

Transformation

Reflections on theory and practice of system change

Written by Johannes Krause, 2014

Translated by Janna Bruins, UN Volunteer

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DEEEP citizens'
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for
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• **1. “The stories we tell ourselves”** by Rene Suša

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• **1. “Development Education and Education in International Development Policy: Raising Quality through Critical Pedagogy and Global Skills”** by Amy Skinner, Nicole Blum and Douglas Bourn in *International Development Policy*.

• **2. “Catalysing the ‘Shadow Spaces’: Challenging Development Discourse from within the DEEEP Project”** by Amy Skinner and Tobias Troll in *Policy & Practice*.

• **3. “Journeys to Citizen Engagement: Action Research with Development Education Practitioners in Portugal, Cyprus and Greece”** co-written by Amy Skinner and Sandra Oliveira with contributions from Kerstin Wittig-Ferguson and Gerasimos Kouvaras.

• **4. “International Volunteering and Development – Learning to be a Global Citizen”** co-written by Amy Skinner, Dr Eleanor Brown, Mark Griffiths, Kristina Kontzi and Maria Koleth in *Voluntaris Journal*.

• **5. “Monitoring education for global citizenship: a contribution to debate”** by Harm-Jan Fricke and Cathryn Gathercole with contributions from Amy Skinner.

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Transformation

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I. The Great Transformation

People and organisations working towards justice and a life in harmony with nature have hoped for a long time to be able to change the state of affairs step by step.

However, it currently seems as if societies around the world are moving deeper and deeper into a state of crisis without an exit strategy.

- Climate change is progressing at a dramatic pace. The window of time for countermeasures to be taken before certain tipping points in the system have been reached is closing. The global community appears incapable and subdued in the face of this challenge. Biodiversity is similarly affected.
- Global resource use is growing without restraint. Economic growth in so-called emerging economies is immense. In the societies living in affluence, shopping and consumption have become key cultural orientations. The economy needs growth to remain stable – however, the Earth's resources are limited.
- The financial crisis has impressively highlighted the fragility of our economic and financial systems, the devastating impacts of its increasingly uncontrollable dynamics and its disconnect with actual needs. Presumably, the recent crisis has been but the beginning.
- These (and many other) features of the crisis increase global inequality and increasingly render the circumstances of the disadvantaged precarious if not altogether intolerable. Social tensions are intensifying everywhere.

Within only a few years, the pace of global change seems to have accelerated significantly. At the same time, the challenges have become much more complex and mankind's ability to address them has decreased noticeably.

There are several novel elements to the current situation:

We continue to lead lives vastly beyond our means. The dynamics of the underlying systems have become faster, less straightforward and less predictable. A range of areas within the global ecology, economy, and politics have become intertwined due to systemic reactions and impacts on each other. In this global network of causes, consequences and likelihoods, we are no longer in a position to create prognoses or even steer these dynamics. We have, so it seems, lost control.

Suspicion is increasingly turning into certainty: incremental improvements within the very system which brought on the current crisis will not succeed in addressing the problems. If the dominant model of Western civilisation has led us into a fundamentally threatening cul-de-sac, we will need a new system- a different system.

This fundamental change of direction has been described as a *system change* or a *great transition*. The term *system* denotes society's structures and institutions, cultural values and ideology patterns, the thoughts and behaviours which shape our society. These elements interrelate and impact on each other in systemic relationships. *Transformation* is a profound process of change, affecting a fundamental alteration of an object, akin to the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. The replacement of a formerly stable system through a new one with new functionalities and a new structure may be called *system transformation*. The term *paradigm change* denotes the fundamental renewal of the culturally dominant world view.

This thinkpiece explores the dynamics of systems-transforming processes and ways to actively help shape the great transformation. In the following I will address the question of which paradigm is at the core of the current system (chapter II) and specify the central characteristics and challenges of transformation – as opposed to non-transformative change (chapter III). I will conclude by outlining, with due cautiousness and humility, approaches to supporting systems change in practice (chapter IV).

II. The modern paradigm

What does this system consist of which has brought forth the aforementioned crises, and which may have proven itself to be irreparable?

The inherent drive or 'necessity' for growth in the current system, continuing destruction of the environment, global spread of the class divide, uncontrolled capitalism in the financial industry; the current economic order, protected and supported by our political and legal institutions, is without doubt related to the core of the crises we are facing today.

Societies' institutions and structures, such as the economic and legal orders, are however only the surface of a system. Beyond this surface the system is being borne, enabled and stabilised through inner, cultural features: norms and values, world views, cultural narratives.

In the following I will outline a few aspects of the dominant cultural perspective of the modern world, which is at the heart of our economic activity, the majority of laws we create, the discussions we have, the science we explore, and the ways of sense-making we have constructed for our lives and societies. These thought processes of the modern paradigm are so natural to us that it is difficult to even acknowledge them as conditional. Yet they form the cultural basis which enabled economics and politics to produce the current crisis humanity faces.¹

Progress

Under the modern paradigm it is normal to believe in progress: biological and cultural evolution is a sometimes tangled but steady ascent. Things evolve for the better, or at least they are expected to. We live in anticipation of the future – we do things today to enable certain things tomorrow. The future is where we project our ideals.

We set ourselves goals and strive to achieve them, in our careers and our personal lives, individually and collectively. As individuals, our concept of ourselves and our biographies is one of continuing growth, development, ascent, and perfecting of ourselves.² We portray the history of our society, and humanity as a whole, as a process of continuous technological progress and constant rise in prosperity.

¹ The following exploration of facets of the modern paradigm is inspired by Capra (1983) and Dürr (1986).

² See Welzer (2011).

The modern belief in progress ignores the absence of uninterrupted linear or exponential growth processes in nature. The world is shaped by cyclical processes. Live systems are shaped by various feedback loops, dynamic interaction and balances, and by circular processes of creating and perishing. An additional problem in a continuous 'higher-faster-further' is that it cannot be sustainable. A culture of boundless growth has to be destructive.

Objectivity

Under the modern paradigm, it is normal that there are objective certainties, hard facts which cannot be doubted and which we can, and must, use for orientation. Established evidence matters; indeed, it is the only thing that matters. Science serves to reveal objective truths about the world. Science mustn't be speculative, relative, or subjective, but entirely objective. Humanity is able to look at scientifically established facts and draw the necessary conclusions, based on an objective evaluation of the subject.

The modern ideal of objective knowledge ignores recent findings in disciplines including quantum physics, psychology, neurology and discourse theory which raise serious questions around 'objectiveness'. 'Truth' invariably depends on the beholder – not only with regard to its outward appearance but also with regard to its meaning. Reality originates in the process of perceiving, observing and naming what we perceive.

Absolute, true statements on 'reality' per se are impossible. A further problem in the positivist-rationalistic understanding of science, which is led by the ambivalent principle of objectiveness, is that it rather effectively marginalises alternative perspectives.³ This contributes to the self-immunisation of the modern understanding of science, which is as authoritarian as it is limited.

Dualism

Under the modern paradigm it is normal to perceive the world in strictly differentiated, often hierarchically arranged dualities. We distinguish between mind/body, human being/nature, man/woman, black/white, day/night, true/false, healthy/ill, we/others. Just as naturally as we make these distinctions, we also upgrade and downgrade one part of each pair in occidental thinking.

We already know from quantum physics and from postmodern philosophy that the unambiguousness of these binaries is a construct of our minds, which has only created a reality perceived in these terms. Physicists had to learn to live with the fact that quantum-physical phenomena cannot be satisfactorily classed as waves or particles, and that intellectual and material reality are inextricably linked.

How much more arbitrary do our social categorisations appear in this light? The current pattern of shaping complex reality into binary, hierarchically structured opposites in our minds brings with it a particular challenge. It generates enmities, power structures, mechanisms of suppression, and a detachment of the human from our embeddedness in the natural world.

Fragmentation

Under the modern paradigm it is normal to perceive phenomena through analysis: through a dissection into its components. We consider the world and everything in it – material objects, living creatures, societies – to be built from primary, single parts. In modern thinking, atoms, cells, individuals, nations form the starting point of any consideration. Their relationships and the systems they form – bodies, organisms, collectives, a global community – are in contrast considered secondary.

This approach is not only arbitrary (only a subjective decision determines, which level of systems would be considered as primary) but also does not measure up to reality in many ways. The concept of matter formed of par-

³ Michel Foucault uses the term *power/knowledge* for the double process of constructing reality and thereby asserting power.

ticles is, as quantum physics shows, inadequate: rather, it is connectedness, relationships and wholeness that are distinctive marks of the physical world.

Living systems function as entities and cannot be adequately understood through an approach of analysis and dissection. A perception based on dissecting material objects, living creatures and societies is further problematic in that it makes separation, individualism, and competition seem a natural way of existing in the world. Fragmentation – a perspective based on separation rather than wholeness – gives rise to egotism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and anthropocentrism.

Instrumentality

Under the modern paradigm it is normal to ask oneself in any given situation: what is the benefit? Ever since the industrial revolution, mankind has expanded its endeavour to dominate the natural environment and to make it serve them. Modern economics are based on the assumption that the human being, as an economic subject (*homo economicus*), acts as rational profit maximiser.

This attitude to gauge any situation and any counterpart for potential benefit and use is wide spread in Western society, where competition is considered the ideal and rivalry is seen as the normal state of social interaction.

From the perspective of 'life' however, the 'self' and the 'others' are inseparable. The self and the other always form a wholeness, an entity. I am my neighbour, with whom I form a society. I am the others, with whom I form the living entity of Earth. I am the cosmos and the cosmos is in me.

If we approach the world in an instrumentalist way, we ignore the reciprocal relationship and interdependence of all phenomena and risk damaging systemic balances. The cultivation of an instrumentalist approach in the Western economic community has generated a culture of 'legitimate' utilisation and exploitation of each other and of the natural environment, destroying reverence of life itself.

III. The virtual impossibility of transformation

The previous chapter has outlined the modern paradigm which underpins the current civilisation system 'from the inside', i.e. which culturally shapes it, supports it, and stabilises it. I have attempted to describe where I see the cultural core of the system which has led humanity into existential crisis. In which ways could a system transformation thus take place?

There are a myriad of theories and models which attempt to describe transformative processes. These models of social transformation are varied: they originate in different contexts, serve different purposes and contemplate distinct systems.

Yet it seems that in this great variety one can recognize a common pattern which reveals the essence of transformative processes. After examining a range of transformation models,⁴ it appears that two key features are essential for transformation: crisis and unpredictability.

Firstly, all transformation models examined in this context have found that transformation is, at the beginning, an unsettling process of destabilisation and disintegration of the familiar. Those structures, institutions and thought patterns which have been working so well that they have become dominant and accepted, now no longer serve us. We become aware of their conditionality.

A process of disengagement follows. The familiar in its old form dies away. This process of disintegration of an old

⁴ In the German language essay this Think Piece is based on, I have examined transformation theories and models from different contexts: Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' change process, Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, Theory U from the *Presencing Institute*, the Field-Process-Model from the *Institute for Participatory Design (Institut für Partizipatives Gestalten)*, Arnold Toynbee's „A Study of History“, the model of the *Berkana Institute* and the *SmartCSOs Model*. See Krause 2014.

system may involve a sense of losing control, agony, inner and outward conflict, disorientation and depression. Transformation cannot be reached without crisis.

A second feature of transformation is that prior to its occurrence, it is impossible to understand when and how it will occur or which shape the new system will take. Characteristically, transformative change means that different rules of the game will apply to the 'after', a different language and a different logic. From a perspective rooted within the current system or paradigm, the yet unknown cannot be imagined or described.

Equally, the transformation *process* can only be described *ex post*. Its course cannot be predicted or, even less so, controlled or governed. A transformation strategy which – rooted in the linear, causal modern approach – aims to steer the process towards a goal, is therefore not feasible. Theory and practice of a system transformation have to allow for this open-endedness and unpredictability of the transformation process.

A distinct feature of transformative change is that it transcends the boundaries of what is thinkable in the old system – as it transforms patterns and structures of the old thinking itself. This is not trivial. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant systematically outlines how our perception of the world is structured through the categories present in our minds. Reality forms only in the eye of the beholder.

Constructivist and post-structuralist theory demonstrates that our discourse – connections of language and communication in which we have always existed – provides us with certain patterns of meaning through which we perceive the world; or rather, only *generate* this world as an understandable, meaningful reality while in the process of perceiving it.⁵

Quantum physics has, at a microscopic level, confirmed that even material reality only originates in and through the process of observing, and therefore depends on the prevalent ways in which we view something, on our patterns of observing something: if we search the world for particles, then we will *find* a world made up of particles, or rather *generate* a world made up of particles through our mode of observation.⁶

Neuroscience further demonstrates how thought processes in the human brain are represented by neurones linked via synapses. Electrical signals, i.e. thoughts in the neurone network of the brain, prefer to use already existing synapses. Brain cells react to each electrical pulse by strengthening and broadening the existing link. New sensations and experiences are reflected in the brain as new links of synapses which, however, always fit into the already existing network of connections. It is easiest for our brain to send electrical signals down already existing links. This means that we preferably place any perception in our existing thought pattern, into our existing perspective on the world, and are able to bend our minds a fair bit in the process.⁷

A deconstruction and reconstruction of neurone links (representing how our brain and our thoughts are wired and how we understand the world) is possible since the brain is malleable, even if this capability decreases with age. Such re-shaping (transformation), however, only occurs if old structures prove entirely unfit in making sense of a new sensory or emotional experience. This may be perceived as severe confusion, shock or crisis.

These excursions into a range of scientific disciplines show just how difficult it is to talk about or describe system transformation and paradigm change. Such accounts tend to describe the transformation process from a meta-level, supposedly from a place beyond any thought system or paradigm, which is however, evidently, impossible.

Thinking about paradigms and paradigm changes, systems and their transformation can only happen strictly *within* the world views and thought patterns which shape, limit and enable this very thinking. Postmodern political scientist Mathias Albert writes „it is a practical, if not logical impossibility to criticise a certain mode in which meaning is produced (in and through language and signs) without at the same time employing this very mode and thereby contributing to its reproduction“.⁸

5 On constructivism, see e.g. Berger/Luckmann (1966).

6 See e.g. Capra (1983).

7 See Spitzer (2003); Stadelmann (2001).

8 Albert (1999), p. 59.

It is highly challenging to even perceive the structures of the current system as such, since these structures live in our thinking and shape and determine it. Our perspective on the way we see (and the way we don't), our reflecting on the way we reflect (while overlooking other possible approaches), necessarily has blind spots.

We should attempt to remain sceptical of our own perceptions and thinking and to be cautious about our notion of transformative processes – since these ideas spring from the 'old' paradigm and have been formed by the entrenched patterns of perception and thinking of the 'old' system.

If we take these reflections seriously, we cannot escape the implications: we are not capable of imagining and anticipating the transformation of the existing social system. Transformative processes can only be described and made sense of in retrospect, i.e. from the perspective of the newly created system- from within its patterns of interpretation. While still in the process, we are ignorant of the meaning which the present moment in the process will have from a future (post-transformative) point in time.

We may have to accept that we cannot effect transformation but can only *allow* it to occur. We cannot generate it, steer it, or control it. The ambition to shape transformation is an oxymoron. We must forget about facilitating transformative change.

Hailing a 'great transformation to a just and sustainable society' is just as illusive. We cannot know, or frame, or even imagine what will be at the end of a transformative process – it may be a sustainable society or something else entirely.

Transformative processes have the disobliging habit of eluding our control and our influence, and our predictions of the course they will take and the outcomes they will produce. This may be difficult to accept for people who are keen to actively shape and take responsibility for the world they inhabit.

On the other hand, these limitations of our influence may be liberating: transformation triggers itself. Everything is subject to constant evolution. Clouds in the sky, cells in our bodies, atoms and energy which surround us and of which we are made, ideas and mindsets we learn and pass on – everything is fluid and changes form constantly. Everything is in a continuous process of change, transformation, of creating and fading. Our civilisation, the modern paradigm and the institutions of the system they uphold will end, and will transform – this much is certain.⁹

Perhaps what matters now is a fundamental change in our mindsets or attitudes.

Everything modern society has been cultivating for centuries is not helping us anymore in the given situation. In fact it stands in our way: the predominance of ideas around being active, creative, forceful, determined, masculine, egocentric, the predominance of 'Yang'. What we may need in the current crisis is an attitude of humility. Not to do, but to let happen. Not to shape actively, but to observe attentively. Not to plan and manage, but to let oneself be a helpful tool, without knowing where the journey leads to.

Such seemingly ludicrous self-restraint requires transformation of ourselves, at a moment of crisis, when we are desperate to act! It seems intolerable. And yet – how else can we, while locked in the current 'yang'-mode, effectively work to overcome this same mode? Striving to be more modest, more humble, mindful, quieter and more attentive – this is possibly the very mindset from which something new can spring. It however excludes us being able to do, shape, produce, control it.

We need to learn to deal with this paradox. We have to accept, embrace that we, our civilisation, our world will fade. We cannot save it or conserve it. We can only ready ourselves for the crisis, the turning, the transformation which will inevitably come. Only when we have achieved this humility and this acceptance of the constant flux around us, will we gain the freedom and the serenity, the fearlessness and the peace which are needed to help the recovery of our world.¹⁰

⁹ These thoughts are based on the writings and teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh.

¹⁰ See Thich Nhat Hanh (2008), p. 4357.

These reflections should in no way express pessimism, defeatism, resignation and a retreat to inwardness. This is the crucial point: yes, we are incapable of consciously inducing a system transformation and of shaping it. At the same time, we are the single factor defining the transformation. After all, it is us who think and lead discussions, who give and pass on meaning, who create, support and change institutions. We are the system and we are its constant change, its transformation. We are instrumental in the system change and we can be so consciously. Not as its managers but as mindful participants.

Partaking in change would mean to be alert to imminent changes and to grant them room in ourselves and our surroundings. Letting these shifts happen and unfold through ourselves requires of us an attitude that is happy to serve, but is not passive or indifferent. We are a force in this shift, since change comes into effect in ourselves and through ourselves. It thus matters greatly which mindsets and intentions we have when we participate in change.

It matters whether we are open or closed, cling to the old or embrace the new, whether we focus selfishly on ourselves or care for and are connected to our contemporaries with love. Through the values and mindsets we live, through the dreams and vision we cultivate, we lend intention and direction to our part in a transformation. The rest will be delivered by the open flux of change, which we can neither initiate, nor impede, nor guide.

IV. The practice of system change – or: what can we do?

What does it practically mean to play a part in a major transformation of our times and to let it happen *through* us? To me, four aspects appear to be vital: deconstruction, dissidence, alternatives and spirituality.

Loosening-up exercises for the mind

Transformation invariably involves, as outlined above, the destabilisation or even disintegration of established structures. However this process does not have to be experienced as destructive, triggering an inner defence in us (which exacerbates the crisis anguish). We can choose to perceive transformation like a new door opening up, and can consciously partake in this event.

To facilitate a positive involvement in this process of destabilisation or disintegration, we can carry out collective exercises to loosen up our minds, to gain awareness of entrenched patterns of thinking and perceiving, and to learn to handle these more flexibly.

It seems particularly essential to challenge dualisms, i.e. thinking in pairs and in (usually hierarchical) opposites. What happens to two opposites if we don't focus on what separates them, but on what connects the two, their mutual entanglement, the unity of both poles? We (e.g. Europe) are not separated from others (e.g. Islam, Russia, Africa, the USA).

We are so closely linked economically and politically, culturally and historically, ecologically and morally that humanity represents an entity, a community. The human being is not outside of and above nature. We are a single, complex, whole, living system. Such a holistic view lets us see the world from a different angle and can offer new perspectives on a number of ethical dilemmas.¹¹

Maybe we should form a habit of thinking holistically rather than analytically: understanding the earth as a living creature, conceiving of ourselves and 'the other' as linked in a larger context, not seeing that what separates first but learning to see connections.

Maybe we can practice to think 'cyclically', i.e. in cycles of growing and abating, of coming and going, rather than in linear processes of progress.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida used the term *deconstruction* to talk about the process of dissolving binary oppositions by generating alternative readings of a phenomenon that focus on the interwovenness ("the other in the self-same") rather than on the difference.

Such increased openness of the mind, independence of established thought patterns and of collective cultural patterns of interpretation begins when we learn to recognise these for what they are. Observing one's own thinking and finding patterns therein is an enthralling and liberating undertaking. Such self-observation is a first step in letting go, in broadening and opening one's mind to alternative ways of thinking.

In this process it can be conducive to engage with what's foreign, to let ourselves be challenged, to seek exposure to the unfamiliar and the different. Here, where nothing is obvious or plain to us, lies the opportunity to see beyond blind spots and overcome established thought patterns. Which new encounters, unfamiliar contexts, untapped sources of information and experience hold particular potential to put the familiar and the accustomed into perspective?

People from different regions or different social backgrounds? New places, new ways of living, working, eating and behaving, new languages? Spending time in nature? Artistic or physical activity? New approaches to spirituality and healing? Opening up to the unknown with curiosity and respect holds the opportunity to broaden our minds.

The path of deconstruction of established patterns of thought and perception, and opening up to alternatives, is not an individual one. Rather, it has a collective, social function. It aims to create new thinking spaces, as post-structuralist discourse theory approaches have stated. To this effect we should create new forums, new media, places and groups where ideas can flow freely, 'laboratories' for unconventional thinking, establish niches where alternative discourse can be had, tried out and cultivated, using nature, art, music, poetry, spirituality etc. What matters is allowing alternatives to the current, rational view of the world and to jointly create spaces for thoughts, experiences and debate to explore these.

We should in particular take note of the wealth of experience, knowledge and wisdom of individuals and communities who exist beyond or at the margins of modern Western societies. What is the likelihood that the ideas and thoughts which will replace the predominant, Western, modern paradigm, will originate in the Western world?

I feel that the most vital contribution of global learning to transformation lies in the conscious scrutiny of world views and mindsets, known as 'unlearning', and in the engagement with knowledge and ideologies, epistemologies, practices and patterns of interpretation of non-western and non-modern traditions.

Gentle dissidence

In a time when racial segregation prevailed in the United States, Rosa Park refused to vacate a seat reserved for whites on the bus. Gandhi's movement boycotted taxes, police and military service, the educational and legal system and goods from British production.¹² Both refused to conform to a system rooted in injustice.

Today's situation is of course quite different from that of Rosa Parks and Gandhi, who protested against the institutionalised injustice they experienced through acts of civil disobedience. Today, we are equally victims and perpetrators of the system we live in. We are subjected to it, yet we benefit from it, maintain it, reproduce it through our thinking, our behaviours, and the institutions we use and thus stabilise. We are the system.

Maybe a contemporary non-conformist approach could consist in the effort to not participate where we feel something is evidently wrong. The point would not be to fight 'the system' as an external enemy in an 'us against the system' approach. If we acknowledge that we are part of the system, the point has to be to practice truthfulness, and to question our own actions and behaviours – as individuals, organisations, society – through critical reflection and soul-searching.

Gandhi's struggle is essentially an inner struggle for truth in one's self: the 'foe' in its external form is defeated not by defeating him, but by winning him over through the truthfulness of one's attitude, in one's actions and in

¹² See Gandhi (1920), p.9-13.

the vastness of one's love. The constant endeavour for inner truth and truthfulness is the true core of Gandhi's non-violence (Ahimsa).

'Live in truth' – this has been a key ethical notion for Vaclav Havel to fend off corruption under authoritarian state-run socialism.¹³ I feel the attitude we need in the face of an unjust, hostile system, is one of courageous yet self-critical non-conformism, a straight yet gentle dissidence, an Ahimsa. The force of this dissidence does not arise from antagonism and confrontation, but from the effort to be conscious of one's actions, and from benevolence, love, compassion for all those who are, like us, tied up in this ill-fated system. What could such dissidence look like?

Dissidence in a system which recklessly tears up the Earth, ploughs it, and robs it of all its valuable elements, which covers Earth with concrete, waste, toxic matter and noise, might mean living simply and self-sufficiently, purchasing and using as little as possible of anything, not traveling on planes, not driving by car wherever possible.

Dissidence in a system in which power and opportunity is linked to vastly unequally distributed property and in which relationships are increasingly commercialised and monetised, might mean looking for ways to avoid the possession of financial or other personal means, use and maintain shared goods – 'commons' –, use alternative currencies, practice generosity, exchanging, giving, receiving.

Dissidence in a system, in which egotism is virtuous, competition is a key motivator, and growth is the law, might mean giving up on careers and social status, do less denaturalised, estranged work for your livelihood and seek meaningful work instead.

Dissidence in a system in which mankind believe they stand above nature, and objectifies, enslaves, torments and exploits its fellow creatures might mean: not eating animals, or rather, not keeping animals and not supporting animal husbandry through one's own lifestyle.

Dissidence in a system which has created such an unacceptable situation – yet is so effective in disabling those who would be able to change it through a little '*panem et circenses*', might mean boycotting the entire shallow spectacle – TV, commercial football, Hollywood, advertising, celebrities, news streams, staged political stand-offs in the constantly choreographed struggle for power – which absorbs our attention and distracts us from what is essential.

To destabilise the institutions, norms and habits of a system, we need non-conformism and dissidence, we need people who say: I'm not playing my part in this anymore. In the current system, which encourages stringency, amassing of personal property, selfishness and growth, it can have a truly subversive effect to adopt an attitude of gratefulness for what we are lucky to already have, and to cultivate modesty in our consumption and lifestyle choices.

Applied utopia

Dissidence as outlined here should not equal a bitter resistance, deprivation and withdrawal from society – to the contrary. Living differently, trying alternatives, letting creative humus build in the niches of the system – all this can be very much a fulfilling life. In our own microcosms, we can begin to experiment with new, more conscious ways of living in our communities, of creating, sharing and being alive. Through this, we will experience a life more diverse, more whole, and more honest.

Particularly the time period in between two systems – where an old system disintegrates and a new one has not yet been established – can offer astonishing spaces to do things which were thus far unthinkable, impossible, utopian. Those who have experienced the collective high of a transition and the feeling of being alive that arises when a group permits itself to get to the task and fulfils its potential to the maximum – those have an idea of how good life can feel.

¹³ See Havel (1985).

Cells of something new originate everywhere we experiment with new forms of a socially just economy, democratic self-governance, self-sufficient lifestyles and common goods, in niches, subcultures and partially autonomous areas.

If these alternative spaces can be connected to each other, learn from each other and attract more attention, inspire others to emulate and develop ideas, begin to merge – then the contour lines of a new system could emerge in an unplanable, probably somewhat rocky, collective search.

This development is already in full swing. Worldwide, initiatives are springing up which seek alternatives to growth and are starting a discourse on what constitutes a good, fulfilling life – what constitutes well-being beyond meeting fundamental material needs.

The commons-movement is gaining significance: an increasing number of groups are beginning to experiment with models of joint ownership, shared resources, and socially conscious, non-commercial economies. Intentional communities, eco villages and transition towns are beginning to form an increasingly close network of models of a sustainable lifestyle.

What matters now is bolstering and connecting these movements, to cultivate their diversity and capacity to innovate – and to be careful not to let them become banal, re-commercialised and co-opted by mainstream consumer culture on the way out of their niche.

Undogmatic spirituality

Transformative changes go beyond what we can process in purely cognitive and rational terms. As outlined, transformation means the collapse of the familiar foundations of our thinking, our established meanings and patterns of orientation, and ultimately of the institutions of the old system – an abyss threatens the world we know. How can we conquer this challenge?

Many of the great, most impressive transitions in history, from Gandhi to Martin Luther King, had something essential in common: they were rooted in a spiritual reason. The experience of oneness with a larger cause has brought with it the determination, clarity and strength to entirely devote oneself to the struggle for what one knows and feels to be right, under difficult circumstances.

This experience of unity enables a compassionate attitude even toward our ‘opponent’, with whom we are really one in any event. Who hasn’t at some stage, when looking into a starry sky, or faced with birth or death, felt the miracle of being? Who hasn’t, after this experience, gained a keener view for what is essential and what is not, and felt a great peace in themselves?

It seems that applied, and shared, spirituality – whether Christian or Buddhist, inspired by deep ecology or mysticism, self-made or whatever which way – is a fundamental element of support in the transformation process. It facilitates the transcending of the self, the ego, and the experience of unity with others, with all living things, with the divine.

Spirituality offers a fundamentally different, holistic angle next to the modern-rational, separating, mechanistic way in which we experience the world. How could someone led by an open, free-thinking, non-authoritarian spirituality not experience a profoundly felt awe of life? How could she not see other people as her sisters and brothers? How could a feeling of the superiority and the unity of the cosmos, as experienced through spirituality, not bring with it humility, connectedness, love for all living things?

From the opening and broadening of our own awareness, from transcending the ego and experiencing oneness arises a caring approach to one’s self and to others with whom we are inseparably linked. This existential yearning for peace, justice and protection of the Earth has the potential to be stronger than the pressures and norms, the appeals and sanctions of any man-made system. Thus, it may be in living spirituality, in meditation, prayer, practicing awareness, contemplative art, where the highest potential for transformation lies.

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