



Reciprocity

The Appreciation of Gifts

It is normal for humans to take the world around us pretty much for granted. We flip a switch and there is light. We turn a tap and there is water. When we need milk or boots or a pump, they will be available in the local store. When we need information there is Google. We casually surf a wave of invention and effort generated by others, sliding down a never-ending slope of convenience created by others. Each day we balance on the sharp edge of photosynthetic life and take it for granted. What is a single green leaf worth?

Sir Isaac Newton once wrote “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” He was a genius who nevertheless understood that his accomplishments owed a debt to others.

Cities generate great technology. Where cities didn't develop in the world, cultures didn't progress much beyond the hunter-gatherer stone age. But it was the development of agriculture that allowed cities to develop. There is a symbiotic relationship here that is perhaps not well appreciated, especially today by those people who grow up in cities and enjoy a lifestyle virtually devoid of want. Most people today who live in cities have lost the family connection to the land. Food, energy, water and air just show up and people are too busy being busy to appreciate how it arrives. Only when the quality of these factors of life sinks to the point of threatening health or lifestyle does it receive much attention.

People who occupy the countryside, on the other hand, often resent city control of markets and money, ostensibly leaving the rural worker poorer while urban dwellers pull down large salaries and pension benefits. And when cities need more water, more electricity, more food, more metals, and more hydrocarbon energy it is the rural people who are forced to move over, give out, and give in. As the countryside becomes more and more industrialized the balance between rural and urban appears to be increasingly broken.

A person once said to me that all wealth is created in the cities. Certainly the technological marvels of the last few centuries have been created in the city and much of this represents wealth. But let us not confuse wealth and money. Cities created technology but they are also prodigious consumers of the things necessary to keep them functioning. They spin off marvelous inventions but also spew out a litany of liabilities mostly seen by people downstream, downwind, and out of sight. We need a new way of organizing our cities, and we need to remake the financial balance between cities and the rural areas that support and nourish those cities.



There is a term for this new balance and it is reciprocity. Reciprocity is an appreciation of cities for the regenerative rural landscapes that protect their source of water and clean air, and produce healthy food. Reciprocity is a concomitant appreciation among rural landowners for the role of cities in creating marvelous new technologies that make our life and work easier and more satisfying. It involves much education and appropriate incentives, plus enlightened public policy. We have starting to envision this path but it is a long and difficult road to a different set of attitudes including that of appreciation for what others, and nature, provide every day.

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July 2012