

# Restorative Economic Democracy

## By Starhawk

The job of the economy is to produce security and abundance for all, equably, efficiently and sustainably, in a way that furthers human freedom and mutual solidarity, that strengthens our bond to place, and protects the interests of future generations.

Security means that people can look forward to maintaining a reasonable standard of comfort, health, and beauty in their lives, and not fear for their families' survival.

Abundance means we value pleasure and beauty as well as survival. Abundance is more than survival, it means bread and roses, enough to allow us to indulge our creativity and curiosity, time for play as well as work.

Equably does not mean that all people are rewarded exactly equally, but that all are fairly rewarded, that some forms of work are not overvalued while others are undervalued, that vast gaps in income and opportunity do not exist.

Efficiency, the watchword of the global power mongers, takes on a new meaning: The use of the least amount of nonrenewable energy and resources possible to do the job.

Sustainably means that our enterprises can continue on indefinitely because they are based on renewable energy and resources and the waste products they produce can become resources as well.

Solidarity means that we support each other through the vicissitudes of life, and that no one has to bear the brunt of misfortune alone.

A name for this economic system might be a Restorative Economic Democracy. 'Restorative' because its task is to heal the wounds and excesses left from our current system, to restore habitat, diversity, abundance and hope. 'Democracy' to imply participation in decision making at every level.

### Ecological Abundance

There are five basic ways to generate abundance:

**New inputs of energy.** In a sustainable system, the energy we use would be renewable, ultimately deriving from that free gift of solar energy that every day arrives on the planet. The sun drives the wind and the tides, sustains plant growth, and ultimately provides nearly all the energy in use on the planet. Oil and coal are the stored solar inputs of the past, and are not renewable in any human time scale, so their use should be extremely costly.

**New inputs of materials and labor.** Again, in a sustainable system renewable and nontoxic materials would be favored: nonrenewables would become extremely expensive. Our current system replaces human labor and energy with oil-based energy: a sustainable system might reverse that trend and find empowering and productive ways to use the renewable resource of human labor.

**Recycling:** Abundance in natural systems does not depend on how much of a substance comes into the system, but on how many times it is used before it passes out. Human economies also thrive when every dollar that enters a local economy is cycled through many, many times before it leaves. Abundance can be created not by necessarily generating more cash but by finding ways to recirculate the money and the value it represents.

In nature, waste is food. Every byproduct of a process becomes a source of some other process. Decay breeds fertility. We could design our production processes so that every part of a product can either be reused, reprocessed or can decay naturally into fertilizer.

**Creativity and innovation:** Creativity is perhaps our only unlimited resource. Creativity thrives in conditions of freedom, dignity, hope and respect. Societies that oppress whole groups of people, that limit the opportunities of women or people of color or the poor, cut off their potential human resources and ultimately impoverish themselves.

In nature, the edge where two systems meet is often the most creative place. The tidepools, where the ocean meets the land, teem with life and diversity. Of course, each system must be large and intact enough to function well. A forest that is so cut up it becomes all edge cannot provide viable habitat for many creatures.

In human society, the edge where different cultures, social systems and worldviews meet is often an extremely creative edge. The cultural edge where African and European musical traditions meet, to take one example, generated jazz, blues, soul, rock & roll, rap, and hip hop. Cultural hegemony, the superceding of indigenous cultures and local traditions with one global McDonald's/shopping mall/superstore, destroys edge and diversity, and undermines our potential for the creative innovations that could increase real abundance.

**Efficiency:** Efficiency really means doing more with less, as Buckminster Fuller said. If we can accomplish the same ends using less resources, we have freed them up to produce more abundance. Permaculturalists talk of 'stacking functions'—making sure that every element of a system serves more than one function. So I might plant comfrey under my apple tree, to keep the grass down, draw up nutrients from the soil, provide mulch, and give me a source of a valuable healing herb. So too, in an economic system, each element should fulfill more than one need. The city of Arcata, California, for example, treats its sewage by running it through a designed wetlands, which not only processes the sewage, it provides habitat for birds and animals and an area for local recreation and a tourist destination.

The old economic model is based on the image of the frontier: that there is always somewhere new to go, always new sources of materials and energy to explore and exploit. But we have now come close to the end of those resources. The model of endless expansion is leading us to cannibalization of the very systems that support life on earth.

But possibilities of expanded abundance still exist, even when we acknowledge the limitations on finding new sources of resources and materials in a finite and well-exploited world. A restorative economic democracy generates abundance by shifting to the use of the resources that renew themselves, such as the sun's energy, and by improving our efficiency, through conservation and better use of what we have. Recycling and recirculation of inputs are another source of abundance. And finally, human creativity and ingenuity are an unlimited resource when we provide the conditions in which they can flourish.

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