

Some Definitions of Dignity Undermine Dignity: Evelin Lindner's Personal Choices

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What *is* dignity? Author Umair Haque has this to say: Dignity is 'hard to pin down, define, fill in. But we all know what it means when we see it'.¹ Haque defines dignity as follows:

Dignity is a minimum level of well-being below which one's life cannot fall. There are many kinds of well-being — the strength and breadth of one's relationships, one's financial security, one's intelligence and wisdom, one's empathy and courage, one's happiness and meaning. When one is shielded from losing all these things below some level, then one has dignity. What is the shield? The job of a social contract is to ensure that the average person can be rich in all these things — genuinely, not just materially, rich. And that is what dignity is.²

Bonnie Selterman has been teaching human communication and culture at New York University for many years.³ She has many questions about dignity: If dignity is inherent, she asks, it must be inviolable, is not this true? How can we then claim it is violable? Is one's dignity violated if one feels and experiences one's dignity has been violated, is dignity a state of mind? If the violation of dignity were a purely subjective state of mind, there would be no outside objective metric for determining the violation of dignity. Furthermore, if someone for some reason does not 'know' that her dignity has been violated, it must not have been violated. For example, what about women who simply accept their submissive status?

Indeed, when I worked in Egypt from 1984 to 1991, I asked myself the same questions. Eighty-six per cent of Egyptian women surveyed in 1995 thought that husbands were justified in hitting their wives, for instance, when she failed to put meals on the table in time, or if she refused sex.⁴ For these women, male violence was similar to a natural disaster — hurtful but unavoidable — it was not regarded as a personal humiliation, it was not categorised as a 'human-made disaster' that could be avoided.⁵ Only through education did these women come to understand that domestic violence may be far from a natural disaster.⁶

Zuzana Luckay Mihalčinová has been mentioned before, and also she asks questions.⁷ Luckay warns that dignity, even though it has now become part of our anchoring in the world, needs to be intentionally and pro-actively nurtured rather than taken for granted and regarded as inherent. Co-founder of the Dignity Rights Project, Erin Daly chimes in: 'Human dignity is both a source and an aspiration of rights ... once you have understood human dignity you cannot undo it'.⁸

Anthropologist Alan Page Fiske has been introduced earlier as well. People create relationships that are 'not simply combinations of the characteristics of the individuals that engage in them', according to Fiske, they follow 'shared models of how people should coordinate with each other'.⁹ Anthropologists can list innumerable systems, yet, Fiske found that people, most of the time and in all cultures, just use four elementary and universal forms or models for organising most aspects of sociality, four 'structures out of which people construct, understand, evaluate, sanction, and motivate most joint activities'.¹⁰ Interaction can be structured, first, according to what people have in common or *communal sharing*, second, according to ordered differences or *authority ranking*, third, by using additive imbalances or *equality matching*, and, fourth, according to ratios or *market pricing*.¹¹ These four social models follow the well-known four mathematical scales of

measurement of nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio, of which the first is the most comprehensive and qualitative and the last the least comprehensive and most quantitative.¹²

Family life is often informed by communal sharing, as it embraces the motto of ‘one for all and all for one’, while authority ranking involves asymmetrically ordering people along vertical hierarchical social dimensions — it can mean a nurturant teacher who manifests the *Homo amans* model, or the brutal dictator who follows the *Homo dominans* path. Equality matching implies a balance of taking turns, for instance, in car pools or babysitting cooperatives. The fourth, the market-pricing model, views relationships as defined by proportions or ratios, and this is the arena of *Homo oeconomicus*.

Today, every aspect of life is moving into the least comprehensive anchoring, namely, market pricing, the one that reduces the fullness of quality furthest into the straightjacket of quantity calculations, the one that spawns definitions of dignity the undermine dignity.

Let us try to use Fiske’s system to differentiate possible definitions of dignity:

- Communal Sharing (CS) is a model of collaboration that highlights what we have in common. It is the most comprehensive, qualitative, and least humiliating frame of sociality. It highlights unconditional ‘giving forward’ from the heart, from a place of loving generosity, where there is no quantity calculation, no tit-for-tat requirement, no material incentives.¹³ It resembles love marriage in contrast to convenience marriage or forced marriage, it is the realm of Martin Buber’s I-Thou dialogue in contrast to I-It instrumentalisation. It characterises what is widely regarded as a ‘good family’, meaning that all members give what they can and receive what they need.¹⁴ It characterises strong connective relationships constituted through solidarity and unity under principles such as ‘all for one, and one for all’,¹⁵ and ‘love the land, love the people, share the surplus’.¹⁶ Differences do not divide but strengthen the community, everyone counts, everyone develops a feeling for what others need, and shares the responsibility to offer it. In this context, dignity manifests through individuals connecting in solidarity and care, it manifests when they cooperate with each other to create a world of unity in equal dignity for all in their diversity, always recognisant of the inherent human desire ‘to walk upright’. Indeed, a culture of communal sharing seems to be the way forward for the dignity of the entire human family.
- Authority Ranking (AR) describes ordered authority differences. If people in positions of authority are benevolent, they strive to meet everyone’s needs and thus nurture communal sharing. Less benevolent leaders, in contrast, deprive everyone and demand that subordinates give what they can, while they themselves take more than they need and employ routine humiliation to maintain this asymmetry. The concept of dignity will follow this dichotomy. A benevolent authority, a nurturant teacher, for instance, will foster the personal growth of all of her students and view every community member as equal in dignity and worth. A malevolent authority, an oppressive dictator or tyrannical teacher, will rank worthiness and allow dignitaries to believe that their ‘honourable decorum’ entitles them to look down on lesser beings.
- Equality Matching (EM) points at additive differences and equivalent exchanges. This means that people offer to give something only if they can expect an equivalent return. Other people’s needs only count if people are in a position to reciprocate — ‘if there is no contract, there is no responsibility’ (see the discussion on Roman law earlier in the book). Wherever equality matching is given priority and defines the overall system, dignity and humiliation are linked to strict calculations, while the generosity of unconditional communal sharing is discredited as naïve. Dignity is seen as something that can be earned through offering products or services or through consuming them, which ‘the self’ seen as a territory that is separated from its surroundings through borders that have to be continuously guarded against possible infringements and humiliations from unfair contracts. The commons dilemma is sharpened because people who would be willing to offer unconditional support are ridiculed as naïve or as

spoilers of fairness rules, because people pledge their support only after all others have given theirs. Unconditional giving is foregone, notions such as hope or optimism are made dependent on the probability of fair returns in the future, and this ultimately endangers the dignity of all.

- Market Pricing (MP) is a model of ratio and proportion. It is the narrowest quantitative and potentially most humiliating frame. Every person, every resource on the planet becomes a commodity — ‘no money means no existence’. Dignity is tied to the mindset of arithmetical calculation in terms of money and one’s ability to acquire it. Dignity is conceptualised as individual autonomy in local/global competitions for dominance. If driven to extremes and not contained, the outcome is the stripping of everyone’s dignity.

Human beings use these four modes of coordination to organise nearly every aspect of all social domains, Alan Page Fiske explains. Even when we simply invite to dinner, we follow these four models. For instance, we can share the food and drink without calculating who gets how much (CS), a host may ask his guests for assistance (AR), the guests might feel obligated to reciprocate the invitation (EM), and the host will have bought the food to be prepared (MP).¹⁷ Another example are soldiers in a platoon. They may be ready to sacrifice their lives for each other (CS), they have a commander (AR), they take turns standing guard (EM), and scarce ammunition may be used efficiently (MP).¹⁸ Whenever a group or a dyad interacts, they can use the same four basic ways, ‘they can seek a consensus of the group as a whole, the chief can decide (and delegate minor aspects of the decision), people can vote, or they can use a market mechanism based on utilities or prices’.¹⁹ When a task has to be accomplished, people ‘can all simply pitch in without assigning individual responsibilities, an authority can give orders down a chain of command, everyone can do an equal share (or take turns), or participants can be compensated in proportion to the amount they each complete’.²⁰

Moral judgement follows similar paths. ‘Treat each person’s needs and suffering as your own, do what the gods or your elders command, treat each person equally, or give every person their due in proportion to what they deserve’.²¹ When people transfer goods or services, ‘they can give a gift without expecting any specific return; they can pay tribute in fealty to a superior (or, inversely, bestow a benefit to a subordinate as a gesture of largesse); they can make a balanced, quid-pro-quo exchange; or they can sell and purchase at market rates’.²² Also the social meanings of land are inscribed in this logic, as land can be regarded as a shared commons, or as the domain or fief of a lord, or as a marker of equal status (such as eligibility to vote), or as a commercial investment.²³

Allow me to share how I personally benefitted from Alan Page Fiske’s work. Since I was a child, my personal intuition led me to want to embrace unconditional ‘giving forward’, and my initial experimentations with this practice showed me that this is indeed the most fulfilling and meaningful way of being. However, I lacked justifications. I was therefore delighted when I understood how my personal path resonates with Fiske’s concept of communal sharing. Fiske’s insights helped me stand by my own intuitions and be proud that I offer my capabilities as an unconditional gift of love to humanity, that I work for a dignified future for humankind and give everything I have without expecting any reward. I am an *ild sjel*, as my Norwegian friends would say, a ‘fire soul’, filled with passion just for its own sake.

Fiske’s model also helped me to see where people come from who misunderstand my path, some even feel provoked by it and want to punish me for it. Some people regard my path as counterintuitive and paradox — how can rewardless life be rewarding — while others see it as naïve, or even suspect me of being mentally deranged. A ‘sober’ person, they say, invests into the future of humanity only if there is justified hope for reasonable returns, and in case there is no such hope, why should one care? In short, many find it dubious that I nurture dignity in a world while humanity may already be in hospice and no longer in hospital.

Fiske’s model made me also understand where people come from when they wonder ‘Who pays for what Evelin does?’ and expect that I must receive ‘something in return’, even if only ‘points’ for

dutiful behaviour in the heavens after death, or as a footnote in future history books. Some ask, ‘How come that Evelin with her two doctorates is unable to monetise her efforts?’ Even those who have understood why I choose to refrain from ‘monetisation’ and wish to manifest a gift economy, wonder why I deem certain gifts as unethical and refuse them. In other words, also in these cases my value choices are misattributed to psychological weaknesses.

People who react to my path in such ways, come from the mindset of arithmetic operations, from models of sociality that Fiske would call equality matching and market pricing, from concepts of human nature that are described by the *Homo oeconomicus* model of human nature, which they deem to be the only model of both sanity and dignity. Some people even become defensive and accuse me of moral extortion, of wanting to use my life choices to make them feel guilty about their own selfishness. Other are steeped in the authoritarian version of authority ranking, never exposed to the possibility that one may look at the world like a gardener does, like a loving nurturer and inspirer, and that gardening may be the best metaphor for understanding happiness and making sense of mastery.²⁴

I have no problems understanding why so many people’s narrative goes into the opposite direction of mine, why they believe that giving priority to market pricing in a society is a sign of progress. They say that ‘we modern humans’ can be proud of our ingenuity, of having transcended ‘primitive’ egalitarian communal sharing, that we even have surpassed authoritarian domination by making the exchange of goods and services more effective and fair through market pricing. I understand when people feel personally attacked or even humiliated when I question this proud narrative and point out that communal sharing in the spirit of loving nurturing may be a form of being-in-this-world that we may need to re-consider and re-invigorate, particularly now, as we inhabit a world in deep crisis.²⁵ When I meet people who live in niches of high monetary wealth, who still are relatively shielded from global crises — and this includes academics at established institutions with tenure or at least income — many are irritated by me voluntarily foregoing their privileges and instead putting my personal life on line to experiment with side-stepping money-based contracts. They feel they earned their privileges through hard work and are entitled to enjoy them, an entitlement they feel is undermined by me working double as hard to try out direct solidarity, conviviality, gift economy, and Palaeolithic life-styles, all approaches that are informed by communal sharing and which are seen as bygone and primitive.²⁶ Writer Upton Sinclair observed already in the 1930s what I experience every day, ‘It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!’²⁷ I resonate with sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, who located the roots of this predicament in dysfunctional educations reproducing dysfunctional systems,²⁸ which then resist change ‘at the levels of psychology, therapy, spirituality, religion, science, philosophy and education’.²⁹ The kindest among my critics simply have pity with me when they see me gasping for oxygen like a mountaineer on top of Mount Everest and advise me to take up a less stressful office job, oblivious of the fact that gasping is part of being a mountaineer.

Luckily, I am also surrounded by people who resonate with my path of unconditional loving generosity, who give me the strength to survive in a mainstream context that is more or less inimical to my life design. I am always open to new learning, eager and curious, always aware that I might overlook important facts or insights, aware that we all are per definition blind to our own blindness. I am therefore thankful for all support that opens my eyes to new knowledges and new insights, and when such insights are brought to me in caring and nurturing ways, I am doubly thankful. Combative styles may be acceptable for people with surplus energy who live in niches of secure financial situations, people who are anchored and protected in well-established institutions, whereas in my case, combative styles drain the energy that I need to continue on my path to the top of the mountain so to speak. I would not know what to do without the support of the dignity family around me, Linda Hartling, Michael Britton, and many others.

One of those who support my path, both practically and with theory building, is also Howard Richards, philosopher of social science and scholar of peace and global studies. Through my life

choices, I manifest what he stipulates as ‘necessary and sufficient principles’, by which he means, first, the principle of always maintaining a ‘pro-social attitude’, and second, the principle of aiming for a structural understanding of ‘what works’.³⁰ My life path fulfils both requirements in that it is pro-social and it works.

Structural understanding — understanding whether a system is functional or dysfunctional starts with what Richards calls ‘growth points’, ‘levers’, or ‘fulcrums’, all of which serve as wedges or hinges. What those wedges do is demonstrate ‘what works’ to people who initially disagree. Paulo Freire used phrases such as *temas bisagra* or themes. Philosopher Roy Bhaskar speaks of ‘transcendental arguments’, and political scientist Steven Cohen of ‘reasons for hope’.³¹ I have used the term ‘Trojan Horse’ to highlight that such ‘wedges’ often are hidden,³² and this is precisely what my life path shows — the fact that I work double as hard as others only to forego monetisation and foreground solidarity in my life fundamentally undermines existing dysfunctional systems and their justifications, yet, this is so hidden that some simply overlook it, while others feel puzzled and vaguely provoked, and only very few support it openly.

Solidarity really works. It was Bill Mollison, founder of permaculture, who formulated the tenet ‘Love the land, love the people, share the surplus’,³³ a tenet that is superior to the doctrines of ‘the market’. Economist Ernst Friedrich Schumacher was right in saying, ‘In a sense, the market is the institutionalisation of individualism and non-responsibility’.³⁴

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¹ 'The one thing (this) global economy can't provide. Or, why this is the beginning of the end of the old order', by Umair Haque, *Eudaimonia*, 12th March 2018, <https://eand.co/the-one-thing-this-global-economy-cant-provide-d029c6ce0e9d>.

² Ibid.

³ It is a privilege to have Bonnie Selterman as an esteemed member in the our Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies fellowship. Her support for our annual Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict at Columbia University in New York City is invaluable. She formulated these questions for the 15th Workshop, titled 'What is the language of dignity?'

⁴ El-Zanaty, et al., 1996. See the graphical presentation of the statistical results of women accepting beatings also at www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/english/ch7/index.htm#fig5. See also 'Social statistics in Egypt', presented by Bothaina El Deeb at the Expert Group Meeting on Setting the Scope of Social Statistics, convened by the United Nations Statistics Division, in collaboration with the Siena Group on Social Statistics, 6th–9th May 2003, unstats.un.org/unsd/Demographic/meetings/egm/Socialstat_0503/docs/no_32.pdf. See, furthermore, 'Violence against women in Egypt', a report prepared for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 24th session, 15th January–2nd February 2001, by Carin Benninger-Budel,

www.omct.org/pdf/VAW/EgyptEng2001.pdf. In a study carried out between January and March 1997 on a sample of 100 women aged between 14 and 65 years old (married or having been married) from Manshier Nasser, an informal settlement located ten minutes from the city of Cairo — reveals that:

30% of the women questioned admitted to being subjected to domestic violence on a daily basis, 34% on a weekly basis, 15% on a monthly basis and 21% occasionally. For 75% of these women, the main reason for this domestic violence was found to be sexual. Women are beaten, raped or abused for having refused to have sex with their husbands. Other reasons cited were spending (65%), visiting (32%), housework (25%), religion (8%), jealousy (6%) and disobedience (5%).

⁵ See for disaster and dignity, for instance, Lindner, 2010.

⁶ See, for instance, ‘The Middle East’s feminist revolution’, by Naomi Wolf, *Project Syndicate*, 28th February 2011, www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-middle-east-s-feminist-revolution?barrier=accesspaylog.

⁷ Luckay, 2012.

⁸ Erin Daly in the 4th Dignity Rights Virtual Workshop: Commemorating the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 30th November 2018, organised by the Dignity Rights project ‘Dignity in Action’ of the Widener University Delaware Law School, led by Erin Daly and James May. The title of Kass’s contribution was ‘Dignity — Putting it all together’. It is a privilege to have Erin Daly as an esteemed member in the global advisory board of our Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies fellowship.

⁹ Fiske and Haslam, 2005, p. 267:

People observe objects and persons, categorise and remember them, make inferences and plans about them. ... But people do more than cognise each other, they coordinate. They create relationships that are intrinsically motivating, that evoke emotions, and that they constantly evaluate with respect to shared models of how people should coordinate with each other. The structures and mechanisms of social relationships are distinct from the psychological structures and mechanisms of individual persons — and the characteristics of relationships are not simply combinations of the characteristics of the individuals that engage in them. Social relationships are distinct entities that must be analysed at their own level, as forms of motivated coordination.

¹⁰ Fiske and Haslam, 2005, p. 268.

¹¹ Fiske, 1991, Fiske and Kintsch, 1992, Fiske, 2004, Fiske and Fiske, 2007, Rai and Fiske, 2011. See an introduction on www.sscnet.ucla.edu/anthro/faculty/fiske/relmodov.htm. See also *Why the P2P and commons movement must act trans-locally and trans-nationally*, by Michel Bauwens, P2P Foundation, 12th June 2016, <https://blog.p2pfoundation.net/p2p-commons-movement-must-act-trans-locally-trans-nationally/2016/06/16>. I thank Uli Spalthoff for making me aware of this article. Bauwens recommends Kojin Karatani, 2014. Similar to Alan Page Fiske, 2004. in *Structures of social life*, Karatani recognises four basic modes of social life, and these modes exist at all times and in all places.

¹² Psychologist Stanley Smith Stevens, 1946, has developed the best known classification of measurement with four levels, or scales: *nominal*, *ordinal*, *interval*, and *ratio*.

¹³ Many wonder why the religious right in the United States is so committed to the free market and so infuriated by welfare, and why, on the other side, neo-liberal thinkers praise marriage and the family even in the absence of religious underpinnings. Political scientist Melinda Cooper, 2017, explains what happened. Sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen, 1990, in his *Three worlds of welfare capitalism* offered a classic categorisation for national regimes of social welfare programs: we all are dependent upon (1) the state, (2) the market, and (3) our families. Cooper, 2017, reports how there was a brief moment in American history where public spending on such public goods as higher education and housing was more prominent, where this was regarded as something to be financed by public spending. However, then came a pivotal turning point when all this was brought back to family obligations financed by private debt. This happened when 1960s radicalism challenged accepted notions of family and sexuality and both neo-liberals and social conservatives found this deeply threatening. They identified public spending as a moral hazard — students had time to pursue unbecoming ideas because they or their families were not paying for their education themselves. The result, today, is a student body — including their families — mired in debt. Public spending on welfare was seen as another moral hazard, subsidising and even causing feminism and the breakdown of

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the family as it made women too independent of presumptive husbands and fathers. Cooper suggests that despite the completely different views on what ‘family’ means — neo-liberals see the family as a cluster of rational actors, while social conservatives see it as a sacred institution and a buffer against the market — both are satisfied with the neo-liberal family and the privatisation of risk and deficit spending as it serves neo-liberal opposition to the New Dealers’ visions of a family supported by social insurance, and at the same time it attends to conservative opposition to trends such as feminism and gay rights advocacy. In this way, Cooper differentiates the view that neo-liberalism privileges atomised individualism over familial solidarities and contractual freedom over inherited status. What it does in the United States is privileging atomised families over societal solidarities, which brings back inherited status by way of contractual bondage.

¹⁴ See a similar phrase in the New Testament, Acts of the Apostles 4:32–35: 32 ‘distribution was made unto every man according as he had need’ (διεδίδετο δὲ ἐκάστῳ καθότι ἂν τις χρεῖαν εἶχεν). This phrase was used to describe the communal lifestyle — without individual possession — of the community of believers in Jerusalem. The phrase, ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’ was in use later, among others, in early the socialist movements.

¹⁵ Simão and Seibt, 2014.

¹⁶ This saying is attributed to the founder of permaculture, Bill Mollison.

¹⁷ Fiske and Haslam, 2005, p. 268.

¹⁸ Fiske and Haslam, 2005, p. 268.

¹⁹ Fiske and Haslam, 2005, p. 268.

²⁰ Fiske and Haslam, 2005, p. 268.

²¹ Fiske and Haslam, 2005, p. 268.

²² Fiske and Haslam, 2005, p. 268.

²³ Fiske and Haslam, 2005, p. 268.

²⁴ Humanist philosopher Erich Fromm, 1974–1976/1992, p. 4:

This is indeed well understood by any gardener. The aim of the life of a rosebush is to be all that is inherent as potentiality in the rosebush: that its leaves are well developed and that its flower is the most perfect rose that can grow out of this seed. The gardener knows, then, in order to reach this aim he must follow certain norms that have been empirically found. The rosebush needs a specific kind of soil, of moisture, of temperature, of sun and shade. It is up to the gardener to provide these things if he wants to have beautiful roses. But even without his help the rosebush tries to provide itself with the optimum of needs. It can do nothing about moisture and soil, but it can do something about sun and temperature by growing ‘crooked’, in the direction of the sun, provided there is such an opportunity. Why would not the same hold true for the human species?

Even if we had no theoretical knowledge about the reasons for the norms that are conducive to man’s optimal growth and functioning, experience tells us just as much as it tells the gardener. Therein lies the reason that all great teachers of man have arrived at essentially the same norms for living, the essence of these norms being that the overcoming of greed, illusions, and hate, and the attainment of love and compassion, are the conditions for attaining optimal being. Drawing conclusions from empirical evidence, even if we cannot explain the evidence theoretically, is a perfectly sound and by no means ‘unscientific’ method, although the scientists’ ideal will remain, to discover the laws behind the empirical evidence.

²⁵ Indigenous communities practice mutual sharing and *giving forward* rather than *exchange*. See Graeber, 2011.

²⁶ Or ‘money-based ties’, see Lappé, 2016.

²⁷ Sinclair, 1935/1994, p. 109.

²⁸ Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970/1990.

²⁹ ‘Two necessary and sufficient principles’, by Howard Richards, *TRANSCEND Media Service* Editorial #596, 22nd July 2019, www.transcend.org/tms/2019/07/two-necessary-and-sufficient-principles/.

³⁰ ‘Two necessary and sufficient principles’, by Howard Richards, *TRANSCEND Media Service* Editorial #596, 22nd July 2019, www.transcend.org/tms/2019/07/two-necessary-and-sufficient-principles/.

³¹ Cohen, 2017, in his book *The sustainable city*. It was a pleasure to attend the presentation of this book at the book shop Book Culture in New York City on 13th November 2017. See <https://sustainable.columbia.edu/events/book-talk-sustainable-city-steven-cohen>.

³² Lindner, 2006, p. 66:

The notion of equal dignity is a Lévinasian ‘Trojan horse’ that ‘sneaks’ into the Kantian view. The ‘Trojan’ connection is implicated in the human rights stipulation that equal chances and enabling environments for all are necessary to protect human dignity.

³³ ‘Two necessary and sufficient principles’, by Howard Richards, *TRANSCEND Media Service* Editorial #596, 22nd July 2019, www.transcend.org/tms/2019/07/two-necessary-and-sufficient-principles/. According to Mollison, land should not be a commodity, see also Polanyi and Joseph E. Stiglitz (Foreword), 1944/2001.

³⁴ Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, 1973, chapter three: The role of economics.