



“Summary of article by Mary E. Clark: Rethinking Ecological and Economic Education: A Gestalt Shift” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics. Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 73-76

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Leaders in many less developed parts of the world believe that the West has solved all the old economic and social problems, and that if the prescriptions of the West are followed, their problems will also be solved. What they fail to notice is the environmental destruction and social disintegration that Western economic behavior causes. This paper discusses two systems of social organization, one based on competitive individualism (Gestalt I) and the other based on the concept of community (Gestalt II). The author concludes that Gestalt II is essential for global sustainability, and offers some implications for education in the principles of Gestalt II.

Gestalt I: Linear Progress and Competitive Individualism

By the 1500s, long-standing hierarchical systems in Europe started disintegrating, giving way to a new world view based on new assumptions about human nature and the social order. Contracts between self-centered, competitive individuals with a right to property were viewed as the foundation of societies. Self-interest and competition were seen as ways of maximizing a nation's wealth. Wealth and power were a sign of virtue, and the pursuit of utility and pleasure became the supreme goal of life.

This view of the world has led to problems. Its driving force, material reward, demands constant growth, which results in constant stimulation of throughput. This has run head-on into environmental limits. Other problems that have resulted from this competitive structure are psychological in nature. The pursuit of rank, power and ability to consume have destroyed meaningful community, creating psychic angst throughout all levels of society. Finally, competitive individualism has led to misconceptions in our understanding of evolutionary and ecological processes. We have mistakenly taken evolution to represent a continuum of "progress" from lower to higher states, with humans at the top. An even more pervasive misconception is that "competition" underlies all of Nature. It must be understood that evolutionary success is not a matter of winning, but one of "fitting in."

Neoclassical Theory and the Problem of Values

Economics as a discipline has ignored or simplified the relations between economic activity, Nature and the human psyche. Different definitions of value notwithstanding, market prices are the single yardstick of value. One problem with this approach is the conflating of the trivial and the life-giving, and of "costs" and "benefits." Another is how one assigns "prices" to social

relations, the environment, and other "goods" that fall outside the market economy. Economists seek to solve this problem by commoditizing everything and attaching a price. Where prices cannot be obtained directly, they invent shadow prices. However, when assigning shadow prices to the loss of a forest, for example, economists tend to estimate transactional prices, not the price of long term social "income." While less arbitrary measures of value have been suggested for material objects (e.g., embodied energy), no numerical value can be assigned to our affective relations with our surroundings or with each other.

Gestalt II: Dominance of Community/Environmental Relations

An alternative gestalt views economic activities and material consumption as a link between Nature and human community. The establishment of viable societies or sustainable ecosystems requires a deep understanding of human nature, its needs, and its proper relationship with Nature as a whole.

Desired Environmental and Social Goals

The achievement of sustainability is the environmental goal, and this can apply to either the global environment or local and regional resources. The former implies a "top down," centralized management style under the direction of existing international power structures. Such a system may be needed in the short run to deal with climate change and other global concerns. However, in the long run effective global management depends on responsible management of local ecosystems, making use of the available knowledge base to answer questions such as what is local sustainability, and who is concerned about maintaining it.

Fikret Berkes and M. Taghi Farvar¹ point out that the usefulness of the knowledge of local people can far exceed that of scientific "experts." Traditional knowledge and cultural wisdom are usually ignored when a system is managed by such outsiders. The challenge is to integrate scientific and traditional knowledge. However, there is little motivation for outsiders to maintain sustainable local systems, since they can continuously move elsewhere to achieve their aims, as the multinational corporations have done, for example.

Regarding social goals, it is wrong to describe human needs as a "hierarchy" in a Maslowian sense. Such a view takes the isolated individual as the point of reference. Yet the sociology of non-human primates, as well as our own social context, shows that bonding, affection and social acceptance are primary needs. If the survival of the planet depends on providing people with a sense of community, then the West must abandon competitive individualism and insatiable acquisitiveness and move towards a communally-based society with shared social goals.

In the West, the degradation of communally owned resources is seen as inevitable due to the "tragedy of the commons." Berkes (1989) provides a number of examples in which the sustainable use of communally managed resources does occur. It is when social arrangements break down that the resource base may diminish. Thus, if local sustainable development is the aim, then there is a strong argument for strengthening communal property regimes over private property regimes.

Implications for Education

Education must play a significant role if we are to move towards a world view based on Gestalt II. Education is needed in the ecological principles of sustainable systems and in psycho-social factors creating sustainable societies. The following are proposed curricular approaches to global education:

- 1) impart a basic understanding of the principles of energy flow and dissipation, material recycling, services provided by "guilds" of organisms such as nutrient and water retention, pollination, pest-controlling species, etc., unexpected positive feedback mechanisms,² principles of island biogeography and species survival;
- 2) study the knowledge base of indigenous societies that have successfully managed resource systems for millennia;
- 3) develop an understanding of the complex and reciprocal relations among soil, vegetation and climate;
- 4) identify and understand the sources of the economic expectations of people in the North, and make an effort to reconcile these expectations with a sustainable level of economic development - this will require a far higher level of popular understanding of how modern industrial economies interface with the natural world; and
- 5) assist in the development of sustainability in the South through building a grounding in cultural anthropology, co-evolutionary social theory and human needs theory.

To bridge from the present to the future we first need to critique current economic theory, redefining "wealth," and clarifying "costs" and benefits." We then need to weave together new social theory, economic theory, and ecological theory into a comprehensive alternative gestalt that lays the groundwork for development of sustainable local communities globally.

Notes

1. Fikret Berkes and M. Taghi Farvar, "Introduction and Overview," in Common Property Resources, ed. Fikret Berkes (London: Belhaven Press, 1989).

2. "Positive feedback" does not mean beneficial, but uncontrolled and destabilizing.