Exploring Sociocultural Evolution: Intensive Modality and the Promise of the Third Sector

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Abstract: This paper seeks to articulate some of the frames, conditions, and alternatives for sociocultural evolution in the new millennium. Two frameworks are applied to this task: Francis Fukuyama’s interpretation of historical process and Ervin Laszlo’s concepts of intensive and extensive evolutionary modalities. In the context of the dynamics of the global economy, the paper considers the need to improve contemporary democracy, the role of artists in this struggle, and the importance of social networks and trust in underlining the functioning of society and economy. It also contemplates the possibilities of the voluntary sector as a realm where fiduciary arrangements give way to community bonds, and considers whether a social economy model could become an alternate institutional framework for civilizations in transition.

Résumé: Cet article cherche à articuler certains des cadres, conditions et possibilités d’une évolution socioculturelle au début de ce nouveau millénaire. Pour accomplir cette tâche, il a recours à deux approches théoriques: l’interprétation de processus historiques de Francis Fukuyama et les concepts de modalités évolutionnistes intensives et extensives d’Ervin Laszlo. Dans le contexte de la dynamique de l’économie mondiale, cet article considère le besoin d’améliorer la démocratie contemporaine, le rôle des artistes dans cette tâche, et l’importance de réseaux sociaux et de confiance pour le fonctionnement de la société et de l’économie. L’article contemple aussi les possibilités du bénévolat, qui pourrait remplacer des arrangements fiduciaires par des liens communautaires, et se demande si un modèle d’économie sociale pourrait devenir un cadre institutionnel de remplacement pour les civilisations en transition.

The process of sociocultural evolution always advances under conditions that reflect human constitutional design choices. We choose among alternative frameworks, within which we let sociocultural evolution proceed. Identifying the constraining and enabling conditions that shape this process comprises an integral part of examining—and perhaps proactively guiding—the process. The task of choosing among alternatives is facilitated when the frames and dynamics are made visible in this way. And, if we can identify the conditions on which the optimal workings of the process of sociocultural evolution depends, it becomes a
constructive task to assure that such conditions prevail (Vanberg, 1994). The goal of this paper is to begin to sketch out these frames and conditions, and to begin to articulate some of the alternatives for sociocultural evolution in the new millennium. In particular, it searches to portray alternatives that divert us from the dangerous path we are currently on, a path which has led us to create the environmental dangers that currently threaten life on this planet.

Two frameworks are usefully applied to this task. First, Francis Fukuyama’s (1995) interpretation of the human historical process as the interplay between two large forces: the rational desire to satisfy material needs through the accumulation of wealth, and the “struggle for recognition.” Second, Ervin Laszlo’s (2001) suggestion that as we head into the Third Millennium, the dominant modality of sociocultural evolution must shift. Laszlo discerns two evolutionary modalities: intensive and extensive. In this paper, I will explore the alternatives these two evolutionary modalities promise, overlaying Fukuyama’s two large forces, and considering the operations of three major sectors of society: government, economy, and community.

**Dual evolutionary modalities**

In the context of the massive environmental problems facing us today, human society needs an alternative mode of evolution, different from the path that we’ve followed to this point. This shift does not mean that sociocultural evolution with its attainments of social and cultural development must come to an end, only that another mode of evolution must take precedence. Laszlo (2001) discerns two evolutionary modalities: intensive and extensive.

**Extensive evolution**, the general form of sociocultural evolution we have generally enacted to date, unfolds on a two-dimensional axis across the planet. Societies pulled themselves up by their sociocultural bootstraps from local communities with limited power and impact, to the present globally extended technological civilization. The historical evolutionary process has been marked by a canonical increase in the complexity, size, and level of organization of human communities, and by their territorial expansion and environmental impact.

**Intensive evolution**, in contrast, unfolds along a different axis. Instead of unfolding as a two-dimensional extension on the surface of the planet, intensive evolution moves along a vertical axis. By this Laszlo means that it unfolds by going deeper into the structure of social communities, and toward reaching greater heights in the development of human communication and consciousness.

The ends of the extensive modality of sociocultural evolution can be grasped under the headings of conquest and colonization, complemented by the imposition of the values leading to profit-generating consumption. The ends and means of intensive evolution differ from these. They can be grasped under the headings of connection, communication, and consciousness.

This concept of intensive evolution complements the contemporary currents of scientific investigation and discovery. The new sciences, Laszlo (2001) argues, are growing beyond the classical separations and are showing us an interconnected universe where particles and humans interact through the deepest layers of
reality. From this perspective, the full potential of human communication unfolds only when the communicators apprehend the strands of connection through which they communicate. Awareness of these strands is an important factor in humanity’s continued evolution. It opens one’s vision to a wider conception of culture and ultimately to species- and planet-centred dimensions. The technologies that drive intensive evolution, such as electronically based information technologies, are likely to be joined by laser-based technologies and those that conserve and convey information in a holographic mode. These technologies, in the course of the twenty-first century, will create and sustain connections through multiple and quasi-instant links. Intensively evolving communities are oriented not toward conquest and consumption, but toward a deeper structure of social relations. A new phase is about to open for our species but, Laszlo warns, the threat of delay remains real.

Material needs and struggles for recognition
In his book, The End of History and the Last Man, Fukuyama (1992) argued that the human historical process could be understood as the interplay between two large forces: the first was that of the rational desire to satisfy the material needs through accumulation of wealth, and, for the second, he used a Hegelian term: “struggle for recognition.” The desire for recognition, an extraordinarily powerful part of the human psyche, has no material object but seeks a just evaluation of one’s worth on the part of another human’s consciousness. It can manifest in any number of contexts but is also the basis of most political passions and often works at cross purposes with the desire for rational accumulation. Moreover, what usually passes as economic motivation is in fact not a matter of rational desire but a manifestation of the desire for recognition.

How are the two large forces of the human historical process situated in these modality scenarios? How do they play themselves out? How might they interact? What are the implications?

Fukuyama (1992) is ready to assert that economic life is pursued not simply for the sake of accumulating the greatest number of material goods but also for the sake of recognition. Within this he sees the critical interdependence of capitalism and liberal democracy. He believes that modern liberal democracy seeks to satisfy the desire for recognition by basing the political order on the principle of universal and equal recognition. Liberal democracy works because the struggle for recognition that formally had been carried out on a military, religious, or nationalist plane is now pursued on an economic one. What happened in the modern world is not simply the embourgeoisement of warrior cultures and the replacement of passions by interests but also as the spiritualization of economic life. Today, democratic political institutions no less than businesses depend on trust for effective operation. For Fukuyama, the reduction of trust in a society will require a more intrusive, rule-making government to regulate social relations.

It is useful, at this point, to explore these ideas further by looking more closely at the operations of society, in particular its three sectors: government,
economy, and community. How might the intensive evolutionary modality play out in each of these three spheres?

**Government, governance, and contemporary democracy**
The economic and social restructuring of the advanced capitalist societies are driven by a revolutionary development in a range of information and communication technologies. Through their potential capacity to transcend the time and space delimiters of modernist organization and technique, information and communication technologies are facilitating the emergence of new forms of human interaction. Brian D. Loader (1997) is predicting a paradigmatic change in the constellation of power relations between individuals, governments, and social institutions. An alternative civilization of mind is naturally evolving in cyberspace which will eventually replace the politics of the flesh, sovereignty, military force, and national boundaries. To support his theory, Loader quotes Barlow (1996): “We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonwealth, our governance will emerge” (p. 5).

The prophesy like this one, he comments, ignores the fact that the disjuncture between the old world order and the rapidly emerging global economy has at its core the power of multinational corporations vis-à-vis nation-states and their citizens. Technosocial restructuring is occurring in the real world. The degree to which a wider range of people may become “wired” is likely to be heavily dependent upon public policymaking.

Intensive sociocultural evolutionary development would appear to need, at a top level of importance, improvements in contemporary democracy. It would foster evolutionary improvements by effectively addressing issues—and improving practices—of political participation and power sharing.

Today, the world is in transformation, the new world cannot be predicted, it must be created. The world we will create in reality depends on us. The alternative to a world governed from “above” can only be a self-governing world—one that chooses the shape of things to come from “below” (The Club of Budapest, 2001).

Can contemporary thinking on these issues be of assistance in making visible the most beneficial conditions which we might nurture to direct sociocultural evolution towards a path of intensive modality? The key notions for the improvement of contemporary democracy are participation and power. Although it appears that no contemporary analyst has adequately dealt with, at an overall theoretical level, the question of the low level of participation in voting at elections, a few scholars have developed insights about this process that might be helpful.

General discussions of democracy currently concern democracy beyond the nation state, in relation to globalization and regionalization, as well as below the nation state and decentralization in local and micro-regional settings. In the West the prominent notions are active, reflexive, and radical democracy. In the East a double transition is taking place toward democracy and toward market society. The shift to market forces widens economic inequality while democracy presumes equality. This same tension plays a role in the major issues in the countries of the South where a pattern of external imposition continues with the international
financial and economic regimes. It brings Nederveen Pieterse (2001) to the ques-
tion: “To what extent is liberal democracy a culturally particularist form of
democracy?” (p. 409).

Nick Hewlet (2000) observes that the low level of participation in voting
reflects a feeling of what Pierre Bourdieu (1981) describes as political “dispos-
session,” rather than satisfaction with the present state of affairs. Analysts who
promote direct, or more direct, democracy address this issue head-on, arguing for
measures which include more local debate, more education to encourage partici-
pation, more recognition of “difference” among voters, and democratic structures
on an international level. But many of the same people seem to avoid the other key
issue—the power of those with vested interests in keeping contemporary democ-
rapy as weak democracy. Hewlet (2000) asks, with good reason: “How can present
structures be transformed in order to reduce the power of big business, profes-

ional politicians, the media, and patriarchy—the forces which resist democratic
change precisely by using tremendous power?” (p. 175).

Could artists play an important part in this struggle? Any important engage-
ment in this battle would require a significant change in the orientation of the con-
temporary art world. As Julia Kristeva observed six years ago, a standardizing and
pervertible order is reining. The culture and art of revolt—the essential aspect of
European culture and art—is under threat. We are submerged by entertainment
and performance culture, while being on the brink of a black hole (Kristeva,
1995).

More recently, at a conference on “The Role of the Arts in the Process of
Social Change” in Budapest in December 2000, philosopher Renata Salecl dealt
with the question of whether we live in a period of anxiety or not, and how new
trends in the arts relate to it (Salecl, 2001). The difference between contemporary
art and art of the 1960s, she explained, is that the latter tried to make a political
gesture by tearing out the walls of the gallery, while contemporary art has given up
on the notion of the political. The return to one’s own body or making a work of
art out of one’s everyday life can be perceived as a gesture which says that there is
no point in involving oneself in political debates. The only power we have is over
ourselves.

Salecl (2001) considers this apolitical turn in the arts to be very much linked
with the logic of contemporary capitalism. The ideology of turning towards
oneself is deeply connected to the logic of developed capitalist societies. It goes
hand in hand with consumerist ideology, which constantly demands us to change
our appearance and which also teaches us to believe that there is no point in caring
about politics.

The arts encompass more than the messages of the consumerist ideology,
however. If, on the one hand, the arts try to show everyday life as an art object; on
the other hand, they also try to depict the backside of things, for example, inside
the body. (A concrete example of this latter approach is found in the work of anat-
omist Gunter von Hagens, who uses a special technique of plastification of real
parts of corpses so that we can see the skin without the body, the body without the
skin.) This sometimes gives the impression that everything can be exposed, and there is nothing else to surprise us beyond that which is supposed to lie behind the mask. In contemporary society, it appears as if social antagonism is non-existent, that is, that there is no void, no reason for undirected fear. This impression goes hand in hand with the dominant ideology of “there is no secret.”

But while ideology appears to make everything visible in contemporary society, people are nonetheless constantly left with the impression that someone else is running the show behind their backs, or that there is a hidden enemy who has to be exposed and eliminated. This paradoxical situation, which breeds anxiety, appears to contain within it the seeds of change.

Creativity is not a genetic but a cultural endowment of human beings. Culture and society change fast, while genes change slowly. Today’s economic, social, and technological environment is our own creation and only the creativity of our minds can help us to cope with it (The Club of Budapest, 2001).

**Economy, social networks, and trust**

The most crucial area of modern life in which culture exercises a direct influence on domestic well-being and international order is the economy, Francis Fukuyama (1995) asserts. There is a mistaken tendency to regard economy as a facet of life with its own laws, and it is important to stress that economic activities are rooted in sociocultural life. In all successful economic societies, economic communities are united by trust. The ability to associate depends on the degree to which communities share norms and values. It is out of such shared values that trust comes. The accumulation of social capital, while a complicated and, in many ways, mysterious cultural process, relies on this bedrock of trust. Fukuyama has no doubt that a healthy capitalist economy is one in which there will be sufficient social capital in the underlying society to permit businesses, corporations, networks, and the like to be self-organizing.

According to Hobsbawm (1996), the most striking characteristic of the end of the twentieth century has been the tension between the accelerating process of globalization and the inability of both public institutions and the collective behaviour of human beings to come to terms with it. A global economy is an economy where the strategic, dominant functions in all processes work as a unit in real time throughout the planet (Castells, 1996). In this global economy, the dominant segments of capital flows, labour markets, markets, production, management, information, and technology operate simultaneously at the world level. Within this context, Castells explains, the social relevance of any social unit is considered by its presence or absence in specific networks. The structural hierarchy of networks and the hierarchy of positions within a network’s flows largely determine their ability to influence the overall social logic from a particular position. Selective networks, through their flows, cover all spheres of society and all areas of the planet, but they segment countries and people according to the specific goals of each network and according to the specific characteristics of people and countries. This results in an extremely uneven social geography.
Castells (1996) predicts a tendency towards the breakdown of the communication pattern between the dominant institutions of society, working along ahistorical, abstract networks of functional flows, and the dominated communities, defending their existence around the principle of irreducible, non-shared identity. Thus, the structural logic of the informational age bears the seeds of a new barbarianism, arising from the fundamental opposition between the net and the self. In this context, the direct linkage between the structure of social organization in terms of the identifiable material interest and the logic of social mobilization has been lost. There is only the endless construction of the self by people engaging in the interaction process, instead of representing themselves in everyday life. In this situation, identity-based social movements, and autonomous personal lives should oppose this capitalist/informational logic by setting a different hierarchy of values (Castells, 1998).

So, what conditions might be most beneficial to nurture the shift from the current situation toward a mode of intensive sociocultural evolutionary development? In the early 1990s the mainstream rejection of all criticism of markets and their operations by policymakers and the media was commonplace. As Richard Falk (1999) points out, what resulted was a dogmatic climate of opinion that virtually shut down the political imagination, presenting citizens of even the most established democracies with a strong dose of their own irrelevance. The libertarian co-optation of information and computer technologies fostered a natural alliance between the most ardent geeks strung out along the electronic frontier and the more dynamic parts of the private sector that built new empires of wealth mainly through the manipulation of information and money. But, as Falk suggests, the Web also offers contradictory emancipatory resources as free goods to all those who are seeking to build networks of relations among activist social forces.

**The third sector: The last hope?**

The third sector, also known as the independent or voluntary sector, is the realm in which fiduciary arrangements give way to community bonds. Here, the giving of one’s time to others takes the place of market relationships based on selling oneself and one’s services to others. The third sector is where many people first learn how to practice the art of democratic participation. It is where companionship is sought and friendships are formed, where people relax and play and more fully experience the pleasure of life and nature. As Margaret Mead once remarked, “anything that embodies our deepest commitment to the way human life should be lived and cared for, depends on some form . . . of volunteerism” (quoted in Rifkin, 1995, p. 245).

The third sector, Jeremy Rifkin remarks, already cuts a wide swath through society. Community activities run the gamut from social services to health care, education and research, the arts, religion, and advocacy. Volunteers often assist municipal government, donating time to crime prevention work and disaster relief. This independent sector in the United States currently contributes to more than 6% of the economy and is responsible for 9% of total employment (Rifkin, 1995). In Canada, a large national “Voluntary Sector Initiative” had been launched
to better understand this sector, and to develop an Accord which will guide the federal government’s relationships with the voluntary sector in this country (see URL: http://www.vsi.bc.ca).

French social scientists introduced the term social economy in the 1980s in an attempt to clarify the distinction between the third sector and the market-exchange economy. The social economy is not measured the way one measures capitalism in terms of salaries, revenues, and so forth; its outputs integrate social result with indirect economic gains.

Unlike the market economy, which is based solely on “productivity,” the social economy is centered on human relationships not reducible to or replaceable by machines. Historically, social economics was born in the midst of the social dislocation brought on by the industrial revolution. Sismondi in his New Principles of Political Economy (1819) articulated a kind of economic thought more sensitive to questions of social well-being, in reaction to the prevailing orthodoxy with its emphasis on material wealth, unfettered markets, and individualistic competition. It was to be a more realistic science of human welfare calling on the state to take on the function of “protector of the poor.” Mark Lutz (2002) considers this to be still the most distinctive, and probably also the least controversial, aspect of most contemporary currents in social economic thought.

Rifkin (1995) tries to identify the necessary elements for a compelling alternative vision to the utilitarian ethos of the marketplace. The talent, energy, and resourcefulness of hundreds of millions of men and women could be redirected to constructive ends, he suggests, if we succeed in finding an alternative to formal work. The transformation of the third sector into a powerful independent realm capable of absorbing the flood of dispersed workers must be given urgent priority if we are to weather the technological storm clouds on the horizon. Nonetheless, the spirit of the social economy has yet to gel into a powerful worldview, countervailing that which has led to a rapacious consumption of the earth, and under which our planet’s biosphere has being compromised by resource depletion on the front end and environmental pollution on the back end.

Might Ervin Laszlo’s vision of intensive evolutionary modality of sociocultural development be able to usefully contribute to building this worldview? We human beings need more than food, water, shelter, self-esteem, and social recognition. We also need something to live for: an ideal to achieve, a responsibility to accept. In most parts of the world, the real potential of human beings is sadly underdeveloped. Underdevelopment creates frustration, and frustration, giving rise to defective behaviours, blocks development. This cycle must be broken at its point of greatest flexibility, and that is the development of the spirit and consciousness of human beings (The Club of Budapest, 2001).

**Constraining and enabling conditions**

Contemporary societies are going through a fundamental transformation which is radically challenging the understanding of modernity rooted in the European Enlightenment. The guiding ideas and core institutional responses of the first modernity no longer appear self-evident. This is true of the idea of territoriality in
relation to globalization; of full employment in relation to the work society; of fixed ideas of community and hierarchy in relation to individualization; of a “natural” division of labour in relations between the sexes. It is also true regarding the concept of limitless growth in relation to the ecological crisis.

Beck (2000) proposes the term reflexive modernity to refer to the transition from the first modernity, locked within the national state, toward a second, open, risk-filled modernity. The transition takes place within continuity of “capitalist modernization,” which removes the fetters of the national and welfare state. This transition is occurring despite the fact that many are to the disadvantage of large majorities and to the advantage only of elite minorities of global players. This makes the optimism evident in statements of the high-tech savants who remain unconvincing of the crisis at hand. For them, the hardware and software already exist to speed our passage into a new silicon-based civilization. Rifkin (1995) remarks that they seem unaware of a new form of barbarism waiting just outside the walls of the modern world, and of the masses whose cries for justice and inclusion still go unheard.

Ulrich Beck (2000) refers to this neoliberal utopia as a kind of democratic illiteracy. For the market that this utopia embraces is not its own justification; it is an economic form viable only in interplay with material security, social rights, and democracy, and hence with the democratic state. To gamble everything on the free market is to destroy, along with democracy, that whole economic mode.

If change continues on the path it is now, analysts tell us, in the next ten years only half of employees will hold a full-time job for a long period of their lives. With the end of the work society, Beck believes, the mood of doom and gloom resulting from technological advances in labour productivity and from the awareness of ecological destruction can be turned around into the beginning of the self-active political society. In the shadow of the “side-effects” of global dangers, society opens out into the (sub)political. The concept of “subpolitics” refers to politics outside and beyond the representative institutions of the political system of the nation-state. It means “direct,” ad hoc individual participation in political decisions, bypassing the institutions of representative opinion-formation and often lacking the protection of law (Beck, 1996).

This situation might mean that a new vision, based on a transformation of consciousness and a new commitment to community, may take hold. We can identify the constraining and enabling conditions that shape sociocultural process also in the following argument. With millions of human beings spending more and more of their waking hours away from work in the formal economy, the importance of formal work to their lives will diminish, including its hold over their concept of self-worth. For the increasing numbers for whom there will be no jobs at all in the market sector, governments will be faced with two choices: finance additional police protection and build more jails, or finance alternative forms of work in the third sector. In fact, in many nations the third sector is becoming a more effective force for dealing with local needs than either the private or public
sectors. This is especially true where the formal market economy plays little role in the economic life of the community.

The farewell to the work society will perhaps cause less pain and anguish if there is the prospect of successfully moving toward a world civil society that is at once global and local. Beck points out emphatically that this step requires an attainable and enticing goal to be present on the horizon, a goal capable of overcoming pragmatic scepticism. Those who wish to escape the spell of the work society must enter “political society” under a new historical meaning of the term—a society that gives material form to the idea of civil rights.

In this context, civil labour involves the politics of taking the first step. Through civil labour that can and must be done for others, civil rights pass beyond paper texts to become a palpable social reality in people’s lives. It places at the centre of things the art of activity and becoming active—including the resources of time, space, money, and co-operation. Unlike forms of voluntary commitment that acquire their status from being done without payment, Beck (1996) points out, civil labour is not paid work but it is rewarded with civic money and thereby socially recognized and valued.

In the money society, money is the measure of all things. Civic money, in contrast, means a quantity for getting by with. In this context, entrepreneurship can and must be associated with work for the common good. Public welfare entrepreneurs combine in their person that which appears to be excluded by the prevailing logic of functionally differentiated societies. Civil labour may thus become an innovation that permits other innovations. A culture of creativity.

The social economy becomes the best hope for re-establishing an alternative institutional framework for a civilization in transition, on a path, perhaps, toward a vision of intensive evolutionary modality. The main challenge facing all of us is to ensure that the technological capabilities of the information era are deployed to ethical as well as market criteria which include central normative ideas like sustainable development, human rights, and cosmopolitan democracy (Falk, 1999). Congruent to this, in the Manifesto (The Club of Budapest, 2001) Laszlo asserts that unless people’s spirit and consciousness evolve to the planetary dimension, the processes that stress the globalized society/nature system will intensify and create a shock wave.

Quite generally, says Erich Jantsch (1992), we can define ethical behaviour as behaviour which enhances evolution. This implies that ethics is not given a priori, but emerges with evolution. In the human world, the regulatory devices consist chiefly of laws, rules of behaviour, and taboo—and also of morality as a direct inner experience. As an integral aspect of evolution, ethics is not subject to revelation. It may be experienced directly by way of the dynamics of self-organization and creative process.

As a dynamic principle, morality is a manifestation of the mind. Our consciousness includes transpersonal dimensions. By means of our mental construct we design social and cultural systems, and ultimately, if we agree with Jantsch, we are not the helpless subjects of evolution—we are evolution.
References