

# Back To The Future? Rebuilding Sustainable Economies And Communities

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In the context of crises—“political, economic and particularly, financial” and a “fundamental transformation” of power, diversity, globalizing inequity and job creation, the World Economic Forum’s Klaus Schwab [1] urges radical rethinking of “outdated and crumbling models” if we are to have any capacity to respond to the challenges of “building sustained economic growth, mitigating global risks, promoting health for all, improving social welfare and fostering environmental sustainability” [2]. Schwab’s call for new models, including what he calls “collaborative power,” “global togetherness,” a stakeholder rather than shareholder mindset and a turn from capitalism to “talentism” in efforts to mobilize “hidden talents,” includes much to admire—not least in the context of an open access journal committed to the Creative Commons, to community standards and to bringing down intellectual property and other fences and sharing resources for mutual learning. Such open access is critical to my own work on learning across our differences to rebuild communities and institutions; revalue Aboriginal and associative organizations; rethink corporate social responsibility, performance indicators and reporting standards; and promote community entrepreneurship and environmental sustainability [3-6].

Schwab’s critique of crisis and his proposed remedies are not entirely surprising given his commitment to the Social Entrepreneurship Foundation and the title of his intervention at the World Economic Forum, invoking as it does Karl Polanyi’s work of 1944 [7]. Polanyi’s study of the rise of the market economy and market societies did, of course, argue for the inevitable triumph of socialism. Schwab does not go so far; nor does he embrace the State Capitalism that is currently so prominent in the developing world [8] and so problematic in its relations to democracy. Nor does he endorse those who would blame a few individual, organizational, or national bad apples or would simply hit the reset button with minor regulatory change, bailouts and stimulus packages. Schwab’s comments instead recall Haque’s *New capitalist manifesto* [9] or Porter and Kramer’s [10] efforts to “reinvent capitalism and unleash a wave of innovation and growth” through the lens of “shared value”. But it may be that Schwab like so many others is so caught up in seductive stories of novelty and innovation that he overlooks talents and answers hidden in plain sight—obscured by dominant, even dominating, thinking widely represented as the only and natural way of thinking. He and others overlook the histories of how we have come to this tipping point and what knowledges, models, people and principles have been sacrificed in the process. Here I want to consider two powerful alternatives to the status quo—co-operatives and Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing both of which can be mapped readily onto the values and capacities Schwab is seeking.

We need to remember a history of the invisible hand’s anonymous ancillaries ‘terms of trade,’ ‘market demands,’ ‘competitive pressures,’ ‘productivity,’ or ‘efficiency requirements’ [11] constructing rather than bridging gaps between and among groups and felt most keenly by Indigenous communities around the world and especially the women and children often left behind in the chain of development. Those dominant discourses and unfettered market forces motivated the formation of co-operatives in the nineteenth century in response to the disastrous socio-economic consequences for ordinary people of industrializing globalization. The Rochdale Pioneers sought

answers through mutual self-help and a commitment to people before profits and a set of business practices and principles “emphasizing quality, honesty, market prices, cash trading, democratic governance, provision of education and information to members” [12]. Promoting co-operative responsibility long before the corporate world discovered corporate social responsibility, co-operatives pursued goals such as community capacity building, environmental sustainability and local employment, including good governance practices, highlighted in the seven co-operative principles (ICA, 2012):

- Voluntary and open membership
- Democratic member control
- Member economic participation
- Autonomy and independence
- Education, training and information
- Co-operation among co-operatives
- Concern for community

Despite the fact that co-operative forms of ownership remain largely invisible in business school curricula or in mass media celebrating “heroic” individualism while dismissing co-operative behaviors as “irrational” or “just plain stupid” [13], there are now three times more members of co-operatives than individual shareholders worldwide: 328 million share owners compared to 1 billion member owners of co-operative enterprises with a value of over US\$1.6 trillion. Three countries with over half the population in co-operative membership are Ireland (70%), Finland (60%) and Austria (59%). The greatest numbers of co-operative memberships are India (242 million), China (160 million) and the USA (120 million). One in five people across North and South America are co-operative members [14]. In the current context there are new opportunities to highlight the important role of co-operatives as “a sustainable form of enterprise” better able to weather the storm than other types of businesses and able to sustain communities by maintaining the provision of livelihoods and essential services [15]. The United Nations has taken that lead, launching in January 2012 the International Year of Co-operatives intended to level the policy, legal and regulatory playing field and “to raise public awareness of the invaluable contributions of cooperative enterprises to poverty reduction, employment generation and social integration. The

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Year will also highlight the strengths of the cooperative business model as an alternative means of doing business and furthering socioeconomic development" [16].

Even in the context of "Global Apartheid"-the growing gap between rich and poor whereby the richest 20 percent own 82.7 percent of global income and the poorest 20 percent earn only 1.6 percent [17], Aboriginal communities similarly continue to act resourcefully while remaining vital stewards of the world's diversity, representing only 4% of the world's population but preserving over 60% of the world's linguistic and biodiversity [18]. This despite a colonial history and education uncoupling thought and knowledge from spiritual, ecological and social relationships that was but one version of the violence done to Indigenous peoples around the world. In the process, local knowledge was disdained, ignored, or destroyed, or at best trivialized as "folk wisdom," while self-serving expertise was legitimated and justified in turn colonial encroachments, dispossession and exploitation of peoples and their resources as the "natural" order of things. According to the thinking of the dominant, Aboriginal peoples needed to develop to catch up with mainstream standards and values. The challenge was to fit Aboriginal peoples into mainstream institutions rather than learning from Aboriginal peoples and hence improving those institutions. Mutualism and reciprocity were largely absent from assimilationist colonial enterprises and institutions.

But societies and their institutions require open, dynamic systems to exemplify and hence facilitate new ways of thinking and doing: knowledge ecologies [19] to supplement and challenge the arcane "autopoiesis" of a systems theorist such as Luhmann [20]. In the global context of economic, environmental and financial crises, the entrenched habits of the First World and corporate elites with access to levers of power (media, government and resources) threaten to hijack "the" agenda. Elites do so by characterizing climate change and ecological interests as impediments to prosperity, as luxuries (like social justice) we can no longer afford, while reducing the plurality of economies and entrepreneurial models to a single, reductive logic and multiple bottom lines to the overarching imperative of a single financial one. In the process they distract attention from human responsibility for the economic meltdown and either discount or appropriate to their own competitive purposes co-operation and multiple bottom lines. Nevertheless, in so many contexts around the world, co-operatives and their principles are engaging and being enriched by Aboriginal communities bridging the traditional and social economies to achieve a common vision of a healthy, sustainable community. What Indigenous stories offer are cautionary, inspiring, yet practical encounters with the blind spots of the global, which replicate only too accurately the presumptions of the colonial. Patterns of elite ignorance and inattentiveness pose questions about how we define success and how it can be measured outside the hierarchies that still subordinate sustainability to growth and public goods to privatized interests. Bauman [21] has been among the most vocal and prolific critics of globalizing modernity's wasteful ways, telling powerful stories to counteract some of the master narratives that relegate some knowledge to the dustbin of history, while individualizing and privatizing to the point where attention is diverted from the socio-economic roots of problems.

Many are tempted to see Indigenous communities and co-operative practices as a function of deprivation (socio-economic, cultural and environmental). Through the lenses of deficiency and underdevelopment, harshness means co-ops. According to this view, if Indigenous peoples were living in abundance, they would be individualist, atomistic and rapacious like the rest of us. But Indigenous appreciation for what they know to be the plenty offered by the land

confirms their obligation to Creation and community. As Jacobs [22] points out, "planning for the Seventh generation, or the faces yet to come, was an integral part of Indigenous decision-making long before the Brundtland Report"; "indigenous people have been living this concept since time immemorial," living as they do "in a kinship relationship with the environment". Learning from such holistic thinking, we might achieve new forms of sustainability by rethinking scarcity (and plenty) and therefore revisiting our apparently incurable addiction to growth and choice where more is never enough. Such rethinking is not about bringing the pre-modern into modernity but about recognizing the full range of relations in which we participate and on which we depend, whether or not we recognize that this is the case. Access as concept and practice must itself be open to the capacities of capitalism's allegedly poor cousins and to the multi-directional flows of knowledge and goods to and from self-regarding centres and resourceful peripheries.

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