

Reconstructing sustainable communities: responding to (self)destructions of consumerism

Életképes közösségek: a fogyasztói társadalom (ön)pusztító vonásaira adható válasz

MÁRTA B. ERDŐS

Abstract

The author argues for adopting a holistic, systemic perspective when approaching contemporary ecological, economic and social crises states and future developmental possibilities. Issues of social welfare and well-being are addressed in a relational/community framework with responsibility as a core concept.

Keywords: *systems theory – human development – responsibility – resilience – community*

Összefoglalás

A szerző amellett érvel, hogy a jelen ökológiai, gazdasági és társadalmi válsághelyzeteit és a jövőbeni fejlődési lehetőségeket holisztikus, rendszerszemléletű megközelítés alapján érdemes újragondolni. A jólét és a jóllét kérdései kapcsolati-közösségi keretben kerülnek tárgyalásra: e szemlélet szerint a felelősség kulcsfontosságú kérdés.

Kulcsszavak: *rendszerszemlélet – emberi fejlődés – felelősség – reziliencia – közösség*

A systemic perspective on human progress

As early as in the 1970s, Gregory Bateson, one of the most influential representatives of systems theory pointed out to a basic fallacy that is at the root of the contemporary ecological, economic and social crises states. A fallacy of exclusion, *man's heroic struggle against the blind forces of nature*, serves as the fundamental ideology of modernism and of endless technological 'improvements'. As humans, however, are parts of the ecosystem themselves, they are not in the position to fully control or conquer it. Striving for such a purpose is inherently fallible as no element of a system may fight against the whole system for total control. If it does, it may result in the destruction of the defective parts or of the entire system. "*The creature that wins against its environment destroys itself.*" (Bateson, 1972, p. 493)

Shared, false ideologies tend to persist – as human beings are not rational but rationalizing animals and believe whatever their short-term interests seem to suggest. (Aronson, 1968) What are the long-term possible consequences of such misconceptions? Complex dynamic systems may tolerate errors effectively and are very flexible; but the vulnerability of the system is increased by every single moment of destruction until the system reaches a liminal stage where its balance is easily upset and the entire system will collapse. At critical thresholds (tipping points) the system changes abruptly from one state to another: in chaotic systems, minute causes result in large effects. Disparate phenomena have been studied to identify common signs of critical states, characterized by low resilience/low recovery potential; and predictors as critical slowing down, increase in autocorrelation, increase in variance, skewness and flickering have been identified. (Scheffer et al., 2009; Heylighen, 2002) It is important to note, however, that

order, chaos, complexity and diversity – as socially constructed, interest-driven categories – may have very different meanings and implications in the different cultures.

Under stress, the level of diversity is increased in living systems to cope with new challenges. (Csermely, 2004) Similar tendencies have been identified with humans (from this perspective, epistemological systems of high complexity) in psychosocial crisis states, such as strong “ambivalence” (i.e. opening up one’s personal constructs to find new perspectives); reliance or even “dependence” on others, emphasizing the strength of human relations as external reserves; and trial and error approaches to acquire new strategies in problem solving. (Caplan, 1964) On the contrary, suicidal persons¹ are characterized by an increasing narrowness of perception, of relationships, emotions and life goals. (Ringel, 1979) Consilient evidence on disparate phenomena supports the claim that diversity is an important resource and is the precondition of survival and development in the ecosystem, including humans and their societies.

Should we unconditionally embrace and celebrate diversity as the best candidate to solve our problems? The notion of catastrophic evolution may explain for people’s controversial attitudes to diversity and change. If the ‘receiving’ system is chaotic (Heylighen, 2002) and/or the adaptation period is very short, that is, ‘sudden contact’ occurs, it often results in radical and accelerated transformations or unpredictable shifts in the system, e.g., in its physical and symbolic structures and construction processes. The consequences are often devastating. In our era of globalization, sudden contact has become part of everyday life. (Moghaddam, 2006)

The above empiric results and theories suggest that we probably tend to under-estimate the complexity of the ecosystem, overestimate its resilience and our capacity to control it; neglect the existing predictors of tipping points; misuse the potentials inherent in diversity; overlook the possibility of second order change (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fish, 1974) and believe that change is identical with returning to some previous known state instead of entering some new and yet unknown context.

The meaning of development for human communities

“Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.”

Edward Abbey

In the dominant discourse of Western societies development is largely identified with economic growth. GDP is often fetishized in the political discourse as the single important measure to evaluate a country’s overall success; though it does not tell much on some aspects that have long been considered important by a number of cultures, such as the ‘pursuit of happiness’, recently defined as ‘subjective well-being’; or on social justice. (Abdallah et al., 2009) Long debates over the Easterlin-paradox (happiness does not increase as the income per person in a country rises) indicate the need for more complex measures. (Fromann, s. a.) Some alternatives to GDP have already been introduced, such as the Human Development Index, which combines life expectancy, education and income indexes to measure a country’s performance. (Haq & Sen, 1990) The Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a rich and complex Bhutanese measure balancing between material, psychological and spiritual indicators in the following domains: psychological well-being,

¹ The question whether suicide is due to some character pathology, neuroendocrine risk factors or situational factors or a combination of all these is beyond the scope of the current paper.

health, education, culture, time use, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards. (Ura et al., 2012) Another measure, the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) uses GDP as a starting point but takes environmental and social costs into account; therefore it is more sensitive to issues of well-being. (<http://rprogress.org>.) The Happy Planet Index combines life expectancy, life satisfaction and ecological footprint. (Abdallah et al., 2009; Marry, 2012) There is a common denominator in these complex indices: all of them highlight the issue of ecological and social responsibility, often referred to as “costs” in the language of economic analyses.

Responsibility as a community concept

“Men made it but they can’t control it”

J. Steinbeck

Until recently, we have conceptualized economic life as an autopoietic (Maturana & Varela, 1987) or even intentional system (Dennett, 1998), capable of self-organization and self-regulation in the service of human development. The 2008 global crisis has challenged this anthropomorphic view and raised some vital questions. Do the Batesonian considerations apply to this system? If the market does not control itself then who are to control it? Economic experts, politicians, state societies or some democratic (=diverse) ‘global society’ as a higher level context system? Is global democracy feasible? If the system of global economy is beyond human control, what comes next? What are the present costs/responsibilities? This is an open field for joint action, whether or not a satisfactory response may be given to all of the above questions.

Humans have three major responsibilities (Kruse & Schmitt, 2012):

- Responsibility for ourselves, manifested in the care of the self
- Responsibility for the community, understood as social solidarity or relational responsibility – a solid base for trust
- Responsibility for the future conceived as ecological responsibility² (ecosystem, environment) and generativity (for the human race, sometimes manifested in legal systems as the notion of intergenerational constitution)

These three responsibilities are strongly inter-related. Several studies have demonstrated that generativity – leaving a valuable personal legacy for future generations – is correlated with psychological well-being and life satisfaction. Those with high levels of generativity are less likely to experience anxiety and depression, and are more resilient. (Van Hiel et al., 2006; de St. Aubin & McAdams 1995; Bauer, McAdams & Pals, 2008; Grossbaum & Bates 2002; Kasser & Ryan 1993; Morfei et al., 2006; Huta & Zuroff, 2007) These studies indicate that generative behaviour is a form of the care of self; and are strong empiric supports for Erikson’s (1959) epigenetic principle.

The idea of relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1999) is supported by Böszörményi-Nagy’s contextual therapy theory. The concept of relational ethics is much more than a moralistic project: it is about practical and effective *problem solving*.

² The Bible, when defining man’s position in the ecosystem, emphasizes the concept of *care* over suppression. Modern cultures, though using the Bible as a basic frame of reference, interpret the original concept in a different way („have dominion”). Source: <http://www.zsido.hu/vallas/allatok.htm>

Böszörményi-Nagy's theory focuses on entitlement, care, loyalty, transgenerational patterns and legacies, reciprocity, trust, multidirectional partiality, amendments and solidarity. (Böszörményi-Nagy & Krasner, 2001) There are many important features which characterize a community: common interests, goals, values and identity elements co-constructed and expressed by the members in the symbolic domain (Cohen, 1985). Communities are the contexts for human life and, accordingly, fulfil a number of core functions (Buda, 1994) which can be summarized in the single statement that all our socialization processes take place in the community during the life span. Following Böszörményi-Nagy's line of thoughts, there is a key factor in the person-community relation: the community takes responsibility for the person; and the person, during these socialization processes, learns how to take responsibility for her communities, which are her vital resource. Relational responsibility and relational ethics are based on the natural interdependence present in human relationships. One's capacity to take one's three responsibilities is built upon empowerment and enablement processes.

Distorted social constructions on care and responsibility

There are a number of man-made, socially constructed barriers, manifested in our contemporary discursive patterns and behaviours, which make it difficult for us to take responsibility for ourselves, for our communities and for the future. Consumer society discourses are inherently paradoxical: values of autonomy, freedom, solidarity and care are highlighted, but the same values are simultaneously invalidated by hedonistic messages. The primary subject-object relation is reversed as human identities are produced by the commodities they consume. It is the product which controls the person who is a passive beneficiary in the process. (Firat, 1991) As the present-day system of global economy can be operated by significantly less people that inhabit the earth (Martin & Schumann, 1996), the majority may experience themselves as superfluous persons. Such experiences are at the root of many social and mental problems. Dependence and helplessness is manifested in the deficit language of consumer societies. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999)

Contemporary social tensions are often articulated in terms of addictions and the corresponding discourse patterns penetrate the public and private scenes. The addict is the prototype of the consumer, as the character pathology of our era. (Curra, 2000; Firat, 1991) It is the addict who, losing control, is the "product" of her substance of choice and gains an identity as a substance abuser; s/he is constantly craving for more and more; and wants it immediately, no matter what it costs. Today's loans (irresponsibly abusing one's mind, body and relationships) are to be paid back in the future at a very high interest rate. The addict's needs are artificially created (i.e., 'designer' drugs). Deliberate manipulations of one's own psychical and physical states by drug use result in loss of control. The irresponsibility of the addict is complemented by the destructive and controlling dominance and paternalism of the co-dependent person (the 'hero') – a caricature of responsibility, care and solidarity. (B. Erdős & Kiss, 2012)

The pursuit of happiness – a relational approach

Hedonism is the ideological fuel for consumer societies; however, the pursuit of happiness – an idea going back to Aristotle – has not always been understood as a hedonistic approach to life, focusing solely on the pleasure of the senses and refusing even minor sufferings. Studies by Antonovsky (1987) on sense of coherence, comprising

meaningfulness, comprehensibility and manageability; and by Csikszentmihályi (1990) on the autotelic personality suggest that happiness is more than immediate satisfaction. McAdams' and associates' (1997) narrative research on stories of redemption has reached a similar conclusion. Persons with high generativity have an early belief that the world is a place where people care; demonstrate sensitivity to others' sufferings, have a stable personal philosophy and community commitments. In stories of redemption initial bad experiences are followed by good outcomes; and even tragic episodes turn out to be a blessing. Spirituality, a previous taboo term in science, has become a phenomenon to be studied in the social sciences – even in global WHO projects. (Laudet, Morgen & White, 2006)

These recent notions – as conclusions of empiric researches – have their origin in an early philosophical conception of happiness: eudaimonia. (Bauer, McAdams & Pals, 2008) While one-sided focus on hedonism becomes an endless source of personal resentment whenever things go wrong in one's life (and, no doubt, sometimes they do), eudaimonia is accepting one's own life journey with its ups and downs seen as natural. It is harmony with one's own fate; in John Steinbeck's words: "to *know*, to *accept*, to welcome *her* position."

There are a number of community initiations today which are definitely part of the intensive and exciting search for new conceptions and solutions for contemporary ecological, social and personal and community spiritual problems (among many others, Optimista Klub /Optimists' Club/ and Liliomos Mozgalom /Lily Movement/ in Hungary). The lesson to be learnt from these communities, encouraging reconstructive community dialogue, is the three Rs they are concerned about: Responsibility, Resilience and Resourcefulness.

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