

Our Economic Culture

I've now been sending out these climate change chronicles for about three years. On a number of occasions I've mentioned the need to create a different kind of culture—more specifically a climate change culture to help us deal with our climate changing world.

This is the first of two chronicles. It explains the reasons why we need a new kind of culture and outlines some characteristics of our current culture. In the next chronicle I'll explain how we might swing into action to develop this new climate change culture in local communities.

Why a New and Different Culture?

First, because the world is in the midst of climate change. This global phenomenon has already affected many countries and regions of Earth. It will continue to do so in different ways. We need to develop a culture specifically designed to deal with climate change, a culture we can share with other communities who are developing their own climate change cultures. To borrow a motto from the not too distant past, "Think globally, act locally."

Second, because our current culture is not able to address the causes of climate change. The economic systems we have developed and depend upon every day are at the root of the problem. We have to focus on these systems and develop new living ones that can thrive within a living Earth. Making the transition between current systems and the new systems will be critical.

Third, because there is no quick fix. We need something long term that can be passed on to help those who come after us. This is what I mean by a "culture". We want to lay the groundwork for new habits, traditions, and ways of looking at our place in the scheme of things. We know we can only begin to address the actual problems we have created. Creating a new culture can be seen as a moral obligation toward future generations.

So...because we can't continue down the economic cultural road we are on, we need to develop a different kind of culture—a climate change culture. So how do we do this and where do we start?

I'll start with a story. Here is how I came to realize that our lives are controlled by an economic culture.

The Revelation

Between 1967 and 1969 I lived in Paris while working on a degree in theology and communications. At the same time I was serving as a student chaplain at the *Cite Universitaire Internationale de Paris*. It was a large campus with forty national houses

for students from around the world. On May 8, 1968 the student riots broke out and for a number of months the whole society seemed to roll to a dead stop.

One day I went over to the Cite's largest cafeteria for lunch. It was an incredible sight. There were about two-hundred students from around the world sitting at tables in their respective language groups, eating out of tin plates and yelling at one another to be heard. The din was terrible. It was like being on the ground floor of the Tower of Babel.

I was standing next to two American students in a lineup waiting to get served. They, too, were looking out over this amazing array of diverse cultures and languages. Then I heard one of them say to the other, "Geez, I wish we had a culture, don't you?"

Thinking back on that experience there were three things that the students and I didn't realize at the time.

First, they did indeed have a culture but it was not based upon ethnic origins or language or various historical traditions. It was an emerging economic culture and it was beginning to influence and dominate other cultures and countries around the world.

Second, people and countries that were embracing this culture didn't understand that it was a culture. They just looked upon it as the way things had to happen in a changing global scene. Often it brought exciting new products into their lives.

And third, neither the students nor I could have imagined back then what is so obvious today. The economy has always played a role in ethnic cultures, but today things are reversed. Now the economy is the dominant culture and is profoundly influencing all traditional cultures....which must then find their place within it. Back then none of us could imagine that we had embraced a culture that would do so much damage to Earth and bring us climate change.

So let's take a look at the current economic culture, its origins and its systems.

Our Economic Culture

Since time immemorial the living Earth has guided and determined the process of evolution. But within the past several hundred years with the emergence of the industrial revolution, we humans have taken over the process of evolution. We are determining which things shall be developed, which things shall be ignored, which things shall be allowed to survive or go extinct. And the decision making was based on our evaluation of the various economic benefits of Earth's resources.

We have created an economic culture that is based upon two theories that have been adopted as principles. First is Adam Smith's theory of the "invisible hand" of free markets. Second is the "neo" element that refers to Milton Friedman and Frederick von Hayek's neoliberalism. This theory argues that market systems are the only economic systems that do not threaten individual liberty. And, as is quite apparent, our political and legal systems have provided support for these concepts. Together these principles

have provided the context for an economic culture. Economies have always served as a basis for power, but until the last hundred years or so they were not the only way to control others.

There is nothing more important and more significant in our lives than the economy. We depend upon it for everything—our food, housing, education, jobs, healthcare, energy etc. etc. If you are able to control the economy you are also able to also control many aspects of peoples' lives.

Next all cultures depend upon communication systems. Our current economies have developed the technologies via computers and cell phones to provide instant worldwide communications to the most remote communities on Earth. These technologies play a significant role in the transmission of economic cultural values. If you want to be one of the elite you have to own the things that day after day our electronic media pound into our brains. If we want to be like the elite we must buy these products. So how did the economy and its systems gain so much power? We must turn to the second element of this culture—corporate capitalism.

The Corporate Economic Culture

The world's economic culture is largely capitalist. Capitalism is defined as "*An economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state.*"

But some authors stress the conflict between democracy and capitalism. Democracy suggests that there is a political equality—one person one vote. But capitalism run amok leads to an economic inequality. These days the corporate elite—those with money and power – have risen to the top and now control the economic systems. And thus they control many aspects of our lives.

At times the political systems play an important role. They help pave the way for corporate success through legislation that is beneficial to corporations. Or they remove impediments to limitless economic growth—an example is legislation designed to protect the environment. We see this happening in both Canada and the U. S.

The leaders of the Corporate Capitalist Culture rely heavily on the electronic media and constant lobbying. They also pay large sums of money to governments in order to maintain their power and influence. And government often accepts their offers.

Our former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper closed a number of important environmental laboratories and removed environmental legislation protecting rivers and other bodies of water that would impede pipeline development. Today Prime Minister Trudeau and most provincial leaders are supporting the development of three major pipelines.

In the United States the words 'climate change' are verboten. President Trump does not allow them to be used in any reports to the public. Meanwhile he has set out to remove all environmental legislation.

So why haven't we noticed the emergence of our current Economic Culture before? A few people have noticed it.

Some years ago Walt Kelly's Pogo hit the nail on the head when he said, "*I have met the enemy and the enemy is us.*"

More recently the American poet Robert Haas put it this way "*Earth is in trouble now. It needs to be protected. And we are what it needs to be protected from.*"

But the person who seems to provide the starting place out of this climate change wilderness is the Scottish psychiatrist. R.D. Laing. He said,

The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice there is little we can do to change, until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds

In my next chronicle I will try to move beyond our "failure to notice". I will provide some suggestions on how we might start to create a climate change culture to replace our current economic culture.

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