

Decentralisation and Social Change

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Hypercars are a concept for automobiles that combines ultralight materials, hybrid-electric drives and aerodynamic design (2). However, the appeal is that while being 70%-80% more efficient they do not compromise on performance, comfort or safety. Furthermore, in theory, it should be possible to mass produce these cars for a comparable cost. Thus, based on the financial view alone it seems quite plausible that there will be a rapid move by the general public to the use of these cars.

Since hypercars employ a hybrid-electric motor they are essentially small power stations on wheels. One of the potential uses of this is that people could use this power to supplement their current household supply that depends on power supplied via the power grid, from central power stations (primarily nuclear and coal).

Once the public begins to realise that they do not need to rely on centrally organised and managed resources the concept will start to take hold. In this way the decentralisation of resources will likely lead to a social change where people embrace self-determinism. This change in values could have profound effects on governments, social structures as well as people's interpretation of religion.

In many ways we could see this as a sign that society is maturing and growing up. Social groups are breaking free from their protective parents and willing to take responsibility for creating their own existence.

Why is this important? Decentralisation can be used as a key to unlocking the potential creativity and knowledge in groups (4) and sharing this wealth with all members of society. This has been seen in the computer industry with the advent and proliferation of open source software.

Thus, by changing the physical flow of resources we can expect to see a change in the cognitive processes of society. This feedback will result in a change in individual perception. One of the underlying reasons for this feedback can be explained via the concept of emergent properties and embodiment (1). That is, social values and world views are woven into and supported by the underlying context. Thus, when values change the context may change or, in this case, when there are other motivating reasons (financial) for changing the context, we can expect to see a change in values and cognitive constructs.

Currently much of society views the world in a centralised patriarchal fashion. This internalises the idea of delegating power and responsibility. Thus, it becomes inherent in our world view that we should receive orders from some form of authority.

This is in stark contrast to the revolutionary work being carried out by Richardo Semler in his organisation Semco (3). Here, a central tenet is that of decentralising decisions and management, with this being sanctioned and championed by upper management. As a result one can see

increases in self-determination and individual responsibility. Furthermore, there is widespread employee satisfaction as well as career growth. Interestingly, this has had the effect that within Semco the retention of middle management is much lower than other disciplines. This has primarily been attributed to the middle management's inability to function without power.

In the case of a corporation the middle management can move on to other companies. When talking about society at large and the governments that control that society we have a different situation. By introducing ideas of decentralisation and self determination to the individuals we may expect to see governments trying to strengthen their strong hold on the citizens. This will probably be an active process even if the individual members of government concerned, do not fully appreciate the protective stance they are taking. At the heart of the problem is the threat to their power. Thus, politicians and the political systems in general do not want to see this type of change.

The ways that we may expect to see governments respond to this is via increased surveillance as well as increased attempts to convince the public of the need for central control and protection e.g. protection against terrorism. This is ironic, because one of the strengths of terrorist organisations and activities is precisely the decentralised nature of the management.

Another area of society that may be challenged is that of religion. More specifically, as concepts of decentralisation and self-determination spread, it is likely that people will want to disband their patriarchal views with respect to spirituality. That is, they may start to be more comfortable with concepts such as "inner self" or "personal god". This may be enacted by an increase in interest by Western society in Eastern religions (which incorporate many of these concepts), or via the re-interpretation of existing Western religions.

By making resource management decentralised, we are encouraging more people to be aware and concerned with how they acquire and use those resources. This, in turn makes the process more open and transparent.

Once a mechanisms are in place for decentralised usage and management of resources we will begin to see a context where it is possible for the wisdom of the crowds emerge. That is, the decentralised usage patterns encourage independent behaviour and diversity in how resources are created, managed and used.

Note however, that one of the key features required for a sustainable usage pattern within a decentralised system is that of interoperability. This is, the components of the network of interaction inherent within the system of resource production and consumption, need to interact in a compatible fashion. However, this does not imply homogeneity. Rather, it implies collaboration.

Again, this has the potential for reinforcing new values within society. When individuals realise the link between diversity and collaboration and the positive impact that this has on their lives, they will start demanding that there is more collaboration elsewhere in society.

References

- (1) Fritjof Capra. *The Hidden Connections*. Flamingo, 2003.
- (2) Hypercar Inc. The hypercar concept. World Wide Web, circa 2005. <http://www.hypercar.com>.
- (3) Richardo Semler. *Seven Day Weekend*. Random House, 2003.
- (4) James Surowiecki. *The Wisdom of Crowds*. Abacus, 2004.