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For some neighbourhoods, community gardens provide a way to re-localize a piece of the food system
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What Do We Want To Sustain? The Two Sides of Politics

Michael Gill

We talk a lot about sustainability, but there is not much attention paid to what it is that we are trying to sustain. Some merely think of sustaining the profit of what they are doing, while others want to sustain the way of living that humans have on Earth at the present time.

It is not always realised that the universe is developing and everything does eventually change. If what we want to sustain is life on the planet in some or many forms, we know we will not be able to indefinitely as our Sun will one day die one way or another. So, are we hoping to sustain a human culture together with the other many supporting life forms in a comfortable way as long as possible, or do we want to develop a life form that is capable of colonising other parts of the Universe?

I do think that our civilisation has reached a point where the two alternatives above are possible. I will call them *Localisation* and *Globalisation*. We have reached a density of population that the Earth can no longer support, and we are now knowledgeable enough to be

able to have some control of how the planet behaves. The question is: should we move toward a single Global Culture or should we try to form many smaller differing cultures that are more self-sufficient and live within the ecological capacity of their part of the Earth?

Centralisation

Centralisation creates a single monoculture administered by a top down centralised elite. This is often called *Globalisation*. Interestingly, the philosophical biologist E.O. Wilson who studies the form of society in the ants and bees suggested that this was the pinnacle of cooperative behaviour. He has recently upset many academics by altering his stance, saying, "Nothing at all can be learned from ants that our species should ever consider imitating" ([Wilson 2014](#)). He has concluded that such societies don't develop or progress; they cannot adopt new ideas in times of change and have sacrificed resilience for ever greater efficiency in a *Boom and Bust* civilisation.

As I see it, human society is being taken this way by the present world leaders, and the present monetary system that is relentlessly concentrating power in the top 10% of the population.

Among the reasons why *Globalisation* is alluring is the speed of development. Contentment does not lead to development and change as quickly as insecurity and discontent. Having a single world culture with its inevitable specialisation will divide society horizontally into different groups with different positions in society, ensuring discontentment and insecurity that will speed up the development of technology and forms of life.

I believe that there is a flaw in this argument. Mankind is not yet ready for this drastic change in our way of life. We are still too self-centred and too many of us are more interested in our own betterment than the betterment of society as a whole.

To be sustainable it will have to limit the population. I expect this to lead towards a world rather like Huxley's *Brave New World*, where a billion or so elite are served by perhaps two or more billion *inferior beings*. No need now for test tube clones, the elite could afford genetic improvements in both their physical and mental attributes. To keep the underclass in their place and in the numbers that they required they would be deprived of health services, education and food, and perhaps eliminated when they get too old, as is the case in *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell. The centralised power may divert all the Earth's resources to their own use, destroying the Earth, but one would hope they will leave sufficient resources for the other species, and the planet, to survive. It could well lead to some serious disaster that would put civilization back several hundred years. Though I have no idea how we might recognise when the time is right to take this course.

Localisation

Localisation, on the other hand would rely very much on the principals of subsidiarity and democracy, with family units joining democratically into local groups that would raise taxes and

use a local currency. I see this as a world of many small states having their own rules and cultures. None of the states should be big enough to act as bullies trying to force their ideas on others, but should be kept in balance by a world federation. All cultures would be constantly in development, looking across cultures for good ideas that would be suitable for their own ecological setting. This would lead to a far slower development of our, and other species, but hopefully to a better understanding of where life is heading and time to develop.

Local groups would organize around a market town forming larger market town groups, and market town groups in an area of similar climate and ecology would gather round a city forming still larger city groups. The cities would provide specialist services, paid for by taxing the local groups for the services that their communities would like to have supplied. The culture of these city groups would be determined by what the climate and ecology of the region can provide, resulting in a great diversity of life-styles (true diversity). E.O. Wilson implies that an element of competition among these co-operating groups leads to innovation and progress, and it is why mankind has been resilient enough to colonise almost every kind of ecosystem on the Earth.

These communities should be as self-sufficient as possible, relying on the next size grouping for physical and intellectual needs that they cannot or do not want to provide for themselves. It would still be possible to travel to different parts of the world, but travel and possessions from other cultures would be luxuries. Intellectual property should be freely exchanged and the internet should encourage science to be worldwide in its scope and cooperation, It is possible that a few laws should be universal (applying to all humans in the universe) but rules, regulations, and customs should be developed at the lowest possible grouping level and designed to create the lifestyle and population density the group desires and which suits their ecological environment without destroying it.

This is my vision. There are many advantages in bringing government to a more local level: it helps democracy and I believe it helps prevent wars. To reach such a contented peaceful society a consensus vision is necessary and should be drawn from a great number of visions of a proposed localised society.

Politics is in a mess. I believe that this is mostly because the old division between left and right has become obsolete. This division started as the working class versus the landed gentry. Then with the industrial revolution it morphed into the workers, represented by the unions, and the rich captains of industry and eventually into public ownership versus private ownership. Finally both sides, realised the advantages of centralised power for their cause, and adopted the monopolistic position. The ultimate goal of centralised power was aspired to by the WTO and the World Bank.

Centralisation wants growth, uniformity, and a world monoculture. Margret Thatcher said there was no such thing as society, and communities seeing their individuality and customs threatened, started to murmur discontent. People started fighting for change. Colin Hein and

Wendell Berry advocated localisation and the social strength of community, followed by David Korten with his belief that changing the story we live by would reform society.

To fight for a cause it is necessary to recognise one's opponents, and it helps to identify what you are fighting for. I would like to suggest that the former is now *Globalisation* and centralised power, while the latter is represented by *Localisation* with subsidiarity and democratic power distributed among a wide diversity of cultures. Left-Right politics would be no more, what we have now is sometimes called corporate power versus people power.

So now my plea is that if you must have a two party form of Government, get one party on each side of the argument and do not have both on the same side, and consider what it is we are aiming to sustain.

Michael Gill graduated from Princeton University in 1949 with Sigma Xi degree in Chemistry and an interest in Astrophysics. Gill spent 6 years slowly working his way around the World ending up in Uganda where he spent 10 years developing studio potters and building workshops for them. Gill holds a Bristol University teaching degree and has taught chemistry and physics.

The MAHB Blog is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

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