

TRANSFORMATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

15-16.9.2008, Old Student House, Helsinki, Finland

Jarna Pasanen

Day one, theme culture, technology and dignity

Aruna Roy, a social activist from MKSS, India, shared her experiences living with the rural people in Rajasthan: One of the biggest problems that we face is that when you say that all in tradition is wonderful, that all small is beautiful, but you ask the communities what are the smaller traditions. Tradition is also *Sati*, tradition is also untouchability, and it is also gender oppression. Tradition is also putting a woman in a position of inequality. Tradition is also prejudices against the Muslims or Hindus or Jews or Christians.

That is why Dalits in India want globalisation because they'll have freedom from tramples of a traditional society, which has kept them subjugated for years. It is extremely complex.

That is why a society which has not seen modernism will not have an alternative system. It wants the formal system. It wants formal politics. It wants the schools. It wants the hospitals. The argument of the Left is being given for years, as in, why have an alternative school for the poor? Why not the formal school for the poor? Why do you need to have an alternative system of health? Why a barefoot doctor? **So it is only when you have everything, the alternative becomes acceptable. When you don't have it, then mainstream is what is most attractive.**

So whether it's politics, or whether it's development or whether it's access to basic livelihood systems that we have, there is no choice. I remember a right wing Indian, with whom I shared the podium once many many years ago, said, and his argument was that bringing in condoms to India was an international multinational plot, therefore, what you were doing was using modernism to influence Indian thought. We went into convolutions and I felt **the real question is not whether its tradition or modernity, the question is whatever the process we adopt, will it bring in equality, will it bring in social justice, will it bring in a better society?** So I think some of those trappings in India are very very different for us and we haven't solved some and we have solved some.

Anita Kelles-Viitanen, from ATTAC Finland, elaborated on the causes of poverty: With indigenous people, poverty does not result from the lack of productivity. **Poverty is not a technical issue. Now as in the past, poverty has its roots in dispossession, lack of rights and territorial abuse of indigenous resources.** Outside forces have always tried to control, restrict and even reduce their living space, at the same time blaming indigenous peoples for unsustainable practices. **This process of marginalisation continues with global extractive industries, bio fuel plantations, land speculation and even when establishing nature parks.** The root cause for poverty is structural. Social exclusion is built into social and economic systems.

It is also important to understand that technology is never value free. It is embedded in social practices of power, and controlled by its norms and values. **Technology comes with strings attached and it is embedded in value systems that do not necessarily work in the interest of the poor.**

The latest agricultural technologies such as GMO seeds - and like my cheap printing machine - come with expensive strings. In my machine, ink costs more than the machine. Since I need ink continuously, Lexmark has managed to hook me into a costly ink-dependency. GMO seeds work only if you use certain pesticides to which the genetic code will respond. The price of pesticides reflects

global market prices over which poor farmers have no control. Nor do they have control over crop prices. They are set by global market speculators, using futures and other financial instruments.

Therefore, we need to explore the nexus of science, technology, culture and power and how it is increasingly driven by market's logic. According to this logic, technology is a resource with benefits mainly to trans-national companies.

Shared explained, told, expresses elaborated???

Sushovan Dhar, Vikas Abhyan Kendra, India, explained the unfair trade-off between production and free-time: **It has been amply evidenced that human beings overwork, at times beyond their physical, emotional and psychological capacities, to sustain consumerist lifestyles, even as a number of studies suggest that once a level of material comfort is attained, 'non-positional goods' such as free time, make a greater contribution to human welfare than additional consumption of material goods.** However, labour productivity in the last hundred years have overwhelming been translated into economic output and conspicuous consumption than shorter work-hours. This sufficiently demonstrates industrialism's supposed bias towards producing more goods than leisure.

In fact, globally even in Europe, **we witness the convergence towards 'flexible' American model that intensifies exploitation and reduces free time.** This whole trade-off between production and free-time being resolved without "debate" is due to the enormous power enjoyed by capital to shape social developments or social course in accordance to its system and benefits. **Therefore, the productivity gains, coming from the ever revolutionising technologies which are also benefits of successive human labour goes in favour of capital and not labour.** This is because the fact that in case the productivity gains resulted in shorter working hours, the benefits of the increased productivity would have passed on to workers. However, the absence of economic growth would have resulted harder for the profits to grow. Although this is true for consumption as well as it might result in lower levels of consumption, the workers would be otherwise benefited as they have much more free time and are in command of more 'non-positional goods'.

Unnecessary longer working hours also drain people of their energy and they are left under-resourced to pursue in their free time creative activities, demanding and challenging, which can substantially increase satisfaction. However, **in the absence of sufficient free-time people prefer low demanding activities, like going to shopping malls or watching televisions which are either consumption-intensive or expose to endless advertisements.**

Ulla Valovesi, from Friends of the Earth Finland, talked about the different world view of the modernised people and the indigenous people: The limits of our natural resources have come visible, be that energy, metal, land, water etc. We have actually come to a crossroad: if we continue this way, all life on this earth is seriously under threat. If we want to have any future on this planet we have to unlearn our destructive ways of life and actively relearn sustainable ways for a whole society.

One reason for our destructive way of life is our rootlessness: we have lost our connection to the earth or for any place for that matter. That makes it possible for us to destroy our surroundings and just move on to new places or to rob what is needed from other places. In that process we end up displacing many other people as well who become also rootless.

One distinctive feature in indigenous cultures is that they tend to be more democratic than dominant cultures. The respect they have for the nature includes also respect towards people. That can be seen as a key element in sustaining a sustainable way of life. When people are denied real democracy, equality and dignity they will continue to fight that deprivation in any means available from subjugating other people to subjugating nature. That situation is itself disharmony and leads easily to destruction.

The Maris in the central Russia understand the nature is alive: every tree has a spirit, so does the forest, every lake, the sea, stones, even things made by people. **The sustainable way of life starts from their connection to this living nature.** It starts from the respective attitude towards life: towards nature with all the living creatures in it, towards other people, towards ourselves and towards the gift of life that we have been given.

This deep emotional, social, spiritual and practical unity has made the Mari very strong as a people and capable to defend those places and traditions together against formidable forces through centuries. Sacred groves can be seen as a very delicate technique to preserve the connection of a whole society with nature and that way also a sustainable future.

Do we dare to change our mind set from compromised technical fixes to building families, communities and societies with respect towards nature and other people? Are we able to find and build on those roots in our own culture that support real democracy and sustainable ways of life and separate them from those that have led to destruction?

Day two, theme ecological democracy: liberation from consumerism

Olli Tammilehto, activist and free lance researcher, explained the creation of dissatisfaction as the foundation of consumer society: **Commodities are bought because of their social, cultural and spiritual meanings and connotations, but they do not satisfy social, cultural and spiritual needs. As far as they satisfy, they do it only for a short while, as soon the meanings are moved by advertisements from old things to new ones.** You cannot buy the new ones at once, or perhaps ever. This creates frustration and dissatisfaction. Charles Kettering of General Motors stated already in 1920s: **"The key to economic prosperity is organized creation of dissatisfaction."**

Advertisement and the commercial media promote manipulation of meanings also on a wider cultural arena, using leaders and public figures in the production of life style models and idols. Living according to the models is possible only for a few, which creates eating disorders, depression epidemic, and other problems in our society.

History of advertisement dates back to astoundingly good results of the war propaganda during the First World War. Sigmund Freud's nephew Edward Bernays began to apply uncle Sigmund's theory systematically to commercial and political propaganda. He also invented a nicer term for the propaganda: "public relations" or PR.

The biggest problem of the elite after the First World War was widening voting right and social movements. Bernays' central idea in his work on propaganda was **"Taking the Risk Out of Democracy":** ***"The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country"***. (Edward Bernays: Propaganda, 1928)

People were convinced that they should not worry if they do not participate in decision making: the economy will produce the things everybody wants. An illusion was created that the official economic and political system will satisfy all the desires, you just have to wait patiently. **Now consumer choices seem to be the essential arena for democracy**, and communal and social goals are replaced by individual goals and as a result there are no movements struggling against power holders.

The consumer society is cultural imperialism of today. The consumer society is marketed as a model for the whole world and the political reasons for its development get obscured. Sociologists and philosophers cook up apolitical modernisation theories, and they only add to

constructing this political project as a natural evolution. To see the truth an earthquake is needed - maybe the climate change will work as one?

Eija Koski, from Reuse Centre shared the problems and challenges of the consumerist society: To decrease the consumption of goods, we should start thinking in services instead of thinking in products. What the consumer really needs is not the product, but the service the product is providing: No fridge, but cold food and drinks. No lawn mower, but short grass. No car, but getting to another place. No washing machine, but clean clothes. No book or magazine, but the content. This is ways it is unnecessary to everyone to own the product it self.

We should also start to ask some basic, but important questions about sufficiency: **"Do I really need it? Time is limited - how much to use for earning money to consume? Home is limited - does new stuff bring more harm than joy? The money is limited - who decides how to use it? The world is limited - is it more worthy than excess consumption?"**

After certain, rather low level, more consumption doesn't increase measured happiness. In the new economics of happiness we should consider the following things: Space use at home - the amount of useless clutter makes life unpleasant. **Never ending pursuit for more brings dissatisfaction.** Getting used to luxury deprives the joy as there are no challenges in life any more. Consumption takes time from more important things, as friends, family and hobbies. And finally: the one who consumes less has to work less; less material means more life.

Advertising is influential aspect of consumption. **We should value more the freedom from consumption needs as defined by others and the right to and ability for critical thinking and making independent choices.** Do you define yourself through being or owning?

Instead greed we should value moderation. **In the limited world, too much for one means too little for the other.** Moderation may not be giving up something but gaining something more important. Interviews of those who consume less tell that people search for communality, peacefulness, safety, contentedness in life as a whole, good consciousness, deepness and time to concentrate on things. Key words for sustainable development defined by the German "board of the wise" are slower, closer, less, better, more beautifully.

The dialogue was co-organised by Coalition for Environment & Development and Friends of the Earth of the Helsinki University.