to continue unabated.

Emerging within this attitude of superiority and exploitation are very powerful beliefs that govern public, industrial and frequently personal decisions. Economism, progressivism, industrialism, consumerism and individualism serve to set the direction of human actions. Charlene Spretnak’s description of modernity includes the following characteristics:

- Homo Economicus - Economic well-being is primary and leads to well-being in other parts of life
- Progressivism - Technology will solve all problems and the human condition will gradually improve through abundance
- Industrialism - Mass production => abundance => consumerism => happiness
- Consumerism - Material goods are the source of happiness
- Individualism - Competition for individual benefit; individual interests take priority over communal interests (1997, pp. 40-41).

The predominance and centrality placed on the role of economics and of economic growth (see Hamilton, 2003) dominates economic and political decision-making. “Economics has become the source of meaning and relation in modern society.” (Rogers, 1994, p. 86) Economism is so strong that even some sustainability advocates see the economy as a fixed reality rather than a means to a greater good (for example, see Hart, 2002). Within such a belief system money and its possessors becomes the supreme good (see Marx, 1978), and affluent living standards spurred by incessant and pervasive consumerism overshadow all other concerns. All of these beliefs enable the market place to be the major determinant of what happens in a society (Trainer, 2003) and reinforce the belief that abundance (through mass production and mass consumption) will solve all problems.

TV, the dominant medium of Western culture, has become the primary vehicle for socialization (Swimme, 1997). Children in North America watch, on average, more than 3.5 hours of TV each and every day and in the process consume thousands of advertisements. By the time a North American child graduates from high school, she/he has spent more hours absorbing advertisements than listening to their teachers in the classroom. Is it any wonder then that society is focussed on consumerism! For many of today’s youth the path to the “good life” can be summarized as obtaining a good education, to secure a good job, so you can earn good money, so you can buy things (Swimme, 1997). Status is conferred upon those in possession of wealth, and money has become a primary determinant of self-worth (Durning, 1991). The illusion created by the dedication to progress and development, and the myth of human betterment through possession of increasing amounts of material creations - more and more stuff prevails.

“We now consume more in one year than we did for the whole period from the birth of Christ to the dawn of the industrial revolution.” (Peter Russell 1998, p. 43)

At the very core of this worldview, and supporting these beliefs, are the foundational assumptions of modernity - dualism, domination and determinism (see Coates, 2003a). Within this worldview humans are separate and distinct from each other, from nature, and from ‘God’, and domination (people over nature; rational over emotional, and people over people) over a mechanistic universe is seen as natural. While media attention has exposed the exploitation of nature, the bias toward dualism, unending progress, economic primacy, and consumerism have evaded mainstream criticism.

- Dualism- Nature remains in background; a resource for human need  
People and their lives are divided into distinct parts  
People are separate and distinct (from nature and each other)
- Domination- Values remain primarily human-centered  
Socialized passivity; powerlessness in relation to BIG business
- Determinism- Universe (Earth) as biological machine; as a collection of objects  
Universe is fixed, never changing  
Outcome / performance oriented approaches to intervention  
Earth, society and people are aggregates (collection of objects)  
Scientism, objectivism, managerialism, efficiency

Modern professions developed within society to serve the needs of progress and industrial development and, as

a result, share the same foundational beliefs. The growth-oriented, acquisitive, human-centered, dualistic bias of modernism remains unquestioned. Most professions have not been conceptualized independent of modernity and tend to ‘psychologize’ problems rather than question foundational assumptions. Many people have been “seduced into docility and willing compliance” (Trainer, 2003) by “culturally conditioned perceptions” (Livingston, 1994), the absence of a viable alternative or focussed resistance.

Many educational institutions, spurred on by the globalization of trade, are preoccupied with preparing workers and consumers, rather than a deep exploration of critical social issues (Trainer, 2003). Schools emphasize order, competition, hard work, individualism, and the belief that a school grade or diploma entitles one to social privilege. An ecologically just and socially just society is not possible when social life is dominated by market forces, profit, economic growth, and increasing standards of luxury; unrestrained consumerism leads to unrestrained exploitation. A satisfactory society, one that concerns itself with well-being, must have a concern for the public good, for the well-being of all. A sustainable society can be seen to enable imaginative and progressive change (Hill, 2004), and to enhance the well-being of individuals, society, and the Earth. Public standards and public institutions can maintain a sense of social solidarity in which we are willing to contribute to the well-being of all.

### **An Alternative Worldview**

To secure an effective solution to environmental and social injustices an alternative foundation of beliefs and values is essential. Such a perspective has been developed by Berry (1988) and is reflected in the work of others including Coates (2003a), Devall and Sessions (1985), Plumwood (1993), Roszak (1992), and Suzuki and Knudtson (1993). Such a view considers every person and all of nature to be important participants in the life of the planet; humanity emerged within nature and human development, perhaps even our survival, is dependent upon a thriving Earth community. Replacing the dualism, domination and determinism of modernity are an alternative set of assumptions which form the foundation of an alternative worldview, that of an emerging or unfolding universe. Core assumptions include:

Interdependence	Whole system consciousness
Care	Connected and overlapping subsystems Earth exists to be shared by all things Diversity and complexity exist within and among systems Limits exist so other species may thrive
Emergence	The Universe, Earth, and humanity are unfolding Every being plays a role in their own evolution and that of the whole.

Within such a perspective, Earth is considered as sacred, as a nurturer of higher existence, as the context within which life has emerged; it is not simply a resource. People are embedded within nature, and connected to the interdependent life of the planet. Earth is a geological and biological system. Within this overarching whole there are many overlapping and interlocking subsystems (ecologies, catchments, villages, economies, etc.). While all objects and living beings may be conceived as independent in particular contexts, they are also tied into many systems. Given the power of human technology, our survival and that of other species requires that we pay careful attention to these interactions (including the known, unknown and unimagined). Changes made to any element can have cascading and potentially disastrous effects.

This moves to the ethic of care both out of enlightened self-interest and the right of other species to continue to exist (we do wonder though, about such things as smallpox and AIDS/HIV). While good science can provide a critical analysis of the connections that may or may not exist, our chances of survival as a species depend on humans developing our capacities to care for, and feel empathy for, other people and other living beings. Together we share many of the systems that make up life on Earth, and our care and attention to their needs can help us to pay attention in ways that will end up helping us to survive. Further, it is becoming increasingly clear that caring for other people and other beings can be a great source of pleasure and fulfillment. Caring for ‘others’ can be an expression of our spirituality as it helps us to transcend an exclusive self-interest. A basic expression of love for other beings is to share the planet and its resources, recognizing that other species have a right to live – it is a co-evolutionary path (Roszak, 1992; Plumwood, 1993).

What emerges from interactions with other systems and from the operation of the system itself are always developments that cannot be deducted from an examination of the elements of a system. These emerging properties are ongoing; the Universe, Earth and humanity are unfolding. Every being plays a role in their own emergence and that of the whole.

These assumptions demand a conscious participation in the personal and communal struggle to live in the knowledge of our essential connectedness to the Earth. We have a moral responsibility to live harmoniously within the biosphere (Berger & Kelly, 1993). Such a communal worldview sees individuality in the context of the whole, and can serve as motivation to bring about a shift in personal lifestyle and social organization that is both sustainable and socially just. This represents a significant shift in consciousness, a refreshing counter to modernity’s human-centred exploitation. However, motivation is not enough (see Revington, n.d.), we must explore the nature of socio-political structures in which such alternative values and beliefs can be put into practice. A review of socio-political structures can help to determine in which one, or ones, sustainability and social justice can be realized.

### **Four Models and Sustainability**

Broadly speaking, four models of social-political structures have been proposed, whether by environmentalists or by branches of the left. Each of these can be regarded as an ideal type so proposals may be developed that draw on one or more models.

#### *Model One: Regulating the Capitalist Economy*

In this model, environmental sustainability is achieved by regulating the mechanisms of the capitalist market place. One method is interdiction - rules, laws, administrative principles that ban certain kinds of conduct (such as release of pollutants). Another is adjustment to incentives - systems of taxation, subsidies and tariffs. Amory Lovins is widely known for this position (Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 2000); many others propose some version (Andersen, 1994; Beck, 1995a; 1995b; Goldsmith, 1988; Pearce, Markandya, & Barbier, 1989; Sachs, Loske & Linz, 1998). Current efforts to meet the expectations of the Kyoto Protocol are most likely to fit this model.

The structure of capitalism as an economy based on competitive private ownership is a problem for this model (McLaughlin, 1993). Managers of any business are required to maximize profitability. They can do this by various means including expanding markets, cutting costs, bringing in new technology, and saving on labor costs. In a competitive environment, any failure to maximize profitability can cause business collapse. Accordingly, every manager tries to *externalize* environmental costs, doing their utmost to avoid environmental regulation. Adding to this, shareholders and managers of private firms are the wealthiest people, and the ones who control media and who can most readily afford political campaigns to pressure governments for non-binding and minimal regulations in efforts to retain profits.

Second, capitalism also creates galloping and inevitable growth – firms compete to reduce labor costs by bringing in more productive technology and increasing markets. The result is constant expansion and the threat of growing unemployment if growth slows.

A third problem is the interests of consumers. When Marxists say that labor is “alienated” they mean that people do not take creative pleasure in their paid work; those who own the company or control their government department dictate what they do at work. In capitalism, to have access to goods and services, people must sell their labor power (Marx, 1978); hence the cultural dominance of consumerism. Material consumption is an arena of choice and power that is valued precisely because of the absence of choice, creativity and power in the world of paid work. In turn the capitalist economy has come to depend on the expansion of the market that comes from pressure for wages (Cardan, 1974).

Any serious regulation of the capitalist economy would result in increasing restriction of leisure and consumer choice with lower real wages and fewer consumer goods. This would be experienced as an unwelcome strangling of freedom of expression. In the regulated capitalist economy, people would still have little control of their work and consumers would have lots of reasons to resist environmental policies. As today, this experience would provide a powerful motive for the accumulation of private consumer goods - a compensation for paid work.

Summarizing these objections to the first model; regulated capitalism leaves intact the key structures of ownership and paid work that are at the heart of capitalism. Yet it is these very structures that are the wellsprings of the resistance to environmental regulation and explain the political force of this resistance. Any serious attempt to implement this model could either founder on this resistance - with a return to business as usual – or be forced to move on to deeper attacks on the structures of capitalism, thereby changing into one of the other models we will consider.

#### *Model Two: The Mixed Economy Model*

The mixed economy model implies radical change from current socio-political arrangements. In this model a democratic government supervises three arenas. It regulates the private sector, which produces consumer goods and provides inputs to public works. Second, government handles environmental repair and public infrastructure. Third, government funds (through Guaranteed Adequate Income – GAI <sup>1</sup>), but does not control, a voluntary or “autonomous” sector, which engages in such things as community projects and childcare.

This attractive model has been very popular both with environmentalists (see Goodin, 1992; Leahy, 2001; Porritt, 1990; Tokar, 1987; Trainer, 1995) and before that with the new left (Gorz, 1982). The government sector would expand, as many firms would not survive strong environmental regulation. Unemployment however, would not be a problem as the government finds people a job, or funds them on a guaranteed adequate income or shortens the working week.

Some early criticisms of this model still seem apt. Frankel (1983, 1987) maintains that capitalist companies cannot easily cope with the higher taxes and greater controls that this model proposes. For example, even in today's capitalist world companies encounter problems of international competition and overproduction. The most likely result would be bankruptcy for many companies, with capital flight likely. While the government could employ displaced workers, it is probable that taxation of a struggling private sector could not provide sufficient funds for this.

Sustainability requires zero or negative growth. Given increasing productivity, the only way to achieve zero growth would be to continually reduce employment in the private economy. However, this private economy would be the source of consumer goods and inputs to the other sectors of the economy. So the number of people fully employed in the private economy falls at the same time as the distribution of its products, to people who are not part of its paid workforce, must continually increase. This situation would be very difficult to handle politically.

Another problem with the mixed economy model is the role of the voluntary sector. While people receiving the guaranteed adequate income could be expected to volunteer for socially useful work, they are not supervised or made to work. The problem can be viewed as a dilemma.

A. The guaranteed adequate income enables a comfortable lifestyle and people are provided with tools and resources to help them make a useful contribution.

- The GAI draws people out of the consumerist lifestyle and soaks up unemployment.
- Yet many leave paid employment to escape hierarchical supervision.
- The experience of democratic control in GAI community groups undermines discipline in the paid work force.

OR

B. The guaranteed income is less than the lowest wage and does not allow a comfortable lifestyle.

- Those forced onto the GAI through contractions of the private economy remain disaffected.
- The GAI is experienced as low status.
- There is insufficient funding for the voluntary sector to make a meaningful contribution.

While strong commitment may lead to progress at resolving these concerns, a central problem remains -- at least two thirds of people's experience of work in this model is still an experience of taking orders, whether within private firms or government bureaucracies. Because consumer spending is always the legitimate reward for alienated work, pressure to expand spending and growth would continually plague the model in practice.

#### *Model Three: The Nationalization Plus Democracy Model*

In the nationalization plus democracy model, democratic control guides a soviet style economy (Commoner, 1990; Martell, 1994; Pepper, 1993; Resistance, 1999; Weston, 1986). Government owns most businesses, but does not control them completely as workers also participate through democratic control of the workplace. Whereas representative democracy was quite nominal in the Soviet Union, current proponents of this model envisage representative democracy as substantial and central to this model. The community at large democratically directs major production decisions and environmental planning.

In this model there would be no problem with businesses going broke and laying off employees. While some industries would be abandoned, others would be taken over by government ownership. New government enterprises would create environmentalist infrastructure. Taxes would not come from private businesses – as in the mixed economy model; instead the government would fund central planning decisions. The problems of the guaranteed adequate income would vanish, as there would be employment for community tasks, not voluntary work on a guaranteed income.

Most people today believe a nationalized economy would curtail political freedom. Every productive organization that could disseminate ideas would be owned by the state.

A more central problem is whether it is politically viable to mix local democratic control of production with national control of the economy. As Cardan (1974), Castoriadis (1987), and Hardt & Negri (2000) have pointed out, capitalism faces a problem like this continuously. Modern production requires workers to make decisions and participate responsibly. Yet these elements of workers' control have to be continually squashed lest they undermine management. The nationalization plus democracy model replicates this problem, presenting its own dilemma.

- Local democracy really means something. Workers use their discretion to subvert and sabotage government directives – getting extra income through corruption or making their own decisions about what is useful production.

OR

- Government control is sufficiently far reaching to prevent any sabotage or subversion. It also prevents any significant workers' control. There is the same disaffection that plagued the Soviet economy.

Another issue is that the economic problems of the Soviet Union would likely be replicated. Feher, Heller and Marcus discuss the problems of Eastern Europe in the Soviet era (1983). At the local level, each management unit tries to increase their share of national resources, in de facto competition with other units to make sure they can carry out the tasks government has set them. They inflate the importance of their projects and understate the costs in an effort to get the government committed so it will make sense to put more into the project at a later date. The bureaucrats respond by discounting all claims. But by how much? The end result is massive inefficiency. Systematic hoarding is the norm - government may not be able to supply resources when needed. Top planning authorities would favor projects that were guaranteed to work out as predicted, frequently at the expense of local democracy. Producer goods and public infrastructure would receive most funding. Further, the quality and durability of all goods and services would suffer without marketplace competition. None of this would help to reduce waste.

In this model, control over labor through the wage would be the key to implementation of planning decisions. People would be working for a wage to get access to goods and services produced by other units. Wages, private income, or income from corruption would still be the main compensation for the submission that goes with paid labor. Each worker would aim to consume more while the government would want to cut back to attain environmental goals. More responsible managers would be rewarded with higher wages, a message that

the consumer lifestyle is a mark of social status, power and community trust.

#### *Model Four: The Gift Economy Model*

In a gift economy people do not work to get money to buy things. What people get is what they make themselves or what is given to them. People would volunteer their work because they realized a job needed to be done or would be interesting. Social status would reward those who provide products and services. In the gift economy production is not owned by private shareholders or government but by a patchwork of clubs, societies and federated hobby groups. The gift economy model is one kind of anarchist stateless utopia (Guerin, 1970), the term pioneered by the Situationists (Debord, 1977; Plant, 1992; Vaneigem, 1983; more recently Bey, 1991, 1994; P.M., 1985; and Wilson, 1998). Environmentalist anarchists close to this are Bookchin (1971) and Purchase (1994). Other anarchist environmentalists favor self-sufficient communes (Bahro, 1986; Allaby & Bunyard, 1980) or a return to a hunting and gathering existence (Zerzan, 1994). These latter perspectives are usually addressed in critiques of anarchism (Dobson, 1990; Pepper, 1993; Plumwood, 2002).

The gift economy model would occur if the mixed economy or the nationalized economy was unable to contain its contradictions, and moved to new ground rather than back to capitalism. A gift economy is seen to be more compatible with ecological imperatives than capitalism or nationalization for several reasons.

- The producers themselves - to save effort, would reduce useless production. It would make no sense to work hard making useless items that no one else needed and that you did not enjoy making.
- With complete control at the point of production, workers in a gift economy would be able to take steps to avoid environmental harm to themselves and their communities.
- Producers in a gift economy would produce environmentally sensible items and services to maximize the social value of their gifts; there would be no acclaim if they damaged the environments of their own and other communities.

The gift economy would make it easier to transform technology and infrastructure for sustainability and to accept the sacrifices that would go with this as work is the key arena for creativity and participation. Fulfillment through consumption is less relevant, and creating an environmentally sustainable infrastructure would be an exciting task. If producers organized and controlled the distribution of their products, the need for state intervention, and the size of government could be significantly reduced.

A state depends on employees who will obey central directives to implement its decisions. In a gift economy all people would be supplied by the gifts of a multiplicity of independent producers, and each of these producer groups would be making their own decisions about distribution.

For such a system to work to produce roughly equal outcomes there would have to be a cultural commitment to equality. Equality could not arise from a rationed out impartiality - there would be no central authority to determine equal shares. Instead it would come about through relations with *particular* others that in aggregate were not balanced to the disadvantage of any gender, orientation or cultural/ethnic group. So people would have to be motivated by a generous and sympathetic benevolence. Empathy and aesthetic appreciation would also guide our responses to other species.

Of course such a model is not without its critics - the impossibility of the gift economy is the stock in trade of ideology.

A common objection is that coordination requires authoritative and coercive centralized organization (Pepper, 1993). The gift economy achieves coordination through two factors. First, independent and multi-pronged collectives of media, research and administrative workers keep other producers' collectives up to date with what is required and by whom. Second, the aim of producers' collectives is to ensure an equitable outcome for society as a whole.

Another critique of stateless utopias is that they imply a socially divided populace (Frankel, 1983) where an insular and smug parochialism would prevent an evenhanded distribution. However, the gift economy is not a communalist utopia; it is not "bioregionalism" (Sale, 1991). In the gift economy networks of geographically overlapping producers' collectives would work to sort out problems and secure a fair share.

It is argued that only a democratic state can ensure the rights and well being of minorities. However, in today's liberal democracies the majority supports these rights. A gift economy would do no worse. In a gift economy the same majority would be implementing these same policies: through the defense of minorities from violence by voluntary collectives of peacekeepers, and through community processes of justice and social work.

Critiques of the gift economy in terms of human nature are common, and many people assume that a competitive human nature would destroy any society that had to depend on egalitarian generosity to work. We can accept that human nature *as it is now socially constructed* operates to prevent a gift economy. For a gift economy to work a cultural shift must take place.

#### **Getting to the Gift Economy**

The gift economy, at the present time, does not exist in embryo within capitalism as pure enclaves of a new mode of production. The social transformation and shift in worldview required to move a capitalist society toward one based on a gift economy is substantial (to put it mildly). However, we see the gift economy as the social structure best able to support sustainability. To many people in a capitalist society the gift economy may appear unnatural and unrealistic or, at best, naïve. However, capitalist culture, along with the economic requirements of effective operation within a capitalist economy, produces a variety of hybrid situations. While aspects of the capitalist authoritarian mode of production dominate, some aspects of a gift economy operate to

further the goals of the left social movements (Leahy, 2004; Mollison, 1988; Trainer, 1995). Many movements in our society reflect elements of the gift economy already – coops, credit unions, Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS), Fair Trade Coops, Living Simply (Elgin, 1993), Permaculture, and community gardens, to name a few. The proliferation of these ‘alternative’ initiatives reflects the efforts of thousands, if not millions, of people to promote the values of community, interdependence, sustainability, and equality. These initiatives promote individuals joining together to create meaning and economic well-being with less and less reliance on mainstream economic structures. In this way they can be seen as precursors of the gift economy.

We suggest that the arrival of the gift economy will occur through the development of these alternatives, cooperative and meaning filled activities. While most will be unique and attend to local needs and resources, some will become very successful, catch on and be imitated by others. Swimme (1997) refers to these as “key attractors.” Some of these successful structures will become so substantial that they will form an infrastructure around which new communities and new social structures will form. Such a transformation will proceed more rapidly if the existing socioeconomic order breaks down, or if attempts to develop mixed economy or nationalization models fail; if the extractive and exploitive nature of our capitalist economy prevails, one might be very confident of this eventuality.

In the interim we can encourage the development of community based initiatives that provide meaning and control, that enable local resources to be used by local residents to create local benefit where local benefit includes the needs of all species and future generations. Since many people raised in a capitalist and individualist society will be skeptical, it is essential that alternatives demonstrate success and improvements to the quality of life. In the absence of demonstrated effectiveness, it is unlikely that the necessary critical mass will be secured. A number of actions and practices can foster the knowledge and values that are consistent with the emergence of a gift economy. These include:

- Bringing to public attention the unreasonableness and severe destruction of the present organization and functioning of society can serve to open people to consider alternative world views and ideals that improve the well-being of all, and see human actions and social structures, along with the ‘rest of nature,’ as part of Earth’s evolutionary unfolding. The development of an ecological or global consciousness emerges from a critique of human superiority and exclusively human-centered valuations, and an awareness of the injustice and exploitation inherent in modern society.
- Link environmental and social justice issues, environmental decline is almost always associated with social injustice (Coates, 2003b). The reality of those who face severe distress, exclusion and depression is so often a product of relentless low standards of living and societal marginalization.
- Create opportunities for meaningful activity outside of consumerism and materialism. It is essential to counter the problem of the alienated worker where consuming and shopping are the primary, if not the only, areas of choice that many people have. Opportunities can be developed so that commitments and a sense of fulfillment can be obtained from volunteering, socially responsible actions, and participation in community projects.
- Promote the development of communities and alternative organizations that are inclusive, egalitarian and supportive of the creative potential in each person, and supportive of ecological ways of life. These can be found in such movements as Voluntary Simplicity (Elgin, 1993), Engaged Living (Robin, 1999), Cooperacy (Hunter, Bailey & Taylor, 1997), The Simpler Way (Trainer, n.d.), Eco-Villages, Permaculture, and cooperatives.
- Opt out of corporatist processes by joining a co-op, boycotting, and challenging retailers to sell local and Fair Trade products. Small meaningful steps that release the potential of every being are to be celebrated as they demonstrate that fulfillment comes from acting on life’s purpose and living in harmony with the web of all life. Complexity science reminds us not to underestimate the potential impact of one person’s small steps taken in community with others.
- Changes in socialization methods and family dynamics can nurture more generous, confident and caring adults. Research has shown that indulging infant can nurture generosity and confidence and early childhood needs (Hamilton, 1981). Traditional child rearing in the West has produced adults who are continuously anxious, and who amass and hoard to feel secure. Also as fathers become more involved in the care of young children and develop close nurturing relationship with their children, children, boys in particular, are more likely to take a more caring role in looking after the community and the planet (Chodorow, 1974). Further, an experience of family and community in which men and women are equal partners is necessary if people are to grow up without expecting someone to be the boss. Firestone (1972) recognized this connection between authority in the family and authoritarian structures in society. To institute the gift economy we must implement the feminist demand for gender parity.

Several of these keys to the gift economy are being implemented now as part of a cultural transition.

## Conclusion

As media attention to environmental issues grows, public concern is awakened to find solutions to problems such as species extinction, climate change, and pollution. This paper examined the dominant ideology of modernity and four major sociopolitical models, in regards to their potential to bring about a sustainable society. A shift to sustainability is unlikely to be achieved without a major shift in ideology or consciousness, away from modernity’s dualism, superiority and human-centered exploitation, toward a foundation based on interdependence, care and emergence. Such a radical shift in ideology needs to be accompanied by a consideration of sociopolitical structures that can be more supportive of sustainability.

A review of four models – Regulated Capitalism, Mixed-Economy, Nationalization plus Democracy, and Gift Economy, leads us to conclude that the Gift Economy is more compatible with ecological imperatives. However unlikely such a model may appear to members of ‘modern’ capitalist society, precursors of the gift economy currently exist and it can emerge as a viable model, if not the only one without built in contradictions to sustainability. The limitations of sociopolitical models must be considered if effective environmental interventions aimed at reducing ecological degradation, and promoting sustainability and ecological well-being, are to be achieved. Hopefully this article can serve to initiate further dialogue on the importance of ideology and politics in the search for a viable path toward sustainability.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> GAI as used in this paper represents Guaranteed Adequate Income. Although there are similarities the use of GAI in this paper should not be confused with Guaranteed Annual Income that may or may not be adequate (above the poverty line).

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