Trumpeter (1990)
ISSN: 0832-6193

BRIEF - PUNGENT COMPARISON OF MODERN UNSUSTAINABLE SOCIETY AND A SOCIETY DESIGNED TO BE SUSTAINABLE

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Why Think About A New Society ?

Isn't modern society just fine? Aren't we richer? Doesn't modern technology give us more power and control? Aren't we happier than people were in previous centuries? Are you happier? Is your world, your planet, going right?

My challenge is more fundamental than those questions. By my analysis, if we successfully pursued the goals of modern society for the next century, we wouldn't like the world we would have created. Still more fundamentally, the trajectory we are following in pursuit of our goals cannot be sustained. We have been shortsighted and have refused to look ahead and take into account the unintended consequences of doing every day those things we have always done — but "better and better." We cannot achieve our goals by continuing to follow our present path. We have no choice but to change. What are those goals that deceive us about our future?

Modern industrial society emphasizes the following goals: seeking quality of life by accruing material wealth; unlimited growth in economic activity; efficiency; productivity; employment for economic ends; hedonistic consumption in the present; market determination of activity; swift and unfettered development of science and technology; expertise; domination of nature; domination of the powerful over the weak (men over women, rich over poor); being competitive; taking risks; winning; being first or on top; peace through strength.

A society that pursues those goals vigorously, as nearly all modern societies do, must end up depleting its resources and degrading Nature. Furthermore, it will poison humans and other creatures with its wastes. It also will so change geosphere/biosphere systems that they will destroy much that we have laboriously built and will upset our long range plans. Oscillating patterns in geosphere/biosphere systems will create so much uncertainty that people will be

unwilling to invest, thus withdrawing a fundamental underpinning of modern society.

People in modern society must now confront this uncomfortable choice: we can thoughtfully transform our society to a sustainable mode, or we can stubbornly refuse to change and have change painfully forced upon us by the collapse of society's fundamental underpinnings. Resisting change will make us victims of change. 1

In my definition, a sustainable society does not merely keep people alive; life must be something more than merely not dying. It is a society in which people live their lives so that Nature can cleanse itself and reproduce. It cares for Nature and resources so that many future generations of people and other creatures can live decent lives. Such a society can sustain its trajectory. This definition is fleshed out in the following contrasts.

Contrasting Characteristics of a Sustainable Society Vs. Modern Industrial Society

Contrasts in Goals:

1. A sustainable society articulates as its highest value "life in a viable ecosystem." In pursuit of that value it would seek the flourishing of all life, not just human life. It would help its people learn how to live quality lives that also would sustain a long-run harmonious relationship with Nature. In contrast, people in modern society are constantly urged to maximize their personal wealth with little thought for its impact on Nature.

2. A sustainable society affirms love as a primary value. It expresses this love as compassion not only for those near and dear but for people in other lands, for future generations, and for other species. In contrast, people in modern society are urged to seek power, be competitive, and be able to dominate others. A sustainable society would emphasize partnership rather than domination; cooperation more than competition; love more than power.

3. A sustainable society affirms justice and security as other primary values. Modern society also pursues those values but in a militant beleaguered mode. A sustainable society would more likely use mass non- violent resistance to curb those who would brutalize or dominate others. It would use the minimal force necessary to maintain a civil public order.

4. A sustainable society would maximize opportunities for personal development and self realization as the most effective way for people to realize quality in living. It would encourage persons to become all they are capable of being rather than emphasizing getting wealthy and consuming as

is done in modern society. A sustainable society would redefine work so that it would become a means to self realization and would de- emphasize orienting work to benefit economic enterprises. In our thinking we should decouple work from employment. Persons doing their own work, or non-paid contributors to family and society, should be valued as much as those highly paid. Self esteem should be decoupled from employment and should derive more from skill, artistry, effort, and integrity.

Reconsideration of Our Focus on Economics

1. A sustainable society would place higher priority on environmental protection than on economic growth. Economic growth is a means and not an end, whereas a viable ecosystem must be society's top priority. We must reconsider our current misplaced emphasis on growth and recognize that there are limits to growth in human population and in economic activity, otherwise society will lose other more highly treasured values: the continued good- functioning of its global geosphere/biosphere systems, the viability of ecosystems, the flourishing of other creatures, the preservation of open green space, the continued availability of vital resources, the continued health and prosperity of humans.

2. A sustainable society would emphasize conservation in use of material things and care in their disposal because it recognizes limits to resources and to the ability of biospheric systems to absorb pollutants. It would recognize that we must curb growth in human population so that the masses of humanity do not destroy the Earth's carrying capacity. Modern industrial society worships growth and falsely believes that life would be awful without growth.

3. A sustainable society would place greater emphasis on non- material satisfactions to achieve quality of life. It would cultivate a love of simplicity. It would support this policy by de-emphasizing the role of advertising as the driving force in communication and entertainment. Modern society fails to recognize that our mad desire to sell creates a culture that will lead to its own painful demise.—

4. A sustainable society would utilize both planning and markets as basic information systems that supplement each other. Both are needed to guide economic activity and public policy. It would recognize the fundamental inability of markets to anticipate the future and to adequately assign social value to objects and policies. Modern society, in contrast, reifies markets into persons that demand closing or moving of plants, that demand harmful and wasteful goods, that demand pollution, that demand public subsidies, that demand changes in laws.

5. A sustainable society would recognize that public goods (schools, highways, parks, national defense, environmental protection, etc.) are just as important for quality of life as private goods. It also would recognize that markets are incapable of providing public goods; therefore, it would use government and other public agencies to provide public goods and justly assess taxes to pay for them. In contrast, reliance on markets in modern society emphasizes personal goods to the point that we now have a society with personal affluence and public squalor.

Science and Technology in the Service of Society

1. A sustainable society would recognize that our current belief that science and technology are value-free gives the ability to direct these forces and to collect their benefits over to those who can pay for specialized talents and equipment — it serves the values of the establishment. It would recognize as well that S & T can accrue so much wealth and power that those who control them can use them to dominate all other creatures — they can literally destroy any or all life. While continuing to value further development of science and technology, it would learn to develop social controls of science and technology. In contrast, modern society worshipfully adores science and technology and eagerly promotes their development without foresight as to consequences or the need for controls.

2. A sustainable society would recognize that powerful technologies present serious hazards that put people and other creatures at risk; also that new technologies can induce sweeping changes in economic patterns, lifestyles, governance, and social values; therefore, it would not allow deployment of new technologies without careful forethought regarding the long-term impact of the proposed technology. It would design and enforce social controls for the deployment and use of technologies.

Social Learning as the Dynamic of Social Change

1. Societies have always learned but we can consciously promote social learning, not only to deal with pressing problems, but also to help realize our vision of a good society. A society desiring to become sustainable would emphasize social learning as its best strategy for evolving sustainable modes of behavior that also lead to quality in living. In contrast, modern society is much more reactive than proactive. It refuses to deal with problems until they become powerful immediate threats, whereas foresighted learning could anticipate problems and avoid crisis policy making.

2. A learning society would redesign government to maximize its ability to learn, and it would use the governmental learning process to promote social

learning. To do so, it would add a new branch of government designed to give it a foresight capability, thus helping everyone to learn, called "A Council for Long Range Societal Guidance." In contrast, modern society takes a very short-range perspective and prides itself on being immediately "practical."

3. A learning society would affirm the inherent value of persons by requiring that governors listen to citizens; therefore, the society not only would keep itself open for public participation, but also would encourage social learning in both officials and citizens. Modern society, in contrast, values much more highly the views of experts and officials.

4. A learning society would counter-balance the current distorted emphasis on narrow expertise by giving equal or greater emphasis to holistic, systemic, and futures thinking, and it would accord esteem to those who practice this way of thinking. It would reaffirm the belief, once held in primitive societies, that a knowledge of Nature's workings is basic to being educated. It would act on that belief by requiring environmental education of all students, as it now requires every student to study history.

Learning a Planetary Politics

A sustainable society would recognize that we are part of and strongly affected by global systems; that our health and welfare are vitally affected by how people, firms, and governments in other lands behave. Therefore, it would strive diligently to build an effective planetary politics. It would encourage social movements and political parties to develop effective linkages with movements and parties in other countries. It would encourage social learning leading eventually to a world society with a world government.

Notes

1. Readers desiring further argument and evidence in support of these assertions should consult, Lester W. Milbrath, Envisioning a Sustainable Society: Learning Our Way Out , Albany, SUNY Press, 1989.

Citation Format

Millbrath, Lester W. (1990) BRIEF - PUNGENT COMPARISON OF MODERN UNSUSTAINABLE SOCIETY AND A SOCIETY DESIGNED TO BE SUSTAINABLE *Trumpeter*: 7, 3. http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.7.3.13

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