

(2024 February 6) Building Social Infrastructure - Lubrano (PlanetCritical)

Building Social Infrastructure, The Cognitive Dissonance Crisis (Planet: Critical)

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https://www.planetcritical.com/p/the-cognitive-dissonance-crisis?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web

Last week I interviewed Sarah Stein Lubrano on cognitive dissonance, the self and how to change our minds. The conversation was fascinating, ranging with Sarah explaining that our brains will make up theories to rationalise new evidence which doesn't fit our world view. With regards to the climate crisis, this partly explains how politicians, corporations, lobbyists and the majority of us continue business-as-usual despite the nature of that business being the root of climate breakdown and even social upheaval.

We discussed the rich and vastly underused topic of “social infrastructure”, infrastructure that facilitates community, connection and widening typical social circles. A wonderful example Sarah gave was imagine schools having a room where parents could hang out as they wait to pick up their kids. Although a homogenous group in one sense, no doubt they would have conversations with people outside of their typical circle, conversations which could lend different perspectives to the world. Social infrastructure provides spaces for people to have non-judgemental conversations, which often involve story-telling. As Sarah explained, this environment often helps people change their minds, a skill we under-develop in Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic (W.E.I.R.D) countries.

While in the West we believe our sense of self is fixed, research shows this sense of self is constructed, changing and responsive to our environments. It is our W.E.I.R.D commitment to its permanence which renders society polarised; the more we identify the Self as permanent, and identify with our beliefs, the more oppositional views become threatening to our self-hood. We perceive difference in opinion as threatening to our very existence, triggering a self-protective instinct. Yet the only fixed state in nature is death itself.

The beauty of social infrastructure is it reveals how we respond to our environment, how we co-create the world with the very infrastructure we develop. The world is not a top-down devised master plan with pieces slotted into place to achieve greatness, rather our politics, our societies, our possibilities develop along with our infrastructure, meaning great care needs to be taken when considering what comes next, and what may offshoot as a result. On the other side of the coin, we do not necessarily need to know exactly what comes next, but rather have a sense of what infrastructure may inspire, and allow the collective mind to do the rest.

An excellent example of infrastructure developing world views are fossil fuels themselves. Our understanding of exponential growth, our belief in the limitlessness of humankind, even our militarisation would not be possible without fossil fuels. They are an incredibly energy-dense and

cheap fuel which has powered what we consider now to be humankind's reality—cheap and energy abundant, meaning we can do anything. The reality is such a worldview is only feasible due to access to such energy. Yet, it muddies the water of the future. Most people who promote renewable energy do so in the understanding it will replace fossil fuels and continue business-as-usual, just sustainably. This is unlikely due to the fact the material configuration of such a renewable grid would be unsustainable. True sustainability of the future demands a reduction in our energy consumption. This is no bad thing, given how much we squander due to the abundance and low cost of fossil fuels. But economists seem to think the economics came before the fuel which powers our economies, and lead political leaders and the public down energy-blind rabbit holes.

What do W.E.I.R.D countries have in common?

Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic. The citizens of these countries exhibit markedly more extreme psychological characteristics than those of non-WEIRD nations. One of the weirdest characteristics is a belief in a fixed “self” which will behave in a reliable and predictable manner no matter the environment. The belief in this unchanging self is what makes it very difficult for us to change our minds—and even concoct wild rationalisations to justify our behaviour. Welcome to the age of cognitive dissonance.

Sarah Stein Lubrano, a researcher at Oxford University, joins me to explain the cognitive dissonance phenomenon, its roots in the alleged security granted to us by a fixed sense of self, and why it's so hard to change our beliefs. She then reveals what neurophilosophy tells us about how to help others change our minds, the power of storytelling, and the importance of social infrastructure for creating cohesive, fluid and non-judgemental communities. It is these brave communities which dare examine themselves, their beliefs about the world—and change their maladaptive behaviours. This is an episode about how to dare change our minds.

Comment: Michael Gregory

I thought I had posted a comment here yesterday, but it seems not to have stuck so I'll send another.

Among the most interesting aspects of this very interesting podcast was the suggestion that we may at last be moving toward a socio-political reality that corresponds to the psychedelic psychological awareness of the self as a non-autonomous non-cartesian phenomenon. One of the major stumbling blocks in the way of addressing climate change as well as many other problems in the world today is that the standard western notions of both the self and the world are based on ancient metaphysical and eschatological myths of non- or quasi-physical, eternal or otherwise supernatural entities (souls, spirits, platonic Ideas/Ideals, etc) that keep us from seeing and relating to substantive, symbiotic, synergistic reality. It's a pleasure to see two young intelligent people discussing our environmental situation and searching for helpful ways to address the problems with full awareness of the need to see with new eyes.

