

Challenging Organisations and Society

reflective hybrids®

Inner Outer Spaces

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Ervin Laszlo

The Challenge Before Us: Mastering the Bifurcation of the Humanity-System

1 Background Paper for the Club of Budapest International Network

This project of the Club of Budapest and its international network is a project in design. It moves back from concern with the immediacies and urgencies of the contemporary situation and takes a look at the context in which they appear—and attempts to deal with the immediacies and urgencies in the correct context. The context in this case is nothing less than the condition of humanity on the planet; a condition that is beset with critical problems that will ultimately decide the continuation of this experiment in conscious evolution, an experiment unique in the biosphere.

This project invites its participants—and we are all participants—to move into a fresh space; a space where we have sufficient distance to see the problems and their possible solutions, and not so much as to lose contact with them.

Entering this space is vital for individuals as well as for both private and public organizations. We are all part of the system of humanity on the planet, and we should all be intent on becoming part of the solution to the problems that confront this system and not part of the problems themselves. We know that the problems are fundamental, and that they cannot be solved (as Einstein said) at the level of consciousness at which they arose. So we need a new consciousness, and that calls for an unpolluted design space, where we can view what we need to see, where we can think about what we have seen, and from which we can then move forward to act: doing our best to implement the design we have envisaged in the conviction that it is in both our and the human community's best enlightened interest.

2 Our Mission

It has been said that the future is not to be predicted; it is to be created. This is true, and it is fortunate. If the future were predictable it would be a sad thing, because it would mean that we already know what it is and cannot do much about it. The way it is today will be the way it will be tomorrow, with just some linear changes: some things grow while others vanish. As the French say, “*plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*” That would be most unfortunate. There is nothing more depressing than a future predicted as the linear continuation of the present.

Continuing along the current evolutionary trajectory would be catastrophic. Yet the future can still be created, and it can be something different from what it is now. Future-creation can innovate, and the innovation can be profound and embracing. That is our hope, our chance and the mission to which we are dedicated.

The alternatives before us are clear. We face either a future of breakdown or a future of breakthrough. These are diametrically opposed alternatives. We are at a point where we can still decide which of them will be realized because we are in the midst of a system-level bifurcation.

3 The Challenge of a Bifurcation

What is a bifurcation? A bifurcation indicates a change, a radical change, in the evolutionary trajectory of a system. A system will evolve along certain lines, which can often be measured in terms of energy, size, complexity, or some other parameter. It can evolve along its historic trajectory with minor fluctuations. But a time can come when such a linear evolution is no longer possible. The system faces a stark alternative: transform or collapse. This is the point of bifurcation. The concept comes from the theory of complex systems, and it applies to human societies as well as to humanity as a whole. There are laws of complexity, including laws of the evolution of complexity, that apply to all systems. A nonlinear system-level transformation called a

bifurcation is one such law. It occurs in the evolutionary trajectory of nearly all complex systems, and it spells the end of some systems and the transformation of others. The challenge before us as conscious systems is to take the path of transformation rather than that of extinction.

4 Basic Conditions of Life in the World

Systems can only persist in the physical world when they manage to counter the universal tendency to “run down.” Complex systems maintain themselves through a constant regulation of the flows they require for existence. They balance the loss of free energy (the increase of entropy) entailed by their functioning in a physical environment. Complex systems in a state far from (thermal and chemical) equilibrium are self-regulative, and they are not massively stable. They constantly tune themselves to the requirements of their persistence, which is to regulate the flows to which they owe their existence. The values of these flows are never entirely stable (which would indicate equilibrium)—they are at best dynamically stable. They are quasi-stationary system, patterns imposed on a flow of energy, matter, and information.

Let’s take the human organism as an example. If we measure the temperature of an organism, its sugar concentration, rate of heartbeat, and dozens of other parameters, we find that the measured values fluctuate around certain norms. In a healthy (that is, viable) organism the fluctuations are brought back to a condition that represents health for the system. In regard to body temperature, the healthy norm in humans is 36.6 degrees Celsius. If body temperature descends below this value, autonomous processes (such as shivering) begin, and also conscious measures are initiated (such as dressing oneself more warmly).

Disease in a complex system is a deviation from homeostatic norms, and healing is the recovery of the norms, allowing the actual values to again fluctuate around them. Chronic disease is a condition that does not allow the recovery of the organic norms. A terminal disease is the condition where the

deviation in regard to some values interferes with the processes that maintain fluctuations around other values, and the system can no longer maintain itself in the far-from-equilibrium living state.

Processes of health and healing operate by negative feedback. The deviations catalyze processes that counteract those that create the deviation and pull the system back to the viable condition. Life-threatening diseases operate by positive rather than negative feedback. A process that leads to a deviation is not corrected by a countervailing process, but rather it is reinforced, so that the deviation grows. Then it becomes greater and greater, until a point is reached where the system collapses. A bifurcation in the evolutionary trajectory of the system either replaces the system-threatening processes, or the system succumbs to the deviation.

5 Sustaining the Existence of Multiorganic Systems

Living systems are mortal, and sooner or later they encounter an incorrigible deviation. But systems constituted of living systems are not necessarily mortal. The norms that govern their functioning are changeable and renewable; they are not like the fixed set of genes that ensure viability for biological systems.

In biological systems homeostatic norms of sustainable functioning govern the processes that maintain life. Systems constituted of biological systems—that is, social or sociocultural systems—are likewise governed by norms of viable functioning; however, these norms are not biological but cultural: they are values, beliefs, and the consensually shared or individually developed and adopted preferences, laws, and directives that define the permissible functioning of the systems. These norms make up the operative culture of sociocultural systems. They are changeable, which means that they can be evolved along pathways of viability. Sociocultural systems are potentially immortal. The organisms that constitute them die, but they can be replaced. The system as a whole can persist indefinitely.

6 Flaws in the Current Humanity-system

The system made up of all the sociocultural systems on this planet is the humanity-system. The dominant culture of the humanity-system is flawed: it renders the functioning of the system unsustainable. If the humanity-system is to persist, it must change, which means that it must shift its dominant culture. This is feasible, given that the operative norms of the system are changeable. They can be handed down and adopted by generation after generation of humans. Functional norms would render the humanity-system indefinitely existent, and offer the chance of sustained existence for the people born into the system.

We can be more specific. In most parts of the world the dominant culture is the culture of modernity. It originated in Europe at the dawn of the Modern Age and then spread to America and the rest of the world. This culture is not aligned with sustainable norms of life in the biosphere. In the course of the last one hundred or one hundred and fifty years the humanity-system divorced itself from the rest of the living world. It now operates in view of only maximizing its own good, and not even of maximizing its overall good, but only the good of some of its groups and factions. It maximizes their good on the basis of narrow and short-term assessments, disregarding the good of the rest of the humanity-system. Take, for example, economics. For contemporary economists the actual whole system, which is the network of life on the planet, is only “nature” or “the environment”—a subsystem. The whole system for modern economics is the system of the production and exchange of real and virtual goods. This turns the real world upside down. People and groups and communities of people no longer belong to the system of life on the planet; they are only rational interest-maximizing actors in the system of production and exchange.

This flawed perception of reality threatens the whole web of life on the planet. We know that every biological system must maintain itself in harmony with every other system, and ultimately with the whole system of which it is a part. Now, in the language of science, harmony means coherence. Every

system needs to be internally coherent, so that every part of it is actively connected with every other part, and all the parts together are tuned to maintaining the system in its environment. This requires that the biological system is also extrinsically coherent: in tune with its environment, which in the final count is the web of life on the planet. The same requirement applies to systems made up of biological systems, that is, social and sociocultural systems. All systems in the biosphere need to be intrinsically as well as extrinsically coherent. In one word, they must be supercoherent. This is the basic condition of their sustained existence and persistence. Supercoherence is a precondition of sustained functioning for every complex system, whether it is an amoeba, a mouse, a human being, or an integral grouping of amoebae, mice, and humans. It is the basic condition of the sustainability also of the humanity-system. That system must be a system of coherently related human beings. It must be coherently related to what is generally called “nature” and is in fact the web constituted of all living things on the planet.

7 A Concise Diagnosis

The humanity-system has lost its supercoherence. Human societies are coherent only in the short term, only in regard to some of their parts and only with some elements of the web of life. The integrity of the humanity-system has broken apart. There is the economy, there is business, there is culture and education, and there is science and technology. These are equally many subsystems, and they are neither working together, nor are they working in harmony with the wider environment. This is a problem. When the subsystems of a system are coherent only within themselves, they may endanger the whole system. Ultimately, they may catalyze the collapse of that system. This is the syndrome of cancer. Cancerous subsystems are coherent within themselves and replicate themselves. But in so doing they destroy the coherence of the system of which they are a part.

The cancerous functioning of human subsystems is a relatively new phenomenon. Until the dawn of the modern age most societies were significantly coherent not only within themselves, but also with their environment. They often fought each other, but they were not parasites or cancers that threatened the systems that framed their collective existence. Today there are powerful subsystems that endanger the entire humanity-system. They are concentrating wealth and power in and for themselves, impoverishing and marginalizing the rest.

The subsystem that garners ever more power for itself is the system of so-called sovereign nation-states. A sovereign nation-state does not recognize responsibility for any population and any part of nature beyond its boundaries.

The subsystem that analogously garners wealth for itself is the so-called private sector. Yet in an interdependent, interacting, and highly interconnected and intercommunicating system no sector can be “private” in the sense of *privatus*, which in Latin means “withdrawn from public life.” In the contemporary humanity-system all individuals and groups are “public”: they are connected with, and belong to, the *publicus*, “the people.” The opposite of a sector that is private is not one that is public in the conventional sense of being governed by a nation-state. It is a sector of civil society that joins its own perceived interest with that of the humanity-system that it perceives as its home.

In the humanity-system itself no individual, no company, and no state is or can be sovereign. Sovereignty pertains only to the whole system, which is the global Gaia-system.

8 A Perspective on the Cure

If we are to create a more sustainable and flourishing future, we have to ensure the internal coherence of all human beings on the planet, and ensure

likewise the coherence with the larger system of individuals and groups of individuals. This is a large but not an impossibly large order. It is possible for us to recover our internal as well as external coherence—our supercoherence.

Recovering our supercoherence means rediscovering the cultural norms of our existence on the planet. Actively seeking and adopting these norms is the practical task of globally thinking individuals, and groups of individuals such as the Club of Budapest. Fortunately these norms can be recovered: they have been suppressed and ignored, but not lost. They are present in the consciousness of all healthy people. We are all intrinsic parts of the humanity-system, which is an intrinsic part of the global Gaia-system. Our cultural norms are the norms of sustainable existence in the ambit of these systems. We can recover these norms from the realm of instincts and intuitions, behold and articulate them, and adopt them as basic guides and inspirations for thinking and acting.

The bottom line is this. We either learn to live in harmony with all creation on this planet, or we risk leaving the stage of history. That would surely be a pity, for systems of the level of evolution of human beings must be rare in the universe, even if not necessarily unique. Safeguarding the humanity-system and contributing to its evolution on this planet could be of cosmic interest. Be that as it may, it is clearly in the most immediate and enlightened human interest. It is a goal that merits pursuing with unconditional love and dedication, and all the means and resources that are at our disposal.

About the Authors

Edda Heijting has a post bachelor in management and social studies from the Erasmus University Netherlands. She has worked in different positions at municipalities and started her own consultancy company, Heijting Weerts Groep, in 2000. The main goal of the company is the development of social innovations together with researchers from different universities.

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Steeff Peters has a PhD in elementary physics from the University of Amsterdam. He has held various positions in financial institutions and consultancy firms, combining organizational and information technology developments.

In 2001 he became professor at the Free University of Amsterdam on strategy, businesses processes and IT. Since 2013 he has worked together with Edda Heijting in the Heijting Weerts Groep.

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Maria Spindler, PHD, has been organizational consultant for 22 years in economics and at NGOs. Her consulting topics are creating future, inventing organizations and structures, leadership culture, and organizational learning. She has been lecturer at universities in Europe and the US on corporate culture, organization and leadership, and group dynamics. Her book publications deal with organizational learning, innovation, leadership, group dynamics, consulting, and research. She has been qualified to train the trainer for the ÖGGÖ. Maria founded the cos-journal in 2011 and is its chief editor.

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Christian Stary received his Diploma degree in computer science from the Vienna University of Technology, Austria, in 1984, his Ph.D. degree in usability engineering, and also his Habilitation degree from the Vienna University of Technology, Austria, in 1988 and 1993, respectively. He is currently full Professor of Business Information Systems with the University of Linz. His research interests include the area of interactive distributed systems,

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Franz Viehböck, electrical engineer, was Austria's first cosmonaut. He visited the Mir space station in 1991 after two years of training. At the Mir space station he conducted 15 experiments in the fields of space medicine, physics and space technology. He returned after 7 days and 22 hours with Soyuz TM-12, and landed in Kazakhstan on October 10. The following two years he gave numerous lectures on the mission, then went to the United States and worked for Rockwell. When Rockwell was taken over by Boeing he became Director for International Business Development in Vienna. Viehböck resides in Berndorf, Austria.

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Join COS, a Home for Reflective Hybrids

The future is an unknown garment that invites us to weave our lives into it. How these garments will fit, cover, colour, connect and suit us lies in our (collective) hands. Many garments from the past have become too tight, too grey, too something...and the call for new shapes and textures is acknowledged by many. Yet changing clothes leaves one naked, half dressed in between. Let's connect in this creative, vulnerable space and cut, weave and stitch together.

Our target group is reflective hybrids – leaders, scientists, consultants, and researchers from all over the world who dare to be and act complex. Multi-layered topics require multidimensional approaches that are, on the one hand, interdisciplinary and, on the other hand, linked to theory and practice, making the various truths and perspectives mutually useful.

If you feel you are a reflective hybrid you are very welcome to join our COS movement, for instance by:

- Visiting our website: www.cos-collective.com
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COS Conference 2017

Making a life for one and for all-in an uncertain world

We are living in rapidly and radically changing times, in many places for the world.

Times that are hard to make sense of, to figure out what to do?

What do we do when we do not know what to do?

How do we feel? Think?

Each one of us has some valid experience and we, as humans, created some relevant knowledge.

We invite you to join a 4–5 day learning expedition to explore, create and share guidelines, repertoire and directions to unmapped territories of the uncertain and emergent futures.

If you are:

- *Curious and passionate* about the topic and want to meet other wonderful people
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Intelligence

Editors: Tonnie van der Zouwen (NL) and Maria Spindler (A)

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