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Craft and the Triple Bottom Line

For over thirty years the environmental movement has made clear the tension between economic growth and ecological sustainability. There is a problem in our accounting systems. Economics as currently practiced ignores long-term costs and risks: hidden social and environmental losses are called externalities by mainstream economists, because they are external from balance sheets. More recently the developed Western world has struggled with integrating a more holistic form of accounting, one which requires that businesses factor into their accounting systems more than financial profit and motive, and include audits of social and ecological importance as well.

This approach is called the Triple Bottom Line. The term was originated by John Elkington who also wrote The Green Consumer Guide. It seems Elkington's experience editing a book which showed people were happy to pay over the average price for goods and services showed that there was a wider appreciation in general society that the traditional 'bottom line' of making a profit was not, in fact, the only 'bottom line' of motivation for many people. Added to the bottom line of profit are concerns about the planet – how ecologically damaging a product or process is, and about people – whether the social conditions involved were harmonious or hurtful. The concept was turned into a marketing campaign by Elkington's company for Shell as "People, Planet, Profit". Herein lies a difficulty many people have with the concept. To them it seems like a cynical ploy to carry on business as usual with a nod in the direction of ecological and social sustainability.

But that in itself seems to be a cynical view. The Green movement can seem a bit all-or-nothing. Often it appears that unless you are squeaky clean and pure green, you are not green at all, that you have no right to claim any part of the aura of green. But there is a distinction to be made between cynical media manipulation of corporate personae, and real attempts by companies to address these issues.

We can look at the world of wine as an analogy. Some wine, no doubt, is going to be drunk to induce drunkenness. Some is going to be treated like the finest art work, to be perused, examined, wondered over and judged extensively. How much do the producers worry about this when they are actually producing the wine? Or is it a worry only at the marketing strategy? I cannot believe the latter to be true. For a wine to be marketed in any way it must have an image and that image must emanate from its provenance. The producer of any wine – of any thing – must have an idea of what they are producing in order for the creation of a marketing strategy for it. And so it is with a triple bottom line approach. It cannot be merely greenwash. Producers must know, must be able to choose, what it is they believe in, and then can market from that. But a triple or multiple or integrated bottom line approach even in marketing terms must emanate from a planned approach initially. (Other bottom lines may be just as applicable to the crafts – ontological and developmental measures among them.) I would argue that an integrated bottom line approach is best seen as an attitude rather than an accounting system; that it is of most use as a planning rather than an accounting or marketing strategy. Seen this way, its

relevance to even the smallest applied arts business venture becomes obvious – and compelling.

With the words credit crunch ringing in our ears we might look cynically at the idea that people are prepared to pay more for things. But even a certain very high turnover, very cheap fashion chain has a notice in their store windows concerning the social conditions under which their clothes are manufactured. Companies like these are neither a beacon nor even a benchmark, but it is clear that companies – even those which seem to be entirely based on an economic bottom line – increasingly have to take into account other bottom lines.

This can be a strategy of strength. Instead of being forced into this position by an ever more aware public, some craftspeople, seeing this approach as something they want to take on board, are reaping the benefit. Diana Porter is a jeweller in Bristol. I have often seen her work and noticed it on friends and acquaintances - people love it artistically – but they also love the way Porter works. All the diamonds are guaranteed conflict free; she can offer a supply of ethically produced gold, where the supply chain is transparent and is guaranteed not to exploit the workforce or adversely affect the environment. However, her aim is to make ethically produced metals the norm in the UK. She also has an outstanding track record in her own employee relationships. I think it matters to customers that she loves what she does, that they know the materials used are ethical, and that the workers throughout the process are treated really well. People are drawn by the normal reasons for buying jewellery – but often will buy more pieces because of the whole package. Moreover, they may look at other jewellers, other ways of producing jewellery, in a different light. Increasingly when people consume they want to feel good about it.

Because there are more ways of paying for things than with money. The statistics for wellbeing in our society are as sobering as the increasing duty on alcohol. Since the 1950s, as our society has become increasingly wealthy, all the indicators of wellbeing such as health, emotional awareness, connection with friends and with communities, awareness of sensations, and cooperative activities, have shown we are either no happier or, sadly, a bit to a great deal less happy. We have goods our grandparents would have seen as being only for the very wealthy – television sets, many ways of listening to a range of music, cars – but we are not at all happy about it. Increasingly we are hankering after things that money cannot buy – a sense of connection, of belonging, of community. Someone once said that we humans can have comfort and convenience, or health and happiness, but not both, and it seems to be the challenge of our age to accept the truth of this and to choose which we will, by our behaviours, opt for.

But a multiple bottom line approach has positive ramifications beyond the “feel-good” factor. Just as biodiversity in an ecosystem maximises that system’s flexibility and adaptability, building in multiple bottom line considerations to even the smallest scale craft venture can be a strategy of strength. Rather than seeing bottom lines other than profit as costs to be accounted for, more enlightened companies realise that waste reduction, attracting and retaining talent, increasing labour productivity with (for example) healthier workplaces, reducing costs and future risks by pro-actively reducing carbon emissions, and attracting customers and investors by a marketing strategy of authenticity, can add to profit, as well as covering other measures of how well a company is doing.

There are even further reasons for adopting an integrated bottom line approach. Business based on only one of the bottom lines, for example purely on profit, is vulnerable when conditions change. This way of approaching the topic is based not on a moral standpoint or even a wellbeing one but one based on the natural laws observed and expounded in systems thinking. This way of looking at the world means thinking of what we might ordinarily consider entities as parts of systems rather than separate, and systems in themselves. A system is an organisation of parts joined by a network of relationships. Classical reductionist thinking usually breaks a material, a process, an idea or an entity down into its constituent parts, separating them so as to make them simpler to understand. The common example given is the dissection of a frog. By the end of the dissection you will have found out all about the constituent parts of a frog, which will be in small pieces in front of you, but no real idea of what created that living breathing entity. Systems theory sees a shift away from the focus on constituent parts towards a focus on the arrangement or relationship of those parts.

The triple bottom line is often shown as a sort of Venn diagram, with each circle intersecting with the others, and in the middle of the intersection is an ethical business model. But this has been challenged: you could also, and perhaps more correctly, describe the model as a nested sequence of circles, with the environment in the centre, social radiating out from that, and economic on the outside, since it is possible to have an environment without a society, but no society without an environment. And you can have a society without a monetary economy but no economy without society. I think this model is good in many ways but in particular in the way in which it makes uncompromisingly clear that the invisible “capital” on which all of our economic system is based is the environment, and we leave it out of the accounts at our peril.

The nested version of the Triple Bottom Line approach shows us that, if we ignore one part of the pattern, perhaps concentrating on an outer ring, it is like concentrating on one aspect of the system rather than on the system as a whole. This is a risky strategy, and can have dire consequences as it did for the dustbowl farmers of the 1930s or farmers during the potato famine in Ireland. Concentrating on one aspect to the exclusion of others means one is exposed to great risk if the one part does not thrive or, indeed, fails.

Coombe Farm in Devon is an example of an applied arts business which sees diversity and a multiple bottom line approach as fundamental to its being and its success. It is a gallery, from which the work of local artists is sold. It runs courses which are most often residential. Offering courses does not only bring in income; it can keep the owners and teachers more in tune with a variety of people. The resident learners are fed by food which is grown in the gardens and prepared by the resident cook and gardener, who clearly invests more than someone who was doing it as a day job. There are plans to open out the series of courses to those who are less able to afford them; school groups, those on lower incomes, and other marginalised groups for whom art might currently seem irrelevant. In fact many artists and groups recognise the importance, as schools move ever further away from materials-based education, of education as a strategy for reasserting the importance and relevance of materials, art-based knowledge and exploration, in ensuring the survival and growth not just of an appreciation of art but in the development of the entire person. And those who see art as important will return to it throughout their lives. Materials are locally sourced where possible. Undoubtedly the owners are doing this because they have a sense that it is ‘right’, but it is also a

strategy of economic strength. If one aspect is not going well at a particular time, for example if the gallery is not selling much, then another aspect will assume more importance – for example, that the food and the fuel are sourced from the site, reducing carbon emissions (and cost).

Carbon is a difficult issue because it often seems invisible. And the problem with many Applied Arts industries is that the damage they do is so visible. And because the products of Applied Arts are familiar to us, they are what we think of as opposed to other processes. For example, gold and silver mining products are used in industry as well as in jewellery making; but when we see the problems and conditions endured by small scale artisanal miners, we blame jewellery making. We don't see the advantages in buying locally produced bone china from well-established and historically-centred companies with an excellent social record such as Denby; in our mind's eye we see only slag heaps and chimneys. And we also don't see the concealed costs in, for example, the cheap dinner service from China. Not only is the pollution involved in its production on the other side of the world and therefore able to be ignored, but the costs of its production are often subsidised by Government or other bodies, as for example in the comparatively cheap cost of transporting from China due to lower fuel duties on aircraft. If we really paid the true cost of production, taking into account the costs of cleaning up after ourselves, proper health care and other conditions legally enforced in this country for the workers who produce anything consumed in this country, and other currently invisible, non-enforced, or otherwise omitted costs, the cheap goods would suddenly not seem so cheap after all.

The thing about applied arts having really visible effects on the environment works both ways. When one works with material processes, yes, they do have an effect, socially and environmentally. But the process of working with materials also means that the craftsperson is more aware than most of the provenance of the matter with which one works. In close connection with materials it is less easy to ignore, as the vast majority of the developed Western world does, the history of a thing, an object. And selling in opposition to very cheap objects which purport to be handmade can only make craftspeople wonder at the conditions under which objects are created, and compare these conditions to their own, even to what is allowed under their own industry regulations. As John Seymour said (2002: 14) 'every time we buy some factory-made article we wonder what sort of people made it – if they enjoyed making it or if it was just a bore – what sort of life the maker, or makers, lead ….I know that the modern factory worker is supposed to lead an "easier" life than, say, the peasant. But I wonder if this supposition is correct. And I wonder if, whether "easier" or not, is it a better life? Simpler? Healthier? More spiritually satisfying? Or not?'

Sometimes being more aware of things of which other people remain ignorant leads to interesting choices. Bellacouche is a company formed by Anne Belgrave and Yuli Somme. The company makes burial shrouds from felt, designed to be beautiful, biodegradable, and part of a harmonious ceremony which sees death as an integral part of life. The shrouds are often used in woodland burials. The business reflects, I think, to a growing desire to reconnect to processes and places we feel we are losing or have already lost but feel a need to return to.

The force of nostalgia in our consumption choices is well-documented and utilised by advertisers; it could work in a much more conscious way for the good of craftspeople. With some companies there is a conscious attempt to carry on an

experiment from the past. Kambium is a company whose intent is, in part, to continue to search for the utopia of William Morris. Vincent Large was apprenticed at the Edward Barnsley Trust, the scheme set up to honour Edwards Barnsley's contribution to the Arts and Crafts movement in furniture design. Large's designs combine skills in woodwork with green woodworking and steam bending – low energy making which achieves a long product life cycle. His work continues the socialist experiment – Large is well aware that his family is supported by the state in the form of Tax Credits – but adds an ontologically sustainable dimension to the work. In other words, the craftsperson must be interested enough to continue to produce innovative, soulful work, otherwise a business is not sustainable. I am sure we can all think of a craftsperson who had a great idea for a product which they were either stuck with making with gritted bored teeth for the rest of their career, or who chose to let it go in order to experiment and maintain job satisfaction, perhaps to the detriment of their business.

Other experiments which are being carried out are in the forms of rethinking ways of organisi ng and marketing applied arts. The Guilds of Craftsmen model is one way, aligned to the gallery system, but there are other options, such as workers' cooperatives. Sustainable Makers is part of the Transition Town initiative in Totnes, which is envisioning a post peak oil future in planned and positive steps. Sustainable Makers is a group for all makers who want to be involved in exchanging their ideas, for those who are prepared to share responsibility and take an interest in developing the community. Their intention is to set up, for example, studio & workshop space suitable for several functions including workshops or teaching and specialist technologies; smaller individual units to be let to makers committed to researching and developing sustainable practice in their particular discipline; a range of specialist equipment and technologies within the communal workspace which could include kilns for glass and ceramics, welding equipment, construction tools; IT facilities, web production, marketing tools; an office/meeting room. All of this could be set up as a "not for profit company", with a membership basis. A brand for Sustainable Makers is also intended. This is another example where a system with different component parts may well prove stronger than one with a more focused but limited range.

South Mountain Company is a building company which goes beyond worker's rights ideals and is a worker-owned company. This type of company has been described as 'labour-ist' rather than 'capital-ist' in that voting and property rights are given to workers (the labour) rather than to capital, even though the worker-members supply capital through membership fees and retained earnings. The South Mountain Company traditionally builds houses only in Martha's Vineyard (in the north of North America) so any mistakes have to be lived with, in the community of which the owners are a very active part. It builds houses for the wealthy at a premium so that it can pursue a longstanding policy of building social housing in a place where many of the young people who grew up on the island and whose families are not wealthy have felt they could not afford to live. It has included things like solar heating and composting toilets in these subsidised houses. It uses local wood where it can and certainly certified wood, and values the handmade nature of its buildings. It employs its own interior designers who source ethical fabrics, furniture and craft objects. It sees itself as a company but also as a system, as a functioning entity in which all parts are equally important (the office workers are, naturally, part of the co-ownership initiative). I think the South Mountain Company has lessons for the smallest (i.e. individual) crafts worker. If individuals emulated the way this company works they would treat themselves with care, valuing all parts of their work (yes,

even the office tasks).They would treat themselves with as much care as they take to access environmentally benign materials, and to make a profit.

Here's a language question: is the reason we say we will 'pay' for things even if not in monetary terms because of the total dominance of the economic paradigm in our lives? Can the word 'pay' even begin to encompass other forms of engagement or transfer or exchange? What I am sure of is that this economic paradigm, of itself, let alone anything it stands for or influences, is in itself unsustainable and will pass. And we can start now to look at other ways of dealing with duty, responsibility, exchange and reward than the limited sense in which we engage now. Once a multiple bottom line approach is taken as a paradigmatic cornerstone, profit will not suffer – on the contrary; social conditions, and with them those notoriously difficult to quantify indices of wellbeing will improve and increase; the environment will stand a better chance; and perhaps the applied arts will even begin to take a more prominent and valued place in society. So there are many reasons to embrace a multiple (or an integrated) bottom line approach, not just to our accounting systems but to our whole approach to business. From the smallest company to the largest corporation, the rewards – of many different kinds – are potentially very great indeed.

References

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