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An Other Economy

The Voice of Sustainment

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We can ignore or forget the fact that the ground we live on is little other than a field of multiple destructions. Our ignorance only has this incontestable effect: It causes us to *undergo* what we could *bring about* in our own way, if we understood. It deprives us of the choice of an exudation that might suit us. Above all, it consigns men and their works to catastrophic destructions. For if we do not have the force to destroy the surplus energy ourselves, it cannot be used, and, like an unbroken animal that cannot be trained, it is this energy that destroys us; it is we who pay the price of the inevitable explosion.¹

Georges Bataille, 1967

The ideas to be rehearsed here had their genesis a decade ago. They still await their moment of development. Irrespective of attribution, this moment will certainly arrive for either an ascendant or beleaguered minority. Their first exposure was predominantly a critique of how the notion of economy is dominantly understood.² This brief

exposition aims to register another way of thinking and engaging the economic.

Notwithstanding that we exist in a historical moment hostile to speculative ideas, what is said here invites leaps of imagination.

A Case for Another Thinking

The dominant way in which (an) economy is understood, in both general and economic discourse, is as a restricted, abstracted process of (usually monetary) exchange which has intrinsic meaning. This thinking increasingly induces humanity 'to err in a serious way' – not least in undervaluing and mismanaging material resources.³

This restricted understanding of economy fails to grasp that exchange is, at its essence, a general condition of the being-of-being. Exchange, in every phenomenal domain, forms part of the meaningless essence of being, the flux of dynamic process, in which we ourselves are implicated.⁴ Our failure to acknowledge this general condition of exchange, this **general economy**, is at the very core of our being, and our worldly extending of, the unsustainable (i.e., the totality of all the material and immaterial forces that negate futures and that have been unleashed by humanity on their worlds and selves).⁵

Notwithstanding differences of language, projects, disciplines, geography and time, an understanding economy as the general condition of exchange is found amongst a scattering of thinkers who appear to have very little in common. It is firmly lodged within the philosophy of both Georges Bataille and Jacques Derrida (with their critiques of the restrictive economy and engagement with the notion of 'general economy'); in Gregory Bateson's fusion of biological and economic process (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 1972); exemplified in the total system of reciprocity presented as the basis of exchange in Marcel Mauss (*The Gift*, 1925); and it inflects the works of Georg Simmel (*The Philosophy of Money*, 1907).

What unites these thinkers' philosophical, sociological, anthropological and biological lines of inquiry is their recognition of the material and symbolic 'interconnectedness and entanglement of phenomena'. This recognition (as characterised by Siegfried Kracauer – one of Simmel's most insightful students⁶), and the thinking it has the ability to unlock, is still of enormous latent importance. Its unrealised potential has largely remained trapped in a variety of unfashionable academic discourses with inaccessible languages. Yet the influence of this thinking retained agency – again Simmel provides a clear example. As David Frisby's preface to the second edition of *The Philosophy of Money* tells us, many have 'stood on his shoulders'. Sociologists like Robert Merton, Erving Goffman, Lewis Coser, Talcot Parsons; radical political thinkers like Karl Mannheim, Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried

Kracauer; as well as contemporary theorists such as David Harvey and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, are all in his debt. One of Simmel's key revelations was to present exchange as indivisible from the animation of things, sociality and human beings as "... the purest form and most developed kind of interaction, which shapes human life when it seeks to acquire substance and content".⁷ For Simmel, exchange, as it occurs fundamentally, depended first on a seizing (a taking from the world which is not ours), sacrifice (a giving up to acquire), and an organising (of elements, values and symbolic mechanisms).

But such is the power of the addictive nature of the restrictive economy (as Bateson observed), and the accompanying faith in 'capital logic', that it completely displaces all other possible understandings and constitutes a complete regime of meaning. Globally, now for vast numbers of people, there is no other way of thinking exchange than as the money/commodity relation of the restrictive economy. Post the fall of Soviet communism, the restricted economy became even more constricted. Likewise, the hyper-capitalism of the information economy, wherein commodities, immateriality and meaning all fuse, marks a further colonisation of exchange by a market-based model. This pervasive condition of ever-extending commodification has become normality for recent generations, totally occupying imaginations. While this world-view has many manifestations, our concern here is to register its presence within design and architecture, which is not exactly a demanding task.

Design and architecture have become totally subordinate to the restrictive economy.

For almost every designer and architect, as well as most of those writing about, teaching and researching design and architecture, 'design' is taken to be a commodity to service the 'needs' of the market. This view is baldly stated in a recent book by Harold Nelson and Erik Stolterman: "Design is, by definition a *service relationship*. All design activities are animated through a dynamic relationship between those being served ...and those in service, including the designers ... Design is about *service on behalf of the other*".⁸ Nelson and Stolterman believe that it is this service relation that differentiates design from the arts and sciences. Thus 'creativity', ego, skills and knowledge are all mobilised to this end. The reward for excellent service: a good income and fame for the few. Although social and environmental conscience is exercised by a small minority, this is done within the dominant 'service provision' paradigm. Instrumentally orientated educational institutions (effectively all architecture and design institutions) totally comply with this model.⁹ This culture of design and architecture, its instrumental thinking, its bias towards technocentrism and its appropriation of fashionable sciences, all fall into and serve the restrictive economy.

To bond design to service within currently dominant views of economy, is to neuter it and render it completely incapable of engaging the fundamental, absolutely critical and pressing problems of the age. In contrast, design can be positioned as an agency of the ethical and, by implication, of the future. As such it can be directed to serve the advancement of sustainment, and become accountable to an economy that accepts its subordination to the 'general economy'. Here, rather than viewing design, the arts and science as having different orientations (as Nelson and Stolterman do) they, in their difference, beg to be seen to serve the same end.

We would do well to recognise that for all its apparent 'success' the restrictive economy is a fated failure – in the last instance, all it can serve and sustain is itself, and in so doing it has no allegiance to 'human being' (or the-being-of-being itself):

The theorists of the restrictive economy not only display a limited ability to comprehend limit but also fail to recognise its own restrictiveness. They work with a very curtailed mechanism to generate, recognise and respond to feedback.¹⁰

Economics of Unsustainability

Economic critiques of humanity producing and consuming itself, and much more besides, into unsustainability have been around for a while. The formation of the Club of Rome, the publishing of the *Blueprint for Survival* in *The Ecologist* (by its editors) and *Limits to Growth* (by Donella Meadows *et al*) in the early 1970s, marked a key moment in how initial debates were framed in terms of expanding populations, limited global resources and the proposition that, economically, a 'stable state' could be established. Today, we now have a far more complex picture of the nature of human-induced environmental damage, one not merely based on sheer numbers, but rather on the multiplicity of impacts attributable to peoples' differential behaviour as producers, consumers and global dwellers. Of course the language of (un)sustainability is of more recent vintage.

The mainstream and oft-cited definition of sustainability comes from the 1987 World Commission on Environment, Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*. The Report centred on 'sustainable development' defined as "... those paths of social economic and political progress that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Here, sustainability was directly linked to economic growth, but managed so that natural resources are used to ensure the "quality of life of future generations". This definition still acts as a key point of reference, but it is just not satisfactory.¹¹ In fact the position adopted by Brundtland is firmly within the restrictive

economy and carries a now widely adopted contradiction based on the notion that economic growth, as it is currently understood, and sustainability can be made compatible – that sustainability can be realised ‘without regrets’.

One does not have buy back into the ‘limits to growth’ position to oppose this proposition.

It is worth reminding ourselves that inequity, injustice and damaged psyches are as much symptomatic of the unsustainable as is environmental damage. They are all signs of a world that cannot continue to be and be as it is.

The restrictive economy’s ascendancy to a totalising, global system of exchange, arrived out of a long historical process that enfolded the demise of feudalism, the hegemony of rationalism (via the Enlightenment), the formation of modern state institutions and civil society, plus of course the rise of capitalism and social democracy. Francis Fukayama controversially defined the full realisation of the restrictive economy, and its political underpinning, as the end of history.¹² Without agreeing with either his analysis or conclusions, what is apparent from his, and his critics, analysis, is the *temporality* of this economy. It has a being in time, and thus is but a moment. It is between what preceded it and what will follow – when its moment ends, be it gradually or cataclysmically, another will follow. As is always the case, historical endings mark historical beginnings.

No matter how difficult the task, tentative the explorations, or heterodoxical the project in the eyes of ruling economic, cultural and political elites (‘bourgeoisie society’), we really do need to start to think about another kind of economy – a different basis of material and symbolic exchange. The imperative of the unsustainable actually casts us into situation that is far more urgent than such rhetoric suggests. What is lacking though is a language in which this urgency can be communicated.

Shifting from Quantity to Quality

The considerable institutional momentum of ‘sustainable development’ acts as a substantial blockage to a different thinking of sustainability, yet moving toward this thinking is absolutely crucial. Refusing to accept the inevitability of the endurance of a growth-based restrictive economy requires that another kind of economic system be contemplated. What is suggested is a shift from quantity to quality.

‘Quality’ is employed here to speak two understandings and agencies: the performative and the redirective, both of which need to combine to create and distribute wealth equitably – and this by means that sustain mind, matter, cultures and ecologies. Central to this notion of economy is a gross reduction in the ‘consumption’ of everything that is non-renewable and/or environmentally harmful, while at the same time delivering far greater ‘distributive justice’.

The performative gathers, and makes a statement about, the sustainment ability of a commodity. Specifically this goes to quality as (i) intrinsic characteristics (e.g., how well a product is made, functions and for how long, what it looks like; or, what service is provided and with what positive consequences), (ii) the degree to which a product or service creates qualitative improvements in immediate or general environments, and (iii) the extent to which a product or service improves the material, cultural and psychological life-conditions of individuals, families and societies.

Realistically, bringing a quality-based economy even partially into being will contest the quantity-based status quo. It will challenge the normative status of the restrictive economy, destabilise its 'logic' of value, de-naturalise its presence in everyday life, but above all, bring already inscribed major and inescapable problems into earlier focus. In so doing, the ability of its forms to have redirective agency has to be made to accumulate through practical examples, pathfinding projects and their affirmative consequences, but without those kinds of conflicts that serve the unsustainable. In particular it needs to go to four specific areas of action:

The Making of an Environment of Care

Care is normally taken to be something human beings exercise physically and emotionally – craft-workers, racing drivers, surgeons take care; likewise, charity workers, nurses, protestors and grief councillors care. Yet a completely other, philosophical understanding of care exists. This posits care as a fundamental, and essential ontological condition of being – care is vital for being to be.¹³ Care, so comprehended, is manifested in our unthinking ability to normally cross roads, climb ladders, use power tools or cut bread without injury. Against this backdrop, a quality-based economy would need to extend things that performatively care across all elements of working, leisure and domestic everyday life.

A Transformation of The Nature of Things

We need to demand so much more from products and services. Things should be expected to endure by the way they are made, the materials they are constructed from, how they function, what they look like, the energy invested in them, and the financial-material investment in their production technologies; or on the other hand they need to be extremely easy to remanufacture, recycle or be disposed of without environmental costs. These two principles, rigorously applied, would mean the elimination of a significant percentage of products currently manufactured. Likewise, some products need to be dematerialised by service substitution (be they new or improved services) – like, for example, tool hire, personal transportation, laundering and photocopying. More fundamentally, many of the things that currently exist as individual products

invite re-conceptualising as composite objects. Refrigerators, for example, require a heat exchange process, but the heat is wasted. This could be used to heat thermal mass, which could then provide radiant space heating. Heat is also essential for cooking. The implication is that kitchen core technology could be conceived and created that would substitute one product for two, three or four. Extending this thinking invites us to contemplate things that eliminate an excess of things. The investment in, quality of, cost and return from the ‘things that could be’ beg to be grasped as ways of creating considerable wealth from a dramatically smaller material base footprint.

A Transformation of Being with Things

In quite a different direct direction, the idea of rematerialisation invites developing. Rematerialisation is based on the recognition that software-driven automaticity is continuing to erode opportunities for physical effort, and with that, many of its benefits. One of the strategies of rematerialisation involves *displacing machines* with existing or improved hand tools and recoding the experience of using them as a means of learning and disclosure (being in *touch* with circumstances and the quality of material things). One can, for instance, displace the motor mower by the mechanical mower, the car by new kinds of pedal power, the leaf-blower by a traditional broom, the electric food mixer by a hand-powered device, and so on. There is also the possibility of gaining a sense of achievement through the development and exercise of new skills. Seeding these ‘developments’ to become trends would be a means to reduce invested energy and materials, as well as being critical for the sustainment of the self in an age of minimal physical activity and consequent rampant obesity. In so many ways ‘labour saving’ has become ‘life threatening’.

It should be emphasised that what is being talked of here cannot just be reduced to utility. Rematerialisation is in fact inseparable from remaking. What is remade, in often modest and mundane activities of the everyday, is a different relation to the world in which we dwell physically, functionally, aesthetically and emotionally.

Rematerialisation has further productive potential. The rewards it can bring have the capacity to re-align values concerning the expenditure of human energy, which could rupture the fetishisation of money (which, while initially a surrogate for value, became a value in its own right). One of the ways of doing this is to expose the material and symbolic costs of being unsustainable. This, in turn, could also modify the manner in which the restrictive economy is viewed, at least by the concerned few. It could equally provide the means to expose the economic and political inability to confront the un-freedom of the status quo and the limits that sustainment will demand (to secure that freedom which is the essence of being).

Creating Major Changes in Modes of Dwelling

Changing the nature things and services, via dematerialisation, elimination or innovation are worth doing, but by far the most important consideration goes directly to transforming how we dwell-in-the-world. This has partly been illustrated by reference to rematerialisation but demands go well beyond this imperative.

Somehow, and sooner rather than later, how we dwell in our selves (our inner dwelling) and how we dwell in the world with all other beings has to radically change. For this to happen a culture very different to the current cultures in dominance has to emerge. This culture would recognise: the impossibility of transcending anthropocentrism but the importance of learning how to take responsibility for it; the value of beliefs that celebrate and conserve that which is of greatest importance to the sustainment of everything of biophysical interdependence (biota, fresh water, soil and the fragile, damaged atmosphere that envelops us). At the same time, such a culture would accept that how human beings have acted in the past has rendered biophysical ecologies unstable, but it would not put absolute faith in science and technology to rectify this situation just so that today's energy and material-intensive lifestyles could continue on 'as normal'. Instead, it would seek, via changed modes of dwelling, to adapt to the different conditions that are beginning to unfold due to climate change. It would recognise that so many problems taken to be empirical and objective are in actuality relative and cultural, their degree of severity depending upon the perceptions, actions and values we bring to them. This culture then, would view adaptation to climate change not in terms of propping up the status quo, but rather transforming it.

Fundamentally, while science (and technology) should be appropriately mobilised to deal with some of the symptoms of some problems, causes so often require that we change how we dwell. Such change can only be created by cultural means that alter how one sees and acts in (and on) 'the world' in which one finds one's self. These changes are essential to trigger what will become the crucial political, ethical and of course, economic, transformations that realise a culture of sustainment.

Obviously the shift from a quantity to a quality-based economy represents a paradigmatic change of enormous proportions. Certainly it will not arrive by being projected as a utopia and it will not solve every problem. Certainly it will not arrive by outpourings of idealism. Rather, as the unsustainability of humanity (individualised and collective) becomes deeper and more evident, it will be driven by necessity. Without being able to predict when this moment will arrive, it behoves concerned, responsible and critical thinkers to entertain, elaborate, refine, review and extend debate on the concept. This task has to be adopted as a labour of love in the service of being.

Notes

1. Georges Bataille *The Accursed Share* New York: Zone Books, 1988, 23–4.
2. Tony Fry *Remakings: Ecology, Design, Philosophy* Sydney: Envirobook, 1994.
3. *Ibid* 21.
4. “We, as organic forms, are thus deeply implicated in what is sought to be understood, we are part of the exchange, the material in transit, the inventors of the explanation of process. More than this, we are the site of the dynamic that ‘flows’ from living the experience of exchange within economy, as changing matter Relations are thus kinetic, exchange is dynamic and the vectors that transport, move in all directions, through all elements, between the inert, the live, the decaying, the emergent, the scare and the excessive”. *Ibid* 159.
5. “Changing from the perspectives of restrictive economy to those of general economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thing – and of ethics.” Bataille *The Accursed Share* 25.
6. This remark appeared in an essay, ‘Georg Simmel’ by S.Kracauer published in 1920. They are cited in David Frisby’s *Preface to the Second Edition* of Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money* (trans Tom Bottomore & David Frisby) Routledge: London, 1990, xxvi.
7. Simmel *op cit* 82.
8. Harold G. Nelson and Erik Stolterman *The Design Way* Englewood Cliffs: Educational Technology Publications, 47.
9. For instance, debate within the higher echelons of design’s intellectual community (like the international PhD Design web list) is equally limited and (apparently unaware) simply rehashes discussions on questions that have been in circulation for many decades, like ‘What is design?’ ‘What are design studies?’ ‘What is creativity?’ ‘What is the relation between design, art and engineering?’ ‘What is the role of design educational institutions, and what should they teach?’ – and so on. Depressingly, the answers of the present are no better, and frequently worse, than those of the past.
10. Fry *Remakings* 164.
11. Brundtland is based on a number of very questionable assumptions, and a degree of bad faith in relation to the environmental debates that predated it. First, its anthropocentric bias towards future generations means that the interconnected interdependency of all biological life is not sufficiently acknowledged. Moreover, to appeal to the “quality of life of future generations” fails to recognise the unevenness of the human condition. If the socio-economic inequity of current generations is faced, then the issue of establishing a basic quality of life for several billion people has to be confronted *now*, as

does the excesses of 'quality' of that small percentage of the world's population that commands the largest percentage of its resources. Both poverty and wealth drive unsustainability – the former by depleting resources without the ability to renew them; the latter by disproportionate over-consumption. The kind of inequity is structural. It is inscribed into the banking system, the global labour market, commodity exchange and frameworks of international political power. Brundtland's idea of inter-generational equity needs to be subordinated to inter-species and inter-cultural equity. Second, and just as fundamental, is the need to challenge the assumption that the future can be secured via economic growth. This has allowed for the cultivation of a rhetoric of change and tokenistic actions, while maintaining the status quo. In large part this approach was underpinned by an unstated fear – 'unless capitalism was to be accommodated, any appeal to environmental protection would just not be taken seriously'.

12. Francis Fukuyama *The End of History* Penguin: New York/London, 1992. His claim that the 'victory' of capitalism and liberal democracy could be taken as a full realisation of humanity's history has been challenged by many, most notably by Samuel Huntington *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998. Huntington argues that the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism confounds the realisation of the hegemonic moment asserted by Fukuyama.
13. For a more developed exposition of care see Fry *Remakings* 101–140.