



RESTRUCTURING COMMUNITIES

Policies for a Different Society

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We rely on our culture to give balance to our materialistic society. However, this strategy now lacks credibility as the direction of economic efforts is increasingly turning to our culture itself - cultural events, the arts, and social movements, are all becoming dominated by commercial enterprise. At the same time we see the rise of different communities characterised by new values and life styles, creativity, transience and self actualisation, and demanding a different culture. Culture increasingly means 'access to commodified cultural experiences', and this leads to questions about whether our society can survive with a much reduced government and cultural influence, and dominated by commerce as the main arbiter of our lives. New policy approaches are not likely to be evident within current systems since solutions to many of the issues rely on cooperation, tolerance and sharing, difficult concepts to embrace in a society built upon individualism and competitiveness. We need to set out the conditions whereby citizens can participate in building more sustainable communities, but this means turning current policy on its head. Commitment to a different set of principles directed at questioning our spiritual motivation and our institutional base itself, can achieve this. The agenda will be about re-balancing the secular and the sacred.

The paper

In this paper I argue that our culture, as we know it, is under threat – but whether this is a good or bad thing depends on your viewpoint. There is a large literature in this area, impossible to cover in this paper. I therefore, discuss selectively some of the forces that are affecting our culture (the fourth pillar of sustainability), concluding that, whatever side of the fence you are on, we will have to shift towards more inclusive policies and solutions, based upon cooperation, tolerance and sharing.

Flaws in our economic system

It has troubled me for many years that we support a policy framework which is deeply flawed. The thrust of this policy has been to create an economically competitive environment aimed at bringing our activities into line with 'market realities'. The underlying philosophy has been that of 'neoliberalism', an uneasy synthesis of liberalism and neoclassical economic theory, supported by a belief that the pre-eminent place of the individual can best be served by competition and market forces. This basis for the structuring of our society falls short, on the one hand, in the mis-use of liberal thinking and devotion to humanism (Carroll 2004, Eckersley 2004, Hamilton 2004), and, on the other hand, in the interpretation of economic theory and its narrow application (Eckersley 2004, Hamilton 2003, Kingma 2003).

Arguments in this context, relate to: the impact of individualism and materialism on our society; downgrading of politics and democracy to the management of a single ideology business state; globalisation of poverty and disenfranchisement of many as economic growth proceeds; increased participation of governments in business and corporate power at the expense of social and democratic functions; and the impact of conglomerate media power. Also in question is whether the promise of economic growth can, in fact, be fulfilled due to issues such as: the potential, as commodification proceeds, for modification of many goods and services as well as the environment in which they are consumed; and 'adding up' problems where possibilities and effort at the individual level are frustrated in aggregate (Hamilton 2003, Hirsch 1977, Kingma 2003).

While acknowledging that economic growth has brought many benefits, growth now appears to be increasingly at the expense of other equally as important values, while social and cultural problems are reduced to the day-to-day economic, or secular. Reducing all to the economic can be destructive of inclusive values and attempts to synthesise economic, social, environmental and cultural goals – it tends to give rise to a mean-spirited socio-economic environment.

Bias in markets

The institutions which have emerged from the present market policy philosophy are secular in nature - dominantly economic and supportive of business. These institutions are reinforced by actions within markets, which will reflect the characteristics of their main players - those with economic power and property rights. Underlying values of these players are supportive of profit making and competitive behaviour which work towards inequality and disenfranchisement of many.

Markets if left to themselves, may not evolve in sympathy with community values since the private sector will by default develop its own rules of business. These rules will invariably be oriented towards firms capturing and exploiting the resources that will facilitate their private operation and profits. Outcomes of this process may be narrow and destructive. For example, statistics show escalation in crime, suicide and social dislocation as economic growth has proceeded (Eckersley 2004, Hamilton 2003, Kingma 2003), all signs of imbalance, and an institutional framework which is debasing values necessary for a sustainable society (Falk 2001).

A deregulated market environment may also debase concepts of work and lead to problems of scale and dominance of business and bureaucracies. Once power and control shifts beyond the locality to centralised organisations, then community values, employment activities and production and consumption patterns become determined outside the locality. The organisational structures that come with these changes, generally motivated by individual decisions to reduce risk and 'capture' markets relevant to company interests, have the potential to threaten local cultures and destroy social capital, leading to a loss of identity and motivation within communities.

Hamilton (2003) has argued that the market itself has evolved into an instrument of coercion and control over our culture, leading to

'... the emergence of societies where fraud and deception are endemic ... where pre-teen children without incomes are targeted by corporations in an attempt to build life-long brand loyalty, where teenagers declare that the brands they wear and otherwise consume determine who they are, where both popular and classical culture are systematically mined for icons and images that can be used to sell products, where the intimate details of our personal lives are systematically collected and sold to marketing organizations, where sporting, artistic, literary and educational institutions have become the playing fields of advertisers, and where the essential data of our action are provided overwhelmingly by a handful of media corporations.'
(Hamilton 2004, p.viii).

Similar observations are made by Eckersley (2004).

Erosion of social capital

Any forces that diminish social capital will reduce the effectiveness of markets as a mechanism for ordering transactions and conveying appropriate signals for exchange. A material culture, by undermining trust, cooperation and collective endeavour, can destroy the very basis for markets to operate effectively, that is, the trust that transactions entered into will be honoured (Hirsch 1977). The rise of a litigious society and escalation of crime and alienation (Eckersley 2004, Hamilton 2003) are all signs of the erosion of trust.

Thus, as our culture becomes more 'commodified', there is a very real danger that we may lose the richness, diversity and trust upon which our society is based, characteristics which, ironically, underpin the successful working of a market economy.

The success of more inclusive policy solutions to address these issues is also dependent upon the richness of our culture and the strength of our social capital base. A strong cultural base will balance the harsh effects of market forces. As argued by Hawkes (2001):

'A society's values are the basis upon which all else is built. These values and the ways they are expressed are a society's culture. The way a society governs itself cannot be fully democratic without there being clear avenues for the expression of community values, and unless these expressions directly affect the directions society takes. These processes are culture at work ... cultural vitality is ... essential to a healthy and sustainable society.'

A culturally rich and inclusive community is essential to overcome the issues noted above.

Attempts to change or enhance our culture are difficult because a materialistic environment erodes both culture and social capital. Hamilton (2003, p.x), for example, in reviewing evidence that economic growth crowds out a more meaningful set of values, concluded that '... our societies are no happier than they were. Growth not only fails to make people contented; it destroys many of the things that do. Growth fosters empty consumerism, degrades the natural environment, weakens social cohesion and corrodes character.'

If we are to rely on our culture to balance the negative effects of materialism, then we will have to counter the deterioration of our cultural environment. But new more holistic policies are not likely to be evident within current systems since more cooperative and inclusive policy approaches will have to be taken to today's complex issues. Cooperation and inclusiveness will necessitate quantum shifts in behaviour and attitudes and the relinquishment of present power and rights by some. In a society built upon individualism and competitiveness, many would not easily participate in this.

The vulnerability of our culture

The task of policy reform is made even more difficult because major shifts are taking place in many business companies and networks, that are inexorably driving much of our lives and our culture into the hands of business. This directly impacts on the structure of our society, our cultural heritage and the scope for us to express our values. The impacts are particularly forceful where companies are able to organise their activities beyond the market. For example, for many companies, strategic alliances and

agreements now replace market transactions, and resources are managed via 'supply chains' and pooling and sharing arrangements.

Rifkin (2000), for example, has argued that markets and ownership as we have known them are beginning to make way for networks and access to services. In a network economy, physical and intellectual property are likely to be accessed by businesses rather than exchanged. Sellers and buyers are replaced with suppliers and users of services and market transactions give way to alliances, co-sourcing and gain-sharing agreements. In Rifkin's (2000, p.5) words '... many companies no longer sell things to one another but rather pool and share their collective resources, creating vast supplier-user networks that co-manage each other's businesses.'

Companies and business networks and alliances, Rifkin (2000) argues, now have vast capacity to draw local cultural resources into the commercial sphere and to repackage them as cultural commodities, to be accessed as commercial experiences. Rifkin (2000, p.10) argues that

'the economy has turned its attention to the last remaining independent sphere of human activity: the culture itself. Cultural rituals, community events, social gatherings, the arts, sport and games, social movements, and civic engagement are all being encroached upon by the commercial sphere. The great issue at hand ... is whether civilisation can survive with a greatly reduced government and cultural sphere and where only the commercial sphere is left as the primary mediator of human life.'

An example of this for the arts in Australia is given by Griffiths (2003, p.5) who says

'... the buzz of creative industries and the hype of strategic innovation are used to construct the arts as the newest form of commodity. Thus the new logics of creative industries ... have seen arts companies, forced to face a serious situation, begin to transform art into 'product''.

Griffiths argues that, in the process, these arts companies struggle to retain their artistic integrity.

In all areas of our culture, companies now have the ability to exploit cultural resources and turn them into paid-for experiences. The result is elimination of cultural diversity and homogenisation of our culture. For this paper the significant point is the increasing hold that this gives business in controlling our lives and culture. This time of 'access to commodified cultural experiences' is a threat to our culture.

Changes in values and consumer preferences

There is a different perspective to the above in terms of shifts in lifestyles and consumption preferences among significant groups in the workforce. Key groups are the 'downshifter' and the 'creative class', with both having the potential to temper the effects noted above. If the influence of groups like these is large enough, business corporations can be expected to make the changes necessary to accommodate new values and interests – it is an interactive, dynamic process.

'Downshifter' now form over 20 per cent of the Australian workforce and this group is growing. These people want more balance and control in their lives, more time with their families and friends and more personal fulfilment. They have '... expressed a desire to do something more meaningful with their lives, and to achieve this aim they considered it was necessary to consume less, work less and slow down.' (Hamilton 2004, p. 206). This group has the potential to bring about social change, promote the quality of social and individual life and create new communities.

'Creative class' people, now some 40 per cent of the US workforce, are also a new force in moving our societies into fresh, positive directions. Florida (2002) has surveyed and documented the emergence of this class of people, concluding that they come from all walks of life and generally have good formal education and a high level of human capital. This group is, in large measure, fuelled by the high-tech industries and the technologies of the information economy. However, they hold different values, share a common ethos that stresses creativity, individuality, difference and merit and, as with 'downshifter', see the function of work not primarily as a wage or salary but as a means to add creative value and gain self-expression. They are experience-oriented, use time differently, tend to favour participation, flexibility and stimulation, and are less bound by conventional social and lifestyle institutions. Florida (2002, p.68) says

'... the basis of the 'creative class' is economic ... its economic function both underpins and informs its members' social, cultural and lifestyle choices. The 'creative class' consists of people who add economic value through their creativity. It thus includes a great many knowledge workers, symbolic analysts and professional and technical workers but emphasises their true role in the economy ... the way people organise themselves into social groupings and common identities (is) based principally on their economic function. Their social and cultural preferences, consumption and buying habits, and their social identities all flow from this.'

These people appear to be strong culture builders, but the interest is more in developing new 'street level cultures' within the present paradigm of economic growth. Nonetheless, their activities are challenging prevailing norms and attitudes.

According to Florida (2002), policy makers and community leaders have, in general, been slow to understand the implications of these changes for their communities and regions. His research shows that in the US, places that are actively integrating the 'creative class' into their local cultures and politics are prospering and that a new social and economic geography is emerging in these regions. Division in communities appears to be less on income and more on the emergence of centres in which creativity can flourish and where labour markets are 'thick' and flexible enough to provide a place for the exchange of ideas and for different lifestyle interests, in addition to a wage. Features have been acceptance and encouragement of people and business, the creation of an environment for innovation, recognition of merit and ideas, and authenticity and uniqueness of the living environment.

Policy directions

The analysis in this paper shows that whatever one's philosophical persuasion and whatever the issue, the way to a more sustainable society is through embracing policies which encourage inclusiveness and the expression of collective interests. Whether redressing excessive commodification, the crowding out of diversity, biases in markets, erosion of social capital or dated institutions, the way forward is inexorably through new approaches to participation, empowerment and cooperation.

What is important at this time is how we deepen the impetus for a shift to a different and tolerant culture. Preconditions will be debate on values and options, analysis to inform debate, a stocktake of our resources and institutions, and clarification of rights/responsibilities of individuals and groups at all levels, including governments. Infusion of new values into our institutions will give the key to a more sustainable future. The following secular 'action agenda' suggests itself, but this is only a start. Our actions must be infused with higher, sacred values if we are to move towards a more sustainable society.

Reshaping the secular

Communities should be vision oriented and strongly committed to principles which enhance ecological sustainability, (positive) social capital, efficient resource use and creativity. This requires that they take charge of their own destiny, develop visions for their future and implement local solutions. Cultural activities, particularly the arts, play an important role in this process by reconnecting with the spiritual, generating social capital, breaking down relationship barriers and transmitting information.

Communities should secure equitable representation, voice and power in business, social and environmental affairs. More inclusive and participative governance arrangements should support empowerment and creativity. This would require a re-assessment of the roles and responsibilities of many participants. Control processes will no longer work. Thus initiatives which are partisan and coercive should be replaced with approaches which are more local and utilize more inclusive and participative processes and these should be accompanied by new approaches to learning, capacity building, training and re-training, lifelong education and skills development.

Governments have an important role in these processes of change. Initiatives should provide leadership, enable, foster dialogue and implement collective solutions. Principles for the expression of culture, in particular through the arts, should be embedded into policy. The aim should be to establish an environment to encourage innovation, experimentation and creativity.

Communities should set in place comprehensive regional and local arrangements to deliver the necessary infrastructure development, services and networks for economic and social activity. New models for and approaches to financing, risk-sharing and implementation of both private and public investment projects will be required, possibly necessitating change in the roles and functions of participants and better coordination between administrative, planning and policy making institutions. Much of the change required is institutional change. Thus, policy initiatives which do not, at minimum, give consideration to the institutional settings within which change takes place, should be questioned.

Communities should work in partnership to encourage strong industries which value-add their produce locally and form strong linkages both into their communities and into the wider business sphere. Consumers of the future will demand quality and sophisticated goods and services, value added in their own communities, and providing local employment opportunities, new prospects for local produce and opportunities for local re-investment of funds.

A purely market or neoliberal view will be too narrow. Thus, potential actions and policies which give expression to narrow approaches to industry development should be re-examined and modified. Where competitiveness, scale, market share and private profit considerations are seen to conflict with broader goals and vision, special directives may be useful for the private sector to clarify the 'rules of business'.

A new focus of responsibility should involve: looking outside the conventional methods of government; re-inventing governance through institutional change; transferring a degree of power to communities of interest; devolving responsibility; and reviewing the 'scale' of economic and social activity. This will require the striking of a new balance between 'competition' and 'cooperation'. Change would be required in the methods, structures and values of public policy, and in many present accountability systems that tend towards uniformity and control when superimposed on regions and local areas. Policy responses should be 'place' and 'people' specific and grounded in local needs and circumstances, re-discovery of the strength of 'community without politics' and motivation through 'public purpose'.

Towards sacred community

The above action agenda is a good start. But undertaken within the confines of current beliefs and values, it may simply lead to a re-configuration of our secular society. Community revival based on narrow economic goals works to strengthen materialism and competition. We just end up with the same concerns and issues but from a new perspective.

As long as the secular dominates, suppressing and destroying the deeper, creative structures on which human society is based, the outcome will be further escalation of social dysfunction. A secular policy action agenda is, therefore, not enough – cooperative, sacred community should underpin the secular. We need a culture which balances the secular and the sacred, where the day-to-day organization of existence and the theatre within which the true creative expression of humanity can occur, are in harmony and work in a complementary way to realise the potential of all. Only by a deep questioning of our spiritual motivation and our institutional base which gives expression to our creativity, will we evolve into a more balanced society.

The basis of existence is 'unity' of all, with cooperation, tolerance, sharing and working together as the building blocks. Thus, a perception of existence as though we are separate, egoic individuals driven by the need to compete against each other, is wrongly based. As noted earlier, an individualised society leads to anxiety, illusion and disunity. If the prevailing philosophy is 'not unity' then the collective order will reflect this and be characterized by fragmentation and dis-unity. In aggregate, such a philosophy leads to the disintegration of society and a loss of (positive) social capital.

Present institutions and organisational structures tend to work towards dis-unity because the prevailing philosophy on which they are based is secular, that is, they are mainly concerned with organization of the business of day-to-day life. They are characterized by dominance and exploitation. The secular State in this system is a dominant, controlling structure, focused on egoic, individualized goals and tending to neglect the collective interests of communities. Most religious institutions can no longer help to re-balance this situation. The separation of the secular from the sacred and the perception that the spiritual domain is somehow a purely private issue only, has led most religious institutions to now focus dominantly on the secular – they have become absorbed in the 'religion business'.

Local participation and a 'change of mind' at the individual level leading to a change of collective mind, is the only way to restore a balanced society in which individuals' voices are heard and where the individual's role and place is restored in sacred community – this re-focus of the individual's role will then, ultimately, determine the nature of the State or collective community. Such change will only happen in a community in which responsible relationships can flourish and where advanced cultural agreements at all levels can be worked out.

The above action agenda, by stressing the development of more inclusive and participative processes and different governance arrangements, works towards this. However, there must also be a vision beyond the secular and this can only come from action at the individual and group level within cooperative community. We should not wait for action from 'outside' – change will not occur in the system per se but this must be initiated by a 'change of mind' at the individual level. A new leadership and a greater more visionary role played by the civil sector and local government, are central in bringing this about and to restoring the collective interests of our society.

Only with a determination to balance the secular and sacred, can we work towards a more unified, creative and collective society motivated by cooperation, tolerance and sharing.

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