

## **Individualism and Sustainability**

This blog explores how a desire for individualism may have unintended consequences if we don't think through what it really means.

### **I am or We are?**

In the preface to his book Aronson (1992), quotes Aristotle from c328 BCE in his work *Politics* and this neatly defines why it's so important to understand the social context of sustainability.

Man is by nature a social animal and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something in nature that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies used the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to refer to the distinction between societies organized on the basis of kinship and tradition, on the one hand, and by specialization and self-interest, on the other. As modern societies become more urban and industrial, the former is replaced by the latter. This also in a move away from collectivism to individualism.

### **Nasty, Brutish and Short**

Individualism can certainly be bestial if individuals don't just opt out of society, but exploit it for their own 'ill-gotten' gains, without putting much back. The 17<sup>th</sup> Century writer Thomas Hobbes (who coined the title of this section), thought that humans were basically bestial, but that this was moderated by our awareness of this state and our recognition that the rule of law was necessary to prevent our worst excesses and rise above it. This also included a type of transactionalism, in that it was to the advantage of any particular individual to cooperate with another and sometimes cede power to another or others in order for economic and social progress to be made and this is why 'civilisation' came about. He thought that a stable hierarchy was needed based on monarchy and the church and the maintenance of this status quo should be the basis of our moral codes. For example, if everyone robbed from everyone else, then in the end everyone would suffer, it was therefore morally not acceptable to steal (Sorrel, 2019, online). This was a very materialist view of morality and didn't take into account any 'Greater Good' that humans could display, such as laying down one's life for others. The contemporary philosopher John Gray (2002) has similar views, but thinks that morality and self-determination are illusions and that we are just animals hurtling towards extinction due to our destructive and exploitative nature.

My take on social and economic sustainability agrees with some of this Hobbesian view, in that it requires harmony and stability, rather than destructive competition, angst and conflict. It also needs diversity which builds cultural richness (linked to 'good' quality of life) and the resilience to cope with change which may stem from internal or external forces. Resilience can also be a product of cultural richness, rather than merely being some kind of individual trait. In this, it is like the resilience which develops in long-standing and complex eco-systems of the natural world. This is in contrast to mono-cultural systems of industrial farming, where a single crop is more vulnerable to attack. As with environmental sustainability, it also depends upon endurance i.e. securing the planet for indefinite generations with an

accompanying 'Good Quality of Life' (not necessarily predicated on increased Gross Domestic Product).

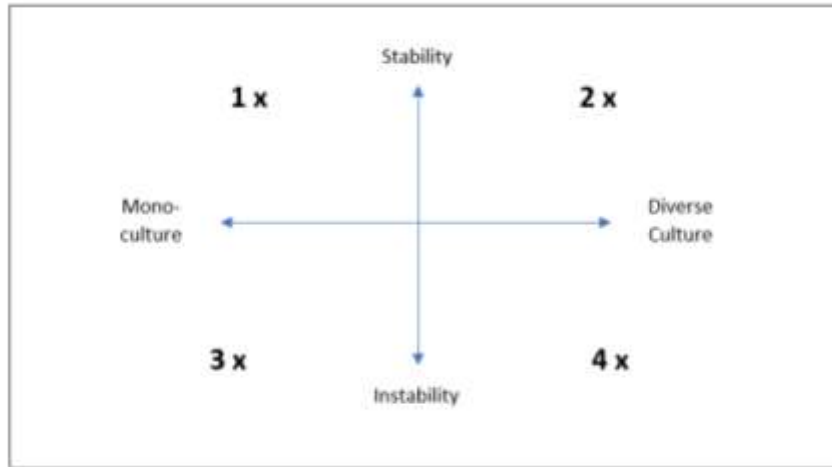
Where I would disagree with Hobbes is that there are strong non-materialistic moral elements running through this kind of sustainability that presupposes that 'everyone matters' and that society at every level, be it family, national or global, should be as egalitarian as possible. This belies the idea that society should always have 'creative' internal and external conflict with winners and losers espoused by Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke (Porter, 2000, p. 25-30), Marxist philosophy and 'Law of the Jungle' linked to 'Darwinian Economics'. Inevitably, conflict affects those least able to cope with it. This is true in conflict within families, right up to an international armed conflict. The basis of conflict is often over 'stuff' in the form of territory, property, small possessions or even ideas developed by religious and scientific individuals and groups and who has jurisdiction over it. Whoever rules the stuff also rules others. Anyone observing toddlers playing with each other can witness this in microcosm. Having the power to name things or people is another aspect of this, which is why up until quite recently Uluru was known as Ayers Rock outside the world of Australian indigenous people.

Another consideration is that, as history has shown right up to the present day, there are many models of society that deliver varying degrees of social sustainability i.e. a society which has a stable status quo, but they don't necessarily deliver sufficient social justice (as defined by the UN convention on Human Rights), individual happiness, cultural richness, or contribute sufficiently to environmental sustainability. The old Soviet Union might be considered a prime example. On top of this, even if you had a perfectly egalitarian society (the Nordic countries are nearer to this than most 'developed' countries), you might also be damaging the biosphere in an unsustainable way. This means that social sustainability must deliver and be part of environmental sustainability, otherwise we are living in, or aspiring to, a fool's paradise.

In Fig. (i) below, I've created a paradigm model where one can plot any given society. In this case I'm thinking of a national society i.e. based on a nation state. It could be applicable to any 'society' (see below for more detailed criteria of this).

The two axes on this model are continuums and the plotted 'X's are at the extremes of each continuum and represent four Ideal Types. No.1 X on the model would be a country like North Korea i.e. highly controlled with foreigners excluded and a dictatorship ensuring it stays like this. No. 2 X could be the UK i.e. with many past and present cultural influences and generally stable, with harmony between people, a mature democracy ensuring individual freedom and social responsibility, making it unnecessary for a Police State. No. 3 X could be a country like Libya i.e. where chaos rules due to competing armed militias since the overthrow of dictatorship. No 4 X could be a country like Brazil, which despite having democracy and a diverse culture is inherently unstable due to other political and social factors.

**Fig. (i)** Societal Paradigm Model



All the above is highly judgmental and generalised from the perspective of a smug, white, middle-aged male living in a western country, aka me! Although there may be more than grains of truth in the four categorisations (whatever that is), it is fraught with difficulty because of the subjectivity of myself and also the weakness of generalisations. For instance, if I went down the road to another area of London, I could encounter an area of mono-culture where people feel excluded from the various systems of liberal democracy and would consider themselves harassed by the police to the extent that they felt they were living in a dictatorship. Nevertheless, one could still assert that 'in general' the UK is a stable society, although as in other stable societies, all this has come crashing down in times of stress, manifesting itself in social unrest. As William Golding illustrated so vividly in his novel 'Lord of the Flies', so-called 'civilisation' is a thin veneer covering all manner of nasties associated with the base instincts of humans. Notice again that none of this is directly linked to how 'environmentally friendly' any given society might be. For instance, North Korea might be more 'eco' than the UK simply because it has more poor people with lower per capita carbon footprints.

### **Stronger, yet weaker**

Once industrialisation took hold, specialization helped us to develop a vast array of technologies. This meant that although collaboration and cooperation were essential, it was in the context of individuals having a narrower range of life skills i.e. we literally became cogs within a machine. Today, we may be able to change a light-bulb, but we can't individually make one. Most of us dumped into a wilderness wouldn't have the first idea on how to survive.

Anthropologists and Historians used to portray the change from Hunter Gatherer to Horticultural/pastoral to Agrarian and finally to Industrial (and now 'Post-Industrial') as an inexorable linear path of 'progress' and ever more refined specialisation. A prime example of this narrative comes from Currier (2015), who says that eight technologies freed us from the biological constraints of our ape ancestors and all other creatures i.e. spears and sticks, fire,

clothing and dwelling, symbolic communication, interaction technologies (e.g. transportation, writing), precision machinery (e.g. clocks, steam engines) and digital information. In the technological sense this is indeed progress, but at the cost of increased unsustainability in social and environmental systems. Pérez-Castro & Graber (2019) rightly criticise this blinkered perspective, as it largely ignores the possible dystopian and catastrophic consequences. They also point out that for many people the dystopia and catastrophe has already been created by the technology, both today and throughout history (Dark Satanic Mills in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and exploited Bangladeshi clothing workers today being just two examples).

It seems that our technological progress always outstrips our social progress and therefore, stymies our ability to cope with it. Who for instance anticipated the challenges of social media in the form of cyber bullying and the vulnerability of an individual's data? Only the benefits were sold by the corporations pushing the hard-ware and soft-ware and we are now in catch-up mode to counter the negative effects.

Although on the whole our hunter-gatherer ancestors lived more sustainably because they were more attuned to the natural world, just as crucially, they were relatively small in number. Their success in developing new technology sowed the seeds of our present sustainability problems, as witnessed by the destruction of species and habitats in their wake (Tudge, 1996, p.609) and Harari (2014, p.65).

Durkheim (1858-1917) articulated very well the idea that society has a life of its own that stretches beyond our personal experiences and this was reinforced with his aforementioned study of indigenous people. He developed a type of social psychology to explain human situations. As a consequence of this, he concluded that society is greater than the individuals who compose it and indeed controls individuals through the establishment of cultural norms and values. These are present in every aspect of our lives and influence our behaviour as individuals and in groups. Because society has this transcendent power, it can shape thoughts and actions and promote one sort of narrative over another. This is literally a 'common sense', which also means that it can be manipulated by powerful individuals and groups for good or ill. So, if the dominant narrative says its 'good to have conspicuous consumption for individual gratification and social standing', is it any wonder we are exhausting the finite resources of the planet? Marx rejected this 'common sense' description, describing it in more loaded terms as 'false consciousness' - perhaps another way of saying a collective delusion. He, unlike Weber, believed in a sort of economic determinism that formed the social fabric i.e. that economic production and consumption were controlled by elites who exploited everyone else and that this perspective needed to be used to change this iniquitous system. Weber thought that other social forces were just, if not more significant and also that social theory should be neutral and not activist in nature (Morrison, 2006). Reich (1970), further developed the concept of false consciousness as featured below.

### **Individuals Rule, OK?**

To get at the nub of individualism one only has to reach for a dictionary i.e.

the idea that freedom of thought and action for each person is the most important quality of a society, rather than shared effort and responsibility (Cambridge Dictionary online, 2019).

Although this is a useful definition, it's far from the whole story. For instance, by placing individualism above communal effort it implies selfishness and egocentricity. Like any other concept there are no absolutes and one can get into deep philosophical discussions about what degree of individualism is acceptable when it has the potential to have a detrimental impact on the individualism of others (knowingly or unknowingly). Chomsky (2013) thought that modern US individualism was inherently selfish and compared it to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century variety which embraced cooperatives where people in rural areas would band together to help local economies and improve educational standards. The same applied in the UK at this time where self-improvement was valued, but not at the expense of others (although in reality this was far from the case due to deep seated class privileges which persist to this day). Chomsky says that further mass-industrialisation and divisions of labour snuffed out, or curtailed much of the cooperative movement.

Neoliberalism as exemplified by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980's, encourages a certain sort of individualism through the system of 'individual responsibility' and 'individual choice', hence the desire of the manufacturers of consumer products to employ enticements through individualised marketing (increasingly via the algorithms of online media). This is itself a construct of what is meant by individualism and can hood-wink us into thinking that in this modern age, we have much more individual freedom. It's like a hand-reared tiger in a cage valuing its freedom of movement within said cage and not realising that its potential for much wider experiences is being constrained by the cage itself.

There is a vast set of literature emanating from ancient Greek philosophers right up to present day which explores aspects of individualism and how its various manifestations and interpretations have positive and negative effects. Some of these, centre upon the juxtaposition of individualism and collectivism and how some societies such as the USA are more inclined to the former and societies such as China, the latter. In individualist cultures, individual uniqueness and self-determination is valued. However, individualist cultures tend to believe that there are universal values that should be shared by all (Neoliberal values being one example), while collectivist cultures (where toleration exists that is), tend to accept that different groups have different values, for example one tribe venerating trees while another might venerate water. Overall, China wouldn't fit this model due to its communist central control and general intolerance of minorities.

As ever, the situation is much more complex, for there are many and varied kinds of individualism and collectivism as well as hybrids in between. For example, even if a nuclear family is quite isolated, it may still have some extended family links, or belong to a reasonably supportive local community. This where social media can help rather than hinder by connecting people who would otherwise be cut off from others. There are also various models which illustrate different types of individualism and collectivism. Singelis et al (1995) defined the constructs of horizontal (H), vertical (V), (I) and collectivism (C) and supported this distinction in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. These constructs were defined as:

*Vertical collectivism*: perceiving the self as a part of a collective being willing to accept hierarchy and inequality within that collective.

*Vertical individualism*: perceiving the self as fully autonomous, but recognizing that inequality will exist among individuals and that accepting this inequality.

*Horizontal Collectivism*: perceiving the self as part of a collective being but perceiving all the members of that collective as equal.

*Horizontal Individualism*: perceiving the self as fully autonomous and believing that equality between individuals is the ideal.

Hines (2020, p.60-61) highlights how feminists, such as the academic Eleanor Wilkinson, see monogamous marriage as an individualist and capitalist construct, because it's designed to 'optimise relationships' and formalise the way that the government and corporations deal with couples i.e. having more control due to legislation. This also counters the collective approach to sex and child-rearing that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Utopian movement and which is still practised by Mormons today. These groups were and are anti-capitalist and localist in nature. This also ties in with the reason for marriage in the first place, which was all about the formal reallocation of property and resources from one generation to another and to consolidate male dominance. Although these advocates of 'free love' and polyamorous relationships may seem 'weird' to many- I mention them because a visiting alien may think the same about marriage and associated tie-ups with the State and the commercial world.

One can see that Neoliberalism is the natural bed-fellow of individualism because of its emphasis on small government and market forces influenced by personal choice. This isn't saying that Neoliberalism advocates 'every person for themselves' and Neoliberals would stress the importance of individual responsibility and a moral imperative to be 'good citizens' and to be empathetic and cooperate with others for the common good (hence the belief in universal values). The teachings of most world religions would reinforce this, as would belief systems such as Humanism. This is also where philanthropists would derive their credibility. It really comes down to how autonomous an individual actually is and how this is viewed by the mores of any given society and to what degree it's encouraged or discouraged.

### **The Big 'I Am'**

An individualist society can be characterised by having Nuclear Families. Hofstede (2001, p.227) says:

Children in this situation...learn to think of themselves as "I" [which] is distinct from other people's I's, and these others are classified not according to their group membership but according to individual characteristics

In contrast, the aforementioned Utopians educated their children never to say "me" or "my", but always "we" and "ours".

Traditional Japan is an interesting case. Befu (1971, p.38) saw this society as lying in-between the extended and nuclear family structures and he termed this 'linear' or 'stem' families. The stem family might have one older child who remained in the family home after marriage and maintained the family line, but it was also possible that outsiders could be adopted to serve this function. Hofstede thinks this might explain why the Japanese can transfer their family loyalty easily to other groups, including the companies they work for (who cater for this in many social ways which creates a more compliant workforce).

As ever, one must be careful not to over-generalise, but one can see that as Neoliberalism takes hold, a certain type of consumptive individualism seems to increase and thus people

become 'Human Resources' as part of demand and supply chains, causing social ties to weaken. This can even be seen in places like China, caused by the vast and rapid movement of people from the countryside to industrial cities and the emergence of business entrepreneurs and a larger Middle Class. This has caused many problems for a totalitarian government with its desire to modernise, against its desire to retain tight central control over the economy and the people. Having more Middle Class people also means much higher consumption per capita and this situation pertains in other developing nations which further accelerates biosphere degradation.

### **Beware of Greenwash...again!**

Green Wash can occur when it comes to 'decarbonising' and where the alternatives might be even more damaging. An example of this crooked thinking from an individualist perspective goes like this: set a target for everyone to replace their petrol or diesel vehicle with an electric one, while at the same time ensure that all the electricity needed is produced from renewable energy. This will cut CO<sub>2</sub> and other emissions and thus help to alleviate Global Heating and adverse respiratory effects. What this thinking doesn't take into account is the *embodied carbon* of the new electric cars and the fact that there would still be a need for maintaining and possibly expanding the road network (roads are constructed from refined minerals and a nasty hydrocarbon called tar). Also, the production of rare metals would need to be increased which would damage the lithosphere and many habitats, thus reducing the Earth's capacity to absorb carbon. Apart from the 'hidden' emissions of embodiment, there would still be emissions from the brake pads and transmissions of the cars, which have been shown to be just as toxic as exhaust emissions (Jupp, 2020, online). Battery production itself is a very toxic process (Opray, 2017, online) and the extra nickel needed alone would cause an expansion of damaging mining in sensitive ecological areas, including possibly the sea-bed (Jamasmie, 2019, online). It would also increase the health hazards of miners and their communities. The dominance of individualism would persist, thus public transport would still be seen as '2<sup>nd</sup> class' and there would be fewer national resources available to improve or expand it. Overall, this is an example of 'greening' the present economy, rather than introducing an alternative model.

It's ironic that the traffic chaos we see today was predicted by a UK government commissioned study called 'Traffic in Towns' (also known as 'The Buchanan Report' after its Ministry of Transport author). Published in 1963, it said that traffic management couldn't be improved by simply providing more road space and that car use in towns and cities would need to be curtailed. It had many other innovative suggestions for better urban design which planners semi-adopted. However, it was against the individualistic grain because at the same time public transport was being drastically cut back as car ownership grew. In 1994 another government commissioned report stated:

has development of the motorway and trunk road programme over the last 30 years influenced the number and pattern of vehicle trips on the system? - our answer is an unequivocal "yes". Any other response defies credibility (SACTRA, p.165, 1994).

Yet despite this recognition, the overall strategy has been one of accepting the inevitability of increased car use and the need to manage this. No question of having a policy which would necessitate reduced car production which would inevitably damage the hallowed GDP.

## Who will save us?

Proponents of Neoliberal individualism would say that it's the best societal model for human well-being and planetary sustainability, because with astute legislation 'The Market' can solve all ills. I would say that Neoliberalism is based on a kind of pseudo-individualism because of the manipulative effects of the market i.e. a consumerist narrative promotes a false sense of 'individual choice'. In this light, it has a stultifying effect on the individual, with its commodification of every part of life and the rule of elected governments often being usurped by unelected corporations intent on maximising profits. This is where the Tiger's Cage analogy applies. Individualism is compromised through various media manipulations of our confirmation bias, by exerting electronic group pressure and creating affiliations to consumer culture. It seems increasingly doubtful that the 'Invisible Hand of the Market', responding to individual choices, will work quickly enough to avoid environmental tipping points, let alone reverse the accumulated damage to ecosystems.

Perhaps pursuing an individualist narrative of any kind is a dangerous red herring. After all, as a species we are essentially social animals who mostly conform to the group, rather than being renegades. As a result, we are more inclined towards collectivism than we like to think. Perhaps we should embrace this, rather than see it as a type of social repression. Yes, we are all individuals who should enjoy rights and freedoms, but not at the expense of others and the sustainability debate highlights this like no other. John Dunne's poem neatly sums this up.

*No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend's  
Or of thine own were:  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind,  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.*

The famous scene in the film 'Monty Python's Life of Brian' shows the paradox contained within our notion of what it is to be an 'individual'. The pseudo-Christ, Brian tries to convince a fawning crowd that they shouldn't follow him. He berates them by shouting "You're all individuals". They respond in unison, saying "Yes, we are all individuals!".

Yet we all *are* individuals and this doesn't have to be shackled to Neoliberalism. To explore what sort of individualism we might need to help us achieve sustainability, let's take a look at how education has been affected by the Neoliberal narrative.

## Shrink-wrapped Education

Apart from ‘smaller government’, there’s been another shrinkage at large as Neoliberal narratives have come to dominate. This has been in the area of humanistic attitudes to education connected with democracy, critical thinking and the development of the individual as a unique person, rather than one who needs to fit into a pre-ordained niche. This is being subsumed by education for economic growth, where credentialism and vocationalism for a global market are seen as the main drivers. It’s overlooked that industrial productivity can increase due to improved technology, but that areas of life such as education can’t, so these areas will always need increasing government resources. As Bergman (2017, p.120) says: ‘Unlike the manufacture of a fridge or car, history lessons and doctor’s check-ups can’t simply be made “more efficient”’. However, education does fit this model if it’s operated like a conventional industry. Whether this is possible without corrupting what education actually *is*, is questioned by practitioners such as Williams (2018, p.33) who says teachers and pupils are:

treated as cogs in an Orwellian accountability machine with only one goal: to make the numbers go up. Because as long as the numbers keep going up, things are getting better. Right? If politicians are in power, their vested interest is in numbers going up to prove their reforms successful. If they are not in power, their interest is in suggesting the numbers are in fact nonsense, in order to achieve power.

All this leads to a reductionist curriculum which purports to tap directly into the ‘economic health’ i.e. rising GDP of the nation. This reflects the much-quoted philosophy of Charles Dickens’ fictional teacher Thomas Gradgrind in ‘Hard Times’ who says:

Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of any service to them.

It just shows how ‘Victorian values’ persist within a Neoliberal narrative and that the satire of Dickens isn’t obsolete. They also reflect the thinking of the Professor Hans Eysenck, who Wiseman (2007, p.7) considers

: one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century...Famous for liking the phrase, ‘If it cannot be measured, then it does not exist.’

## Neoliberalism and Education in England

To aid Neoliberal individualism, the school system is utilised to help make people ‘independent’, so that they can leave their families after schooling to set up on their own, rather than being inexorably shackled to existing units. In the UK, it’s been seen as ‘tragic’ that young people cannot do this as easily as previous generations, due to rising house prices and ‘Austerity Economics’ following the 2008 Financial Crisis. These have forced many to remain living with parents well into their 30s. The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) showed that the percentage of young adults living with their parents in the UK had risen from 21 per cent in 1996 to 26 per cent in 2017, rising from 2.7 million to 3.4 million in the past

two decades. Similar trends exist in the USA, where it's seen as not just tragic, but positively anti-American. As Hamlett (2018, online) starkly puts it:

They're the millennials who've failed to live up to the idea of success our Protestant work ethic-obsessed society has shoved down their throats. They're the ones finally doubting our long-held convictions that material gain, self-reliance, and that all-important guiding principle – *freeeeeedoooooom* – are what determine our sense of worth and give us purpose.

This stigma is far less present in Mediterranean countries, such as Italy and Greece, where rates of people aged 25-34 living at home are 46% and 51% respectively (Coyette et al, 2015, p.42) and this is not directly linked to suffering the most after 2008. For cultural reasons, they continue to have more extended families and thus having live-in adult children is positively welcomed.

The Nordic countries have only about 4% of adult children living at home (Coyette et al, 2015, p.42). They are highly individualist, yet this is off-set by having high expenditure on public services and being much richer per-capita with low density populations, making housing less of a problem. Thus, they don't fit the Neoliberal model of the UK and USA. However, the insidious philosophy of Neoliberalism continues to seep into Europe as witnessed by the liberalisation policies of President Macron in France and through the austerity measures inflicted on southern Europe by the more economically prosperous northern Europe. As Klein (2007) outlined in her book 'The Shock Doctrine' has been used to good effect to dismantle many public services, which previous generations thought were sacrosanct.

Although Neoliberals talk of the need for Meritocracy, this is in the context of the testable narrowed curriculum described above. This has been manipulated by some people who are able to 'play' the mechanistic system by living in certain post (zip) codes with schools that produce better exam results and/or paying private tutors to help their children pass said exams, who therefore rise to the top, ensuring them 'better' jobs with better pay and thus better i.e. higher levels of consumption.

### **Sustainability for all?**

Social sustainability in the context of the themes of my book, comply with a type of Utilitarianism (Greatest Good for the Greatest Number) propounded by Jeremy Bentham in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Greatest Good also incorporates the idea that everyone has a right to a good quality of life and happiness, with not only basic needs taken care of, but the capacity for experiencing the full range of pleasures as long as these don't compromise the capacity of others or have detrimental impacts on the biosphere. What is meant by this is open to wide interpretation. One always has to be wary of who defines what is 'Good' and Utilitarianism can mask massive manipulations and injustices inflicted on the majority by a tiny powerful minority. Also, what is 'Good for Everyone' in the short-term, might not be in the longer term if valuable resources are squandered. As an aside, Bentham also thought that: 'The age we live in is a busy age in which knowledge is rapidly advancing towards perfection' (Porter, 2000, p. 47). This seems like the arrogance associated with rationality, which in turn has led to a hero worship of technology at the expense of environmental integrity.

Social sustainability links with ‘socialist’ and ‘commonwealth’ ideas, rather than rampant, selfish individualism. This is where thinking can get blurred by the associated politics. It’s important therefore to focus on the content of some of this thinking, rather than the immediate dismissal of it, based upon inherently biased political dogma and labels. Being able to do this is a very important part of developing a sustainability perspective, through the pursuit of ‘impartial’ critical thinking.

### **The Magic of Merit**

In a liberal meritocracy, in theory anyone can ‘rise to the top’. The definition of meritocracy is:

a social system, society, or organization in which people get success or power because of their abilities, not because of their money or social position  
(Cambridge Dictionary, 2019, online).

However, despite notable exceptions, this meritocracy is often illusory. In addition, it skews the value of societal groups as highlighted by Bregman (2017). It espouses the notion that a Neoliberal ‘small government’ is a Good Thing and also brings with it the belief that public services are a ‘drain’ on the economy and are by nature ‘inefficient’ and ‘unaffordable’. Bregman (2017, p. 120/121) says:

When you’re obsessed with efficiency and productivity, it’s difficult to see the real value of education and care. Which is why so many politicians and taxpayers see only costs. They don’t realise that the richer a country becomes the more it should be spending on teachers and doctors. Instead of regarding these increases as a blessing, they’re viewed as a disease.

It’s overlooked that in theory (as deluded as this is because we live on a finite planet), industrial productivity can always increase indefinitely due to improved technology, but that areas of life such as education cannot, so these areas will always need increasing government resources. As Bergman (2017, p.120) also says: ‘Unlike the manufacture of a fridge or car, history lessons and doctor’s check-ups can’t simply be made “more efficient”’. He also argues that a refuse collector is far more valuable to society than a banker and therefore, should be paid more. If this sort of logic pervaded the whole of a society, then the hierarchies shown above would be radically different.

Piketty (2014) looked at the concentration of income and wealth from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present and developed a grand theory of capital and inequality. His thick tome was summarised better than I ever could by The Economist (2014, online) and I paraphrase it here. He said that as a general rule, wealth grows faster than economic output, which means national income becomes concentrated in the hands of relatively few people, unless there is a rapid economic growth spurred on by technological progress or rising population. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, this income was concentrated in the hands of rich families who collectively were far wealthier than the state. Only wars and depressions disrupt this and when combined with higher taxes, bankruptcies and the expansion of welfare provision, the wealth of the few shrinks and society becomes relatively more egalitarian.

I think that Neoliberalism has returned richer nations to this process and we seem to have the 'patrimonial capitalism' as described by Marx i.e. small State with power lying with individuals and corporations.

### **Stuff Rules ok?**

Marx predicted revolution, but didn't take into account the massive amount of surplus stuff the capitalist, high-tech economy could produce and it is this stuff which on the whole keeps us 'happy' and generally anaesthetised and compliant. This is aided and abetted by systems of administration which keeps us in our place. Marx also didn't envisage the vast number of new jobs created by capitalism, which greatly expanded an aspirational and acquisitive middle class, which in turn a more prosperous working class aspired. Marx thought that religion was the opium of the masses, but it transpired that encouraging everyone to buy stuff was a much better tranquiliser.

There is another aspect of this 'Stuff Syndrome'. For example, when I'm dealing with a malfunctioning domestic appliance or stressing that an online purchase parcel is late. These are the 'First World Problems' which often distract us from the realities of our impact on the environment. Positively and negatively, stuff has us in its thrall and is literally the product of our over-consumptive system. I've heard it said that any item you possess, however small, has a piece of your time attached to it. This means that the more things you possess, the less time you have for everything else, such as relationships, self-awareness or deep thinking. Think about this the next time you're stressing about a car break down, or you're putting together flat-pack furniture.

The work of sociologists Young and Willmott (1975) can shed further light on why 'stuff' is an opiate and its relation to individualism. They developed a model called 'The Symmetrical Family' also known as the 'Privatised Nuclear Family'. It was characterised by the following criteria:

- Separation between itself and the extended family
- Family life based around the home
- Free time being devoted to chores and odd-jobs (DIY)
- Leisure mainly home-based with increased TV usage
- Strong conjugal bonds
- Husband and wife relationship more about companionship by sharing experiences in and out of the home.

An earlier study by them in the 1950's seemed to show that there was a marked shift from community values to individualism and acquisitiveness when people were relocated from inner-city Bethnal Green in London to a new outer suburb. This documented how much the 'new' culture was dependent on buying stuff and experiences and on the basis of this, making comparisons with others i.e. 'Keeping Up With The Jones's', if not 'Outdoing The Jones's' in term of conspicuous consumption. General prosperity in the UK grew in the 1960's and 70's and this led to an ever-greater consumptive footprints e.g. travelling by car or having a foreign holiday by plane that we still see increasing today, despite a set-back caused by the aforementioned financial crisis of 2008. Perhaps Extinction Rebellion is a forerunner of a more widescale revolution against capitalism.

## Stuff and Nonsense

Whilst reading across the disciplines of history, sociology and psychology, it was all too apparent that a recurrent theme was the human desire to accumulate ‘stuff’. This even occurred in a handbook I read in anticipation of my small daughter becoming a ‘toddler’.

‘Mine’ is an important word in the vocabulary of the typical toddler. It may be applied to objects that actually *are* hers as well as to those that are not... [a toddler]...often resembles a squirrel getting ready for winter. She may hoard or hide toys, clothing, books, half-eaten food, household items of an astonishing variety...not to mention keys, credit cards, shoes, ties, scarves and jewellery... This squirrelling syndrome is normal and age -appropriate and in no way predicts a future of kleptomania...Acquiring...possessions.. brings a sense of satisfaction and security [which] can help build her ego...So keep a tolerant attitude towards your pack rat’s pursuits. Aid and abet her by providing her with a tote bag...And offer her a special drawer.. (Eisenberg et al, 1996, p. 247).

I can vouch for the fact that all this is true and there seems an innate desire for accumulating stuff above and beyond the aforementioned ‘stuff for status’ issue. What concerns me is that this acquisitive behaviour persists into adulthood and we continue to use large amounts of stuff to justify our existence and prop up our delicate self-esteem. This is further reinforced and fed by industries which need the consumption for inexorable growth. Another perspective on this is taken by Siegle (2016, online) who says:

Millennials have been robbed ...of their rights, including free education and an affordable place to live; instead they are distracted and satiated...by fast food, fast tech and fast fashion. This trio comes at a massive ecological and human cost.

Hood (2019, p.26), points out that our desire to possess things is hard-wired into our biology. He says that all animals compete for resources, but that those that live in social groups have evolved strategies to protect and share resources. Humans have taken this a step further by introducing the concept of ‘ownership’. This:

requires brains capable of theory of mind, detailed communication of intent, predicting the future, remembering the past and understanding concepts of reciprocity, convention, inheritance, laws and justice.

This is all well and good and has ensured that human societies remained stable from one generation to another, once they changed from hunter gatherers to settled communities based on agriculture. One could say that these were ‘sustainable’ communities, but within this process lay the seeds of future destruction i.e. the psychology of ownership was not just one of passing land and things to the next generation, but it involved exerting individual and familial power over others and broadcasting success (the origins of conspicuous consumption). This is also linked to the psychological need to be praised and approved of by others, which itself is linked to the status of ownership. So, although humans are highly cooperative, they are also highly competitive and with the rise of materialism the competitive/individualist traits have predominated. Hood (2019, p.165) concludes his book by saying:

We need to turn away from individual ownership because it separates us as humans and sets us against each other in a foolish quest to acquire as much as possible and more than we need. Ownership may be in our nature, but it is not in our best interests. We need to exorcise this possession.

Perhaps for this to happen, parents and educators shouldn't indulge the acquisitive toddler too much. As we all know toddlers grow up, but we all have an inner toddler waiting to burst out. Think about an adult having a tantrum!

### **Divide and Rule**

Privatised/Nuclear families come in all shapes and forms. An example from my own experience is of ethnic minority families where the adults and particularly the mothers command very little English. They have even less incentive to learn English because they can have TV programmes in their own language beamed into their houses via satellite channels. Another, is where on home visits prior to children entering Nursery, our teachers and support staff entered households with no books, yet TVs in every room.



Pergams and Zaradic (2008), noticed how visitor levels to the USA's National Parks had declined and put it down to the rise of electronic media in the home. This served to add to the privatisation described above and also further distanced people from the Natural World. Again, this points to isolationism caused by the accumulation and usage of stuff in the home. Another perspective on this comes from Isaac et al (2008, p. 281-282):

Solidarity among working people runs contrary to the dominant values and themes of competitive, possessive individualism cultivated by pervasive capitalist culture.

They go on to say that:

Capitalism's ever expansive and cumulative qualities have a tendency to turn everything into the form of a commodity in a relentless drive to expand surplus value...[profit]...This includes commodifying human beings as a 'factor of production' which can lead to conflict.

People suffering from privatisation and alienation are a poor match for the capitalist system which dominates the global narrative. This narrative holds most of the economic, cultural, material and political cards that are 'structurally unavailable' to most people. Poulantzas (1975) argued that the state's policy, laws and national offensives typically contribute to

solidifying multiple forms of capital while weakening, fragmenting and disorganising those working for it. He thought this caused more difficult and divisive forms of internal struggles (e.g. racial, ethnic and gender) than those encountered by those in power. This has been borne out by recent events, whereby the vast majority of people argue amongst themselves about a wide range of issues (e.g. immigration, austerity), leaving the ruling elite virtually unscathed.

Another aspect of privatisation in the UK that has crept in and sometimes swept in over the last 40 years or so, has been caused by the diminished provision of amenities designed to be used by everyone. When I was growing up in the 1960's and 70's most of my peers would use the local sports centre, particularly the swimming pool. It was run and heavily subsidised by the council and just about everyone could afford to go. Today, many families can't afford to go to such places. The ones that still exist might well be plusher, but they are invariably outsourced to private companies and the prices mean that many are more exclusive i.e. they exclude by default and design. In an age when child obesity rates are steadily rising (particularly amongst the poorest), this is astounding. This situation adds another societal division which can be added to aspects of health provision, housing, broadcasting, leisure, transport and education. The closure of libraries in the UK is another example of an important communal amenity being abandoned.

### **Benevolent Individualism**

From the earlier discussion about individualism and collectivism, one might take it that I'm against the former and for the latter. It's easy to attach the 7 Deadly Sins to individualism and then postulate that the sins are a product of it. This is too simplistic. Reich (1970, p.190-1) advocated a more authentic concept of individualism that wasn't linked to an overarching external belief system:

self does not mean to be selfish. It means to start from premises based on human life and the rest of nature, rather than premises that are artificial products of the Corporate State, such as power or status. It is not an ego trip but a radical subjectivity designed to find genuine values in a world whose official values are false and distorted. It is not egocentricity, but honesty, wholeness, genuineness in all things. It starts from self because human life is found as individual units, not as corporations and institutions; its intent is to start from life.

Implicit in this is the need for each individual to have a deep scepticism of the status quo and of 'conventional' ways of thinking, which tend to be linear with narrow points of reference used for mechanistic analysis. These have their place, but not to the exclusion of other perceptions, expressions or modes of thought. Reich's take on individualism is also at odds with the likes of Hobbes and contemporary philosopher John Gray, in that he believed in humans' innate goodness and generosity of spirit, rather than bestial selfishness. Reich sees individuals as victims of 'The System', rather than perpetrators of it for selfish gain. All this has implications for educators, because if we see ourselves as 'taming the savage beasts' i.e. children (and I've worked with people who do), rather than nurturing the finer qualities of humanity, then we'll approach our work quite differently. To my mind children/students shouldn't be seen as horses to be broken, so that we can maximise their utility. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' needs to stay anachronistic.

It's significant that Reich and Biesta (2017) write about people today being trapped in an adolescent state, not able to take personal responsibility for much of their lives (perhaps this is being generous given the previous discussion about our toddler tendencies!). In Reich's case he thinks that capitalism encourages this state because it is more receptive to superficial consumerism and for avoiding responsibility for the greater good. This is where a 'false consciousness' is created which dissipates individual and collective wisdom.

Plotkin (2008, p.176) also thinks that many in contemporary society remain in an adolescent egocentric stage, which stifles their development in skills for exercising discernment 'because every next person seems to be offering one form or another of the "answer" or the "secret"'. This means that people never really find self-understanding let alone a critical understanding of their society, leaving themselves more prone to the lures of advertising and other 'false' narratives. This also means that there is much out-sourcing of blame and/or shrugging of shoulders in the face of social inequality and environmental degradation. This links to the thinking of Friere's 'Magic Consciousness' and Reich's concept of 'Disneyfication, whereby people are conditioned to perceive the world in a very limited way by being inveigled by consumerism.

### **Another School of Thought**

Do schools inadvertently damage their communities rather than embrace them? The next section gives thoughts on this starting from an African perspective.

Social and Economic globalisation seems to have exacerbated social dysfunction and also wrenched us away from collaborative localism (I almost wrote 'comradely' localism, but that word is too loaded!). Following in its wake, 'modern' education systems have done the same thing in microcosm and also wrenched children away from forming local knowledge and appreciation of their communities. An African example provides an interesting perspective on this. Mbebeb (2009, p.26), quoting the work of Nsaminanag (2006), describes how:

indigenous African education tradition tends to connect children to their local context and activities of daily life [and] the school tends to separate and distance them.

I paraphrase below Mbebeb's account of how in pre-colonial Africa, learning was based on an 'indigenous educational system that was 'preparatory, utilitarian, communal and holistic in the learner's natural ecology – where things are happening'(Mbebeb, 2009, p.26). This was because in traditional African settings, occupations and vocational training of the young were tied to family or kinsmen. Socialization of family members and kinsmen into economic roles, became a 'cultural value' in respect of the age-old utilitarian education practice. Learning 'mostly occurred through imitation, observation and apprenticeship, where learners were socialised into life-skills in a life space which had a direct impact on vocational awareness, entrepreneurial drive and employability'. With the advent of colonization, attitudes to schooling changed and 'responsibility for economic and vocational education gradually drifted from family and community circles to academic institutions', because this was thought to be the best route to the sort of employment in keeping with a 'Developing Economy'. From this, 'uncritical acculturation' had promoted 'foreign values' that

compromised the local sustainability, because the people had been cut off from knowledge of the natural world and indigenous employment and survival skills.

It's significant that Mbebeb highlights the decline of entrepreneurial drive when one might expect the reverse. It shows how the modern education system had deadened this drive, rather than enhanced it. Although one might say that the modern system benefitted some, particularly if people moved away and attended Higher Education, the cost for assimilating into the global economy for many was high and in the long term probably less sustainable. One can see parallels with our Western experience, whereby Globalisation has atomised communities and where Margaret Thatcher's misused quote 'There's no such thing as society' has come to be a mantra for those who believe in unbridled individualism.

One mustn't romanticise the lives of rural Africans who can live very harsh lives. The expansion of formal education has brought many out of abject poverty (as it did in the West). However, this issue is part of the debate on 'Green Growth' in the 'Developing World' and whether it's really sustainable because of the potential for creating yet more rampant consumers. This situation also highlights what has already happened in the 'Developed' world. One wonders how much our present education 'deadens' the minds of young people, turning them into compliant consumers, rather than critical thinkers who might discover other roads to happiness and well-being. (see the Ken Robinson video on this subject <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U&t=13s> ) In this scenario, individualism is a sham perpetrated by global consumerist doctrines, which pick off individuals one by one who then become cogs in a 'false consciousness' of production and consumption. Thankfully, this situation is not fully Orwellian and we have free and alternative thinkers like Robinson (who sadly died in 2020), who constantly challenge the status quo. We also have many schools and teachers who do the same albeit in subtler ways through the development of critical thinking.

### **Village Policing**

As with other aspects of sustainability described so far, I've found it useful to get back to some basics, in this case what makes strong and lasting communities. Anthropologists have proposed that the ideal size for a human community is about 500 which was the optimum number for Neolithic people to survive. Dunbar & Sosis (2018) found that 50, 150 and 500 people are optimal sizes for successful and sustainable communities (albeit they were looking at rural ones). Once communities exceeded 500, the:

social cohesion seemed to depend on having a Top-Down authoritative structure, associated with the emergence of specialist social, political and economic roles (Dunbar & Solis, 2018, p. 110).

They also found that religious communities could exceed 500 without social friction more readily than secular ones. Perhaps this was because the former had a stronger set of shared values. Not much of this type of research seems to have been done in the area of education, but it makes me think that school leaders need to give more thought when looking at the structure of their schools. Could they be too authoritarian and stifle staff and pupil creativity just because of their size? If so, what can be done to break up the school into smaller units without causing unnecessary fragmentation and isolation? Perhaps the 'Bubble' concept adopted during the Covid 19 pandemic has continued value. Although none of my schools

were religiously affiliated, the strong sustainability ethos meant that there was a strong set of co-constructed values that everyone recognised and generally accepted. My leadership style didn't need to be 'authoritarian' most of the time, because it derived its authority from a communal source.

Social psychology describes how individual behaviour is influenced by cultural mores and physical contexts. For example, a car driver might honk the horn and shout expletives at another who annoys him or her, but would never do the equivalent as a pedestrian. In the UK, we might form an orderly queue at the post-office, but push our way forward to be served at a bar. Once one piece of graffiti emerges on a street wall, more will emerge if people don't do something about the first bit.

These examples can be construed as a social convention or 'common manners'. The judge Lord Moulton described them in terms as the '3<sup>rd</sup> Domain', the other two being 'Freedom' and 'Law'. This was governed by universal conscience created by a shared system of values (Blevins, 2019 online). If it prevailed in its purest form, the other two domains wouldn't be needed. If a school is able to strongly influence its community via its values, then it can benefit everyone.

### **Brain Drains**

Western Higher Education (HE) and particularly UK and USA HE, has been so influenced by the Neoliberal individualistic narrative that the types of courses it offers have been distorted towards less socially and environmentally valuable products and services, as well as the courses themselves being distorted in terms of their narrow curriculums. There has been another shrinkage at large as Neoliberal narratives have come to dominate. This has been in the area of humanistic attitudes to education connected with democracy, critical thinking and the development of the individual (as an actual *unique* individual rather than a unit of consumption and production). This is being subsumed by education for economic growth where credentialism and vocationalism for a global market are seen as the main drivers. Added to this, there has been a bias towards graduates who wish to earn a living in the financial sector. This has caused a 'brain-drain' from other areas of life, with the effect that these 'clever' people have spent their time coming up with complex financial packages to aid consumption and investment, rather than being used to help solve the complex problems which threaten our civilisation. A study conducted at Harvard, found that Reagan-era tax cuts sparked a mass career switch among the country's brightest minds, from teachers and engineers to bankers and accountants (Bregman, 2017, p.169). This exacerbates the problems of the lack of cross-disciplinary working in HE, because not only are there few incentives for this to happen, there is no moral imperative for it to happen and fewer people engaged in thinking deeply about larger societal issues.

### **Me to You**

We are all encouraged to develop our inner and outer selves which can bring out the Narcissist in us all, be it in the form of self-advancement for higher earnings, yoga or colonic irrigation. It's All About Me sums it up, yet as we've seen when times are hard there is an innate human drive to help others for no material reward and to strive for the common good. This is the force that will be needed to create a sustainable world.

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