Helena Norberg-Hodge

Learning from Ladakh

Helena Norberg-Hodge was born in Sweden in 1946. She is a linguist by training, speaks six languages, and is the first Westerner to master the Ladakhi language. Ladakh, or “Little Tibet,” is a desert land high up in the Western Himalayas that, for more than a thousand years, has been the home to a thriving culture based on frugality and cooperation. Encroachments by Western consumerism in the late 1970s and 1980s altered the natural balance and brought threats from pollution, inflation, unemployment, and greed.

Norberg-Hodge is the founder and director of the International Society for Ecology and Culture, and in 1986 she shared the Right Livelihood Award, known as the “Alternative Nobel Prize.” Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh (1991), from which the following selection has been taken, has been translated into forty-two languages.

Before You Read

Consider how a money-based economy could alter the relationships between people in a community that had been based on cooperative labor.

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We don’t have any poverty here.
—Tsewang Paljor, 1975

If you could only help us Ladakhis, we’re so poor.
—Tsewang Paljor, 1983

In the traditional culture, villagers provided for their basic needs without money. They had developed skills that enabled them to grow barley at 12,000 feet and to manage yaks and other animals at even higher elevations. People knew how to build houses with their own hands from the materials of the immediate surroundings. The only thing they actually needed from outside the region was salt, for which they traded. They used money in only a limited way, mainly for luxuries.

Now, suddenly, as part of the international money economy, Ladakhis find themselves ever more dependent—even for vital needs—on a system that is controlled by faraway forces. They are vulnerable to decisions made by people who do not even know that Ladakh exists. If the value of the dollar changes, it will ultimately have an effect on the Indian rupee. This means that Ladakhis, who need money to survive, are now under the control of the managers of international finance. Living off the land, they had been their own masters.

At first, people were not aware of the fact that the new economy creates dependence; money appeared to be only an advantage. Since it traditionally had been a good thing, bringing luxuries from far away, more of it seemed to be an unconditional improvement. Now you can buy all sorts of exotic things that you could not before, like three-minute noodles and digital watches.
As people find themselves dependent on a very different economic system for all their needs and vulnerable to the vagaries of inflation, it is not strange that they should become preoccupied with money. For two thousand years in Ladakh, a kilo of barley has been a kilo of barley, but now you cannot be sure of its value. If you have ten rupees today, it can buy two kilos of barley, but how do you know how much it will buy tomorrow? "It’s terrible," Ladakhi friends would say to me, "everyone is getting so greedy. Money was never important before, but now it’s all people can think about."

Traditionally, people were conscious of the limits of resources and of their personal responsibilities. I have heard older people say: "What on earth is going to happen if we start dividing the land and increasing in numbers? It can never work." But the new economy cuts people off from the earth. Paid work is in the city, where you cannot see the water and soil on which your life depends. In the village you can see with the naked eye how many mouths the land can support. A given area can only produce so much, so you know that it is important to keep the population stable. Not so in the city; there it is just a question of how much money you have, and the birth rate is no longer significant. More money will buy more food. And it can grow much faster than wheat or barley, which are dependent on nature with her own laws, rhythms, and limits. Money does not seem to have any limits; an advertisement for the local Jammu-Kashmir Bank says, "Your money grows quickly with us."

For centuries, people worked as equals and friends—helping one another by turn. Now that there is paid labor during the harvest, the person paying the money wants to pay as little as possible, while the person receiving wants to have as much as possible. Relationships change. The money becomes a wedge between people, pushing them further and further apart.

The house had a festive atmosphere whenever Tsering and Sonam Dolma’s friends came to work with them as part of the traditional thangsdje practice. Sonam used to cook special food for the occasion. But in the last two years, the practice has gradually disappeared and their farm near Leh is increasingly dependent on paid labor. Sonam complains bitterly about rising prices and resents having to pay high wages. The festive atmosphere of friends working together has gone; these laborers are strangers, sometimes Nepalis or Indians from the plains who have no common language.

The changing economy makes it difficult to remain a farmer. Previously, with cooperative labor between people, farmers had no need for money. Now, unable to pay larger and larger wages for farm hands, some are forced to abandon the villages to earn money in the city. For those who stay, the pressure increases to grow food for profit, instead of food for themselves. Cash cropping becomes the norm as farmers

are pushed by the forces of development to become dependent on the market economy.

The new economy also increases the gap between rich and poor. In the traditional economy there were differences in wealth, but its accumulation had natural limits. You could only care for so many yaks or store so many kilos of barley. Money, on the other hand, is easily stored in the bank, and the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

I knew a man named Lobzang who had an antique shop in Leh. Like many Ladakhi shopkeepers, he had given up farming and come to Leh to make money, but his wife and children still lived in the village. He wanted the best for his children, and as soon as he could afford the housing, he planned to bring them to town to get the benefits of an education and, in particular, to learn English.

I had just dropped in his shop to say hello when an old man from Lobzang’s village came in to sell his butter jars. It was a full day’s journey on foot and by bus from the village. The old man probably planned to spend a couple of days with relatives in Leh, buying supplies to take back to the village with the money from the butter jars. He looked dignified in his traditional burgundy woolen robes. He put two jars on the counter. They had the warm patina that comes from generations of constant handling. They were made of fine-grained apricot wood and had a simple elegance that would certainly appeal to tourists. "They’re lovely," I said. "What will you keep your butter in without them?" "We keep it in used milk tins," he said.

They argued about the price. Apparently a few weeks earlier, Lobzang had promised him a much higher price than he was willing to offer now. He pointed to some cracks in the jars and refused to raise his offer. I knew he would get ten times as much when he sold the jars to the tourists. The old man threw me an imporing look, but what could I say? He left the shop with a disappointed stoop to his shoulders and enough money to buy a few kilos of sugar.

"You shouldn’t have said they were lovely," Lobzang scolded me. "I had to give him more."

"But he’s from your own village. Do you have to bargain so hard with him?"

"I hate it, but I have to. Besides, a stranger would have given him even less."

Evaluate the Text

1. How has the introduction of a money-based economy distorted relationships between people and made them dependent on things they didn’t even know existed?
2. How does the incident of the shopkeeper and his former neighbor illustrate the change for the worse that has overtaken the Ladakhis since money became the medium of exchange?

◇ Exploring Different Perspectives

1. Contrast the homegrown capitalism Norberg-Hodge describes with the remittances of money sent by workers to their home countries in “Follow the Money” by Vivienne Walt and Amanda Bower.

2. How does money override the personal meanings of possessions in the accounts by Norberg-Hodge and Bill Geist in “The Land of Lost Luggage”? 

◇ Extending Viewpoints through Writing and Research

1. Have you ever participated in a barter situation where you traded goods for services? How were your relationships different from those based solely on an exchange of money?

2. In your opinion, were the Ladakhis better off before the introduction of money? Explain your answer.

3. The author’s discussion of consumerism in Ladakh can be found at http://www.isec.org.uk/articles/pressure.html.

Tomoyuki Iwashita

Why I Quit the Company

Tomoyuki Iwashita signed on to work for a prominent Japanese corporation just after graduating from college. The life of the typical “salaryman” did not appeal to him for reasons he explains in “Why I Quit the Company,” which originally appeared in the New Internationalist, May 1992. He is currently a journalist based in Tokyo.

Before You Read

Consider the insights this piece offers into corporate life in Japan and why a well-paid worker would drop out.

1. When I tell people that I quit working for the company after only a year, most of them think I’m crazy. They can’t understand why I would want to give up a prestigious and secure job. But I think I’d have been crazy to stay, and I’ll try to explain why.

I started working for the company immediately after graduating from university. It’s a big, well-known trading company with about 6,000 employees all over the world. There’s a lot of competition to get into this and other similar companies, which promise young people a wealthy and successful future. I was set on course to be a Japanese “yuppie.”

I’d been used to living independently as a student, looking after myself and organizing my own schedule. As soon as I started working all that changed. I was given a room in the company dormitory, which is like a fancy hotel, with a twenty-four-hour hot bath service and all meals laid on. Most single company employees live in a dormitory like this, and many married employees live in company apartments. The dorm system is actually a great help because living in Tokyo costs more than young people earn—but I found it stifling.

My life rapidly became reduced to a shuttle between the dorm and the office. The working day is officially eight hours, but you can never leave the office on time. I used to work from nine in the morning until eight or nine at night, and often until midnight. Drinking with colleagues after work is part of the job; you can’t say no. The company building contained cafeterias, shops, a bank, a post office, a doctor’s office, a barber’s. . . . I never needed to leave the building. Working, drinking, sleeping, and standing on a horribly crowded commuter