

Subsistence and Status: Utilization and Conceptualization of the Environment

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Introduction

James Speth, Administrator of the [United Nations Development Program](#) ¹, in 1994, outlined some of the massive problems confronting the world a decade ago,

Today, the average person among the 4 billion in the developing countries consumes about 2,500 calories of food each day. The average person consumes 3,400 calories per day in Western Europe and more than 3,600 in the United States... according to recent estimates by the world's leading soil scientists, an area of

about 1.2 billion hectares - about the size of China and India combined - has experienced moderate to extreme soil deterioration since World War II as a result of human activities. Over three-fourths of that deterioration has occurred in the developing regions, most of it in arid and semi-arid regions. When combined with other environmental threats to the agricultural resource base - loss of water and genetic resources, loss of cultural resources, and climate change, both local and global - the situation is disturbing indeed. (Speth, 1994)

Paul Ehrlich, in 1997, expanded on this description of the environmental problems facing the world:

Exploitation is a complex subject, but in a world in which huge international disparities in wealth and power persist, the rich-poor gap is increasing. In 1960 the ratio of the income of the richest 20 percent of humanity to that of the poorest 20 percent was 30:1; according to the *United Nations Human Development Report 1997*, it was nearly 80:1 in 1994. And the rich show pathetically little interest in closing that gap. Since 1950 the richest fifth of humankind has doubled its per capita consumption of energy, meat, timber, steel, and copper, and quadrupled its car ownership, greatly increasing global emissions of CFCs and greenhouse gases, accelerating tropical deforestation, and intensifying other environmental impacts. The poorest fifth of humankind has increased its per capita consumption hardly at all. Indeed, those in the poorest fifth average a cash income of less than a dollar a day, and those in the next fifth average only three dollars a day. This means that 40 percent of humankind accounts for a mere 6.5 percent of the world's income. (Ehrlich, 2 1997 p. 98)

The problems outlined by Speth and Ehrlich have grown steadily worse over the last ten years. Those problems have seriously affected people in almost every non-Western country, for it is in those countries that the environmental degradation has been most pronounced, and it is in those countries that poverty has become widespread and endemic. Deterioration of soil quality is more than matched by an erosion of communities around the world and the human cost of the disintegration of communities has been borne by the poor of non-Western countries. Hundreds of millions, right now, are severely malnourished. Far more are daily exposed to the despotism, brutality and corruption which always appear when communities break down and the structures and processes of interpersonal support and law and order become less and less effective.

Understanding Others Requires Understanding Oneself

Lyla Mehta, in 1999, wrote a short essay in which she examined a new orientation announced by the World Bank. Not only would it fund 'development' activities, it would, in future, provide people in 'developing' countries with the knowledge they need to improve

their social, political and economic lives. As she puts it,

In its new role, the Bank will not only transfer capital to developing countries but also seeks to close the gaps that exist in the level of knowledge in the north and south. (1999 p. 151)

But, she asks, whose knowledge will the Bank be using? As she says,

The foundations of the assumptions linking knowledge with one universal truth have been rejected by a growing confluence of diverse disciplinary perspectives..." (1999 p. 153)

Over the past twenty years scholars in Western countries have become increasingly aware that there are many different ways of seeing and interacting with the world. The dominant understandings of the West are not understandings of an objective reality which have previously eluded humanity. They are the understandings one needs to live successfully in Western communities. The understanding needed to live successfully in other communities is usually very different. Not until one focuses on one's own understandings and then examines them in the light of understandings which exist in other communities, can one begin to appreciate the importance of this insight.

This is an introductory study of the ways in which human beings, in a range of communities, with widely different ways of categorising and understanding their worlds, conceptualise and interact with their environments. It is also, inevitably at the start of the 21st century, an introduction to the ways in which Western capitalism set about changing the rest of the world to serve its own purposes. We will start by examining the understandings of 'Western industrialised'(that is, 'capitalist') people, which drive life and interaction in their communities. Armed with that information, we will then examine non-Western ways of conceptualising and interacting with the environment.

Living *beyond* the Environmental Means: Western capitalism in action

Of course, the term 'Western capitalism' covers a wide array of nations and communities with diverse sets of understandings and forms of organisation. Yet, if pushed to it, I'm sure that you could quickly identify most of the nations to which the term is usually applied, as Speth (1994) did in the quotation at the start of this discussion.

Although it is true that the term covers a wide array of communities, the *fundamental presumptions* which drive Western capitalism are remarkably similar across communities and countries of 'The Western World'. They are spelt out and continually

reinforced through the dominant systems of education, government and subsistence which are extant in those communities. There is a constant interchange of information, expertise, commentary and commerce between these countries. There is also continual, detailed comparison of the 'performance' of the various Western capitalist countries through a continual stream of charters, accords, agreements and studies enabled through such organizations as the OECD. Commentaries on these, along with comparative sets of 'performance indicators', are regularly presented in Western news bulletins and 'current affairs' programs to keep the population 'informed'. As the Home Page of *The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* explained in 2001,

The OECD groups [30 member countries](#) in an organization that, most importantly, provides governments a setting in which to discuss, develop and perfect economic and social policy. They compare experiences, seek answers to common problems and work to co-ordinate domestic and international policies that increasingly in today's globalized world must form a web of even practice across nations. Their exchanges may lead to agreements to act in a formal way - for example, by establishing legally-binding codes for free flow of capital and services, agreements to crack down on bribery or to end subsidies for shipbuilding. But more often, their discussion makes for better informed work within their own governments on the spectrum of public policy and clarifies the impact of national policies on the international community. And it offers a chance to reflect and exchange perspectives with other countries similar to their own. (5/7/01)

While the OECD statement of intent has been altered over succeeding years, the import of the [latest incarnation](#) is very similar.

Actual practice in Western capitalist countries and communities is continuously measured against the ideals of the current dominant version of capitalism. The dominant version of capitalism is promulgated and protected by a cadre of 'specialists' trained in Western universities and colleges. They are employed by Governments, private enterprise, and a range of 'think tanks' (such as the *American Enterprise Institute* and the *Hoover Institution* in the United States) to provide direction to governments and comment on how well practice is conforming to expectations, often on a *daily* basis. Practice in each country is continuously adjusted to conform to currently fashionable economic models. A wide range of 'foundations' (such as the *W. K. Kellogg Foundation*, the *Ford Foundation*, the *Andrew W. Mellon Foundation*, the *Rockefeller Brothers Fund*, the *Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund*, and the *Benton Foundation*) provide research funding, tailored to developing and promoting the economic models of capitalism, not only in Western countries, but around the world.

That is, there is a continuous *ideological management of reality*, ensuring that Western capitalist communities maintain the most important forms of organisation and understanding held by those who control the important institutions of both government and the economy.

Of course, not everyone who lives in a Western country holds capitalist understandings equally clearly or organises life by them. This is one of the reasons why it is so necessary to have close scrutiny of community and individual performance by specialists. But, to be 'successful' one must master them, and to be acceptable in a Western country one must organise one's life (at least outwardly) by them.

Although Western countries consist of an increasing agglomeration of *ethnic* communities (communities which come from 'non-Western' regions of the world) the *dominant groups*, which control both government and commerce, are committed to these central Western capitalist understandings. Those who control the central institutions of Western communities simply assume that the ways in which they perceive their world, and the forms of direction and interaction which they take for granted, are *universals*. They are the only conceivable, *reasonable* ways in which life can successfully be organised and lived. And, the vast majority of people living in such communities, even if they feel uncomfortable with the consequences of capitalist systems of control and direction, can conceive of no viable, *rational* alternative forms of organisation and understanding.

For our purposes here, this is the meaning of the term *hegemony* – control by an elite which promotes and protects the *dominant ideology* (in Western communities, capitalism) as the only reasonable approach to community organisation and action. All strong, cohesive communities have such hegemonic processes which promote and protect what dominant members of the community see as central to life in their communities. This is not just a feature of 'Western capitalist' communities. As a community member, you might not like them, you might feel discriminated against by them, but you can't muster convincing arguments against the ideological demands of the dominant groups in your community. Because the fundamental acculturative, organisational and governmental structures of Western communities are built on the basic presumptions of capitalism, it is a truism that to be successful in a Western community one must order one's life in terms of the fundamental understandings of capitalism.

Acculturative processes and structures, in any community, ensure that people are brought up knowing how they should behave, how society should be organised, what the truly important goals of life are. They also ensure that people conform to what they have

learned. In Western communities they include such institutions and processes as the education system; the systems of law making, legal commentary and law enforcement (such as the legislative arm of government, legal experts, police and courts); a wide range of processes of social appraisal and instructional programs designed to help community members to be 'successful' in their various undertakings; and various regulatory bodies set up to ensure that particular forms of organisation and action are both understood and adhered to.

All these acculturative forms focus, usually without consciously recognising that they do, on ensuring that people in Western communities organise their lives in ways best suited to the demands of life in a capitalist world. So, if one criticises capitalism, one attacks, not simply particular aspects of life, but the fundamental presumptions upon which life in Western communities is built. Those presumptions are continuously reinforced and protected by the acculturative agencies of Western communities. Inevitably, people who have been enculturated in Western capitalist communities feel deeply threatened by any attempts to attack such basic understandings because, not only do they order their lives by them, they order their *thinking* by them as well. So, if the presumptions are attacked, people who hold them and organise life by them feel personally emotionally and cognitively threatened. During the Cold War between Western capitalism and Soviet communism, this was expressed in the heart-felt belief of the majority of Western people that it would be 'better to be dead than red' and that 'the only good red is a dead one'.

Basic presumptions of Capitalism

Below are some of the basic understandings (relevant to this discussion) which drive capitalism and drive those communities in which capitalism is central to daily life for well enculturated community members. A prime characteristic of *hegemonic control* is that neither those who hold the reins, nor those who are subject to the controls and acculturative agencies, normally see themselves as involved in a hegemony. It is simply obvious to all involved that there are certain forms of behaviour, attitude, interaction and understanding to which community members ought to conform if the community is to remain strong and directed. Normally, those involved in a hegemony see the ideas, processes and structures of their community as universally valid, the ways in which any rational community should be organised. To the extent that they can convince people in other communities of this, those communities become involved in the same hegemonic processes.

Those terms which take their force from the underlying presumptions of a community are, as Raiklin (1995) has described, often poorly defined. They are, in the words of the United States

Constitution, held 'to be self-evident', intuitively recognised as valid, needing little explanation, and little or no justification. The presumptions are, of course, *culturally determined* assertions: *postulations*, not 'facts'. Because well-enculturated Western people see these as attributes common to all members of the human species, they assume that models of communal organisation and interaction constructed from them are *universally valid in any community and in any culture*. However, these ways of behaving have not always existed. They have emerged as central in Western countries over the past 500 years.

What, then, are the fundamental postulations which underpin life in Western capitalist communities?

1. Individual human beings are born as pre-social, independent, self-interested, competitive, acquisitive beings with very similar wants and aptitudes. That is:
 - a. Individual human beings want similar things (and the more the better);
 - b. they are all more or less equally capable of getting what they want;
 - c. they compete with each other to get them;
 - d. they develop personal, individualised accumulations of *possessions*;
 - e. having competed with each other to get their wants, they compare themselves against each other to see who has the most;
 - f. on the basis of comparison they can produce a rank order of *success* in economic activity which (with a lot of ancillary fine-tuning) provides the basis for *status*³ and *prestige* in human communities⁴;
 - g. in the process of getting what they want they form groups in which they remain involved so long as they perceive it to be to their advantage;
 - h. communities emerge out of the self-interested interactions of individuals. They 'join' groups because they see personal advantage in doing so and leave them when the advantage is no longer there. If individuals change their wants and needs and the ways in which they get them, community structures will alter, reflecting the changed aims and ambitions of individuals, and altered means of achieving them;
 - i. the best community will be one which emerges out of the self-interested, competitive activities of individuals in pursuit of their own needs and wants. It will ensure that individuals are 'free' from social, political, religious and

any other non-economic *constraints* on their ability to pursue their own needs and wants.

Attempts at 'social engineering' should, therefore, be based on changing people's wants and needs and 'freeing' individuals from social, political and other constraints so that they can pursue their own acquisitive interests. Successfully change their wants and remove community constraints on individual acquisitiveness, and communities will emerge reflecting the best ways in which individuals can attain their new wants. These presumptions have been the driving presuppositions of nearly all forms of 'Third World Development' over the past 50 years.

If any individual fails to achieve material well-being in a 'free' community, it is possible to blame that person for his or her failure. Since all human beings have similar aptitudes, those who are successful in accumulating *possessions* must have applied themselves more diligently than others to the important activities of life. Right wing politicians in Western countries often blame the poor for their own parlous economic position, since, if they applied themselves more diligently and did not 'waste' their resources, they too would be successful.

2. Life, for people well enculturated in Western communities, is divided into a set of *domains* or *environments* including:
 - a. the material environment,
 - b. the social environment,
 - c. the spiritual environment,
 - d. the economic environment, and
 - e. the political environment.

(Can you think of any other inclusive environments that should be in this list?)

Each of these environments is presumed to be more or less *self-contained* so that somebody can act in the 'economic environment' without that activity affecting the 'spiritual environment', the 'social environment' or any of the other environments. One can therefore assert that economic activity does not have social or political or religious consequences and can assume, for example, that economic activity is not responsible for 'material environmental degradation'. By narrowly focusing on behavior within each domain, excluding the others, it can be argued that one should not 'confuse' economic activity with social activity, or make 'social' demands on 'economic' agencies. When individuals are engaged in 'economic' activity, focused on the accumulation of possessions, they should not be *constrained*

by social, political, religious, or other non-economic restraints and restrictions on their acquisitive activity.

Because of the overwhelming emphasis placed on 'economic' activity in Western communities, the driving centre of life in such communities turns out to be 'economic', with activity in the other environments of secondary importance, geared, where possible, to ensuring better economic performance.

Because this set of categories is so fundamental to the way Western communities are organized and their people interact and think, most people in Western communities believe that everyone in the world divides reality into this set of environments. This is, of course, not true. Other cultural communities divide reality into sometimes very different sets of categories and then organize their communities, interact with each other, and explain life in terms of those categories. We will examine one such set of communities, the Wixarika, with a very different set of basic categories and resulting understandings, later.

3. The *material environment* is the arena for Western individualized, self-interested, self-promotional activity. The possessions which are accumulated are obtained from that environment. So, while it might be a lot of other things as well, *the material environment is a set of resources to be manipulated and used in competitive self-promotion*. Since the material environment is a *set of resources* it can also be seen to be a set of 'things' which can be accumulated and used for self-promotion. Human beings can, and should, individually (*privately*) own land and material resources. And, since competitive self-interest is the driving force behind this ownership, other individuals should be excluded from the resources lest they gain a ranking advantage from something they do not 'own'. So, all private ownership is *exclusive*, the *property* of the individual who has acquired it. The material environment becomes divided up into exclusively held parcels and the concept of 'common' land and environment no longer makes sense.
4. If anybody claims to 'own' a part of the material environment, but does not use it *efficiently* (to increase personal accumulation and to make its 'resources' available to others who 'need' them for their own self-interested accumulative activity), then they do not 'deserve' that ownership. The state should either compel them to use those resources 'responsibly', or should make them available to other people who will do so. The material environment should be used to *its full potential*.

The state has the right to compel such use because all

private ownership is guaranteed by the state, and all resources not privately owned are, by definition, *publicly owned* by the government. *Common ownership* (where no particular individual, group or communal institution can claim exclusive possession) has been converted, over the past 500 years, in Western capitalist countries, into *public ownership* (where whatever is not held by private individuals is, by definition, owned by the state). These understandings have produced very serious consequences for people living in non-Western communities, where common ownership has usually been the norm and *economic efficiency* has not been considered important.

5. All interaction between individual human beings is based on and driven by *competitive self-interest* between people of *roughly equal aptitude*. So, provided all individuals have access to the same information and are free to engage in any interactions they wish, all exchanges between human beings will be *positive*. That is, any *free exchange* (any exchange not hampered by social, political, or religious constraints aimed at limiting and directing possibilities of individual accumulation) will benefit both parties. After all, the reasoning goes, why would they enter the exchange if it didn't? So laws should be focused on guaranteeing individual human beings *freedom* to engage in self-interested, acquisitive exchange (aimed at private accumulation of 'assets'), without coercion from anyone, and without interference by anyone (especially social, political or religious agents)

There are many other basic presumptions which underwrite life in Western capitalist communities (see [History of the Emergence of Capitalism](#) for an examination of their historical emergence). However, these will be useful in comparing the ways in which non-Western communities and Western ones understand land ownership and utilization, approach their material environment, and subsist in their environments. 'Subsistence' refers to the ways in which communities and the individuals within them go about obtaining the basic material necessities of life. As we will see, what is 'necessary' to any community is not merely a consequence of the need to survive. That is the tip of an iceberg whose bulk is determined by the needs and wants of members of communities as they strive to live up to the expectations of people around them, and strive to affirm and reaffirm their self-worth.

The presumptions spelt out above will help us in unravelling the *culturally specific* nature of the demands made on other communities by Western governments and agencies. Western

communities, wanting to make the world a 'better' place, have, over the past century, been determined to ensure that non-Western communities become 'democratic' (where individuals of similar aptitude are 'free' to indulge in self-interested accumulation and other self-promotional activities), and 'efficient' users of their resources. And, additionally, they will help us to understand why Western 'experts' have been so willing to disrupt non-Western communities, certain that the disorder which results is not, in fact, disruption, but a transitional phase between non-Western and Western community organisation. C. B. Macpherson (1975) describes how the concept of *property* historically changed in Western communities. As he claims, "the now dominant concept of property was, in its three leading characteristics, a creation of the capitalist market society."

As Macpherson (1975) has suggested, the forms of property holding and utilization in any community are reflected in the organisational forms of the community and the dominant forms of interaction between community members. One of the ways of understanding the dominant organisational and interactional forms of any community is through an examination of its various land, and other resource, tenure and utilization practices.

Consequences of Western Presumptions: Constantly Expanding Resource Bases

A little needs to be said about some of the inevitable consequences of organising life by Western capitalist assumptions. It is in the nature of human beings to insist that the ways in which they divide up their world and the strongly held beliefs which are based on that way of seeing reality are *features of the real world*, not merely existing in their minds, but 'out there', features of an *objective reality*. All other ways of dividing up the world and all sets of beliefs stemming from those ways are, therefore, to one extent or another, delusional. Western people are no less prone to this projection of their own presumptions onto 'reality' than any other people, and no less willing to pronounce other ways of seeing the world as 'mistaken', 'ignorant', 'superstitious', and 'misinformed'.

The first outcome of Western ways of organising life, and the most far-reaching in its consequences, is the effect on the material environment of the Western drive to use it in establishing *competitively acquired rank*. There is *no upper limit* to the goods and services community members require, since the more any individual has or *conspicuously utilises (consumes)* the higher the rank to which the person can aspire. Not only do Western people accumulate possessions, they also 'consume' goods and services in such a way that other people know they are doing so (that is, *conspicuously*). This often becomes the preferred means of self-

promotion since it can easily be manipulated by an individual to suggest greater economic success than has actually been achieved. This is the 'how on earth can he afford that!' syndrome.

Every time that you obtain something more than I have, you affect my standing in relation to you. In order to preserve my social position I feel the need to also acquire or *consume* that thing, or, preferably, something just a little better than it. Advertisers rely on this drive to sell their wares. It is not by accident that advertising has emerged in Western communities. It has not existed as the promotion of consumption in any others. Advertising is driven by the desire of the advertisers to 'make money' and so enhance their status and prestige. It relies on competition between Western people to acquire and consume more and better goods and services than those of similar rank around them. This drive for more and better means that Western capitalist 'economies' are *expansionary*. They, by definition, require a *constantly expanding material environment* from which they can obtain resources for the products required by people who are, competitively, constantly expanding private ownership and *conspicuous consumption*. This is what Paul Ehrlich (1997, p. 98) was referring to when he pointed out that "since 1950 the richest fifth of humankind has doubled its per capita consumption of energy, meat, timber, steel, and copper, and quadrupled its car ownership". Over time, as the demands of Western community members grow, *there is no option but to expand into the environments of other, non-Western communities*.

Status, or rank, is very important to human beings. People in Western communities determine rank by scrutinising individualised, competitive material accumulation and consumption. They have ordered their communities to ensure that only *responsible* people get access to the means by which they can acquire the *necessary* possessions and consumables. That means is, of course, primarily *money*. The most important way in which money is acquired in Western communities has been through *work*. In order to access the means for obtaining the things through which individuals affect their ranking, and therefore their own self-esteem, people have to become involved in *productive enterprise*. People, more or less willingly, spend most of their waking hours involved in activity which will ensure them an *income*. Most Western people are agreed that if a person won't work, won't get involved in consistent productive enterprise, he or she *should* be poor, should not be supported by any other means, and is certainly not entitled to respect.

Once communities become organised in this way, individuals no longer have a choice in the matter. They either do whatever is required to ensure subsistence or they starve. But, much worse than merely starving, they lose status, respect, and a feeling of 'self-worth' when they cannot access the means for subsistence and

status. *Individuals* don't determine how they will acquire status, *communities have the means built into their structures*, and people see the structures and requirements of their communities as 'rational', 'logical' and very necessary. They engage in the necessary activities 'automatically', often not seeming to consciously recognise what they are doing. So, it becomes irrational and illogical that people should engage in any other kinds of status attaining and maintaining behaviour. In Western communities the rational way to ensure subsistence and status is *wage labour* or *private enterprise*. This is simply not the way in which people in most other communities ensure either status or subsistence. Their ways are equally entrenched in their communities, and appear equally rational, logical and necessary to them, but they differ widely from the requirements of Western communities.

Western communities, by definition, *cannot sustain their requirements from a static resource base* (they become very worried when their economies fail to 'grow', or even when they grow too slowly!). The concept of 'sustainable development', if it requires a non-expanding resource base, makes no sense in Western communities. It is because the resource base (from which Western communities produce the goods and services they require for both subsistence and status) must constantly expand, that Western nations are so concerned about gaining access to the resources of 'non-Western' countries. One of the consequences of Western presumptions about the meaning and purpose of life, is that they impose demands on non-Western communities, not for the sake of those communities, but in order to meet their own *constantly expanding needs and wants*. Western peoples are, for perfectly rational and logical reasons (in Western minds), convinced that the environments of people everywhere should be fully 'developed' and that *access to those environments should be guaranteed to Western people*. That is the fundamental driving force behind the *globalisation* push of the past thirty years in Western countries.

Many non-Western communities are under threat. *Western nations are determined to reorganise other communities*, whether they like it or not, to contribute to the snowballing resource requirements of Western communities. As the World Trade Organisation explains,

... liberal trade policies — policies that allow the unrestricted flow of goods and services — sharpen competition, motivate innovation and breed success. They multiply the rewards that result from producing the best products, with the best design, at the best price.

http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/fact3_e.htm
(2 Jan 2010)

Reflecting the dominance of capitalism in the international arena, the statement takes it for granted that the status aims and

ambitions of people in capitalist communities are universal aims and ambitions. There are 'rewards' to be had "from producing the best products, with the best design, at the best price". Communities and countries which attempt to inhibit the "unrestricted flow of goods and services" should be penalised and brought into line with what is, after all, only their own best interest.

But, don't make the mistake made by those who believe that the West's concerns are universal concerns and that the West's forms of understanding and social organisation are the only universally rational ones. While other communities might be being reorganised, they don't, automatically, accept or live by the West's understandings. Their understandings and their forms of organisation are just as deeply ingrained in their minds and in their hearts as those of the West are for Western communities and individuals. And when they are forced to live by other understandings and accept other forms of organisation, they do so with a deep, difficult to express, sense of helplessness, disorientation and, often, despair.

Human Beings as 'A Resource'

A second outcome of Western understandings of reality, and activity based on those understandings, relates to Western perceptions of *the ways in which human beings ought to behave and be organised*. I have suggested that Western capitalist communities see their environments as sets of resources which *ought* to be fully exploited. What we have not yet examined is how those in positions of authority in Western communities view human beings.

It comes as no surprise, I'm sure, that human beings in territories under the control of Western capitalism are seen as a *resource*. If you work in almost any corporation or government institution or agency in a Western country you already know that the department responsible for your personal files and for hiring and firing has a name like 'Human Resources Division'. Since Western capitalist communities are focussed on individual self-promotion, utilising any means (within the legislative guidelines) in order to make a *profit* (the term used in Western communities for the end result of successful accumulation - and, therefore, status - activities), it should come as no surprise that people are also seen as a resource to be exploited for that end. And they also should be used to their full potential. Bernard Magubane (1975) describes the ways in which southern Africans were dispossessed of their lands and then forced into labour for those who knew how to make use of the resources which Africans had so profligately neglected to utilise, or had not even realised existed.

Before they were physically subdued, African traditional societies with plenty of land confronted the requirements of capitalism with

difficult problems. The wants of an African living within his subsistence agriculture, cultivating his *mealies* (corn), were confined to a *kaross* (skin cloak) and some home-made pieces of cotton cloth. The prospects of leaving his family to work in a mine, in order to earn wages with which he could buy things he had no use for, did not at once appeal to him. James Bryce observed that,

The white men, anxious to get to work on the goldreefs, are annoyed at what they call the stupidity and laziness of the native, and usually clamour for legislation to compel the native to come to work, adding of course that regular labor would be the best thing in the world for natives. Some go as far as to wish to compel them to work at fixed rate of wages, sufficient to leave good profit for the employer. (1969:23)

... By force and coercion Africans were divorced from their former means of subsistence in a most frightful manner. The record... is stained with pages almost as dark as those which disfigure the early records of imperialism in India and America... In time the African would learn the bitter lesson that labouring in the mines at wages that made fortunes for the mining capitalist had become an unavoidable necessity...

(Magubane 1975 pp.238-242)

The experiences described by Magubane have been common throughout the world during the period of the colonial expansion of Western European nations. They remain common in the new 'globalisation' version of that expansion.

Of course, as I have already suggested, this attitude toward human beings has not only been displayed in Western activities in non-Western countries. It has been equally fully displayed in Western communities toward those who seemed unwilling to take productive enterprise seriously over the past seven or eight centuries. John Hatcher (1998) traces the attitudes of those in charge in Western European countries over the past eight centuries to the 'labouring poor'. As he says,

When labour was plentiful and cheap the market exercised its own harsh discipline on those who struggled for subsistence, urging them to industry and subservience. However, when labour became scarce the very fabric of society could be threatened, not just by rising wages and costs, but by a swelling independence among the working masses, which commonly manifested itself in a refusal to engage wholeheartedly in unremitting toil.(1998, p. 64)

Hatcher's essay, as he acknowledges, is built on the writing of an earlier historian, E. P. Thompson, who documented *The Making of the English Working Class* in a book of that name in the 1960s.

Not everyone in a Western capitalist community subscribes to the central presumptions of capitalism, but those in hegemonic control require community members, whether they assent to the

presumptions or not, to live by them. Both Thompson and Hatcher outline the ways in which this has occurred over past centuries of western European history.

In Western communities the idea of *class*, broken down into three groupings – upper, middle, and lower – referred historically to the three orders of European feudalism – the aristocracy, the gentry and clergy (or nobility), and the peasantry. The presumptions of Western capitalism took hold in the middle group, which gained increasing political clout over several centuries. They then set about reorganising the 'lower classes' to conform to those presumptions. That is largely what both Thompson's (1967) and Hatcher's (1998) essays are about.

The 'middle classes' have been very successful in educating the 'working classes' to live by capitalist presumptions, though it took about 800 years of 'work-discipline'. Most people who were included in the 'lower classes' in the 18th to 20th centuries in Western capitalist communities now order their lives by capitalist presumptions themselves. This has been reflected in the persistent movement of 'workers' parties' from the left to the centre and now to the 'centre-right' of politics in most Western capitalist communities. What is 'left', 'right' and 'centre' in Western politics is currently being redefined to fit the new realities.

Living *within* the Environmental Means: Non-Western systems of Territoriality and Land Use

In order to comprehend the difference between the postulations underpinning Western capitalist communal organisation and interaction and the forms of organisation and interaction in non-Western communities, we need to look more closely at how such communities were organised before capitalist intrusion. This is, of course, how they still would be organised - with inevitable accommodations to outside influences - if left to their own devices.

Parker Shipton (1984) in an essay titled 'East African Systems of Land Tenure', provides a description of how two sets of communities, the Sukuma-Nyamwezi of north-western Tanzania and the Luo of south-eastern Kenya, organised life and related to their material environments before Western capitalist intrusion and reorganisation of their environments. He also outlines some of the ways in which the communities have had to reorganise in the face of Western pressure for change.

It is common to all human beings that they believe that their ways are the best ways and that where other people deviate from their ways they are less than 'civilised'. Western Europeans are not exceptions to this rule. They demanded change from all these groups, not because the practices they opposed were inherently bad

or evil (if there is a universally valid set of criteria in terms of which such judgments can be made) but because they conflicted with their own understandings.

The Sukuma, Nyamwezi and Luo were not passive. They reacted to the changes brought into their communities by the expansion of capitalist activity into their environments by altering land tenure to accommodate the changed demands. Yet they ensured that the fundamental presumptions in terms of which they related to their environments were maintained. This has always been the response of non-Western communities to Western demands for change. Human beings are not able to simply drop their own understandings and live by the understandings of others. They will always try to accommodate changes they can't resist, while retaining their own understandings of the world and of themselves.

When changes forced upon them become more than they can accommodate within their own understanding of the world, then they begin to lose a sense of communal identity and their communities begin to unravel. Luo, Sukuma and Nyamwezi communities have experienced these consequences over the past forty years in Kenya and Tanzania. Throughout the world, non-Western communities, subjected to unrelenting demands for massive change in their interaction with their material environments, have experienced similar loss of identity, with rapidly escalating crime and violence and out-of-control population growth.

All stable communities (both historically and in the present) have both direct and indirect means of limiting population growth. As communities disintegrate, the means of population control become decreasingly effective and population begins to grow. Many non-Western communities have experienced rapidly increasing population growth as their communities have unravelled. The current average annual rate of population increase throughout the continent of Africa is 3 percent. At this rate of increase, populations double every 24 years. Through all of the non-Western regions of the world the average annual rate of increase is 1.8 percent, with populations doubling every 39 years. The pressures put on both material and social environments by these rates of increase are enormous. Through the Western world, the average rate of increase is a mere 0.6 percent, with populations doubling over 116 years. Given that there are always natural events over such a period which impact on growth, Western populations have either stabilised in countries like the United States or, as in Western Europe, with a 0.3 percent annual growth rate, are in decline. ⁵ Population increase in Western countries comes through immigration.

People like the Luo, Sukuma and Nyamwezi, don't simply reinvent themselves as Western capitalists when they are subjected to Western capitalist demands for change. They lose their sense of

identity and self-worth as their indigenous status and prestige systems break down and their understanding of their environment and of themselves in terms of their environment decreasingly 'makes sense'.

In examining the East African land tenure systems, focus was directed to their systems of land tenure and the political processes which sustained those systems. The Iban of Sarawak on the island of Borneo (Indonesian Kalimantan) relate to their material and non-material environments in terms of *adat*. As Cramb (1989) puts it, "the good man is the man who observes the rituals, recognises the restrictions, and honours the Iban *adat*". The focus is on observance of the moral rules and metaphysical understandings of the community and, in the process, interacting with one's material environment to meet the requirements of subsistence and *communally ascertained needs and wants*.

People in many non-Western communities determine relative status through competitive and/or cooperative involvement in *non-material* forms of activity (e. g. ritual events, festivals, religious activities and any combination of these and involvement in the material environment). They, then, very often, require people who attain particular statuses to demonstrate their fitness for the statuses attained by *obtaining the material possessions deemed correct for the status positions*. If they cannot obtain the necessary possessions, their statuses come under threat. If, on the other hand, they accumulate *more* possessions than they should, or obtain inappropriate possessions, then the rest of the community reacts, wanting to know who they think they are. People who get more than they should have are very often pressured into giving the surpluses away. In doing so they can strengthen ties with other community members.

There are, of course, communities which do not tie possessions to status in this way. In such communities (e. g. the !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert or Aboriginal Australian communities) status is not clearly linked to the accumulation of possessions and owning things does little or nothing for either status or prestige. See Sahlins (1972) for a discussion of such communities.

The ways in which communities are organised and the ways in which they interact with their material environments are two sides of a coin. If the organisation of the community changes, interaction with their material environment will also change. Equally, if interaction with the material environment changes, so does the structure of the community. When those changes are forced from outside, based on understandings of which community members are often not even aware, then community members find it increasingly difficult to make sense of their experiences. The changes forced upon them often require forms of interaction which directly

contradict the basic forms of interaction of the community. Attack the systems of land tenure and utilization in a community and you attack the organisation and interactions of the community. *You cannot force change in land tenure and utilization without directly attacking the cohesion of the community which reflects and incorporates those systems in its organisation.*

One of the saddest features of the 'Third World Development' drive in which Western capitalist nations have engaged over the past fifty years is that in the process of reorganising utilization of their environments, non-Western communities have been disrupted. Many of them are in various stages of disintegration, victims of the well-meaning 'development' activities of Western experts. As the consequences of disruption have become increasingly apparent, in a classic 'blame the victim' response to the problems created, those same experts have urged further, deeper change to address the problems of social disintegration which their policies have induced. Because they have been well trained as Western specialists, they take it for granted that their understanding of the world, and their forms of land tenure and utilization are the only 'reasonable' ones, and they force change upon those who don't see the world as they do or relate to the material environment as they do. As a leader in the magazine *The Economist*, entitled 'Hopeless Africa', says,

No one can blame Africans for the weather, but most of the continent's shortcomings owe less to acts of God than to acts of man. These acts are not exclusively African—brutality, despotism and corruption exist everywhere—but African societies, for reasons buried in their cultures, seem especially susceptible to them. (*The Economist* May 13th-19th 2000)

Brutality, despotism and corruption in communities are evidences of *communal disintegration*, not features of 'traditional cultures' as the *Economist* writer suggests. Western capitalist developers have intruded into communities and changed the face of the material environments of peoples. They have forced new land tenure and utilization practices upon them, extracted huge 'surpluses' from their environments and now blame them for the ensuing social, political, and material environmental disintegration.

We need to understand the single most important difference between almost all non-Western orientations to the material environment and that of Western capitalism. Whereas Western capitalist utilization of the material environment is open-ended, with no upper limit to its use and a built in inflation of demand for natural resources, most non-Western forms of utilization are *closed*, with a *built in upper limit to demand*. This is *not* because non-Western people are 'more attuned' to their environments or because they are 'natural conservationists' or 'closer to the environment' than Western people.

As many studies have shown, non-Western people have shaped and moulded their environments to their needs. Their aim has not been to 'live in harmony with nature', as sometimes suggested by environmental activists in Western countries, but to utilise their environments to supply their needs and wants. However, because their status and prestige systems have not been anchored in the accumulation of material goods and services but in some other form of activity and organisation, there has been no inbuilt pressure to over-use their material environments. Where they have done so (and this has often happened), it was the growth in population living in a region which produced problems, not a constantly escalating demand from a stable population for more and more material possessions and ever-increasing levels of consumption, as in Western communities.

Most human activity is related *not to subsistence* but to the promotion and maintenance of social position and self-esteem. People in communities like those of the Iban, Sukuma, Nyamwezi and Luo are focused on something other than 'private enterprise' and competitive individual material accumulation and consumption as the basis of status. So, they spend *less time in material production activities* and *more time* in what Western capitalist people would consider 'waste' activity, *in religious, ritual, social and kin-based activity of various kinds*. If they are being 'productive' what they are producing is not material goods and services but various forms of ritual, religious and social activity and organisation – whatever is required of the status system which is built into the structure of their communities and into their forms of interaction with each other. So, in many non-Western communities such activities seem extravagantly elaborated to Western people.

The upshot of this focus away from the material environment is that, in the past, they more or less matched their material needs and wants to what was available in their own environments or could be traded for goods from their environments without needing to expand into the territory of neighbouring groups. Sahlins (1972) argues that many communities *underused* the resources available in their material environments. Since they matched their material needs and wants to the usual productive capacity of their environments, in good years they had surpluses and in bad years they had less than they required, but things averaged out over the years.

When Western people arrived in their regions, they demanded that those communities produce a 'surplus' from their material environments for export to Western countries. This required local inhabitants to use their material environments not only to supply their own needs and wants, but to supply, additionally, a range of products sought by Western traders and 'developers'. Utilization of their environment was, therefore, almost immediately, raised to

long-run unsustainable levels. Inevitably, the environments of communities where these demands were made became progressively more degraded as the years passed. As Speth (1994) has claimed, most of the soil and other environmental deterioration of the past fifty years has occurred in non-Western regions of the world. Westerners use their own environments to the limits of sustainability, but readily, and unthinkingly, push the environments of other communities over the edge.

In the jargon of Western capitalism, non-Western communities, prior to Western intrusion, were naturally oriented to 'sustainable development', to *living within their environmental means*. This is why such advanced material cultures as those of Han China, Korea and Japan, although well aware of the existence of other lands and peoples, and although placing neighbouring peoples into tributary relationships, did not greatly expand their accumulative and productive activities into their environments.

For the Chinese, Koreans and Japanese, throughout thousands of years of elaborate political organisation and advanced material culture, North America was less than a week's sailing time away. And they had the sophisticated craft necessary to make such journeys with ease on a regular basis. Yet, when Western Europeans invaded and subjugated the indigenous inhabitants of the North American continent there were no communities of Chinese, Koreans or Japanese to deal with. Why not? Because, despite their elaborate material cultures, status and prestige were not primarily determined by competitive individual material accumulation and consumption. They, more or less, lived within their environmental means.

This is equally true of Aboriginal Australians. Of course they reshaped their environment to better suit their requirements, and of course that meant that Australia, after their arrival, was a different land to Australia before their arrival. But they did not utilise their material environment to, and beyond, its limits. They did not, in Western capitalist terms, 'realise the potential' of their material environments. As Tonkinson (1978, p.18) put it, Aboriginal people stressed, not the mundane skills and techniques for surviving in harsh surroundings, but "the imperative of conformity to Dreamtime laws... it is spiritual rather than ecological imperatives that have primacy in guaranteeing their way of life". The Aboriginal people of Australia, like non-Western peoples in most parts of the world, understood reality, and interacted with the world in ways which are difficult for Western peoples to understand.

A Very Different 'Reality': The Wixarika

Paul Liffman (2000) introduces us to the world of the Wixarika, in

his words, a “resilient but hard-pressed mountain people in the southern Sierra Madre Occidental of western Mexico” (2000, p.129). You will need to read this article two or three times. Read it the first time just to begin to understand how the Wixarika interact with their environments, order their communities and perceive ‘reality’. You won’t find this easy!! It is always extremely difficult for anyone to begin to see the world from a perspective that has so little in common with their own. This is why most people simply don’t attempt it, convinced that, even if the Wixarika do see their world and interact with it in such a radically different way, their way must be foolish, riddled with superstition and highly illogical. So, it should rightly be dismissed and, if possible, Wixarika forms of activity should be reorganised to fit Western capitalist understandings of the world. Concepts such as private property and public property, economic activity and political activity, fit very poorly into an understanding of the Wixarika world. If we try to rewrite the story in such terms we lose most of the meaning which they consider inherent in the *real* world, objective reality for the Wixarika.

Wixarika and Capitalists: The new Mexico

Liffman and his colleagues have explored the world of a people who see their surroundings and interact with each other in ways completely foreign to people living in Western capitalist communities. If you found their world strange, imagine how strange they find your world! Yet, they have been required to accommodate the demands of capitalism. Many of the Wixarika have found themselves in Mexican and United States sweat shops, working long hours for little pay, and trying to understand what this strange, exploitative capitalist world is all about. Even in their home territory, they have been forced to interact not only with capitalist land ownership and utilization practices but with mining companies and other multinational corporations keen to exploit the resources of the country. Can you imagine trying to negotiate mining agreements with the Wixarika while trying to accommodate their understanding of the world? Is it reasonable to require companies to do so? In the main, companies working in Mexico don’t have to worry. The Government doesn’t require them to take the sensibilities of indigenous people into account in pursuing their business interests.

In an article which comes from the [Multinational Monitor](#) 6, John Ross paints the political scene in Mexico in the early 21st century. This is the political climate within which the Wixarika will have to negotiate their future. The political leaders in Mexico in 2001 are Western capitalists, trained in Western universities, closely tied to Western multinational companies, wedded to the privatisation agenda of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and seeing the environments of indigenous people as resources to be

developed for economic gain.

Like so many other Third World countries, the Government of Mexico has been taken over by Western capitalists, convinced that everyone is driven by the same agendas as themselves and that if the poor are destitute it is because they are unwilling to work hard and improve their own lot. But, indigenous communities like the Wixarika usually do not remain passive victims of capitalist intrusion into their environments. The Zapatistas of Chiapas (see Collier, 1999), in the mountains of the Mexican southeast, have shown how much can be achieved by indigenous people determined to protect their way of life. The cost, however, both physically and culturally, can be enormous, as the Zapatistas (and Bouganvilleans in the Solomon Islands) have discovered. An editorial in the *Multinational Monitor* emotively summarises the situation,

Indigenous challenges to power in Mexico... make clear that even the most marginalized populations can stand up to prevailing hegemonic economic and political forces, if they are united, organized, determined, spirited and persistent.

Their inspirational resistance to everyday violence, projected by military forces, paramilitary gangs and political and financial thugs from outfits like the International Monetary Fund, should issue a clarion call to allies in rich countries both to intensify their solidarity campaigns and to challenge directly the core institutions of corporate globalization... (Multinational Monitor, March 2001 - Volume 22 - Number 3)

So, to conclude where we started: Are the problems outlined by James Speth (1994) and Paul Ehrlich (1997) real? Who is responsible for them? What should be done about it?

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End Notes

1 The internet address for UNDP is: <http://www.undp.org/>

2 To access Ehrlich's article on line use the following internet address: <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/97dec/enviro.htm>.

3 For a description of ways in which people in Victorian Britain achieved status see Clausen (1993) or Corfield (1992). For comment on ways in which status and prestige requirements might be changing in the present in Western capitalist communities see [Hemerijck \(1999\)](#)

4 Fallon (1999) provides an examination of the ways in which the subjects of 'status' and 'power' have been approached by theorists. Be careful about her loose correlation of status with power – status is usually associated with authority, power is usually wielded when status and recognised

authority are in doubt. For a discussion on the nature of respect and leadership – recognised authority and the need for expressions of overt power - see Delellis (2000) .

5 The following internet address provides access to international population statistics: <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb/>.

6 You can access this journal through the following address:
<http://www.essential.org/monitor/>

Subsistence and Status: Utilization and Conceptualization of the Environment

by Bill Geddes

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Introduction

James Speth, Administrator of the [United Nations Development Program](#) 1, in 1994, outlined some of the massive problems confronting the world a decade ago,

Today, the average person among the 4 billion in the developing

countries consumes about 2,500 calories of food each day. The average person consumes 3,400 calories per day in Western Europe and more than 3,600 in the United States... according to recent estimates by the world's leading soil scientists, an area of about 1.2 billion hectares - about the size of China and India combined - has experienced moderate to extreme soil deterioration since World War II as a result of human activities. Over three-fourths of that deterioration has occurred in the developing regions, most of it in arid and semi-arid regions. When combined with other environmental threats to the agricultural resource base - loss of water and generic resources, loss of cultural resources, and climate change, both local and global - the situation is disturbing indeed. (Speth, 1994)

Paul Ehrlich, in 1997, expanded on this description of the environmental problems facing the world:

Exploitation is a complex subject, but in a world in which huge international disparities in wealth and power persist, the rich-poor gap is increasing. In 1960 the ratio of the income of the richest 20 percent of humanity to that of the poorest 20 percent was 30:1; according to the *United Nations Human Development Report 1997*, it was nearly 80:1 in 1994. And the rich show pathetically little interest in closing that gap. Since 1950 the richest fifth of humankind has doubled its per capita consumption of energy, meat, timber, steel, and copper, and quadrupled its car ownership, greatly increasing global emissions of CFCs and greenhouse gases, accelerating tropical deforestation, and intensifying other environmental impacts. The poorest fifth of humankind has increased its per capita consumption hardly at all. Indeed, those in the poorest fifth average a cash income of less than a dollar a day, and those in the next fifth average only three dollars a day. This means that 40 percent of humankind accounts for a mere 6.5 percent of the world's income. (Ehrlich, 2 1997 p. 98)

The problems outlined by Speth and Ehrlich have grown steadily worse over the last ten years. Those problems have seriously affected people in almost every non-Western country, for it is in those countries that the environmental degradation has been most pronounced, and it is in those countries that poverty has become widespread and endemic. Deterioration of soil quality is more than matched by an erosion of communities around the world and the human cost of the disintegration of communities has been borne by the poor of non-Western countries. Hundreds of millions, right now, are severely malnourished. Far more are daily exposed to the despotism, brutality and corruption which always appear when communities break down and the structures and processes of interpersonal support and law and order become less and less

effective.

Understanding Others Requires Understanding Oneself

Lyla Mehta, in 1999, wrote a short essay in which she examined a new orientation announced by the World Bank. Not only would it fund 'development' activities, it would, in future, provide people in 'developing' countries with the knowledge they need to improve their social, political and economic lives. As she puts it,

In its new role, the Bank will not only transfer capital to developing countries but also seeks to close the gaps that exist in the level of knowledge in the north and south. (1999 p. 151)

But, she asks, whose knowledge will the Bank be using? As she says,

The foundations of the assumptions linking knowledge with one universal truth have been rejected by a growing confluence of diverse disciplinary perspectives..." (1999 p. 153)

Over the past twenty years scholars in Western countries have become increasingly aware that there are many different ways of seeing and interacting with the world. The dominant understandings of the West are not understandings of an objective reality which have previously eluded humanity. They are the understandings one needs to live successfully in Western communities. The understanding needed to live successfully in other communities is usually very different. Not until one focuses on one's own understandings and then examines them in the light of understandings which exist in other communities, can one begin to appreciate the importance of this insight.

This is an introductory study of the ways in which human beings, in a range of communities, with widely different ways of categorising and understanding their worlds, conceptualise and interact with their environments. It is also, inevitably at the start of the 21st century, an introduction to the ways in which Western capitalism set about changing the rest of the world to serve its own purposes. We will start by examining the understandings of 'Western industrialised'(that is, 'capitalist') people, which drive life and interaction in their communities. Armed with that information, we will then examine non-Western ways of conceptualising and interacting with the environment.

Living *beyond* the Environmental Means: Western capitalism in action

Of course, the term 'Western capitalism' covers a wide array of nations and communities with diverse sets of understandings and forms of organisation. Yet, if pushed to it, I'm sure that you could quickly identify most of the nations to which the term is usually applied, as Speth (1994) did in the quotation at the start of this discussion.

Although it is true that the term covers a wide array of communities, the *fundamental presumptions* which drive Western capitalism are remarkably similar across communities and countries of 'The Western World'. They are spelt out and continually reinforced through the dominant systems of education, government and subsistence which are extant in those communities. There is a constant interchange of information, expertise, commentary and commerce between these countries. There is also continual, detailed comparison of the 'performance' of the various Western capitalist countries through a continual stream of charters, accords, agreements and studies enabled through such organizations as the OECD. Commentaries on these, along with comparative sets of 'performance indicators', are regularly presented in Western news bulletins and 'current affairs' programs to keep the population 'informed'. As the Home Page of *The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* explained in 2001,

The OECD groups [30 member countries](#) in an organization that, most importantly, provides governments a setting in which to discuss, develop and perfect economic and social policy. They compare experiences, seek answers to common problems and work to co-ordinate domestic and international policies that increasingly in today's globalized world must form a web of even practice across nations. Their exchanges may lead to agreements to act in a formal way - for example, by establishing legally-binding codes for free flow of capital and services, agreements to crack down on bribery or to end subsidies for shipbuilding. But more often, their discussion makes for better informed work within their own governments on the spectrum of public policy and clarifies the impact of national policies on the international community. And it offers a chance to reflect and exchange perspectives with other countries similar to their own. (5/7/01)

While the OECD statement of intent has been altered over succeeding years, the import of the [latest incarnation](#) is very similar.

Actual practice in Western capitalist countries and communities is continuously measured against the ideals of the current dominant version of capitalism. The dominant version of capitalism is promulgated and protected by a cadre of 'specialists' trained in

Western universities and colleges. They are employed by Governments, private enterprise, and a range of 'think tanks' (such as the *American Enterprise Institute* and the *Hoover Institution* in the United States) to provide direction to governments and comment on how well practice is conforming to expectations, often on a *daily* basis. Practice in each country is continuously adjusted to conform to currently fashionable economic models. A wide range of 'foundations' (such as the *W. K. Kellogg Foundation*, the *Ford Foundation*, the *Andrew W. Mellon Foundation*, the *Rockefeller Brothers Fund*, the *Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund*, and the *Benton Foundation*) provide research funding, tailored to developing and promoting the economic models of capitalism, not only in Western countries, but around the world.

That is, there is a continuous *ideological management of reality*, ensuring that Western capitalist communities maintain the most important forms of organisation and understanding held by those who control the important institutions of both government and the economy.

Of course, not everyone who lives in a Western country holds capitalist understandings equally clearly or organises life by them. This is one of the reasons why it is so necessary to have close scrutiny of community and individual performance by specialists. But, to be 'successful' one must master them, and to be acceptable in a Western country one must organise one's life (at least outwardly) by them.

Although Western countries consist of an increasing agglomeration of *ethnic* communities (communities which come from 'non-Western' regions of the world) the *dominant groups*, which control both government and commerce, are committed to these central Western capitalist understandings. Those who control the central institutions of Western communities simply assume that the ways in which they perceive their world, and the forms of direction and interaction which they take for granted, are *universals*. They are the only conceivable, *reasonable* ways in which life can successfully be organised and lived. And, the vast majority of people living in such communities, even if they feel uncomfortable with the consequences of capitalist systems of control and direction, can conceive of no viable, *rational* alternative forms of organisation and understanding.

For our purposes here, this is the meaning of the term *hegemony* – control by an elite which promotes and protects the *dominant ideology* (in Western communities, capitalism) as the only reasonable approach to community organisation and action. All

strong, cohesive communities have such hegemonic processes which promote and protect what dominant members of the community see as central to life in their communities. This is not just a feature of 'Western capitalist' communities. As a community member, you might not like them, you might feel discriminated against by them, but you can't muster convincing arguments against the ideological demands of the dominant groups in your community. Because the fundamental acculturative, organisational and governmental structures of Western communities are built on the basic presumptions of capitalism, it is a truism that to be successful in a Western community one must order one's life in terms of the fundamental understandings of capitalism.

Acculturative processes and structures, in any community, ensure that people are brought up knowing how they should behave, how society should be organised, what the truly important goals of life are. They also ensure that people conform to what they have learned. In Western communities they include such institutions and processes as the education system; the systems of law making, legal commentary and law enforcement (such as the legislative arm of government, legal experts, police and courts); a wide range of processes of social appraisal and instructional programs designed to help community members to be 'successful' in their various undertakings; and various regulatory bodies set up to ensure that particular forms of organisation and action are both understood and adhered to.

All these acculturative forms focus, usually without consciously recognising that they do, on ensuring that people in Western communities organise their lives in ways best suited to the demands of life in a capitalist world. So, if one criticises capitalism, one attacks, not simply particular aspects of life, but the fundamental presumptions upon which life in Western communities is built. Those presumptions are continuously reinforced and protected by the acculturative agencies of Western communities. Inevitably, people who have been enculturated in Western capitalist communities feel deeply threatened by any attempts to attack such basic understandings because, not only do they order their lives by them, they order their *thinking* by them as well. So, if the presumptions are attacked, people who hold them and organise life by them feel personally emotionally and cognitively threatened. During the Cold War between Western capitalism and Soviet communism, this was expressed in the heart-felt belief of the majority of Western people that it would be 'better to be dead than red' and that 'the only good red is a dead one'.

Basic presumptions of Capitalism

Below are some of the basic understandings (relevant to this discussion) which drive capitalism and drive those communities in which capitalism is central to daily life for well enculturated community members. A prime characteristic of *hegemonic control* is that neither those who hold the reins, nor those who are subject to the controls and acculturative agencies, normally see themselves as involved in a hegemony. It is simply obvious to all involved that there are certain forms of behaviour, attitude, interaction and understanding to which community members ought to conform if the community is to remain strong and directed. Normally, those involved in a hegemony see the ideas, processes and structures of their community as universally valid, the ways in which any rational community should be organised. To the extent that they can convince people in other communities of this, those communities become involved in the same hegemonic processes.

Those terms which take their force from the underlying presumptions of a community are, as Raiklin (1995) has described, often poorly defined. They are, in the words of the United States Constitution, held 'to be self-evident', intuitively recognised as valid, needing little explanation, and little or no justification. The presumptions are, of course, *culturally determined* assertions: *postulations*, not 'facts'. Because well-enculturated Western people see these as attributes common to all members of the human species, they assume that models of communal organisation and interaction constructed from them are *universally valid in any community and in any culture*. However, these ways of behaving have not always existed. They have emerged as central in Western countries over the past 500 years.

What, then, are the fundamental postulations which underpin life in Western capitalist communities?

1. Individual human beings are born as pre-social, independent, self-interested, competitive, acquisitive beings with very similar wants and aptitudes. That is:
 - a. Individual human beings want similar things (and the more the better);
 - b. they are all more or less equally capable of getting what they want;
 - c. they compete with each other to get them;
 - d. they develop personal, individualised accumulations of *possessions*;

- e. having competed with each other to get their wants, they compare themselves against each other to see who has the most;
- f. on the basis of comparison they can produce a rank order of *success* in economic activity which (with a lot of ancillary fine-tuning) provides the basis for *status* 3 and *prestige* in human communities 4;
- g. in the process of getting what they want they form groups in which they remain involved so long as they perceive it to be to their advantage;
- h. communities emerge out of the self-interested interactions of individuals. They 'join' groups because they see personal advantage in doing so and leave them when the advantage is no longer there. If individuals change their wants and needs and the ways in which they get them, community structures will alter, reflecting the changed aims and ambitions of individuals, and altered means of achieving them;
- i. the best community will be one which emerges out of the self-interested, competitive activities of individuals in pursuit of their own needs and wants. It will ensure that individuals are 'free' from social, political, religious and any other non-economic *constraints* on their ability to pursue their own needs and wants.

Attempts at 'social engineering' should, therefore, be based on changing people's wants and needs and 'freeing' individuals from social, political and other constraints so that they can pursue their own acquisitive interests. Successfully change their wants and remove community constraints on individual acquisitiveness, and communities will emerge reflecting the best ways in which individuals can attain their new wants. These presumptions have been the driving presuppositions of nearly all forms of 'Third World Development' over the past 50 years.

If any individual fails to achieve material well-being in a 'free' community, it is possible to blame that person for his or her failure. Since all human beings have similar aptitudes, those who are successful in accumulating *possessions* must have applied themselves more diligently than others to the important activities of life. Right wing politicians in Western countries often blame the poor for their own parlous economic position, since, if they applied themselves more

diligently and did not 'waste' their resources, they too would be successful.

2. Life, for people well enculturated in Western communities, is divided into a set of *domains* or *environments* including:
 - a. the material environment,
 - b. the social environment,
 - c. the spiritual environment,
 - d. the economic environment, and
 - e. the political environment.

(Can you think of any other inclusive environments that should be in this list?)

Each of these environments is presumed to be more or less *self-contained* so that somebody can act in the 'economic environment' without that activity affecting the 'spiritual environment', the 'social environment' or any of the other environments. One can therefore assert that economic activity does not have social or political or religious consequences and can assume, for example, that economic activity is not responsible for 'material environmental degradation'. By narrowly focusing on behavior within each domain, excluding the others, it can be argued that one should not 'confuse' economic activity with social activity, or make 'social' demands on 'economic' agencies. When individuals are engaged in 'economic' activity, focused on the accumulation of possessions, they should not be *constrained* by social, political, religious, or other non-economic restraints and restrictions on their acquisitive activity. Because of the overwhelming emphasis placed on 'economic' activity in Western communities, the driving centre of life in such communities turns out to be 'economic', with activity in the other environments of secondary importance, geared, where possible, to ensuring better economic performance.

Because this set of categories is so fundamental to the way Western communities are organized and their people interact and think, most people in Western communities believe that everyone in the world divides reality into this set of environments. This is, of course, not true. Other cultural communities divide reality into sometimes very different sets of categories and then organize their communities, interact with each other, and explain life in terms of those categories. We will examine one such set of communities, the Wixarika, with a very different set of basic categories

and resulting understandings, later.

3. The *material environment* is the arena for Western individualized, self-interested, self-promotional activity. The possessions which are accumulated are obtained from that environment. So, while it might be a lot of other things as well, *the material environment is a set of resources to be manipulated and used in competitive self-promotion*. Since the material environment is a *set of resources* it can also be seen to be a set of 'things' which can be accumulated and used for self-promotion. Human beings can, and should, individually (*privately*) own land and material resources. And, since competitive self-interest is the driving force behind this ownership, other individuals should be excluded from the resources lest they gain a ranking advantage from something they do not 'own'. So, all private ownership is *exclusive*, the *property* of the individual who has acquired it. The material environment becomes divided up into exclusively held parcels and the concept of 'common' land and environment no longer makes sense.
4. If anybody claims to 'own' a part of the material environment, but does not use it *efficiently* (to increase personal accumulation and to make its 'resources' available to others who 'need' them for their own self-interested accumulative activity), then they do not 'deserve' that ownership. The state should either compel them to use those resources 'responsibly', or should make them available to other people who will do so. The material environment should be used to *its full potential*.

The state has the right to compel such use because all private ownership is guaranteed by the state, and all resources not privately owned are, by definition, *publicly owned* by the government. *Common ownership* (where no particular individual, group or communal institution can claim exclusive possession) has been converted, over the past 500 years, in Western capitalist countries, into *public ownership* (where whatever is not held by private individuals is, by definition, owned by the state). These understandings have produced very serious consequences for people living in non-Western communities, where common ownership has usually been the norm and *economic efficiency* has not been considered important.

5. All interaction between individual human beings is based on and driven by *competitive self-interest* between people of

roughly equal aptitude. So, provided all individuals have access to the same information and are free to engage in any interactions they wish, all exchanges between human beings will be *positive*. That is, any *free* exchange (any exchange not hampered by social, political, or religious constraints aimed at limiting and directing possibilities of individual accumulation) will benefit both parties. After all, the reasoning goes, why would they enter the exchange if it didn't? So laws should be focused on guaranteeing individual human beings *freedom* to engage in self-interested, acquisitive exchange (aimed at private accumulation of 'assets'), without coercion from anyone, and without interference by anyone (especially social, political or religious agents)

There are many other basic presumptions which underwrite life in Western capitalist communities (see [History of the Emergence of Capitalism](#) for an examination of their historical emergence). However, these will be useful in comparing the ways in which non-Western communities and Western ones understand land ownership and utilization, approach their material environment, and subsist in their environments. 'Subsistence' refers to the ways in which communities and the individuals within them go about obtaining the basic material necessities of life. As we will see, what is 'necessary' to any community is not merely a consequence of the need to survive. That is the tip of an iceberg whose bulk is determined by the needs and wants of members of communities as they strive to live up to the expectations of people around them, and strive to affirm and reaffirm their self-worth.

The presumptions spelt out above will help us in unravelling the *culturally specific* nature of the demands made on other communities by Western governments and agencies. Western communities, wanting to make the world a 'better' place, have, over the past century, been determined to ensure that non-Western communities become 'democratic' (where individuals of similar aptitude are 'free' to indulge in self-interested accumulation and other self-promotional activities), and 'efficient' users of their resources. And, additionally, they will help us to understand why Western 'experts' have been so willing to disrupt non-Western communities, certain that the disorder which results is not, in fact, disruption, but a transitional phase between non-Western and Western community organisation. C. B. Macpherson (1975) describes how the concept of *property* historically changed in

Western communities. As he claims, "the now dominant concept of property was, in its three leading characteristics, a creation of the capitalist market society."

As Macpherson (1975) has suggested, the forms of property holding and utilization in any community are reflected in the organisational forms of the community and the dominant forms of interaction between community members. One of the ways of understanding the dominant organisational and interactional forms of any community is through an examination of its various land, and other resource, tenure and utilization practices.

Consequences of Western Presumptions: Constantly Expanding Resource Bases

A little needs to be said about some of the inevitable consequences of organising life by Western capitalist assumptions. It is in the nature of human beings to insist that the ways in which they divide up their world and the strongly held beliefs which are based on that way of seeing reality are *features of the real world*, not merely existing in their minds, but 'out there', features of an *objective reality*. All other ways of dividing up the world and all sets of beliefs stemming from those ways are, therefore, to one extent or another, delusional. Western people are no less prone to this projection of their own presumptions onto 'reality' than any other people, and no less willing to pronounce other ways of seeing the world as 'mistaken', 'ignorant', 'superstitious', and 'misinformed'.

The first outcome of Western ways of organising life, and the most far-reaching in its consequences, is the effect on the material environment of the Western drive to use it in establishing *competitively acquired* rank. There is *no upper limit* to the goods and services community members require, since the more any individual has or *conspicuously utilises (consumes)* the higher the rank to which the person can aspire. Not only do Western people accumulate possessions, they also 'consume' goods and services in such a way that other people know they are doing so (that is, *conspicuously*). This often becomes the preferred means of self-promotion since it can easily be manipulated by an individual to suggest greater economic success than has actually been achieved. This is the 'how on earth can he afford that!' syndrome.

Every time that you obtain something more than I have, you affect my standing in relation to you. In order to preserve my social position I feel the need to also acquire or *consume* that thing, or, preferably, something just a little better than it. Advertisers rely on

this drive to sell their wares. It is not by accident that advertising has emerged in Western communities. It has not existed as the promotion of consumption in any others. Advertising is driven by the desire of the advertisers to 'make money' and so enhance their status and prestige. It relies on competition between Western people to acquire and consume more and better goods and services than those of similar rank around them. This drive for more and better means that Western capitalist 'economies' are *expansionary*. They, by definition, require a *constantly expanding material environment* from which they can obtain resources for the products required by people who are, competitively, constantly expanding private ownership and *conspicuous consumption*. This is what Paul Ehrlich (1997, p. 98)) was referring to when he pointed out that "since 1950 the richest fifth of humankind has doubled its per capita consumption of energy, meat, timber, steel, and copper, and quadrupled its car ownership". Over time, as the demands of Western community members grow, *there is no option but to expand into the environments of other, non-Western communities*.

Status, or rank, is very important to human beings. People in Western communities determine rank by scrutinising individualised, competitive material accumulation and consumption. They have ordered their communities to ensure that only *responsible* people get access to the means by which they can acquire the *necessary* possessions and consumables. That means is, of course, primarily *money*. The most important way in which money is acquired in Western communities has been through *work*. In order to access the means for obtaining the things through which individuals affect their ranking, and therefore their own self-esteem, people have to become involved in *productive enterprise*. People, more or less willingly, spend most of their waking hours involved in activity which will ensure them an *income*. Most Western people are agreed that if a person won't work, won't get involved in consistent productive enterprise, he or she *should* be poor, should not be supported by any other means, and is certainly not entitled to respect.

Once communities become organised in this way, individuals no longer have a choice in the matter. They either do whatever is required to ensure subsistence or they starve. But, much worse than merely starving, they lose status, respect, and a feeling of 'self-worth' when they cannot access the means for subsistence and status. *Individuals* don't determine how they will acquire status, *communities have the means built into their structures*, and people see the structures and requirements of their communities as

'rational', 'logical' and very necessary. They engage in the necessary activities 'automatically', often not seeming to consciously recognise what they are doing. So, it becomes irrational and illogical that people should engage in any other kinds of status attaining and maintaining behaviour. In Western communities the rational way to ensure subsistence and status is *wage labour* or *private enterprise*. This is simply not the way in which people in most other communities ensure either status or subsistence. Their ways are equally entrenched in their communities, and appear equally rational, logical and necessary to them, but they differ widely from the requirements of Western communities.

Western communities, by definition, *cannot sustain their requirements from a static resource base* (they become very worried when their economies fail to 'grow', or even when they grow too slowly!). The concept of 'sustainable development', if it requires a non-expanding resource base, makes no sense in Western communities. It is because the resource base (from which Western communities produce the goods and services they require for both subsistence and status) must constantly expand, that Western nations are so concerned about gaining access to the resources of 'non-Western' countries. One of the consequences of Western presumptions about the meaning and purpose of life, is that they impose demands on non-Western communities, not for the sake of those communities, but in order to meet their own *constantly expanding needs and wants*. Western peoples are, for perfectly rational and logical reasons (in Western minds), convinced that the environments of people everywhere should be fully 'developed' and that *access to those environments should be guaranteed to Western people*. That is the fundamental driving force behind the *globalisation* push of the past thirty years in Western countries.

Many non-Western communities are under threat. *Western nations are determined to reorganise other communities*, whether they like it or not, to contribute to the snowballing resource requirements of Western communities. As the World Trade Organisation explains,

... liberal trade policies — policies that allow the unrestricted flow of goods and services — sharpen competition, motivate innovation and breed success. They multiply the rewards that result from producing the best products, with the best design, at the best price.

http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/fact3_e.htm
(2 Jan 2010)

Reflecting the dominance of capitalism in the international arena,

the statement takes it for granted that the status aims and ambitions of people in capitalist communities are universal aims and ambitions. There are 'rewards' to be had "from producing the best products, with the best design, at the best price". Communities and countries which attempt to inhibit the "unrestricted flow of goods and services" should be penalised and brought into line with what is, after all, only their own best interest.

But, don't make the mistake made by those who believe that the West's concerns are universal concerns and that the West's forms of understanding and social organisation are the only universally rational ones. While other communities might be being reorganised, they don't, automatically, accept or live by the West's understandings. Their understandings and their forms of organisation are just as deeply ingrained in their minds and in their hearts as those of the West are for Western communities and individuals. And when they are forced to live by other understandings and accept other forms of organisation, they do so with a deep, difficult to express, sense of helplessness, disorientation and, often, despair.

Human Beings as 'A Resource'

A second outcome of Western understandings of reality, and activity based on those understandings, relates to Western perceptions of *the ways in which human beings ought to behave and be organised*. I have suggested that Western capitalist communities see their environments as sets of resources which *ought* to be fully exploited. What we have not yet examined is how those in positions of authority in Western communities view human beings.

It comes as no surprise, I'm sure, that human beings in territories under the control of Western capitalism are seen as a *resource*. If you work in almost any corporation or government institution or agency in a Western country you already know that the department responsible for your personal files and for hiring and firing has a name like 'Human Resources Division'. Since Western capitalist communities are focussed on individual self-promotion, utilising any means (within the legislative guidelines) in order to make a *profit* (the term used in Western communities for the end result of successful accumulation - and, therefore, status - activities), it should come as no surprise that people are also seen as a resource to be exploited for that end. And they also should be used to their full potential. Bernard Magubane (1975) describes the ways in which southern Africans were dispossessed of their lands and then

forced into labour for those who knew how to make use of the resources which Africans had so profligately neglected to utilise, or had not even realised existed.

Before they were physically subdued, African traditional societies with plenty of land confronted the requirements of capitalism with difficult problems. The wants of an African living within his subsistence agriculture, cultivating his *mealies* (corn), were confined to a *kaross* (skin cloak) and some home-made pieces of cotton cloth. The prospects of leaving his family to work in a mine, in order to earn wages with which he could buy things he had no use for, did not at once appeal to him. James Bryce observed that,

The white men, anxious to get to work on the goldreefs, are annoyed at what they call the stupidity and laziness of the native, and usually clamour for legislation to compel the native to come to work, adding of course that regular labor would be the best thing in the world for natives. Some go as far as to wish to compel them to work at fixed rate of wages, sufficient to leave good profit for the employer. (1969:23)

... By force and coercion Africans were divorced from their former means of subsistence in a most frightful manner. The record... is stained with pages almost as dark as those which disfigure the early records of imperialism in India and America... In time the African would learn the bitter lesson that labouring in the mines at wages that made fortunes for the mining capitalist had become an unavoidable necessity... (Magubane 1975 pp.238-242)

The experiences described by Magubane have been common throughout the world during the period of the colonial expansion of Western European nations. They remain common in the new 'globalisation' version of that expansion.

Of course, as I have already suggested, this attitude toward human beings has not only been displayed in Western activities in non-Western countries. It has been equally fully displayed in Western communities toward those who seemed unwilling to take productive enterprise seriously over the past seven or eight centuries. John Hatcher (1998) traces the attitudes of those in charge in Western European countries over the past eight centuries to the 'labouring poor'. As he says,

When labour was plentiful and cheap the market exercised its own harsh discipline on those who struggled for subsistence, urging them to industry and subservience. However, when labour became scarce the very fabric of society could be threatened, not just by rising wages and costs, but by a swelling independence among the

working masses, which commonly manifested itself in a refusal to engage wholeheartedly in unremitting toil.(1998, p. 64)

Hatcher's essay, as he acknowledges, is built on the writing of an earlier historian, E. P. Thompson, who documented *The Making of the English Working Class* in a book of that name in the 1960s.

Not everyone in a Western capitalist community subscribes to the central presumptions of capitalism, but those in hegemonic control require community members, whether they assent to the presumptions or not, to live by them. Both Thompson and Hatcher outline the ways in which this has occurred over past centuries of western European history.

In Western communities the idea of *class*, broken down into three groupings – upper, middle, and lower – referred historically to the three orders of European feudalism – the aristocracy, the gentry and clergy (or nobility), and the peasantry. The presumptions of Western capitalism took hold in the middle group, which gained increasing political clout over several centuries. They then set about reorganising the 'lower classes' to conform to those presumptions. That is largely what both Thompson's (1967) and Hatcher's (1998) essays are about.

The 'middle classes' have been very successful in educating the 'working classes' to live by capitalist presumptions, though it took about 800 years of 'work-discipline'. Most people who were included in the 'lower classes' in the 18th to 20th centuries in Western capitalist communities now order their lives by capitalist presumptions themselves. This has been reflected in the persistent movement of 'workers' parties' from the left to the centre and now to the 'centre-right' of politics in most Western capitalist communities. What is 'left', 'right' and 'centre' in Western politics is currently being redefined to fit the new realities.

Living *within* the Environmental Means: Non-Western systems of Territoriality and Land Use

In order to comprehend the difference between the postulations underpinning Western capitalist communal organisation and interaction and the forms of organisation and interaction in non-Western communities, we need to look more closely at how such communities were organised before capitalist intrusion. This is, of course, how they still would be organised - with inevitable accommodations to outside influences - if left to their own devices.

Parker Shipton (1984) in an essay titled 'East African Systems of

Land Tenure', provides a description of how two sets of communities, the Sukuma-Nyamwezi of north-western Tanzania and the Luo of south-eastern Kenya, organised life and related to their material environments before Western capitalist intrusion and reorganisation of their environments. He also outlines some of the ways in which the communities have had to reorganise in the face of Western pressure for change.

It is common to all human beings that they believe that their ways are the best ways and that where other people deviate from their ways they are less than 'civilised'. Western Europeans are not exceptions to this rule. They demanded change from all these groups, not because the practices they opposed were inherently bad or evil (if there is a universally valid set of criteria in terms of which such judgments can be made) but because they conflicted with their own understandings.

The Sukuma, Nyamwezi and Luo were not passive. They reacted to the changes brought into their communities by the expansion of capitalist activity into their environments by altering land tenure to accommodate the changed demands. Yet they ensured that the fundamental presumptions in terms of which they related to their environments were maintained. This has always been the response of non-Western communities to Western demands for change. Human beings are not able to simply drop their own understandings and live by the understandings of others. They will always try to accommodate changes they can't resist, while retaining their own understandings of the world and of themselves.

When changes forced upon them become more than they can accommodate within their own understanding of the world, then they begin to lose a sense of communal identity and their communities begin to unravel. Luo, Sukuma and Nyamwezi communities have experienced these consequences over the past forty years in Kenya and Tanzania. Throughout the world, non-Western communities, subjected to unrelenting demands for massive change in their interaction with their material environments, have experienced similar loss of identity, with rapidly escalating crime and violence and out-of-control population growth.

All stable communities (both historically and in the present) have both direct and indirect means of limiting population growth. As communities disintegrate, the means of population control become decreasingly effective and population begins to grow. Many non-Western communities have experienced rapidly increasing population growth as their communities have unravelled. The current average annual rate of population increase throughout the

continent of Africa is 3 percent. At this rate of increase, populations double every 24 years. Through all of the non-Western regions of the world the average annual rate of increase is 1.8 percent, with populations doubling every 39 years. The pressures put on both material and social environments by these rates of increase are enormous. Through the Western world, the average rate of increase is a mere 0.6 percent, with populations doubling over 116 years. Given that there are always natural events over such a period which impact on growth, Western populations have either stabilised in countries like the United States or, as in Western Europe, with a 0.3 percent annual growth rate, are in decline. ⁵ Population increase in Western countries comes through immigration.

People like the Luo, Sukuma and Nyamwezi, don't simply reinvent themselves as Western capitalists when they are subjected to Western capitalist demands for change. They lose their sense of identity and self-worth as their indigenous status and prestige systems break down and their understanding of their environment and of themselves in terms of their environment decreasingly 'makes sense'.

In examining the East African land tenure systems, focus was directed to their systems of land tenure and the political processes which sustained those systems. The Iban of Sarawak on the island of Borneo (Indonesian Kalimantan) relate to their material and non-material environments in terms of *adat*. As Cramb (1989) puts it, "the good man is the man who observes the rituals, recognises the restrictions, and honours the Iban *adat*". The focus is on observance of the moral rules and metaphysical understandings of the community and, in the process, interacting with one's material environment to meet the requirements of subsistence and *communally ascertained needs and wants*.

People in many non-Western communities determine relative status through competitive and/or cooperative involvement in *non-material* forms of activity (e. g. ritual events, festivals, religious activities and any combination of these and involvement in the material environment). They, then, very often, require people who attain particular statuses to demonstrate their fitness for the statuses attained by *obtaining the material possessions deemed correct for the status positions*. If they cannot obtain the necessary possessions, their statuses come under threat. If, on the other hand, they accumulate *more* possessions than they should, or obtain inappropriate possessions, then the rest of the community reacts, wanting to know who they think they are. People who get more than they should have are very often pressured into giving

the surpluses away. In doing so they can strengthen ties with other community members.

There are, of course, communities which do not tie possessions to status in this way. In such communities (e. g. the !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert or Aboriginal Australian communities) status is not clearly linked to the accumulation of possessions and owning things does little or nothing for either status or prestige. See Sahlins (1972) for a discussion of such communities.

The ways in which communities are organised and the ways in which they interact with their material environments are two sides of a coin. If the organisation of the community changes, interaction with their material environment will also change. Equally, if interaction with the material environment changes, so does the structure of the community. When those changes are forced from outside, based on understandings of which community members are often not even aware, then community members find it increasingly difficult to make sense of their experiences. The changes forced upon them often require forms of interaction which directly contradict the basic forms of interaction of the community. Attack the systems of land tenure and utilization in a community and you attack the organisation and interactions of the community. *You cannot force change in land tenure and utilization without directly attacking the cohesion of the community which reflects and incorporates those systems in its organisation.*

One of the saddest features of the 'Third World Development' drive in which Western capitalist nations have engaged over the past fifty years is that in the process of reorganising utilization of their environments, non-Western communities have been disrupted. Many of them are in various stages of disintegration, victims of the well-meaning 'development' activities of Western experts. As the consequences of disruption have become increasingly apparent, in a classic 'blame the victim' response to the problems created, those same experts have urged further, deeper change to address the problems of social disintegration which their policies have induced. Because they have been well trained as Western specialists, they take it for granted that their understanding of the world, and their forms of land tenure and utilization are the only 'reasonable' ones, and they force change upon those who don't see the world as they do or relate to the material environment as they do. As a leader in the magazine *The Economist*, entitled 'Hopeless Africa', says,

No one can blame Africans for the weather, but most of the continent's shortcomings owe less to acts of God than to acts of man. These acts are not exclusively African—brutality, despotism

and corruption exist everywhere—but African societies, for reasons buried in their cultures, seem especially susceptible to them. (*The Economist* May 13th-19th 2000)

Brutality, despotism and corruption in communities are evidences of *communal disintegration*, not features of 'traditional cultures' as the *Economist* writer suggests. Western capitalist developers have intruded into communities and changed the face of the material environments of peoples. They have forced new land tenure and utilization practices upon them, extracted huge 'surpluses' from their environments and now blame them for the ensuing social, political, and material environmental disintegration.

We need to understand the single most important difference between almost all non-Western orientations to the material environment and that of Western capitalism. Whereas Western capitalist utilization of the material environment is open-ended, with no upper limit to its use and a built in inflation of demand for natural resources, most non-Western forms of utilization are *closed*, with a *built in upper limit to demand*. This is *not* because non-Western people are 'more attuned' to their environments or because they are 'natural conservationists' or 'closer to the environment' than Western people.

As many studies have shown, non-Western people have shaped and moulded their environments to their needs. Their aim has not been to 'live in harmony with nature', as sometimes suggested by environmental activists in Western countries, but to utilise their environments to supply their needs and wants. However, because their status and prestige systems have not been anchored in the accumulation of material goods and services but in some other form of activity and organisation, there has been no inbuilt pressure to over-use their material environments. Where they have done so (and this has often happened), it was the growth in population living in a region which produced problems, not a constantly escalating demand from a stable population for more and more material possessions and ever-increasing levels of consumption, as in Western communities.

Most human activity is related *not to subsistence* but to the promotion and maintenance of social position and self-esteem. People in communities like those of the Iban, Sukuma, Nyamwezi and Luo are focused on something other than 'private enterprise' and competitive individual material accumulation and consumption as the basis of status. So, they spend *less time in material production activities* and *more time* in what Western capitalist people would consider 'waste' activity, *in religious, ritual, social and*

kin-based activity of various kinds. If they are being 'productive' what they are producing is not material goods and services but various forms of ritual, religious and social activity and organisation – whatever is required of the status system which is built into the structure of their communities and into their forms of interaction with each other. So, in many non-Western communities such activities seem extravagantly elaborated to Western people.

The upshot of this focus away from the material environment is that, in the past, they more or less matched their material needs and wants to what was available in their own environments or could be traded for goods from their environments without needing to expand into the territory of neighbouring groups. Sahlins (1972) argues that many communities *underused* the resources available in their material environments. Since they matched their material needs and wants to the usual productive capacity of their environments, in good years they had surpluses and in bad years they had less than they required, but things averaged out over the years.

When Western people arrived in their regions, they demanded that those communities produce a 'surplus' from their material environments for export to Western countries. This required local inhabitants to use their material environments not only to supply their own needs and wants, but to supply, additionally, a range of products sought by Western traders and 'developers'. Utilization of their environment was, therefore, almost immediately, raised to long-run unsustainable levels. Inevitably, the environments of communities where these demands were made became progressively more degraded as the years passed. As Speth (1994) has claimed, most of the soil and other environmental deterioration of the past fifty years has occurred in non-Western regions of the world. Westerners use their own environments to the limits of sustainability, but readily, and unthinkingly, push the environments of other communities over the edge.

In the jargon of Western capitalism, non-Western communities, prior to Western intrusion, were naturally oriented to 'sustainable development', to *living within their environmental means*. This is why such advanced material cultures as those of Han China, Korea and Japan, although well aware of the existence of other lands and peoples, and although placing neighbouring peoples into tributary relationships, did not greatly expand their accumulative and productive activities into their environments.

For the Chinese, Koreans and Japanese, throughout thousands of years of elaborate political organisation and advanced material

culture, North America was less than a week's sailing time away. And they had the sophisticated craft necessary to make such journeys with ease on a regular basis. Yet, when Western Europeans invaded and subjugated the indigenous inhabitants of the North American continent there were no communities of Chinese, Koreans or Japanese to deal with. Why not? Because, despite their elaborate material cultures, status and prestige were not primarily determined by competitive individual material accumulation and consumption. They, more or less, lived within their environmental means.

This is equally true of Aboriginal Australians. Of course they reshaped their environment to better suit their requirements, and of course that meant that Australia, after their arrival, was a different land to Australia before their arrival. But they did not utilise their material environment to, and beyond, its limits. They did not, in Western capitalist terms, 'realise the potential' of their material environments. As Tonkinson (1978, p.18) put it, Aboriginal people stressed, not the mundane skills and techniques for surviving in harsh surroundings, but "the imperative of conformity to Dreamtime laws... it is spiritual rather than ecological imperatives that have primacy in guaranteeing their way of life". The Aboriginal people of Australia, like non-Western peoples in most parts of the world, understood reality, and interacted with the world in ways which are difficult for Western peoples to understand.

A Very Different 'Reality': The Wixarika

[Paul Liffman \(2000\)](#) introduces us to the world of the Wixarika, in his words, a "resilient but hard-pressed mountain people in the southern Sierra Madre Occidental of western Mexico" (2000, p.129). You will need to read this article two or three times. Read it the first time just to begin to understand how the Wixarika interact with their environments, order their communities and perceive 'reality'. You won't find this easy!! It is always extremely difficult for anyone to begin to see the world from a perspective that has so little in common with their own. This is why most people simply don't attempt it, convinced that, even if the Wixarika do see their world and interact with it in such a radically different way, their way must be foolish, riddled with superstition and highly illogical. So, it should rightly be dismissed and, if possible, Wixarika forms of activity should be reorganised to fit Western capitalist understandings of the world. Concepts such as private property and public property, economic activity and political activity, fit very poorly into an understanding of the Wixarika world. If we try to rewrite the story

in such terms we lose most of the meaning which they consider inherent in the *real* world, objective reality for the Wixarika.

Wixarika and Capitalists: The new Mexico

Liffman and his colleagues have explored the world of a people who see their surroundings and interact with each other in ways completely foreign to people living in Western capitalist communities. If you found their world strange, imagine how strange they find your world! Yet, they have been required to accommodate the demands of capitalism. Many of the Wixarika have found themselves in Mexican and United States sweat shops, working long hours for little pay, and trying to understand what this strange, exploitative capitalist world is all about. Even in their home territory, they have been forced to interact not only with capitalist land ownership and utilization practices but with mining companies and other multinational corporations keen to exploit the resources of the country. Can you imagine trying to negotiate mining agreements with the Wixarika while trying to accommodate their understanding of the world? Is it reasonable to require companies to do so? In the main, companies working in Mexico don't have to worry. The Government doesn't require them to take the sensibilities of indigenous people into account in pursuing their business interests.

In an article which comes from the [Multinational Monitor](#) 6, John Ross paints the political scene in Mexico in the early 21st century. This is the political climate within which the Wixarika will have to negotiate their future. The political leaders in Mexico in 2001 are Western capitalists, trained in Western universities, closely tied to Western multinational companies, wedded to the privatisation agenda of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and seeing the environments of indigenous people as resources to be developed for economic gain.

Like so many other Third World countries, the Government of Mexico has been taken over by Western capitalists, convinced that everyone is driven by the same agendas as themselves and that if the poor are destitute it is because they are unwilling to work hard and improve their own lot. But, indigenous communities like the Wixarika usually do not remain passive victims of capitalist intrusion into their environments. The Zapatistas of Chiapas (see Collier, 1999), in the mountains of the Mexican southeast, have shown how much can be achieved by indigenous people determined to protect their way of life. The cost, however, both physically and culturally, can be enormous, as the Zapatistas (and Bouganvilleans in the

Solomon Islands) have discovered. An editorial in the *Multinational Monitor* emotively summarises the situation,

Indigenous challenges to power in Mexico... make clear that even the most marginalized populations can stand up to prevailing hegemonic economic and political forces, if they are united, organized, determined, spirited and persistent.

Their inspirational resistance to everyday violence, projected by military forces, paramilitary gangs and political and financial thugs from outfits like the International Monetary Fund, should issue a clarion call to allies in rich countries both to intensify their solidarity campaigns and to challenge directly the core institutions of corporate globalization... (Multinational Monitor, March 2001 - Volume 22 - Number 3)

So, to conclude where we started: Are the problems outlined by James Speth (1994) and Paul Ehrlich (1997) real? Who is responsible for them? What should be done about it?

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End Notes

1 The internet address for UNDP is: <http://www.undp.org/>

2 To access Ehrlich's article on line use the following internet address: <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/97dec/enviro.htm>.

3 For a description of ways in which people in Victorian Britain achieved status see Clausen (1993) or Corfield (1992). For comment on ways in which status and prestige requirements might be changing in the present in Western capitalist communities see [Hemerijck \(1999\)](#)

4 Fallon (1999) provides an examination of the ways in which the subjects of 'status' and 'power' have been approached by theorists. Be careful about her loose correlation of status with power – status is usually associated with authority, power is usually wielded when status and recognised authority are in doubt. For a discussion on the nature of respect and leadership – recognised authority and the need for expressions of overt power - see Delellis (2000) .

5 The following internet address provides access to international population statistics: <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb/>.

6 You can access this journal through the following address: <http://www.essential.org/monitor/>

