Wealth is a System of Concentration

Contributed by Chuck Burr
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Wealth is not what we are taught. Wealth is not stuff; it is a fiercely protected system of concentration. Wealth is a verb, not a noun. It is the act of the hoarding, and is a key pillar of our culture.

The Agricultural Revolution: The “Dominion Revolution”

This system was invented by one tribe in the fertile crescent 10,000 years ago during an event called the Agricultural Revolution.

This historical event has been grossly misnamed. It should be called the Dominion Revolution. The change had nothing to do with farming. People were farming and eating way before then. It had everything to do with a complete reversal of the story we live by from, "we belong to the earth," to "the world belongs to man."

This is the point where our modern Taker culture was born. Until the Agricultural Revolution all of humanity were indigenous Leaver peoples. We were just one of thirty million species -- we were simply part of the fire of life. One universal shared animist spirituality shared across thousands of cultures.

Once we saw the world as our own, and that we can take from and apart regardless of the consequences, a whole new set of possibilities opened up. It started with denying our competitors access to food and privatizing the land. If the world belonged to man, not only things but all life including people can be possessed or at least exploited. Every social justice problem directly stems the dominion story that perpetuates our modern mono-culture or civilization.

The End of Nature's Peace Keeping Law of Limited Competition

Once you extended the logic of dominion all the way out, you were now allowed to wage war. A lion only takes one gazelle, and the rest of the gazelles go back to grazing because they know the lion follows the peace keeping law of nature or law of limited competition: only take what you need to survive, no more. However, since the world belongs to man, he may take all of the gazelles, or trees; he may wage war on the forest or even his fellow man.

Since it is too disruptive to wage war all of the time to get what you want, a lower level system of violence needed to be invented to get what you wanted. The solution was privatization and locking up the food so everyone had to work within the hierarchical, consumptive, Taker system to survive. If you did not work or at least behave within the system you did not get fed.

By having everyone living within the hierarchy, you can have dozens or -- with technology -- thousands of people doing the concentrating for you. The way to get rich is to direct your way part of the concentrating flow from as large a network as possible.

That is why our system embraces large corporations -- they enable the largest concentration network possible. We don't need a transnational corporation to flip hamburgers, but with 31,000 restaurants, you can concentrate $23.5 billion a year. Wealth is not the $23.5 billion, it is the system that allows something that does not really exist, a corporation, to operate a chain of 31,000 restaurants exploiting 1.5 million employees world wide.

Protection of Hierarchies

Our modern Taker system is fiercely protected. You can't end private property by taking the property of the wealthy. Hierarchies maintain great defenses from attacks from below. McDonalds grows where McDonald-Douglas goes, now Boeing.

Government especially exists to enforce the system of private property and wealth, along with the infrastructure and markets that enable concentration. Make no mistake about it: government is not here to feed you, as most naively believe. The regulations, laws, zoning, finances, markets, inspectors, police, and military are here to make sure no one messes with private property or the market.

Further, if we want another country's natural resources, first we send in the corporations, then the jackals if necessary, and, if they didn't succeed, the military. No ifs, ands, or buts. They system will try to continue and expand at any cost. This meme is taught to us since childhood by "father culture" that civilization is the end of history and must progress at any cost.

This system of protection of the hierarchy is far more than overt force. It includes deep stratification of education, social cliques, and access to capital. Before my awakening I had all three and played within the system. I interned for President Reagan and had seen the inside of several Fortune 100 companies all by the time I was 35. With a little luck, it worked.

Now I am trying to give it all back through one of the country's few really sustainable models and education. Restoration Farm builds topsoil, biodiversity, community, and educates. Show me a list of companies that do that.

We Need a New Story

After being on the inside, and through traveling, I know how it works for the very few, and does not work for everyone else -- human and our non-human relations. I also know now that you cannot reverse the system from within the system. You have to get far enough from it to develop a new story. There in lies the solution.

More and more of us want a new story, a new way to live. We want to make a living that does not end in insecurity, a life of bad food, not thinking for oneself, poor health, wage slavery, no retirement, and a death detached from your family. What are those things but civilization?

Tribal Solution to Making a Living

A tribe or a smaller band is a group of people who want to make a living together. A "community" today may be no more than a grouping of Yuppies in close proximity. These are two very different things. More tribe-like or band-like is a circus -- literally. In a small circus, everyone has decided to throw in their lot, and make a living together. No one is higher or lower. Being the "boss" is still just a job that someone may have to do, but comes with no privileges. Decisions are made by consensus.

A tribe is group of people who are land locked and combine what they have, be it land, tools, or skills, and then make a living together. A tribe also has a sense of place in their watershed or bioregion. That is important, but is not the focus of this discussion.

The trick is to carve out enough space to be able to detach ourselves from the modern Taker world. The Amish call this avoiding entanglements with our culture. That is why the old order of Amish drive wagons with wood-steel wheels that they can build and maintain instead of rubber wheels they can't. The point of creating some level of autonomy as a group is to gain the freedom to live your own culture and stories such as, "humanity belongs to the earth." If you are married to

modern culture you can't live a new story or imagine a new vision.

Now, the Amish do and do not live tribally. They live in a grey area in between. Each family still owns its own land, but work together cooperatively in another sense.

We have to end private property and hierarchical government, and replace the failed story of dominion. Concentration, wealth, poverty, every global crisis, and social injustice are the end result of the story we tell ourselves about the nature of the world we live in, "the world belongs to man."

We will lose a lot of cool stuff in this new world or "earth culture" as I call it, but peak oil is going to do that for us anyway.

Natural Wealth and Permaculture

Real wealth is the resilience of nature and her ecosystems measured by biodiversity, topsoil, and cooperative connections. Ecosystems cooperate and have synergies that are not about competition.

Real human wealth is your community, education, and the cradle-to-grave security that results. Real wealth results from giving security to get security; it does not come from making things to get things.

If you are not taught to think, it's hard to think. We teach people in my local community, students, and interns from around he world to see with whole-system eyes. I am finding a huge divide in the education between lay people and those who study permaculture. Permaculture helps people see holistically, something we are not taught in school. Each department is separated in our educational system, very little is taught as a whole system. Your typical economics course does not tell you that for every dollar made, the planet is trashed somewhere and a bunch of people are exploited along the way. It is more important to learn how a whole ecosystem works, than it is to split atoms.

The Consumption of Population

The final word goes towards the ultimate expression of dominion. The story that Adam chose Eve is misunderstood because the word Eve is mistranslated. Eve means life, it does not mean a person or a woman. Adam, choosing unrestrained life, means he is choosing abandoning Nature's peacekeeping law of limited competition, and accepting unlimited procreating supported by totalitarian agriculture.

Taker peoples have always been able to overwhelm Leaver peoples because they had more people from a greater food supply. Again, we return to the misunderstanding of the Agricultural Revolution: Because the Takers decided to take all of the land for human food production and uses, they simultaneously denied their fellow species' access to food, and so built their human population. They made the choice to consume the world, start the food-population race, and literally convert the natural world to human flesh.

This all stems from the choice of dominion or taking, which birthed our system of concentration and wealth. Wealth is not wealth, it is the Taker system of dominion.

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Further Reading: The above essay drew heavily on Daniel Quinn's book Ishmael, published by Bantam in 1992, and other works such as Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail Or Succeed by Jared Diamond (Penguin Group, 2005).

This essay appeared on CultureQuake on Oct. 12, 2009 and has been slightly edited. - JL, Culture Change

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Video: The Message -- word/sound/power by zzz33333 -- very sage about the mess. As Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young sang in Ohio in 1970, "Gotta get down to it".