

Give and Take in Modern Complex Society

2019

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In many traditional northwest native American cultures the potlatch is a centrally important ritual/ceremony. Customarily, a potlatch is conducted by an individual or family that has gathered together possessions that it has decided to distribute to the community. The event calls the community together in a central location for this celebratory distribution – reception ritual in which the provider is recognized for his/her/their generosity and the community benefits from the sharing of valued possessions and resources. The potlatch levels the “playing field” so that all members of the band/tribe remain relatively equal with respect to valued “goods.” Potlatch sponsoring band/tribal members gain status/recognition according to how much and how valuable the gifts are that they give away to the community. By contrast, individuals in these cultures who covet/hoard wealth invite being shunned as outcasts.

Does this sound like what happens in modern complex society? How about the exact opposite? Yes, a few individuals and families do give a significant percentage of their time, effort and money to support others in their neighborhoods and especially in their church communities. Interestingly, these individuals and families tend to have limited wealth themselves; so, their “philanthropy” is that much more impressive. And, of course, there are the few extremely wealthy individuals and families whose foundations distribute some of their excess wealth to sponsor specific social needs. But for all the big monetary numbers that are attributed to what these foundation philanthropists give away, rarely do they give away anything like the percentage of their wealth/income that the first category of givers offer. And, most importantly, both of these groups are the clear exceptions in modern complex society where accumulating, hoarding and displaying all forms of wealth is the norm as well as a primary means to gain status. What a person gets, has, and holds for him or herself and for the immediate family rather than what he or she gives to others constitutes a primary basis for being recognized, envied and celebrated.

Why the difference? For the full answer, see my essay, “Crisis of Cooperation,” 2017. In this essay, I identify the many variables that promote one side or the other in our fundamental competition – cooperation dynamic as humans. And I suggest that modern complex society in contrast to aboriginal, “simpler” bands and tribes suffers from augmentation of the competitive and diminution of the cooperative. The main result: social relations in modern complex societies are overall in a state of imbalance. And this imbalance is expressed most prominently at the institutional level in the relationship between our competitive

capitalist economy and our egalitarian/cooperative based democratic government. In this context, as economy is allowed to “buy out” government, a clear trend emerges toward a market government and ultimately toward a market society where everything is regarded solely in terms of its monetary value. It follows logically that in a market oriented society, the hoarding of wealth and the assignment of status to those who gain and display the most wealth is just one symptom of the underlying imbalance between the forces for competition and the forces for cooperation!

What is needed? First, to recognize the basis for the imbalance problem, second, to understand the many negative consequences that follow from the imbalance that exists, and third, to determine what we need to do to rectify the situation. See my essay, “Market Economy, Market Government, Market Society: Is Modern Complex, Civilized Society Sustainable?” for an assessment of these three interconnected issues.

Ultimately, we could hold up the following barometer to indicate when we have restored balance in the global societal system as a whole: First, we reach the point where we celebrate citizens for the extent to which they give/contribute to benefit the community [neighborhood, city, county, state, nation, united nations] as indicated by a prospective Forbes Magazine annual list of the 500 individuals who gave away the greatest percentage of their wealth that year – potlatch. And second, we reach the point where we shun/condemn citizens who take and hoard the greatest amount of wealth for themselves as indicated by the current Forbes Magazine annual list of the 500 richest people in the world. When we achieve this reversal worldwide in who we celebrate, then we will probably have corrected the many other factors that lead to the current imbalance problem. And, most importantly, we will probably have reached the point where complex, civilized society becomes globally sustainable for the really long term.