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Radical Decency Reflection #49
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Politics: Systems Analysis, Values Response

We exist within systems. The environment, the culture, our families and primary relationships, even the cacophony of voices in our heads – all of these are systems. So, it goes without saying, the principles that govern the way systems operate are enormously influential in our lives.

The implications that flow from this reality are, however, deeply obscured by the individualistic worldview that predominates in our culture. The story, endlessly taught and told, is that we are the “captain of our ship;” that good people – through hard work, determination, and smarts – chart their own destiny.

This perspective also permeates our view of how change happens. We think it’s all about individual action. “I’m going to fix this relationship through my shrewd choices,” or “he could fix it if only he would get his act together and do the right thing.” Equally, we persist in believing that the way to solve our economic, political and environmental problems is by electing the right leaders.

Unfortunately, the evidence decisively refutes this individualistic approach to change. From time to time, the “right” political leader has been elected, depending on your political outlook – Kennedy or Reagan, Clinton or Bush. But the “problem” always remains: Inefficient and profligate government (for conservatives), an increasingly tattered safety net and regulatory scheme (for liberals). Nevertheless, we persist in looking to our leaders for answers. In the process, we virtually ignore the systemic forces that are so much more influential in shaping our world.

In this Reflection, I look at the last 40 years from a systemic perspective. As you will see, it has very little to do with leaders and elections. Instead, it works from these premises:

- A predominant system is in place in our culture that places its highest value on the accumulation of capital through the most efficient possible exploitation of resources, both physical and human; and
- Subject to principles that govern the unfolding of any system, this system seeks to preserve itself, and to expand and deepen its reach.

Cultivating this more systemic view of the world, we can better understand the disruptive and, often, unjust and inequitable policy shifts that seem to “just happen.” Doing so, our ability to influence these events will be greatly enhanced.

Over the last few hundred years capitalism has emerged, to a stunning degree, as the system that dominates our lives. What this means, in practical terms, is that capitalism's outlook is thoroughly embedded, not only in our personal outlooks, but also in the taken for granted ways in which our communities and organizations operate.

At an individual level, we are indoctrinated into ways of thinking and acting that propel this system forward. We view ourselves as individuals. We compete to win. We measure our success by money and possessions. Similarly, at a structural level, our schools, businesses and bureaucracies instinctually replicate capitalism's preferred authoritarian model – what the teacher or boss says, goes – and reinforce its competitive, win/lose mindset with its day-by-day choices. Thus, most every organization's taken for granted goal is to be the “best;” in other words to “win” which, in turn, means more money, size, and influence. Even most reform minded organizations, intent on attracting money and mainstream credibility, are given over to these modes of operating.

Operating in this environment, here is what I view as the real, front-page story of our domestic politics over the last 40 years. To grow itself – to accumulate more and more capital – this predominant system needs two things: More products to sell and ever expanding markets to buy these products. With our unrestrained commitment to advances in technology and productivity, the first part of this equation is fairly straightforward. All that is required are choices that allow the system's momentum to continue without interruption. And that has happened.

But the question of ever growing markets is more vexing. On the one hand, with its single-minded focus on increasing capital, the system will always seek to drive workers' wages down. And these efforts have, over the last 40 years, been very successful. But standing alone, wage stagnation would be highly problematic since it would result in the progressive impoverishment of the very consumers upon whom the system depends to buy its products.

So a more helpful take on many of the public policy changes of the last four decades is to view them as self correcting maneuvers of the predominant cultural system, doing what systems do: Preserving itself and extending its reach, in this case by finding ways to expand consumer spending without raising wages.

Because we habitually see change as the product of individual choices, the emergence of these new ways of operating seems mystifying. But from a systems perspective, there is really no mystery at all. Because the predominant system has so thoroughly colonized our habitual ways of operating, most all of us – knowingly or unknowingly – make choices, day by day, that are complicit with its goals. What consistently happens is this: A wide variety of individuals and institutions make decisions – uncoordinated but informed by this common set of values – that naturally cohere and evolve into policies that consistently promote the system's priority goal of capital accumulation.

One intriguing example is the women's movement. In the last half century, progress toward its larger goal – an end to our authoritarian/patriarchal ways – has been uncertain

at best. But in the area of career options, it has been stunningly successful. Why? Because adding a second wage earner to a majority of American households, in 1970s, allowed a continuing expansion of household purchases even as wages remained stagnant.

Similarly, the exponential growth in credit card use in the 1980s and, then, of “home equity loans” – a term that didn’t even exist until the mid-80s – didn’t just happen. As this second wage earner phenomenon leveled off, these mechanisms allowed consumer spending to continue its growth for another two decades, once again without any increase in wages. The new mechanism? Massive borrowing.

The nationalization and securitization of the mortgage market was the final (I think!) maneuver to extend this strategy. And the dark irony, here, is that with pension plans often being the ultimate purchasers of subprime mortgage bonds, the system contrived to have America’s unwitting worker’s finance their continued buying spree with their own retirement savings.

Note, as well, that systems analysis draws many other, seemingly disparate policy choices into a coherent “capital promoting” narrative: Our complicity with a massive exodus of jobs and capital to other countries; the eerily prescient initiative, five years before the housing market’s collapse, to limit personal bankruptcy relief; the bail out of the banking system; the failure to prosecute the major players in the financial meltdown; the mysterious absence of any serious debt relief initiatives for consumers; and so on.

With the mainstream system’s deeply engrained, capitalist inspired values framing our public debate and dictating outcomes, our change efforts need to start with the systematic cultivation of a new, more humane set of values: Radical Decency. With this new orientation, our lively interest in wealth creation will continue. But it will no longer operate without restraint. Instead, it will be clearly subordinate to, and in the service of the larger goal of a more humane, just and equitable world.

Being decent to your self, others, and the world – at all times and without exception – won’t magically lead to better public policies. But it will shed a clear, critical light on policies – such as those described above – that penalize millions of middle and working class people in order to preserve capital and expand its wealth generating capacity. In addition, as we immerse ourselves in Radical Decency’s wisdom-stretching prescription, new more strategies for change will emerge. See, for example, Reflection #12 (describing strategies for making “decency to the world” a personal priority); Reflection #15 (identifying business as a key strategic focus); and Reflection #45, (describing a more deeply collaborative approach to social change).

Needless to say, a new approach to public policy is sorely needed. Hopefully, understanding the crucial role that values play in perpetuating our “capital first” system – and with Radical Decency as our guide – we will find our way to increasingly effective strategies for transforming the ways in which we transact our public business.