

## ***Structural Changes***

### **Cecile Andrews**

*It is a mistake-as so many over-centralized socialist societies have discovered-to try to eliminate money as an incentive. Money is one incentive among many, and has its place. But to put no limits on the impulse to accumulate money obsessively is as destructive as to place no limits on the impulse to commit violence. A viable democratic society needs a ceiling and a floor with regard to the distribution of wealth and assets.*

~PHILIP SLATER

### **CREATING A NEW CULTURAL VISION**

We want to create a society in which the quality of life both for people and for the planet are more important than the attainment of wealth. In an earlier chapter, we talked about moving from an egocentric ethic in which people are motivated by greed to an ecocentric ethic that values people and the planet. We need to create a belief system that makes the welfare of people and the planet a higher priority than the belief in the right of a few people to get rich. What are the characteristics of an ecocentric society?

#### **Caring**

We want to create a society that is caring. Lack of caring is at the root of the people's despair and the planet's devastation. When you care for people and the planet, you won't sell them down the road. We have seen that in order to be caring, we need to experience caring. So we need structural changes that allow people to behave in a caring way.

#### **Security**

As long as people feel insecure about their ability to survive, they will stay in the old system of striving for more. As long as people are worried that they'll be left behind, they'll keep on the treadmill of work and spend. We need structural changes that give people security.

#### **Equality**

Sometimes, when I'm driving on a freeway and marvel at the fact that we're all out there careening along without crashing into each other, I see our traffic system as a metaphor for life. We're pretty much following the rules, and we usually reach our destination without accident. The reason? Of course there are the structures of license laws, and punishments, but more important is the fact that on the highway, we're all pretty much equal. If someone runs into me, it will probably hurt him or her as much as it will hurt me.

It's easy to see that inequality hurts people, but perhaps it is the system of hierarchy and dominance that is at the root of our environmental problems-when dominance over people is acceptable, we feel it's acceptable to dominate and exploit the planet.

#### **Participatory Democracy**

As Philip Slater shows in his book, *A Dream Deferred*, democracy is the only system that is flexible enough to manage our problems. All theories about change show that change does not succeed unless there is participation by people who are affected. We need structures that encourage participation.

#### **Critical Thinking**

People need access to accurate information and a way to talk over what they have learned in order to understand what is in their long-term best interest. We need systems that encourage critical thinking.

### **CONCRETE PROPOSALS FOR A NEW SOCIETY**

Finding structures that encourage caring, security, equality, democracy, and critical thinking requires a lot of creativity, talking, and study. I am going to describe some of the solutions that have seemed exciting and important to simplicity circle members. This list is not comprehensive and is meant mainly to spark conversations. There will be no change without dialogue and discussion. Giving consideration to some of these ideas is a good start.

#### **Develop a New Standard of Economic Health**

In trying to develop a new vision of societal well-being, we need to have a new way to measure what is going on in the economy and society.

The current measurement used by the government and academics, the Gross Domestic Product (which used to be the Gross National Product before multinational organizations made that an inaccurate measure), reflects that we are doing well. Yet 70 percent of the American public feels unhopeful about the future.

Many groups are urging our government to adopt a different way of measuring progress. For instance, some recommend that we adopt a standard called the Genuine Progress Indicator, a measurement that would more accurately reflect reality. Put simply, the GDP measures all money that changes hands. If money is involved, the GDP goes up. That means negative activities as well as positive activities make our economy look like it's growing.

Even though the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill was bad, it boosted the GDP. Crime is a great booster because of a huge crime-prevention industry. Pollution can count twice-once as a part of an industry that produced it and another as part of an industry to clean it up.

If no money changes hands, the activity is ignored: the unpaid work of caring for family and friends or volunteering in community projects isn't counted, so it is not valued.

The GPI, the Genuine Progress Indicator, includes factors ignored by conventional measurements, such as the value of home and community work. Things such as pollution and crime, resource depletion and degradation of the habitat are included as the negatives that they truly are.

Not surprisingly, the GPI shows things are getting worse. It shows an upward curve from the early fifties until about 1970, and then a decline of about 45 percent to the present. What that means is that costs of our economic activities are starting to outweigh the benefits.

If we begin to see things in more realistic terms, we can more easily argue for the following changes.

#### **Develop New Kinds of Taxation**

Taxation brings in money to run the government, but it also sets policy. The way we tax affects people's behavior. For instance, when people advocate a "sin" tax, they are trying to discourage things like smoking by making cigarettes very expensive.

#### ***Reducing Consumption through Taxation***

Although there are a variety of policies that could reduce consumption, some argue that the only way to get people to quit using up resources is to price things out of range through taxation. Thus in Denmark, the tax markup on cars is so high that people buy fewer cars. The taxes that are collected can be used to provide public transportation.

In Europe as a whole, there is a growing movement advocating *green* taxes or ecological tax reform. Basically, green taxes cut income taxes and payroll taxes and, at the same time, tax activities that create pollution and use up natural resources.

This approach is also popular with the public because it reduces unemployment: by lowering payroll taxes, companies can afford to hire more people. By lowering income taxes, more people can afford to work part time-further helping unemployment by spreading the jobs around.

What we would really be doing with green taxes is reflecting the *true* costs of production: the costs of pollution and the use of resources. In the long run, someone pays for pollution, and we know who that is.

#### ***Limiting Wealth Accumulation***

If we are thinking of true well-being and health, our earlier discussion on the negative consequences of wealth seems to indicate that we must limit the ability to acquire great wealth.

Economist Juliet Schor, author of *The Overworked American*, advocates a more simple and fair tax system: there should be more exemptions for low-income people and higher taxes for the rich. There should be more taxes on corporations and higher inheritance taxes.

#### **Create Security by Setting a Minimum Level of Support**

As long as people have both the possibility of great wealth or the possibility of dire poverty, the desire for more will dominate us. We not only need to set an upper limit on wealth, but a lower limit. Europe is beginning to discuss what it calls a Basic Income Grant (BIG) where everyone would receive a minimum income from the government that would allow them to live modestly. It would allow people to

periodically opt out of the labor market to pursue studies, raise children, create their own business, or live as artists.

Ironically, we want to cut the welfare rolls and promote workfare at a time when there just are not enough jobs to go around. In fact, when unemployment drops, the stock market often takes a dive, because the market worries that low unemployment will cause inflation causing interest rates to rise. Perhaps it will be Wall Street who supports a basic income grant.

Because we have so many problems of addiction and mental illness, giving money outright to people might not be possible. However, we can give people the things they need money for in the first place: food to eat, a place to live, and basic medical care. Access to these necessities should be a right.

#### **Provide Work**

Few politicians are going to recommend a<sup>4</sup> basic, income grant. But if we don't do that, then we had better guarantee people jobs. But is this possible? Our jobs are disappearing as companies continue to automate and transport jobs overseas.

One of the most often-mentioned ways, to provide more work is to reduce the workweek and spread jobs around. This can be done in a way that both employees and employers benefit.

For instance, some companies find that people will accept a lower salary if their hourly wage goes up. Since productivity tends to rise when people work shorter hours, both the people and the company would benefit: there would be higher productivity for the company and a higher hourly wage for the people.

Juliet Schor found that only 23 percent of adults say that if they had enough income to live comfortably, they would prefer to work, full-time. Schor advocates tax policies that would induce employers to offer a variety of options such as trading income for time off, job-sharing, and the upgrading of part-time work. She recommends policies that would prohibit mandatory overtime, policies that would replace overtime pay with comp time (including salaried workers), and policies giving all American workers a guaranteed four week vacation. All of these policies would create more jobs and give overworked Americans a chance to have a full life.

Jeremy Rifkin suggests taxing companies with high profits and giving grants to nonprofit organizations to hire people to expand their work. With this plan, we need not expand the government and we could ensure quality of work by giving

grants only to agencies that have proven their effectiveness over the years. This plan would employ more people and attack our social problems at the same time.

#### **Cut Back on Defense Spending**

One way to find more money to make these changes is to cut back on defense spending. It not only would generate a great deal of money, but the defense industry is one of the biggest polluters- war is the biggest polluter of all.

#### **Reform Campaign Financing**

None of the above will be accomplished until our Congress is freed from its bondage to corporations. Both parties are held hostage by corporate contributions. .

Part of election reform is finding ways to increase voter turnout. Some advocate making voting mandatory as it is in Australia, where, if you fail to vote, you are fined. There should be universal registration, which could be done by the post office or the IRS. And voting should be on the weekend.

#### **Create an FDA-Type Commission to Reduce Consumption**

Before he died, Erich Fromm wrote a book called *To Have or to Be* in which he grappled with our extreme consumerism. He came up with several very interesting ideas. For instance, he advocated creating a government structure similar to the Food and Drug Administration to encourage what he called "sane consumption." This commission would use a variety of experts such as scientists and sociologists, but would also include theologians, psychologists, and representatives from environmental groups, nonprofits, and social organizations. They would work together, to develop a program to reduce consumption and encourage people to consume green products, products that minimize their impact on the earth.

The commission would encourage what is "life-furthering" and discourage what is "life-damaging," developing programs to educate and inspire the public to change. It would think not only in terms of what products and behaviors harm the environment, but what products and behaviors harm people by encouraging passivity, boredom, and destructiveness instead of creativity, participation, and community. .

This commission would encourage a strong consumer movement that would use the threat of "consumer strikes" as a weapon. In Sweden, a similar program has been developed. It's called the Natural Step. A prominent scientist worked with other

scientists to agree on a program of sustain ability, and the entire country, including the government, schools, businesses, and churches, is active in educating people to live sustainably. There is a growing Natural Step program in this country.

### **Expand National Service Programs**

Related to this could be an expanded national service program, a chance for people to work on solutions to our problems. jobs would be low paying, but with good benefits, including housing, health care, and educational opportunities. It would be an expanded version of Vista and the Peace Corps, and it could work at educating people about how to live sustainably; helping people to learn to garden organically or develop plans to use fewer household resources.

### **Continue Efforts toward Establishing Justice**

Although we need new policies, we can't neglect what we have started in this century in trying to bring equity and justice to groups without power like women, people of color, old people, people with handicaps, and gays and lesbians. We must continue to support affirmative action and laws that prevent discrimination.

### **Transform the Global Economy**

Focusing on our country is not enough, though. We can never again ignore the global aspects of change. If we make changes in our country, the corporations will move to another country: As we continue to accept the poverty of the rest of the world, we are laying a foundation for future disaster-either through mass starvation and sickness or war. Organizations such as the World Bank must support projects that benefit the poor people of the world without devastating the environment.

### **ATTACKING THE GIANTS**

It wouldn't be easy to bring about these changes. You need a mass social movement with people demanding change. There are two things that stand in the way of such a movement: advertising and corporations. Many feel that we cannot reduce consumption unless we put restraints on corporations and the kind and amount of advertising they do.

### **Reducing Consumption by Limiting Advertising**

In making an argument for the reduction of advertising, we must realize that there are more costs to advertising than meet the eye:

- We pay for advertising in higher, prices: \$150 billion, or almost \$600 per person.

Ten

percent or more of the price of goods is for promotional costs.

- We lose taxes because advertising costs are considered tax-deductible business expenses. Some estimate that the federal government loses up to \$35 billion a year.

Makers of cigarettes and alcoholic beverages spend \$5 billion a year on their advertising, while cigarettes and alcohol kill over 500,000. people each year. Drinking causes traffic fatalities and plays a direct role in violence, particularly domestic violence.

- Advertising supports violence on television, with hundreds of studies linking television violence to violence in real life.
- Advertising undermines parental control as it is increasingly directed toward kids. Schools are one of the latest territories to be invaded by commercialism. Companies give schools brochures, videos about their products, and offer a free news channel, complete with lots of free commercials. Even many of our nonprofit and civic organizations are becoming dependent on corporate funding, making them more likely to be censored in their activities.
- Freedom of the press is undermined. The press is not free to say what it wants for fear of advertising being withdrawn. Advertisers threaten to pull out their money when there are stories and programs that they don't like. Or, they require that a story be written that complements their product. For instance, women's magazines that run ads for cosmetics are often required to run stories about the joys of cosmetic makeovers.
- With the takeover of news networks by entertainment corporations such as Disney, the news gets watered down or programs censored. Almost go percent of newspaper editors said, in a 1992 Marquette University study, that advertisers had tried to influence story content, and 37 percent said the newspapers 'had complied. In another study, half of the business editors surveyed said that advertising pressure had influenced their editorials. Some argue that advertisers' control of the media is a threat to the First Amendment. It is not government controls that are so much the problem, as our founding fathers feared; rather it is something they didn't even dream of. corporate power.
- Our right to privacy is being undermined. Not only is our privacy invaded by the telemarketers' annoying calls at dinner, marketers have volumes of information on all of us. The strange thing is that we often give it freely, in exchange for something "free." For instance, people said that they would fill out survey forms if they were given free movies on television.

In their book, *Marketing Madness*, Michael Jacobson and Laurie Mazur recommend several steps we could take:

- Tax advertising and use the money for consumer information programs such as anti-smoking campaigns.
- Stop advertising aimed at children. (Several European countries have banned TV and radio advertising directed at children.)
- Expand restrictions on alcohol and tobacco advertising. (Canada has banned all cigarette advertising in all media.)
- Restrict telemarketing and direct mail. (Great Britain forbids companies to rent or exchange customer lists unless the customer is told prior to purchasing a product.)
- Expand restrictions on billboards. (This could be done on highways financed with federal funds.)
- Reduce the volume of advertising. (Make it more expensive by raising taxes on it, set time limits on the airwaves, and revitalize the Federal Trade Commission so that it could do its job.)
- Expand Public Broadcasting. (Compared to the United States, Japan spends eighteen times as much per person, Canada spends thirty-two times as much, and Great Britain thirty-eight times as much. Ralph Nader has called for laws that would require all stations to give an hour of prime time daily to community groups.)

Of course, corporations would fight all of this, first by claiming that any curbs would inhibit freedom of speech. But we have always limited speech whenever the damages outweigh the benefits, and in this case, the damage done through the promotion of a consumerist lifestyle is one of the greatest, and most threatening, we have ever faced.

But if we are going to touch advertising, we are going to have to find a way to regulate and reform corporations.

## **Regulate Corporations**

Corporations bring together all the elements of greed that I described earlier. They are run by hierarchy and competition and their goal is to get you to consume by manipulating you with advertising. They are devoted to greed. There is no shilly-shallying- it is only the bottom line that concerns them. This is the primary institution responsible for people's despair, for the destruction of the planet. Yet we go gaily to the shopping centers, keeping corporations in fine fettle, unaware of the affect of corporations on our lives.

Jerry Mander, in his book, *In the Absence of the Sacred*, portrays the way corporations have reached into all corners of our lives:

- With the exception of the government, corporations are the largest landowners in the United States. They are the major financial backers of electoral campaigns, and the major lobbyists for laws that benefit corporate goals.
- If you switch on your radio, or television, or open your newspaper, you hear the voice of the corporation in the form of public relations and advertising.

The basic rule of corporate operation is that it must produce income and show a profit over time. Among publicly held companies there is another basic rule: it must make a *lot* of money. Nothing else counts-the welfare of people and the planet are nothing.

Finally, though, people are beginning to feel that corporate domination isn't fair. Some people fight back by attending shareholder meetings to try to influence corporate policies, but persistent critics of corporate policy have often been faced with legal action. Schor proposes a Corporate Democracy Act that would require corporations to have boards filled with representatives of various stakeholder groups as well as stockbrokers. In other words, the boards of directors would have to represent the interests of people in general instead of just people who make money from the company.

### **Ensure Public Participation**

To bring about policy changes, we need public participation. We must find ways to help people band together to work for change. We need simplicity circles. We need to support unions and democratically controlled enterprises such as consumer cooperatives, employee-owned firms, and community-owned businesses.

Cecile Andrews, *Circle of Simplicity* (HarperCollins, 1997)

