

# The New Society: bridging the old and the new

*I sympathize with those who would minimize, rather than those who would maximize economic entanglements among nations. Ideas, knowledge, science, hospitality, travel – these are things that of their nature should be international. But let goods be homespun wherever it is reasonable and conveniently possible, and above all, let finance be primarily national.*

JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES,  
On National Self-Sufficiency 1933



## Zoltán Csörgő and Bronwen Rees

Zoltán Csörgő is a scholar, researcher, writer and editor in consciousness studies, symbology and traditions.

**Zoltán Csörgő and Bronwen Rees propose how, in the New Society that the UK government is creating, we may need to draw on the principles of cultural traditions to bridge the gap between the old and the new paradigm.**

**T**HE economic and managerial structures of Western capitalism have spread throughout the world, replacing many former communities and eliminating the traditions that sustain them.

However, these traditions, we argue, are important in maintaining continuity and cohesion. Even whilst we often exist in a virtual world, where time and space have become conflated through new technology, human beings are made of flesh and blood, and need to connect with the external material world, in real time. Traditions in any society, are not just some ‘olde worlde’ nostalgia, but they exist as

the lifeblood of human connectedness, helping individuals collectively to preserve a balance between the old and the new. They contain collective memory patterns that are rooted in nature.

Traditions are the cultural counterparts of economic forms, created by a community to become its collective memory. Much of this memory is informal; values; systems of norms that regulate how people live together, work together or co-operate. As such tradition provides the confidence capital of a society or a local community, giving it its self-sustaining power. We argue that having a sense of tradition is vital if societies and organisations are going to be capable of renewing themselves, and hence become sustainable.

### **The function of traditions**

Traditions contain implicit meaning about our place in the universe, our task and our purpose. They contain a relationship between human nature and nature herself. At the heart of a community is a collective task of getting to know the inner and outer laws of nature in order to exist harmoniously, so that a

human can find meaning in his or her existence. Traditions convey a world of values and qualities of life in which immaterial elements have more significance, thereby creating a moral order in which human character can find firm support.

Traditions contain two cultural mechanisms which sustain the community in which they have developed.

- The first mechanism is innovative and revolutionary and serves the renewal of the system by bringing in and building in new elements.
- The second mechanism is conservative and there is an emphasis on passing on experiences and values, preferably without disturbance, in order to maintain the continuity of community life.

If the first mechanism prevails, the given culture loses continuity; if the second prevails, it will become rigid. Thus, the main function is to keep a balance between old and new elements. The function of traditions is not just a throwback to the past, but is a collective mechanism for community survival, providing organic growth pathways for sustainability.

By mobilising the inner resources both of the individuals within the community, and collectively within the community, traditions create an innovative environment that is capable of *receiving the new* and at the same time is a *source of innovation* itself. So tradition is the source of regeneration; its function is to provide a vehicle through which thought-patterns (and hence actions) are passed on and integrated with the new, and so they provide flexibility, which is a necessary condition for sustainable change. These communities are not only more resistant, but they are more secure, trusting and creative as well, since they contain the potential for transformation, and the wisdom of the past. Thus, they survive, since each person and process in that community has a role, and a purpose that is respected, even if that purpose is one of provoking or challenging!

### **What has happened to traditions?**

In modern Western economies the functions fulfilled by traditions have largely been taken over by the state and its business institutions. The business organisations provide the location and reward for the everyday life of a society's members, while the state (in the UK) provides monetary benefits for those who cannot find a job, or are too ill to carry one out. Since these benefits are tied

*‘The organisation that will thrive in the future, we argue, is one which will be able to embrace both the traditions of the past, and the vision of the future.’*

into a larger economic system, then individuals are at risk when the larger system is in crisis, as is currently the case. Further, a merely monetary contribution, however, does not contribute the confidence, trust and possibilities for growth that are naturalised in traditions. Without an inherent, self-generating memory structure, a consequence for individual employees is the lack of roots, leading to problems of identity, and concomitant psychological consequences. Lack of function, alienation, disintegrating individualism then leads to loss of connection, isolation and fear.

The contemporary organisation has largely ignored these profound aspects of traditions, but we argue here that they do so at their peril. Traditions contain the forms from which the new can emerge, and from which age-old wisdom can be passed from one generation to another. Since they contain the memory of a society or organisation, they can provide a continuity and cohesion that binds a community together in terms of making collective meaning and value.

### **Can we translate the principles of traditions into organisations?**

A locality and its local community, a settlement, is a cultural complex that has survived historical eras with both a forward trajectory, and a historical background. An organisation, on the other hand, is a collection of people and processes engaged in production of either material goods or services. Most organisations could be described by a mechanistic metaphor as first developed by Gareth Morgan in his early pioneering work *Images of Organisation*. In this people and processes are cogs in an ever-turning machine – and the global uptake of ‘human resource management’, and its emphasis on ‘performance management’ and ‘competences’ lay testament to this. However, the mechanistic metaphor, according to the latest theories in systems thinking, is a closed system and these invariably lead to increasing disorder, called ‘entropy’. Thus, even whilst they are created to work efficiently, according to physics, they will dissipate some heat (loss of energy), and are thus unsustainable. If, as we have argued, individuals feel alienated and frustrated within organisations, then this is one of the places where heat, or energy is lost. Finding a way of introducing traditions into organisations could replenish the closed system, turn it into an open one, and thereby give it the lifeblood of sustainability.

## Re-building a sense of tradition into organisation and community

As we are now in a major time of transition, those organisations which can develop, or localities which can preserve, a spirit of tradition will be those which learn how to become sustainable – how to manage and thrive through this time of change.

We would argue then that tradition is – and it has to be stressed – a necessary but not sufficient condition of an ecologically sustainable organisation that can provide a living for its members. Such an organisation is one in which social and ecological considerations are just as important as market extension and profit. This is not to say that market extension and profit are not important. What traditions could do is provide the fuel by which an organisation can preserve a cohesive memory, and thus build a ground and inspiration to build for the future. How may this be done?

A crucial part of this process is a collective intent to acknowledge and respect tradition as a necessary part of the organisation's structure. Innovative change consultants have both implicitly and explicitly recognised the importance of some of the principles of traditions over the past two decades. At an implicit level, there have been attempts to tie in the employees' values with those of the organisation – as encapsulated in the ideas of mission and vision statements. Explicitly, more creative approaches have been to introduce story-telling, juggling, or even meditation into organisations – to try to tap into the emotional and spiritual dimension. However, what has been missing is that such initiatives have tended to be imposed from the top down, so that the effects have not lasted. For the spirit of tradition to take root, the organisation's structure needs actively to incorporate the shared values and stories of the current and former members, to provide a meaningful context for the memory structures to stabilise, and for a different emergent order to take shape. Whilst the mechanistic metaphor for organisations predominates, these initiatives scratch only the surface level and cannot capture the 'hearts' of those employed.

## Empirical examples

Some organisations are beginning to implement projects such as employee volunteer programmes, which build in this element of human relatedness to organisational life (Prayugvong and Rees, 2010). In small localities, social enterprises are emerging,

*“By mobilising the inner resources both of the individuals within the community, and collectively within the community, traditions create an innovative environment that is capable of receiving the new and at the same time is a source of innovation itself.”*

offering people the opportunities to work together in creating sustainable livelihoods. The Greyston Bakery, the New Belgium Brewing Company provide fine examples of how the inclusion of traditional community values can lead to sustainable, innovative organisations.

Where there are still extant traditions, there are movements both for preserving and recreating these for the community. For example in Hungary, which has only had 20 years of a capitalist system, many of the traditions are still extant, and attempts are being made to preserve the best of these, and integrate them with a Westernised economy. For example there are plans to create local centres of traditions where not only dancing (folk dances, circle dances) and other events, feasts, specials days are organised, but lectures, courses about the past, the traditions and the environment of the locality as well, and even the custom of telling tales and stories characteristic of traditional spinneries ('Fonó') can be revived. In traditional communities, the 'Fonó' was the centre of the community, a place where tradition was passed on verbally, and also dancing took place. This was where the unwritten rules of the community and the laws of living together were learnt. Fashioned after these centres, several successful 'dance-houses' have been set up in Budapest, and there are plans to create the 'Fonó' in local centres in Hungary.

### Traditions: a cycle of time

The traditions of the past had important human functions, and these are just as valid today as 2000 years ago. Undoubtedly we are undergoing one of the most profound and far-reaching changes in human history. Perhaps the most important principle that we can learn from tradition is the relationship to cycles of time and nature. The cycles experienced in nature are part of a bigger cosmic process, and the rituals performed the function of reconnecting people with this process to create order, balance and harmony both within the individual and within the community. The complicated, linear strategies which dominate organisations move them away from true contact with the environment, rather than in alignment with it. Continuity is not just an add-on. Multinational corporations, which currently are economically dominant, will however, ignore the wisdom and processes of traditions at their peril, as the on-going economic and environmental pressures increase.

#### References

- Morgan, G (1997) *Images of Organization* Sage, CA US
- Rees, B and Prayukvong, W (2010) 'The Role of Employee Volunteer Programmes in Thailand' *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*
- Nowakowski, L. 'Ethical Business Works', *Interconnections*, Issue 5, pp.55–61
- [www.greystonbakery.com](http://www.greystonbakery.com)
- [www.newbelgium.com](http://www.newbelgium.com)