

Why CPRs Best Suit “Human Nature”  
A Philosophical Melding of Numerous Disciplines

by  
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Abstract:

The premise of this paper is that common property regimes are a central answer to the continued survival of humankind because they fit better with our evolved, intrinsic natures than do regimes based on competitive acquisition of private property. Not only do they provide opportunity for sustainable use; they also make possible a more satisfying fulfillment of our deep-rooted, universally shared emotional needs. The paper addresses three issues.

1) It points out that much experimental research, carried out almost uniformly in Western societies, using Western assumptions about human nature, is unfortunately scientifically misleading. Its findings inevitably confirm premises about human behavior that are, in fact, not universal.

2) It offers an alternative view of our universal nature by:

(a) revising our image of natural selection, pointing out its multiple levels of action and introducing the notion of “fitting-in” at each of these;

(b) suggesting three basic human psychological needs, that are guided by emotions, not by rational thought. We are not “game theorists” after all.

(c) pointing out that since human adaptation is cultural, our overarching need is for a functional, harmonious, and meaningful social life, not for quantifiable material resources.

3) Finally, it contrasts hierarchies having legal controls with egalitarian/communally organized societies based on culture-wide customs with respect to three questions:

(a) In which of these are our disparate needs for personal autonomy and acceptance within a group most equally balanced?

(b) In which of these is social “efficiency” most prevalent? Included here are not only the obvious material benefits, but also psychological fulfillment, including attachment to one’s physical as well as social environment. It adds to the psychological/economic accounting ledger the overhead costs of addressing stress, violence, mistrust, cheating, competition etc.

(c) How do these types of social orderings compare in their capacity to adapt to environmental change?

The paper concludes that: As the stresses from pandemic diseases, climate change, storms, oil scarcity, environmental destruction, deforestation, pollution... increase, our species will need rapid capacities to re-order local societies. This may include reconstruction of the United Nations to replace the power-based, elitist-nations’ Security Council with a new “guidance body” comprising a grassroots, multicultural “Social Forum” dialogue community, where diverse peoples hear each other and suggest common umbrella institutions that facilitate – and coordinate – multiple locally adapting communities, a kind of Whole Earth co-management overseer.

Thus, we need to introduce the concepts of common property regimes widely and create local support for them. It will be a long, slow, process, since our emotional attachments to our own cultures are deep. Like the child being removed by court order from highly abusive parents, we will be terrified at losing the only culture we know. Change must be gentle and nonviolent. Yet the social – as well as environmental – rewards will be great.

The planetary commons is dangerously close to the “tragedy” predicted by Garrett Hardin. But today, it is not the individual herdsmen over-utilizing the local village commons because of the absence of “private ownership” that is the problem. Rather, it is the private, unregulated corporations that see the planet as their commons who threaten us. As Mary Midgley once put it, “On every side now we can see people busily engaged in sawing off the branches on which they (along with many others) are sitting, intent only on getting those branches to market before the price of timber falls.” [1] Today, abstract economic theories, based on very dubious assumptions about human nature, dictate what governments and their advisors insist is “rational behavior.” You here at this conference, of course, clearly perceive the irrationality of their argument in terms of our long-term future. For nearly two decades you have been documenting the fact that, when groups of people collaborate together, allocating among themselves the usufruct of their shared resource base, they develop patterns of use that preserve the health of that resource. Today I shall suggest that they may actually be preserving the health of much more – namely, the psychological and existential health of the people involved.

Given the growing social and environmental chaos around the planet, the rest of the world needs to absorb the meaning and value of the work that you all are doing. Indeed, I believe that the benefits of CPRs can extend far beyond the well-demonstrated preservation of resources, making them extremely attractive – even in current economic terms! It is these additional benefits that I want to outline today, and that I encourage those of you working in the field to include in the data you gather as you study your chosen sites. I believe you will readily confirm that CPRs are “healthy for humans” in multiple ways – ways that will make the return of control over economic and all other social institutions to the hands of local communities irresistibly appealing to increasing numbers of people everywhere.

My suggestions derive from a modified set of assumptions about what we humans really “need” in order to live healthy, secure, and meaningful lives. What sort of emotional needs has natural selection honed in us, and which of these are not being sufficiently fulfilled in privately-owned, competitive market systems? And, as I will suggest, are far more likely to be met in CPRs!

## **What Are Our Basic Psychological Needs as Human Beings?**

### Our Current Western Explanation: The Calculating Robot:

Modernist (Western) notions of human nature have emerged from the fusion of the social theories of the Enlightenment, that supposedly liberated “individual persons” from their medieval confinement to their class of birth, and invented the idea of legal equality. This *political* idea made possible the new *economic “science”* of the Hidden Hand of market capitalism whereby hyper-specialization and competition among individuals was eventually awarded the moral virtue of maximizing the collective good – a true sleight-of-hand in the realm of logic, if ever there was one!

Along came the fathers of *modern psychology*, from Sigmund Freud to B.F. Skinner, who, each in his own way, focussed on the inner life of individuals imprisoned, as they were, in the constraining nuclear family of late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century Western societies. (The closest Freud came to acknowledging the wider culture was in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*.) Mainstream psychology – even contemporary political and social psychology – has been based on a theory of “the individual”, with little attention to cultural meaningfulness, or to the emotional consequences resulting from imposed institutions. Any psychological “problems” are dismissed as merely one of better socializing the individual to fit into the new social *milieu*. Humans are simply robotic machines, infinitely programmable to whatever institutions come along. Any consequent behavioral problems are blamed on the failure of individuals to adapt to the new rules, not on the inhumane nature of the rules they are being forced to adapt to. Infinite behavioral adaptability has become a founding moral assumption of Western individualism.

Furthermore, this theory has been tested mainly by studies conducted on Western college students, who have provided the supporting data that “prove” the theory. This theory reached its peak around the middle of the twentieth century, with the work of B.F. Skinner. He devoted his life to “mechanizing” the human soul,

founding his theory on an intricate set of reflex neural circuits that could be modified through carrot-and-stick “conditioning” – imposed by parents, psychiatrists, or social theorists. Human beings were infinitely malleable, and hence could be shaped to fit any role those in control deemed desirable. We were entering the nightmare landscape of Orwell’s *1984* and Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

Finally, a gang of *biologists* entered the picture, the self-styled neo-Darwinists, who reduced evolution to a “blind competition for survival” among selfish genes existing in a universe of permanent scarcity. By thus ridiculously simplifying Darwin’s wide-ranging observations and cautious interpretations, they gave the imprimature of “rational science” to the claims of political, economic, and psychological theorists, and moral legitimacy to the current globalizing scenario as “the ultimate ideal for all humankind.”

Absent from this overly “rationalized” Western explanation of human nature is any consideration of three fundamental, emotionally-based psychological needs: our need to “*belong*” and be fully accepted in a community; our need for personal “*autonomy*” (understood today in a limited, political way as ‘human rights’); and our existential need for “*meaning*” in our lives. Also missing from day-to-day studies in psychology is our fundamental physiological need for a healthy natural environment to support us, a need that generates in us an emotional responsiveness to our surroundings! The disciplines that are being ignored in our current simplistic self-description are, most obviously, *ecology* – the discipline that students of CPR so clearly recognize – along with *cultural anthropology*, *religious studies*, *moral philosophy* and the *arts*. Also missing is a great deal of “common sense” about the kinds of social interactions all humans need to thrive psychologically, that is now being “scientifically” revealed by careful neurological and social studies of human development and human behavior. It is these that this paper focuses on. They help explain many of the multiple “discontents” that today’s Western world view attempts to repress with Orwellian controls and Skinnerian logic. Both the latter, I suggest, create enormous social psychological and economic overheads that make contemporary society cost-ineffective and psychologically insecure. We are, in fact, all living in an age of emotional disempowerment that needs to be overturned – albeit gently, not violently.

#### An Alternative “Human Nature”:

If we really are something more than robots controlled by calculating “selfish genes”, what are we? What causes us to feel and act in various ways? What are our most fundamental *human* psychological needs? (The “need” – or desire – to reproduce is scarcely unique to humans. All species, sentient or not, do this.) Our specifically primate needs, I have argued [2] are (1) for **autonomy**, for the independence of action that is necessary for our brains and bodies to develop highly complex skills, to solve problems, and to retain and communicate information; and (2) for **secure attachment** within a group. Primate infants are premature at birth and, in most species, require a supportive troop for their survival. Human infants, relative to most mammals, are only about half developed at birth! They are helpless for the next 9 or 10 months of life, until they are able to walk about on their own.

We humans, with our extraordinary capacity for self-awareness, have yet another need, namely (3) for **meaning** – for stories. These cultural explanations, or world views, not only make our highly sentient life psychologically bearable; they also have the function of passing along accumulated information to each new generation. Our cultural stories are what allow us to adapt, *as groups*, to the constantly changing circumstances around us. And, as we will see, they are often difficult to change, even when the need seems obvious.

I call these three needs – for autonomy, belonging, and meaning – “propensities”, things we deeply desire to have, but may still physically survive if deprived of. Unlike food and water and warmth, we don’t necessarily die if they are missing and thus they are often overlooked in our legal codes. How hard it’s been to adopt a universal code of human rights, even one that is limited to the barest of our humane needs – things that governments “shall not do” to their citizens. All our positive needs – cited above – too often go unrecognized, the consequence of a pop-psychology that assumes infinite, robot-like adaptability on the part of babies and developing children. To stubbornly continue in this belief is to embrace catastrophe!

We cannot afford to ignore these three propensities. Because they have contributed to our survival over thousands of millennia, they are backed by powerful emotions! Infants claim independence of action, their

**autonomy**, at an early age – something mothers in early, tribal societies intuitively understood and profoundly respected. Yet infants also seek secure **attachments**. And as soon as speech becomes available, they ask “Why?” – What is “the story, **the meaning** of existence”? Evolution has thus shaped us not only at a crude “selfish gene” reproductive level, but also at a nuanced socio-cultural level. It is the thesis of this paper that, when a society’s institutions fail to fulfill these innate, emotion-laden propensities, that society experiences culturewide trauma that powerfully compromises its evolutionary adaptiveness.

We humans are not – and never have been – “game theorists”. Rather, we are members of cultural groups and selection is occurring at all possible levels – at genomic levels, at reproductive levels, at socio-cultural levels, and at environmental levels. In each case, “mutations” (whether genetic mutations, changes in the conditions of development, in social institutions, or in relationships with the natural environment) must “fit-in”, not only at their own level, but at all other levels. The “cleverness” of our genes is useless, if we use that cleverness to destroy our ability to reproduce successfully (endocrine disrupters), or to create societies that are so psychologically insecure that there are enormous overheads to maintaining their continued function (high internal violence, physically and mentally), or to destroy our support system (global warming, species extinctions, and all the rest). This is the social-psychological problem that I shall be addressing here. And, fortunately, unlike all other living forms, we humans are consciously able to modify our own behaviors to influence our adaptiveness at all but the genomic level.

Interesting, isn’t it, that there is such a big bruhaha about meddling with natural selection at the level of our genes, while ignoring the moral consequences of all the other levels that we can more easily do something about! What kind of society is it that enthusiastically outlaws research that might allow detection and abortion of fetuses with life-threatening birth defects, or might supply healthy stem cells to correct those defects, while denying social support to all the “healthy” babies born to indigent or mentally dysfunctional parents? What kind of society is it that outlaws a self-chosen benign death in face of a painful terminal illness, insisting comatose patients be kept alive at great cost, but simultaneously refuses adequate healthcare to the poorer half of its population? Contemporary society – especially in the United States – seems to give all its moral attention to the circumstances surrounding birth and death, while all but ignoring the injustices and humiliations that it imposes on vast numbers of human beings while they are alive.

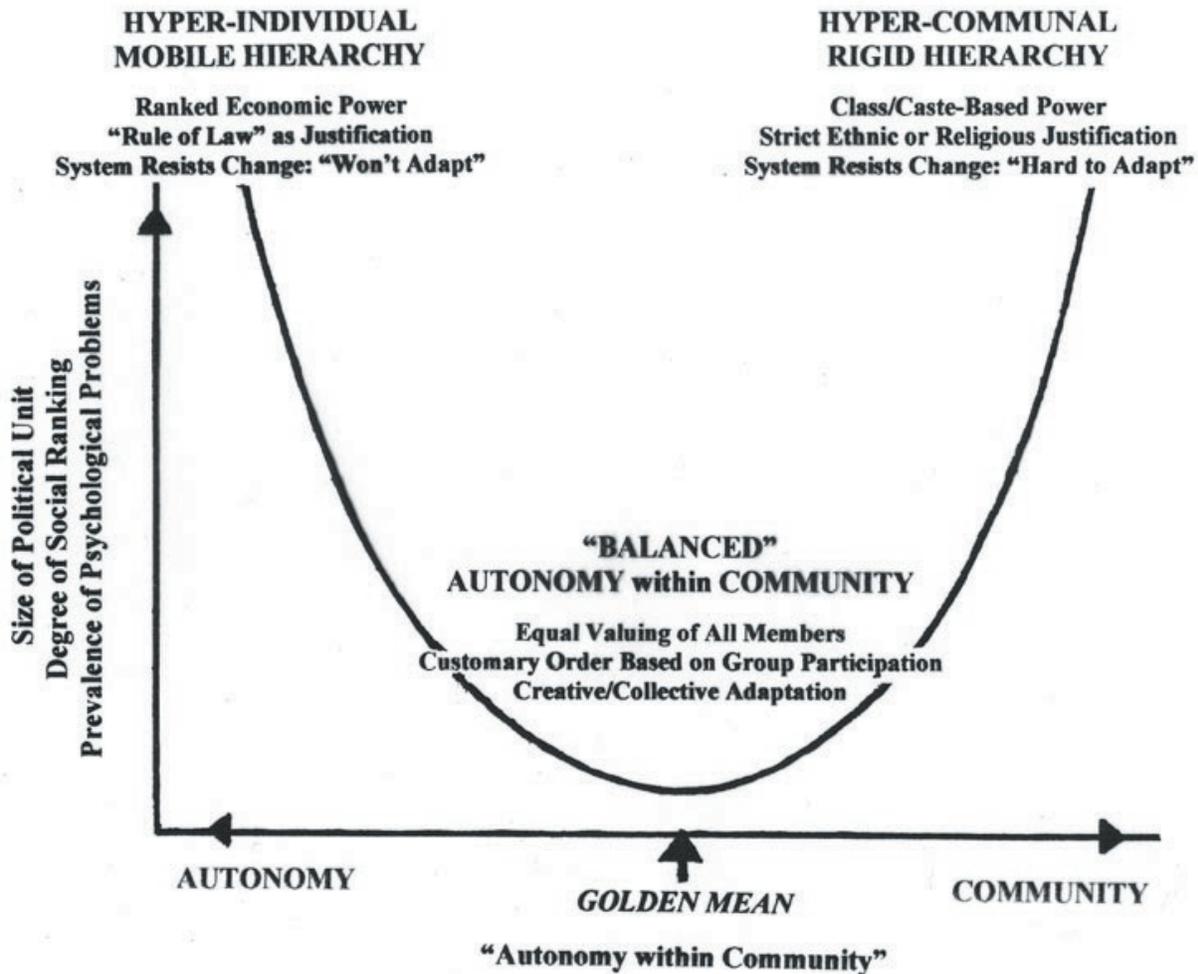
This paper is an attempt to identify some of these failings, their institutional causes, and their societal overheads, and to suggest how CPR systems are more likely to avoid such failings and the overheads that they entail. It concludes that when any culture becomes more just and inclusive, not only are its social “overheads” greatly reduced, it also has the built-in capacity to adapt to changing circumstances with the least internal disruption.

### **A Roadmap:**

Figure I is a sketch of the properties of three broad “culture-types” that are being compared in this paper. Two are large, hierarchical societies, comparable more-or-less to various historical nation-states or empires; they represent the two, rather unattractive ends of the spectrum that are most likely to be psychologically damaging, and most susceptible to violent breakdown because of their inability to adapt to changing circumstances. In the middle, between them, are more balanced, usually smaller societies, whose cultural stories successfully manage to meld our two not-so-easily-compatible primate propensities for autonomy and belonging – or, as some might say, independence and attachment, or freedom and social responsibility, though to me, both “autonomy” and “belonging” connote much more than the alternative terms. These are the societies that manage to create “Autonomy within Community.”

Among the large hierarchies in history, most were of the Hyper-Communal sort. Very large, ranked societies, where castes or classes were generally fixed for life, their cultural stories were usually religiously based, thus justifying their enormous inequalities. Most required an internal militia to keep order. Thus, they could remain stable over centuries, but were unable to adapt their rigid ideologies and hierarchical institutions to changing circumstances. Occasionally (as with the Inca) there was significant attention paid to the health of the local

Figure 1:



environment. Collapse most often ensued either from internal failure (owing to entrenched psychological distress, often at all social levels), or from inability to fend off external marauders. Occasionally collapse was caused, or accelerated, by environmental destruction. Examples include the Roman Empire, the Medieval Catholic Church, and modern Marxist states, particularly the USSR.

The other sort of giant hierarchy is the Hyper-Individualistic type, or what I think of as "mobile hierarchies". These are highly inegalitarian societies – all of them, so far as I am aware, belonging to the modern era and practicing market-based corporate capitalism. There is a pretense of serving individual autonomy, since there are no rules about castes and ranking, but in practice, their social institutions are such that huge disparities in wealth and power exist, and movement up the ladder of power and prestige is highly limited. Some of these societies (especially those in Western Europe) have made serious attempts at "social welfare" to alleviate some of the psychological stresses and blatant inequities, whereas the United States, the self-styled "world's leading nation", has barely addressed these problems, claiming to do so would weaken "the health of the economy".

Indeed, it is "The Economy" that is the substitute ideology for a religiously-based defense of the inequities that continue to grow in almost all these hierarchical systems. What is widely ignored in their "logic" are the rapidly growing psychological stresses and the resulting economic overheads that continue to accrue with each generation. The United States pays the most for these deficiencies, with enormous levels of youth violence, costly police forces and court systems, widespread drug and alcohol abuse, and incarceration of more persons per capita than any nation in the world. Lump this with accumulating existential meaninglessness (often relieved by people turning to rigid, fundamentalist religions), and one has a picture of a psychologically fragile culture. (All of these "costs", of course, are counted as "benefits" when calculating the GNP, another sleight-of-hand of

modern economic logic.)

Thus, although the United States may momentarily be “the most powerful nation”, it is seriously threatened internally, both by social instability and economic fragility. As these mount, the internal levels of trust and compassion – already seriously stressed – will grow weaker, and the levels of hypervigilance (discussed below) will continue to grow. Furthermore, its giant institutions are not susceptible to rapid adaptive change in times of stress, whether from global warming, a collapsing economy, or internal rebellion. But it is not only the U.S. that is exposed; when the costs of environmental impacts are included, virtually all of the Western-type hierarchical societies are highly “fragile” in terms of a stable social structure. While supposedly highly “creative”, these societies are, in fact, not nearly as capable of rapid adaptive change as they themselves suppose. Far too much of the infrastructure, both institutional and physical, is rigidly in place, and the costs of adapting them will bring deep psychological stress, as well as economic costs that will fall hardest on those least able to cope.

Finally, between the two extremes of hierarchy – the Hyper-Communal and the Hyper-Individualistic – are the stable, usually much smaller societies that achieve a Balanced Golden Mean between individual autonomy and communal stability. These include innumerable cultures throughout history (and surely, pre-history), all of which, through their own unique cultural stories, managed to accommodate ways of socializing children and recognizing and respecting the uniqueness of each individual, while maintaining a sense of over-arching social meaning that embodied the customs and accepted behaviors of that culture. This had the advantage of reducing greatly the psychological tensions between members’ needs for autonomy and for recognition as valued members of the community.

Compared to both sorts of hierarchies, these societies were far more likely to have wide participation in social decision-making (“pre-historic democracy”). Furthermore, because their institutions were not made rigid by sheer size, the opportunity for creative social change under stressful circumstances was always present, as was the possibility of creative technological innovations.

Although few nation-states today exhibit this approach to adaptive change, there are both historic and sub-national contemporary examples that illustrate the advantages of such a psychologically-balanced cultural view of society. One example, discussed below, were the so-called “Dark Ages”, which were anything but “dark” in terms of human creativity, adaptability, and well-being. Another example is the tendency in more and more giant corporations to delegate decision-making about the details of the multiple tasks needed back to those who actually perform those tasks. Top-down micromanagement – the sort of thing practiced by the Hyper-Individualistic hierarchies of Western capitalist societies – is now being seen as a hindrance, not an aid, to effective corporate adaptation.

This tiny window of opportunity in the running of the corporate world becomes a much, much larger window when we look at sub-sets of human economic activities that fall into the category of **Common Property Regimes**, about which I shall say more below. Here, I would only point out that low internal tensions, the increasing development of shared trust within the dialogue community, and the skilled practicing of the techniques of well-structured conflict resolution, all serve to maintain a psychologically healthy and potentially adaptable society.

### **Learning from the Details of History – Cycles of Imperialism**

Writing – and hence recorded history – arose in those places where human societies became dense enough to make possible the coercive fusion of small, autonomous tribes into impersonal, ranked hierarchies to which we have given the name Empires. These were quite unlike earlier “confederacies” that existed – and may still exist – among neighboring tribes, whether bound loosely through verbal agreements among local chiefs or city “mayors”, or more formally by ceremonial arrangements. Examples include pre-colonial “peace-ceremonies” among Aboriginal tribes on Australia’s north coast [3], and the Iroquois Confederacy in the northwestern part of what is now the United States, from whom America’s founding fathers borrowed ideas for a Constitution agreeable to thirteen ideologically disparate colonies [4]. (The first draft was called the Articles of Confederation.) The notion of the autonomy of the separate states is still embedded in American political

understanding.

Lewis Mumford, in his great works, *The Myth of the Machine* and *The Pentagon of Power*, leaves us in no doubt of the dehumanizing impact of highly centralized, rigidly hierarchical societies. Such ranked imperialisms have failed on several counts! (1) They became increasingly dependent on slaves, who having no human rights whatsoever, required constant military oversight to keep them from fleeing or rising up over their masters. (2) They tended to grow in size by conquering neighbors, especially those with productive lands or other valuable resources, which also required a large military presence to maintain. And (3) the extreme centralization of power in the hands of a small elite class made them institutionally rigid – unable to creatively respond to changing events. Any change might result in social chaos.

Rome, of course, is the “type specimen” of a failed empire, unable to protect its sprawling, inhumane polity from repeated attacks by marauding barbarians. The latter had the advantage not only of mobility, but also of a far more egalitarian, semi-autonomous society that did not require internal repression to sustain itself. (This is not to say that there was idyllic peace among the marauding barbarian tribes, only that their successes vis-à-vis the Romans did not depend upon a widespread, hierarchically maintained social order.)

The Dark Ages in Europe during the following five centuries were anything but “dark”, though few conventional historians bother to note this. Toynbee barely mentions them in the space between the fall of Rome and the Medieval period. According to Leften Stavrianos, however, it was a time of humanization and creativity. Gone were the big cities; in their place were thousands of feudal manors, where “serfs” negotiated rights and duties with the local lord, and experienced communal autonomy in their daily lives. They “counted as individuals” – they had a healthy “self-identity.”[5]

Moreover, although the Dark Ages left no giant monuments, no godlike political dynasties, and no major written works to find their way into the conventional history books, they left posterity an armload of creative inventions and institutions. Crop rotation farming; the heavy wheeled plow; a harness that greatly multiplied the effectiveness of draft animals; watermills and windmills that did enormous amounts of work formerly done by human slave labor. Living standards for all shot up, while environmental impacts remained relatively benign. “By the tenth century the Western European serf was enjoying a level of living significantly better than that of the proletarian during the height of Augustan Rome.” [6] Moreover, these same serfs, whether farmers or artisans, gained considerable autonomy as individuals and widespread respect for their social contributions. This levelling in ranking and universalizing of respect had the double benefits of adaptive innovations and eliminating any need for a heavy-handed militia to maintain social order, something that seems to be required by most all “civilizations” with highly centralized, all powerful governments. How do we explain this difference?

### **The Psychological Failures of “Rational Modernity”**

This brings us to present day “civilization”, which raises the question, what do we mean by “civilization” and “civilized people”? As Mohandas Gandhi is said to have quipped, when asked what he thought about civilization – “I think it would be a good idea.” Both historically as well as today, most of the societies we cite as “civilizations” did not, and do not, live up to our contemporary understanding of the terms “civil”, “civility”, and “civilized.”

Why, for example do almost all contemporary civilizations, like their predecessors, require a large, armed police force to maintain *internal* order, and an active military to protect them from competing *external* civilizations? Is it just modern technology – our weapons of mass destruction – that is the problem, or is it much, much more? Is there something in the emotional mindset of our Western concept of “global modernity” – and perhaps also in other major contemporary ideologies, such as the “modernizing Maoism” of China – that stands in the way of a truly harmonious global human society?

In 1996, on the American public radio program “Talk of the Nation”, [7] two Western academics, Richard Hellie, a scholar of Russian history and Bruce Perry, a psychiatrist dealing with childhood trauma, agreed that it is quite possible for a whole society to become psychologically traumatized. Although the period they addressed

was Russia in the century and a half from Ivan the Terrible to Peter the Great, during which some five or six generations experienced a constant reign of terror – the two of them agreed that even under less blatantly malignant conditions, widespread psychological damage can occur in virtually *all* members of a society. A whole society can become “crazy” when its social fabric undergoes unremitting psychological stress, where people live in states of constant emotional arousal, or “hyperanxiety.” If the stress appears life-threatening, they become “hypervigilant”, reacting instantaneously and without forethought, to the least signal of possible impending danger. (This is common among soldiers too long in the front lines of bloody battles, who, like military intelligence torturers, are now often trained beforehand via violently dehumanizing techniques so they will acquire this dehumanized state! [8])

Bruce Perry, an expert in the psychological effects of childhood trauma, emphasizes that persistent abuse or other repeated traumatic experience creates permanent changes in the brain, at which point “behavioral *states* become personality *traits*”.[9] Western society – including the vast majority of its most highly educated, well-meaning, generous and empathetic citizens – continues in utter ignorance of this information, steadfastly insisting that “will power” and “self-control” are all that is lacking when people commit great harm, whether to themselves or others. It is now becoming clear that drug abuse, alcohol addiction, anorexia, and attempted suicide, are all **inward attempts to escape from** a mental world of threat, oppression, or shame. And committing violence at home, joining street gangs, or letting loose irrational outbursts against strangers for perceived offenses are **outward attempts to fight against** that mental world inside their heads. Both result, as will soon be clear, from uninvited changes in the wiring of the brains of those involved.

These studies by Perry and his colleagues on abused children have recently been strongly supported by two other lines of research. The first is that of psychoanalyst Allan N. Schore,[10] who has been studying the role of parent/infant attachment in the development of the right hemisphere [RH], the “emotional”, holistic side of the brain where our “sense of self” is located. The RH is dominant until around 3 to 4 years of age, after which the left hemisphere [LH], the rational, calculating, linguistic hemisphere where verbal memories are formed, dominates. But the RH, although “hidden from view” in our conscious, verbal thinking and discourse, retains its profound influence on our moods, feelings and drives, and especially on our reflex behaviors in traumatic situations.

Schore has uncovered through such non-invasive techniques as PET scans and fMRIs, the extraordinary sensitivity of an infant’s developing RH to the presence or absence of an attentive adult, usually but not necessarily, the mother. Ideally, a synchronous functional attachment develops between the right hemispheres of baby and mother during the first year of life, through what Schore calls PROTOCONVERSATION – a back-and-forth exchange of compatible emotional signals: voice, facial expression, touching. Together these constitute a “co-regulating of biological synchronicity.” During this time, the right hemisphere of the baby grows three to four times in size and lays down the emotional neuronal pathways that will persist throughout life. If the primary caregiver is continuously available and responsive to an infant’s needs, a strong sense of security and selfhood develops. If a child is abused or neglected, its RH remains in a hypervigilant, insecure state. (Unexpectedly, it is *neglect* that does the most damage!)

After the LH takes over, any right-brain deficiency sinks from view. Its memory is not available to verbal recall by the growing child! Not understanding this, the “rational” Western world sees only the resultant behavioral problems, regarding them as simply “lack of self-control”, and responds with disapproval, shame, punishment, and, for older youths and adults, even incarceration or death.

The resulting pathological psychic state that often results in adults from insufficient attachment in infancy is now recognized in the psychiatric profession’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) as Borderline Personality Disorder. It is currently diagnosed in about 2% of the U.S. population, and in 10% of psychiatric patients. Suicide rates among these persons are 400X higher than in the general population.

Another researcher whose work explains some of the sources of psychological distress among children in Western society is Professor Barbara Rogoff.[11] Her focus has been on the role a society’s cultural institutions play in the development of such concepts as “personhood”, “community” and the “common good”, and how

they are communicated to children. Her work strongly implies that contemporary Western society pulls human beings in two opposing directions, neither of which supports the development of a secure, emotionally balanced personality. The applications of her work to modern Western society described here, I should note, are my own extrapolations of her observations..

The two directions are the polar extremes of the hierarchies described in Fig.1, namely societies totally committed to the common good at the expense of individual autonomy, and societies totally committed to the rights of individuals with little concern for how this might affect social cohesion and a robust community life. The Western – and especially the American – mode of child-rearing claims to be creating competitive, highly autonomous individuals, enjoying unbounded freedom. In fact America’s children are today being shaped by an increasingly regulated public school system to acquire a narrow range of *specific skills* demanded by a giant, impersonal economic machine that they, as individuals, will have no control over. Thus, the highly touted psychological reward of autonomy in one’s life experience is denied for all but those at the top of the hierarchy; the “freedom” implied by the cultural story is largely illusory.

Nor does the promised “American dream” carry significant psychological reward, even for those who actually acquire it. This dream, a private home housing a socially detached, nuclear family, is a purely economic objective, from which any culturally shared *existential meaning* is absent. Indeed, neighbors often compete in the attributes of their dream homes, falling once again into a ranked hierarchy! The feeling of emptiness that naturally results leads to the spontaneous formation of loosely bonded sub-groups that substitute for the missing cultural identity. These range from church groups, to unions, service organizations, social clubs, and, among the most psychologically excluded, street gangs. The latter probably have the strongest “cultural meaning” for their members, with life-and-death commitments, backed up by solemn rituals. It was the power of the strong bonds formed among groups of orphaned boys fleeing from the terrors of Southern Sudan, that allowed them to survive years of wandering before finding refuge in distant places [12].

But although Americans, and often other Westerners, struggle to create meaningful groups as a source of identity, where they feel unconditionally accepted and emotionally valued, these “default” groups remain embedded in a larger ideological *milieu* that is both impersonal and emotionally sterile. (Indeed, it is this very sterility accompanying the globalization of Western culture that encourages the upsurge in politicized religious fundamentalisms around the planet. [13]) Many contemporary “freedoms” – such as the freedom to change jobs – are negative “goods.” They may allow escape from pain, but do not endow one’s life with positive identity or meaning. Hence, upwardly mobile hopefuls are expected to design personal “career” paths to satisfy a longing for empowerment that too often never becomes “enough.” Life becomes a scary, unsatisfying business.

It comes as no surprise, then, that like all other giant, centrally-controlled hierarchies, Western nation-states face on-going symptoms of psychological trauma: abuse within families, widespread drug use, high levels of violence, and declining general physical and psychological health. (Obesity is now at epidemic levels.) Courts and prisons in the United States are overflowing. All these represent social – and economic – costs, that are nevertheless regularly added to the GNP as if they were “benefits.” As economist Herman Daly and theologian John Cobb [14] have shown, these and the still unpaid “costs” of environmental destruction are a growing social burden that should be subtracted from our measures of economic well-being. As Figure 2 shows, over the past half century, virtually *all* our economic “growth” has, in fact, gone to pay our accumulating social costs. Most environmental costs have yet to be paid, though the natural catastrophes of 2006 are now forcing us to take these into account as well.

Though “modernity” still remains blind to the algebraic faults in its accounting systems, people in other cultures have long been aware of our Western folly. For instance, the Bhutanese, an ancient but by no means “backward” Buddhist culture in the Himalayas, have a saying: “It is easier to build a child than to repair an adult.” [15] They also are “developing” in ways that are environmentally sensitive and sustainable – for example, hydropower facilities are being constructed that are compatible with maintaining the natural landscape and its multiple functions – and they are measuring their progress not only in terms of GNP (Gross National [Economic] Product) but also in terms of GNH (or Gross National [Psychological] Happiness) as well. [16]

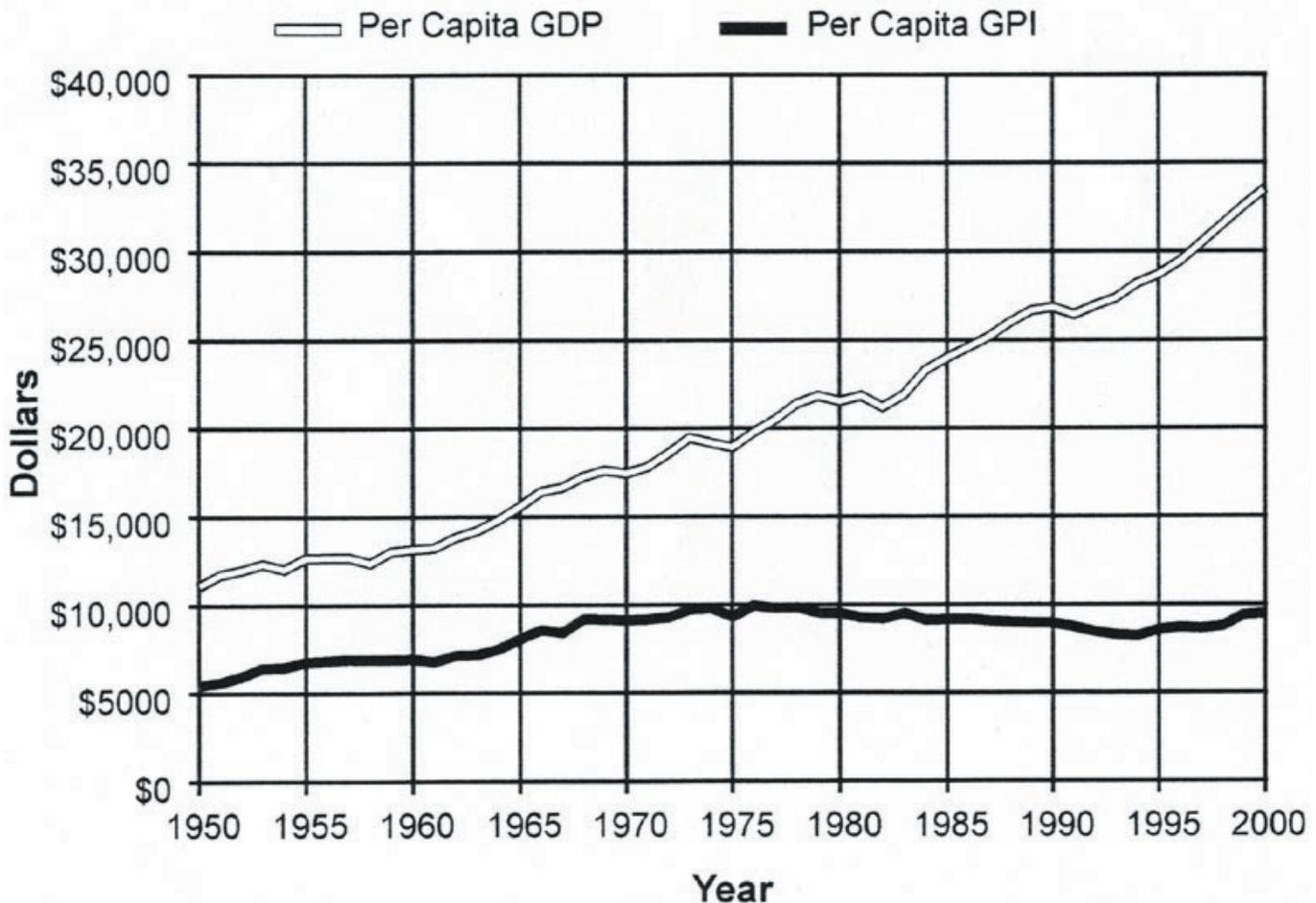
To sum up, while it *is* possible to heal those made psychologically insecure during infancy or childhood [17], the costs of doing this are a social burden that could – and *should* have been avoided. The same is true for the manmade environmental costs we are just beginning to be forced to pay. How can we change?

**Guidelines for Change:**

Rogoff makes several points about social change that are pertinent here. First, a theme that repeatedly comes up, is that to buck the prevalent behavioral “givens” on which one’s culture is based may put a person – especially a younger person – in a psychologically untenable position. In more forgiving cultures, very young “misfits” may be subject to gentle teasing to guide them toward conformity, but in almost all cultures, older youths or adults are punished or even ostracized if they act in ways that pose serious threats to the social order.[18] During times of widespread social stress, a state of fear or insecurity may cause extreme responses by some members of a society to trivial or even non-existent threats supposedly posed by one or another group of fellow citizens. The moral condemnation and ostracism of a host of Americans during the witch-hunts conducted by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, stand as one tragic example of how the response to an exaggerated threat can be carried to extremes. America is by no means the only society whose history includes such extreme acts. Others have been far more bloody: the uncontrolled slaughter of their Armenian citizens by the Turks during World War I, the recent slaughters in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and the Sudan, and of course, worst of all in living memory, the Holocaust conducted by the Nazis, were all far more violent and irrational. Yet in all these cases, one can find a usually unrelated psychological trauma that the whole society has experienced, or is in deep fear of, that releases such wholesale violence against a group living under its own jurisdiction. [19]

**Figure 2**

**GPI vs. GDP, 1950-2000**



In all cases of social adaptation, even under the most propitious circumstances, social tensions will arise between conforming to old traditions and modifying them to meet new circumstances, and these tensions are understandable. Social change is always dislocating, creating psychological and all too often, even physical insecurity. One of the worst periods in history – from which the world is still in the process of recovering – were the recent centuries of colonialism, where culture after culture was torn apart, and its children removed from parents and forced to “Westernize.”[20] The present period of enforced economic globalization is having an equally damaging, though less visibly horrific impact. [21] To avoid widespread trauma, social change must proceed sufficiently slowly that it does not disrupt internal social stability. And, more importantly, it must be voluntarily chosen and implemented by the members of the society that is changing.

These two requirements, for a gradual and autonomous process, are all too seldom met in today’s world. Some small, homogeneous nations, with liberal, non-coercive leaders, are managing fairly well. Japan, after World War II, was remarkably successful in borrowing Western technologies and building a stable economy while maintaining traditional interpersonal social patterns. Another example, cited above, is Bhutan. It is sufficiently isolated, and free of resources attractive to outside economic imperialists, to permit its respected and benevolent King to lead his people in a measured and thoughtful process of “modern” development, that preserves the best of the old culture.[22]

### **The Advantages of CPRs:**

At last, we arrive at the importance of Common Property Regimes at this crossroads moment in our species’s long history. How are such regimes a stepping-stone toward the social change that is becoming imperative? What qualities do they exhibit that facilitate adaptive change without doing further psychological damage but, instead, may greatly improve the emotional satisfaction in people’s lives?

Size: For a start, most CPRs are smaller in geographic area than all but the smallest of nation-states, so there is far greater potential for universal participation, in both day-to-day governance and the necessary adaptation of shared institutions. This extends to representatives from all possible stakeholder groups, and often to all concerned individuals, as well. In some tribal communities in India, for example, even the children participate by contributing to the knowledge pool.[23]

This principle, of a widely inclusive direct input into community decision-making, has characterized most indigenous tribal societies from time immemorial.[24] This strongly contrasts with the party-based, representative “democracies” of giant nation-states, where the number of actual participants in decision-making is quite small, and issues are usually framed in but two opposing forms: *pro* or *con* for a single proposition. Although there often is “compromise” between polar extremes in how the proposition is phrased, almost never is there open-ended, “brain-storming” dialogue, possibly leading to new, creative, previously unimagined “solutions.”

Actually, efforts to resurrect this ancient principle of inclusive “public,” or “grassroots” input have been made in recent decades in Western polities, first by the Green Parties, who have had their strongest impact among Western European democracies, and more recently, in the “direct-democracy” movement, championed by such folks as Frances Moore Lappé, William Ury, Tom Atlee and many others.[25] This principle is also increasingly finding its way into corporate decision-making, where, again, its positive creative potential is proving itself.[26]

Dialogue Skills: One of the problems in such dialogue groups in modern Western societies is the psychological barrier to respectful – and patient – listening. In time-clocked societies, where “efficiency” is foremost in everyone’s mind, and where winning and losing debates is the accepted way of decision-making (e.g. America’s televised pre-election side-shows!), there is a cultural absence of true dialogue skills. Various Green Parties quickly came up against this problem, mainly because they felt obliged to generate political impact in a public forum that demanded confrontation during national elections. They may well have done better to gradually build-up widespread grassroots skills in creative listening and collaborative problem-solving before entering the competitive arena of elections. Their greatest successes tend to be at the neighborhood or city level of action, rather than nationwide.[27] Thus, those CPRs where such skilled open dialogue has become

culturally established are in a far better position to come up with creative solutions to novel problems that are widely acceptable throughout an entire community. Psychologically, instead of “winners” and “losers,” one senses a common impetus to implement the community’s collectively designed changes. Cultural flexibility and adaptability results from common ownership of the change process. (This was, of course, the Marxian ideal, that, however, could not be applied in a gigantic state based on hierarchically organized social and industrial institutions. As someone once said, Marxism has never been tried. Actually, it has, in the highly egalitarian Indian state of Kerala, where communists have several times been elected to office, and later replaced. Kerala is one of the closest modern polities to a CPR “state” that I know of.[28])

Learning to Trust and the Restoration of Respect and Compassion: This repeated process of communal decision-making through creative dialogue gradually leads to the build-up of mutual trust.[29] The less that “power” plays a role in the outcome, the easier it is to establish mutual trust, out of which more readily grows the spontaneous spark of compassion with which all people are initially born. [30]

Multiplying Local Talents: A particular impetus concerning social change initiated by communities sharing the same – or similar – resource bases with neighboring communities comes out of the Indian subcontinent. Though by no means geographically uniform – ranging from the Himalayan north, via the central flood plains bordered by the coastal ghats to the tropical southern tip – the local regions of India share in common a history of three major invasions: the Aryans who brought a caste system, the Moguls who brought science, architecture, a competing religion, and centralized governance, and the British who extracted wealth. These socio-cultural disruptions, however, exposed each local region to the necessity for repeated adaptations to a changing cultural imprint. Today, India is a mosaic of diverse, highly innovative, adapting, surviving cultural communities, all characterized by generations of accumulated local knowledge and innovations. As reported by their champion, Professor Anil Gupta and his colleagues at the Indian Institute in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, multiple grassroots individuals and groups have devised/invented/discovered creative “low technology” solutions to numerous survival problems. Many of these creative, inexpensive and non-destructive innovations have applicability elsewhere in India. What Gupta and his colleagues have created through their Honey Bee Network, is a mutually supportive, subcontinent-wide network of *freely shared*, local traditional knowledges, new inventions and specialized skills that help spread a cornucopia of valuable information to a nation of a billion individuals, most of whom are technically among the “poorest” on the planet. Rather than private patents, profits and secrecy, progress (at least in rural India) rests on open, cooperative sharing of knowledge: a “commons of intellectual property rights.” [31]

In the course of my correspondence with colleagues on the Indian subcontinent, I report here the “gospel”, the “good news from another source, my long-time friend and fellow IASCP member, S.A. Shah. Formerly Chief Forester of Gujarat and a Senior Professor at India’s Dehra Dun Forestry University, Professor Shah, now in his ninth decade, spends six months a year studying the on-going *empowerment* of supposedly “illiterate” forest-dwelling tribals along the boundary between Gujarat and Maharashtra. By combining each group’s own profound knowledge of its local environment and how it functions with information on how to profit in the external economy beyond their area from those resources in an environmentally sustainable way, the Forest Service that once promoted exploitative practices for the economic purposes of free-markets, is now empowering an autonomous, locally controlled and guided community, to harvest the usufruct of their habitat in a way that is simultaneously economically rewarding *and* ecologically sustainable. The ancient forest dwellers are learning to combine their precious knowledge with 21<sup>st</sup> century needs, and so accommodate their behaviors to today’s realities without destroying their support system or their social integrity and independence. [32] Though perhaps outside standard academic definitions of CPRs, surely these local communal adaptations are part of the broader, hopeful trend toward a globalwide multiculture of sustainable, independent, and socially and psychologically healthy communities.

Finally, I cite the recent revelation that egalitarian institutions play a significant role in promoting human psychological health. In his 2005 book, Richard Wilkinson summarizes the latest data showing that modern “high-tech”, free-market social systems, despite their material wealth, suffer increasingly from psychosocial

problems. Furthermore, the high cost of addressing these pathologies has been overlooked. Econometricians have added it, as a benefit, to the GDP, rather than subtracting it, as it should have been, to reveal the true GPI, as shown in Fig.2. Instead of a cultural caste-system, we suffer from an economic caste-system, which, because it is mobile, continuously pits people, even those in the same “caste”, against each other. There is unrelenting pressure to “outcompete” others in order to increase one’s social status ? to be less humiliated, more powerful. (Thus, the rise of labor unions in the early 20th century, and later, of “Solidarity” and other “leftwing” workers’ groups in dictatorial communist Poland and elsewhere. They limited infighting among working class “comrades”, something that threatens the rigid power structure of hierarchical capitalism.)

This invidious and divisive consequence produces measureable decreases in physical (e.g. life expectancy) and psychological health, which affects those on the lower end of the scale the most. By comparing health data from egalitarian and hierarchical societies, David Erdal (cited by Wilkinson) has established strong support for this proposition. It should be added that Erdal, long a promoter of worker-owned cooperatives, has had direct experience with the beneficial consequences of converting hierarchically managed institutions into egalitarian ones, especially, worker buy-outs of companies to create employee-owned and operated companies. [33]

### **Conclusion: Building the “Compleat Commons”:**

The concluding premise of this paper is that human societies have *two* simultaneous tasks to fulfill within any single set of social institutions: they must make their living sustainably, and they must do so while also satisfying all three of humankind’s complex emotional needs: for *autonomy*, for *belonging*, and for *existential meaning*. I would argue that Common Property Regimes are, like cooperatively owned businesses, our best hope for acquiring the social tools needed for flexible and relatively rapid cultural changes. Coming global crises – global warming and depletion of fossil energy resources, among others – will soon demand a functional framework for change.

I conclude with a very brief synopsis of a recent study contrasting how two communities, both living in similar watershed basins in the state of Washington, “resolved” the same environmental need “to reduce the cumulative basin-wide impacts of logging on fish habitat.” The disparate stakeholders in both basins were the Native American tribal peoples who had fishing and other usufruct rights, the private logging companies, whose activities were adversely affecting Native rights, concerned environmental groups, and the agents of the State Department of Natural Resources, tasked with enforcing statewide regulations on the watersheds. A 1987 law had framed the state’s goals in a general way, but without specifying details of the changes needed to meet the goals. Negotiations had proceeded over more than a decade, often aided by natural scientists from outside, and by 2001-2002, the two basins selected by researchers Evelyn Pinkerton and Mark Kepkay for this study had each achieved significant levels of cooperation in meeting the state’s goals. [34] Yet, as the authors ably demonstrate, the nature of the cooperation achieved in the two basins was as different as night and day. (The interpretations presented here, however, are my own, inferred from the author’s descriptions of the process as it occurred in each of the two basins.)

Basin A negotiators (the authors dubbed them “The Locals”) arrived at a solution based on a gradually built trust among the “key actors” – representatives of the four groups, *most of whom had lived in the area for many years*, tended to be older, and had considerable experience with the tasks they were engaged in. These actors learned to negotiate amicably, without permanent resentment, taking scientific information into account, but not relying only on it. Ultimately they established a communal understanding and an on-going process of locally monitoring their agreements, without constantly relying on external authority, whether legal or scientific, to keep them on track. They had built a functional community-of-dialogue that set a customary pattern for their ongoing relationships, a pattern that was focussed on maintaining the health of a shared common place.

Basin B (dubbed “The Cosmopolitans”) also arrived at a working agreement among the stakeholder groups, but it lacked most of the attributes of a *dialoguing community of place and custom* that characterized Basin A. Its key actors were mostly from a younger generation, who thought in terms of the precepts of a modern globalized, Westernized world. Few had lived in the area for very long, and most had little experience in their

appointed tasks. In a word, they were mostly young academics, still “wet behind the ears.”

Like so many modern Western PhD’s, they were intellectual “experts” in their narrow fields of knowledge, trained in the latest cutting-edge science and its methodologies, but untutored in the nuances of human-to-human relationships. The impact of their “solution” for the management of Basin B in regard *only* to its environmental protection was very similar to the impact that emerged in Basin A. But Basin B accomplished the preservation of salmon habitat in the presence of commercial forestry by referring only to “objective scientific data” and the externally (state-mandated) legal constraints resulting therefrom. There was no indication of a “social commons” co-emerging along with their single-focus solution. Any new, unrelated problem arising in Basin B would harvest no benefit from their culturally sterile solution of this one problem.

This “rule of logic and law” – as pointed out long ago by social philosopher Stanley Diamond [35] – is a formidable barrier to the social creation of those deeper, human-based relationships established by the folks in Basin A – who were pursuing Diamond’s alternative to the rule of law, namely, “the order of custom.” When people develop trust, and mutual respect and understandings, they create a *culture of adaptability* – where a whole community collectively shares the task, *and also possesses the necessary skills*, of undergoing society-wide change.

I leave you, the reader, to ponder this “watershed parable”. It is, I believe, a lesson for all “watersheds in human evolutionary history.” What, in our future, will count most? Will it be the doctrinaire interpretations of a left hemisphere, detailed “science”, sure of its latest theories about some minuscule piece of the universe and hence able only to solve one particular problem at a time? Or will it be a right hemisphere appreciation of our built-in emotional sensitivities, that when ignored can lead to cultural incapacitation and, too often, to violence, but when well-served, are in fact the key to cultural flexibility and adaptation? Surely we need scientific data to tell us what needs to be changed, but we need concomitant communal trust and habits of interactive dialogue to discover the pathways to change. The latter seems to this writer to be already present, albeit not always in fully recognizable form, in many Common Property Regimes.

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