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To Change or Not to Change: That Is Not the Question

Today humanity is a vast system of seven billion, with enormous technological powers and unprecedented demands. Its divorce from nature is approaching a tipping point: in its present form the human system is critically unsustainable.

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But how to change and what to change — that is.

People who are concerned about sustainability in the world know that something has to be done to keep this world going; changes have to be made. But they don't agree on the nature of the changes: some call for far more drastic changes than others. Using the level of change they have in mind, the sustainability-concerned people fall roughly into two distinct and in some respects opposing camps: the "shifters" and the "stabilizers."

The shifters — in the global context, "worldshifters" — insist that only a fundamental transformation is of any use. The stabilizers fear such drastic changes: they are for maintaining the current system by making it stronger and more resilient. Who is right?

Perhaps they both are. Some things need to be shifted, and some things need to be stabilized. Let us see what, and why.

The future of our world will be decided in the interaction of two distinct systems: the biosphere —the system made up of the web of life on the planet — and the system formed by the globally interacting communities of humans. One of these systems needs to be shifted, and the other stabilized.

The system of nature on this planet needs to be safeguarded, its dynamic equilibria maintained and made more resilient. It is not to be shifted to a tipping point, for the dynamic regime that would then come about is unlikely to be favorable to humanity. After all, the system of humanity was built within, and indeed into, the system of nature during the thousands of years that elapsed since the last Ice Age.

The human system could persist because it was in sync with the generative and regenerative capacities of the system of nature. This was a highly focused and delicate mesh; its disruption would be fatal to the human system, or to its out-of-sync parts. Many societies, entire civilizations have disappeared for lack of staying in tune with their environment.

Until the advent of the Neolithic, the human system maintained a functional mesh with

nature. Humans lived in kinship, or territorially based tribes, they followed their supply of food and lived more or less “in the lap of nature.” But at the dawn of the Neolithic some communities in the Levant began to grow beyond the lap of nature. They became sedentary villagers and shaped the world around them by domesticating plants and animals, and discarding their wastes into the local environment.

Some traditional people continued to maintain a high level of respect for nature and sought to live in harmony with it. But the Neolithic “revolution” spread in the Middle East and into Europe and Asia. Ever more communities went beyond the laws and rhythms of nature, deforesting, overexploiting, and polluting their environment.

The man-nature divorce became dramatic at the dawn of the Modern Age, when powerful technologies came into use, damaging natural processes in the attempt to fit human needs and demands. Today humanity is a vast system of seven billion, with enormous technological powers and unprecedented demands. Its divorce from nature is approaching a tipping point: in its present form the globally extended human system is critically unsustainable.

Our sync with nature has precious little tolerance for error. We are dependent on the planet for obtaining the most basic resources of our life: air, water, food, habitable space, and the diverse mineral and biological resources on which we have come to depend.

Let us be clear, therefore, what change we are talking about, and where. Do we mean change in the human system, or in the system of nature? And do we mean remedial, resilience and stability oriented change, or basic transformation?

The logical conclusion is that it is foolhardy to speak of change in regard to the natural system on which our very existence depends. Given the limitations of human knowledge, any change we would catalyze in this system is likely to be detrimental to the precariously out-if-sync system of humanity. Yet those who want to “engineer the environment” attempt to do just that. They modify plant life, the chemical composition of the soil, and even try to change patterns of rainfall. These are considered “local” interventions, yet in the highly interconnected web of life they have global consequences.

Trying to engineer nature could lead to literally programming ourselves out of existence. In regard to the biosphere, we should speak of safeguarding and maintaining, rebalancing, and making more resilient the system, and not of changing it. The keyword is stabilization, more exactly, re-stabilization.