

STORIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

www.environmental-justice.com/research

Addressing the 'Core Cultural Mythology'

Environmental scientist Donella Meadows addresses the subject of paradigmatic change in her *12 Places to Intervene in a System*. She asserts that: “transcending paradigms may go beyond challenging fundamental assumptions, into the realm of changing the values and priorities that lead to the assumptions, and being able to choose among value sets at will” (1999). Referring to Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Meadows concludes that paradigmatic change can best occur when a wide variety of individuals systematically point out the deficiencies of the ‘old’ paradigm while others lead us outside of ‘old’ paradigm by proactively modelling a new one (Meadows 1999).

So what are the deficiencies of our current paradigm that have led to such consumptive materialism and exploitation on a macro scale? Suppose that our core cultural mythology is largely informed by both the varied and dynamic means by which we pursue truth (*ie.* art, science, spirituality), in addition to more fixed and static considerations such as our biological nature and our historical context. Imagining the ‘core cultural mythology’ as a dynamic entity that is in constant flux, it becomes evident that there will be a constant power struggle for the control of the ideas and assumptions which form the dominant cultural narrative. Since the dynamic processes by which we collectively pursue truth, such as through the sciences, the arts and through spirituality are highly influential in their ability to impact the core cultural mythology, they are also especially vulnerable to the interests of power (Greig 2007).

In an essay calling upon artists to pursue the truths of the times we live in through honest, socio-politically responsive work, Scottish playwright David

Greig argues that one of the key roles of theatre in our times is to resist “the management of the imagination by power” (2007, p. 215). Here, Greig paints a picture of the influence of capital and power on the core cultural mythology:

“The institutions of global capital manage the imagination in the first instance through media institutions. Hollywood cinema, the television and newspapers of the great media empires like Fox and CNN. These forms create the narrative superstructure around which our imagination grows. In this way we learn to think along certain paths, to believe certain truths, all of which tend, in the end to further the aims of capital and the continuance of economic growth. Once the superstructure is in place, our own individual creativity will tend to grow around it and assume its shape so that the stories we tell ourselves, the photographs we take and so forth, are put in the service of the same narratives and assumptions [...] Very few imaginations are totally colonized, just as very few are totally liberated. In most minds there is a constant back and forth- a dialogue between challenge and assumption like waves washing against a shoreline. [...] By intervening in the realm of the imaginary, power continually shapes our understanding of reality” (2007, p. 216)

Greig argues that art has the capacity to resist this ‘management of the imagination’ by the interests of capital by being dedicated first and foremost to the truth, and thereby challenging the core cultural mythology which has led to an Infrastructure of Consumption and Exploitation. Thus, if we are to truly address our social and ecological crises, we require both an art and a science that is unrelenting in its pursuit of truth. This may allow us to recover our core cultural mythology from the ‘management of the imagination by capital’.

Perhaps this sentiment is better expressed in playwright Harold Pinter’s 2005 Nobel Lecture: “I believe that despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all. It is in fact mandatory. If such a determination is not embodied in our political vision we have no hope of restoring what is so nearly lost to us - the dignity of man” (Pinter 2005).

*To read the full research paper, including the bibliography, visit:
<http://environmental-justice.com/wp-content/uploads/EJR.pdf>*

Rebecca Nada-Rajah

November 2010