

A Different Kind of Sense Making in Times of Chaos and Fake News

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A plague on both your houses! I am sped.

Is he gone and hath nothing?

*(Mercutio to Romeo in **Romeo and Juliet** Act 3. Sc. 1)*

Mercutio's curse of frustration and anguish, as he confronts his imminent death, is in some senses echoed by many across the globe as they confront seemingly unpalatable and opposing choices. Does one, on the one hand, follow the popularist and often vulgar authoritarian? Or on the other hand, does one prefer the candidate that emerges from a small group of venal, self-serving and dynastic democrats? For many, this 'choice of houses'—you are either for me or against me—forces them to take an extreme position that seems both uncomfortable and deeply dissatisfying. It requires an almost impossible navigation of confused narratives, buttressed with dubious opinionation and apparent validation through news stories that are centred in completely different senses of reality. From time to time these contests come to a head in what we call democracy. The consequence is that one or the other set of 'house' narratives and personalities prevails, leaving many of those involved in the process contemplating a present-future that is ill at ease with their souls.

As a generalisation, the narratives of the opposing houses centre on one of two propositions. The first is a popularist narrative (in the Western model) that yearns for a return to a 'nostalgic status quo' or how life used to be; one that, while often ambiguous in its ambit, appears to offer a protective shield against real or imagined threats. In contrast, the alternative narrative asserts, with an unhesitating conviction, a righteous, almost arrogant, 'market first' parable; one that has dominated political and economic discourse for most of the past three decades. Thematically, it is incredulous and dismissive of any consideration of the backwards looking options contained in the first narrative. For adherents of this 'economy first' narrative the return to nostalgia is an unthinkable folly, an unwanted and unintelligent interruption to the progress of a technologically dependent, socially tolerant, globalised, but economically neo-liberal, business as usual model. Proponents of this latter narrative also assume, by way of a causal post script, that in the unlikely event it is embraced (Brexit in the UK, Trump in

the USA), the sense of normality (by their definition) inherent in the first narrative will naturally resume once the folly of that course of action is exposed!

What both ignore is a possible third narrative. This alternative story has, until recently, been rendered almost invisible and only detected in a fragmentary way in the white noise, confusion, distraction and cynical tantrums of the other two. At its core, it suggests that the dysfunction we are collectively witnessing (and participating in) is symptomatic of a disintegrating socio-economic system which, under the dictates of the first two narratives, is continuing to do what the structure upon which they both depend is simply designed to do. It argues that there are few adaptations that this system can make that might slow or even halt ever-increasing disintegration. Thus, if this is the case, it is therefore necessary to contemplate an alternative, one that in current system terms is unthinkable; that is, to explore options that go ‘beyond the system’ as we now understand it.

This essay takes this third narrative as its starting point. It argues that unless societal conversations consider the possibilities this ‘non-system’ frames, many options that might be available remain hidden in the ‘white noise of an assumed normality’ that seems to endlessly re-litigate clearly evident problems without every really resolving them. It starts with an axiom that contemporary societies need to find a way out of the complex and chaotic descent that confronts them. It asserts the need to transcend the litany of unconscionable squabbles based on dubious assertions, baseless assumptions, and elastic truth that is now the norm, and which is both disguised by, and yet demonstrably grounded in, deliberate unethical grabs for power and wealth. But as a framing narrative it also goes further. It recognises that not only is this disintegration a symptom of the death throes of the current western dominated civilisation, but that contemplation of such a societal death is both preferable and necessary—sooner rather than later—if humanity is to enjoy any kind of beneficial future on this planet. As such, this third narrative has an explicit bias towards transition options, transformation assemblages and those ‘emergences’ that enable us all to better understand what might be possible ‘beyond the abyss’ that we, as a collective, presently find ourselves confronting. In sum, it argues for a different kind of understanding from that we have been used to.

At first reading this kind of alternative narrative seems uncomfortable, even harsh, for it is hard to leave behind the familiar (*it can't possibly be this bad, right?*). Yet the evidence shows that our social, economic, environmental and cultural systems are in disarray. More importantly, simply keeping on with this ‘house of cards’ increases the severity of the risks that future generations will have to confront, and over which they have had no say. To confront this moral and existential dilemma is not going to be easy, for as the leadership and systems theorist Margaret Wheatley remarked:

[I]nto the dark centre (that smoking caldera) we will be asked to throw most of what we have treasured, most of the techniques and tools that have made us feel competent. We know what we must do. And when we finally step forward to do it, when we have made our sacrificial gods of understanding, then the ruptures will cease¹.

The essence of this third narrative is about cohering a different kind of understanding. It will need to define both possible landing points (a diversity of transformations in contrast to current one-size-fits-all solutions) and also transitions (escapes). These will, in all likelihood, be sometimes inspiring, often painful and almost always incomplete. They will require different ways of imagining and anticipating, and other kinds of aspiration that necessarily goes beyond many of the seductions and illusions of the familiar, as we realise that much of what we know must be set aside. For a future system cannot be designed inside of, and with the same governing rules and power structures of, a system that is disintegrating.

These Alvin Toffleresque ‘third wave’ narratives ask us to contemplate, confront and then cross an ‘abyss’ or ‘chasm’ between the systems we now understand and the systems that we will need to create. They will demand an embrace of multiple ways of thinking; the acceptance of ongoing and never ending uncertainty (thus abandoning the myth of certainty); and finally, they will require all of us to confront, with no regard for cost or effort, the existential and spiritual crisis that has engulfed we humans as a consequence of our misguided belief that the planet merely exists to serve our every whim.

Escaping our fascination with dialectic thinking

The critical task ahead cannot be limited to generating alternatives. Indeed, it requires an alternative thinking of alternatives. A new postabyssal thinking is thus called for.
(Boaventura De Sousa Santos)².

While almost every second conference and or presentation purports to reference *that* ‘authentic’ Einstein quote (I have no idea if it is true or not) that the definition of insanity is expecting that the logic that got us to where we are now can be used as the basis for going somewhere different, the reality is that at a systemic level, the dominant thinking model, even when confronted with this sensibility, rarely changes. Perhaps this is because the system of thinking, the dialectic approach—the way assertions of ‘truth’ are constituted as opposites or along some kind of spectrum—frames and contains a number of dangerous assumptions. Firstly, it bounds possibility within the way something is framed (Brexit or not, Trump v Clinton). Secondly it is capable of manipulation, either through

carefully crafted statistics, or via outlandish media manipulation that completely alters perceptions of truth and reality (Clinton supported a paedophile ring in a pizza shop she had never been to, and which was later the subject of an attack by a deranged gunman!).

In a world of pervasive social media where anyone anywhere can create and propagate their version of the truth, dialectic thinking has created a world of mirrors, where knowledge is indistinguishable from opinion. It is a world where unwelcome options are filtered out, and any sense of intellectual integrity is not only swept aside, but is openly derided by purveyors of fakery, who too often conceal their real (self-serving) agendas from those they are seeking to influence. Thankfully, this state of affairs may not last as long as the same algorithms now being used by reputational sites (e.g. TripAdvisor) to weed out 90% of fake reviews.

However, there is a deeper question involved here: does this way of thinking presuppose that the logic systems and the rationalism of the self-defined Western Enlightenment is the only way to constitute reality? While rationalism and truth seeking is certainly preferable to ‘fake news’, even a brief survey of other epistemologies or ways of knowing reveals that:

[I]rrationality is not the only alternative to what is currently considered rational, chaos is not the only alternative to order and the concern about what might be less true must be balanced by a concern about what is [asserted to be] more true³.

In other words, the viability of ‘other than dialectic’ thinking needs to be considered. This is what the Greeks knew as ‘beyond’, or analectic thinking. It argues for epistemes and praxis “beyond the horizon of what is already experienced and contemplated”⁴, or ways of understanding that are frequently different from the analytical and empirical so favoured in the Western traditional quest for certainty.

Where the rational meets the ‘arational’: different pathways – same end points

In the mid 1980’s the Indian spiritualist P.R. Sarkar elaborated a new creation theory based on belief in a Supreme Consciousness and his interpretation of Sanskrit cosmology. From this he argued that the origins, development and activity of all living beings are determined by microvita. He suggested that these microvita or ‘angels’ were the smallest entities in the universe; they were invisible and were responsible for the creation and evolution of all living things, chemical elements and even thoughts.

Further he maintained they were mysterious, as they had yet to be scientifically demonstrated and their properties yet to be fully understood.

Writing in the early 90's on the Journal of Philosophical Psychology, the theoretical physicist David Bohm explored recent advances in the understanding of quantum particles. His assertions have remarkable similarities to Sarkar's microvita, and his sense of an implicate order where the universe is in some way enfolded into everything and everything is enfolded into the whole. This includes a view that quantum particles are also involved in the creation of information and consciousness.

The Illusion of Certainty

Uncertainty is pervasive, it is written into the script of life.

The temporality of human existence prevents the achievement of absolute certainty (Helga Nowotny)⁵.

While philosophically Nowotny's assertion seems obvious, the lived experience of the Western tradition is deeply embedded in a mythology that states the contrary is true. Furthermore, this same mythology often conflates certainty with security, and consequently establishes a debatable societal condition against which all political, economic and social actions are judged. This sociology of 'certainty of security' has insinuated itself into almost all the dominant narratives of economic growth, progress, scientific mastery and the supremacy of modernity with little regard for the fact that this, as asserted earlier, defers the price of that certainty to unspecified generations to come. In the process, it has developed a narrative of simplicity: better, quicker, cheaper faster. That is, it demands an order and efficiency that is almost logically impossible in a complex and chaotic, globally connected society. Yet with the use of a particular cunning, the very idea of complexity and chaos, together with its attendant uncertainty, can translate into a societal tendency towards blind obedience, and hence is the ultimate food source for authoritarianism⁶. However, it also propels a society into the adoption of false certainties, induced by hubris and an overreliance on widely shared, but unsubstantiated, assumptions (e.g. economic growth creates more jobs and benefits almost everybody).

The current obsession with certainty often means the collective 'we' are incapable or unwilling to look in certain directions, or to think beyond the structures we know⁷. It locks societies into 'closed

futures' that reduce the capacity to aspire and bind us to solutions that are either manifestly unworkable or suboptimal⁸. Sometimes it even comes at the price of increasing the uncertainty of 'others', thus locking the perpetrators of the same into a future of unpredictable response.

The alternative, therefore, is to embrace the uncertain even with its attendant fears. This opening up of the unexpected, the unspeakable and the unthinkable constitutes a kind of 'primal soup' that allows combinations of new and existing elements and ideas to cohere into previously unseen patterns. These patterns may paradoxically provide an exciting possibility, and a kind of emergent certainty emancipated from the whims of external parties, whose interests may well be diametrically opposite. This analectic thinking is often imaginative in its scope, while being prepared to relocate and co-locate risk with the behaviour of the actors concerned. At the same time, it orients humanity on a very different voyage of discovery; one that is free from the illusion that the only system that is possible for humans to live in is contemporary capitalism.

The Seduction of Capitalist System Primacy

It is as difficult to imagine the end of capitalism as it is to imagine capitalism without end (Boaventura De Sousa Santos)⁹.

While it is inherent in our natures to organise ourselves in social systems or cultures, our collective histories demonstrate that, up until now, all attempts to do so have been both finite and time bound. There is therefore no reason to suggest that the same should not be true of the present system, especially if it is unable to resolve any fundamental contradictions between what it is designed to do and what it actually does.

Hence, we are at a point of history where contemporary capitalism, having overcome a dysfunctional socialism, now reigns supreme. One should note though, that both capitalism and socialism as philosophies have similar attitudes towards extraction, and intolerance to anything that challenges the power of the system itself. By design capitalism requires ever increasing market demand and the opportunity for ongoing investment (that generates monetary returns by those privileged few who have such capacity). However, it now confronts "the three apocalyptic horsemen: stagnation, increasing inequality and high levels of (particularly public) debt"¹⁰. These are now present concurrently, and in extreme form. Furthermore, they are acting in a downward spiral, completely devastating the context required by the capitalist system to operate. 'Business as usual' seems to a rapidly receding scenario.

Of even more concern is that all the political and national structures that have previously been available to counter or modify any particular contradiction have been rendered impotent by an economic model that has escaped the boundaries that those systems depend upon. Thus, there are now inadequate responses, to the disparities that arise through either capitalist or socialist ideology; to the consequences of putting the national self-interest above the global good; and to bankrupt moral and spiritual assertions of entitlement and exclusion based on accidents of geography. Hence, one might argue that the trend towards populism and authoritarianism represents a reaction to the inadequacies mentioned above, and an expectation that they be resolved while still preserving the primacy of the system. This, despite the fact that there is no evidence at all that this is possible.

If this situation defines the contemporary condition, the issue then arises: what alternatives exist to ‘the rule of the big men’ option?

Some argue all that is required is to reduce or moderate the issues of excess and overreach. However, while this ‘descent path’ has the benefit of creating time and space for other options to emerge, the problem it faces is that this pathway is not only diametrically opposite to what the system is designed to do, it lacks the institutional power to create the framings that are required to effect it.

Others posit that human ingenuity and technology provide the way forward: a fourth industrial revolution¹¹. The problem with this option is that it is, and will, continue to increase disparity through privileging those who are already affluent (and who benefit most from advances in technology) while at the same time undermining the need for routine and analytical labour. Furthermore, it concentrates investment in fewer and fewer hands (think Google, Amazon and Facebook) while doing nothing to address the issues of public debt. Indeed, advanced technologies might exacerbate the problem by pushing up demand and extracting profit through an increasingly sophisticated industrial military complex, the privatisation of public goods (schools, hospitals and prisons) and insuring societies against increasingly expensive events that have been created either directly or indirectly through its activities. In short, what has been enabled has been described as ‘disaster capitalism’¹², a practice that profits from catastrophe and bets on disaster through sophisticated financial instruments¹³, and may be extended to a design ethos that is centralised rather than distributive, extractive rather than generative, and authoritarian in essence rather than democratic.

Within this third there are really two possibilities. The first is to develop a manifesto for change that is so extensive that the present capitalist system would lose all of its essential characteristics, in ways that make it become unidentifiable¹⁴ yet, in the process, form nothing new. This would herald a kind of interregnum that is almost *Bladerunner* like in its existence; a place where the mere struggle for

existence is the only viable agenda. The second is for the ‘creative minority’, which every culture has long relied upon to respond to challenges, to reorganise into a pluriverse commons that is deliberately biased (that word again) to design and facilitate transformation. This intentionality would co-realise communities of diverse interest that would look to harness the energies of non-authoritarian centric dissatisfaction, and which would create a new sociology of emergence, as it learns from and collides with the voices of the ‘other,’ whose reality has long mirrored what is now a global condition.

Therefore, under one reading, the rise of populism and authoritarianism, be it in the Americas, Asia or Europe, does us all a favour, however painful its short term effects might be. It engenders a reawakening, an unwelcome wake up call to manifestations of a system in the process of disintegration that we now must confront. It signals a time when uncertainty reigns, where imperatives for dialogue and narratives of ‘the beyond’ are vital, and a need for the definition of spaces where the growing number of aware, but disillusioned, creative minorities can now refocus their energies.

When creative minorities cease to subscribe to dominant narratives civilizations die!

The speculative historian Arnold Toynbee, in his twelve-volume study of the rise and fall of civilisations, argued that when the ‘creative minority’ cease to engage in solving the challenges that face society they withdraw. In their place, a new group emerge who, through technocratic power and unthinking imitation of each other, act to protect the vested interests of those that are ruling. However, in the process, they lose control over their environment and over time they also alienate the populations they purport to serve. Eventually this inability to successfully respond to challenges causes civilisations or cultures to die. The contemporary fashion of deriding all things intellectual, of applauding unsubstantiated opinionation, and of assuming there is a technological answer for everything, seems, given rising levels of socio-economic disparity on a global scale, to have remarkable parallels with the Toynbee analysis.

The Hubris of Anthropocentric Dominance

Humanity can survive and adapt to the Anthropocene, if we accept human limits and transience as fundamental truths and work to nurture the variety and richness of our collective cultural heritage (Roy Scranton)¹⁵.

While some may not believe that the current system is disintegrating (normally because it threatens their vested interests), the multifaceted, existential threats caused by unfettered exploitation of planetary resources cannot under any circumstances be resolved within that system. Furthermore, although populists and authoritarians seem to take a perverse pride in denying climate modification (in Toynbee's terms the triumph of opinion over intellect), few are able to deny the evidence of alarming ocean acidification, increasing desertification, the loss of fresh groundwater, urban air pollution and the advent of what is now being described as the 6th great extinction of living things. Taken together, these changes to our bio-physical systems have already altered the structure of the planet so significantly it is now widely considered by scientists as the beginning of an entirely new geological era; a shift from the Holocene to the Anthropocene era.

Despite the fact that decades of evidence has, to date, almost always confirmed that humanity is collectively hurtling in exponential fashion along a worst case scenario trajectory, most, even those that acknowledge this appalling state, see any cause to modify their behaviour in a substantive way. "Technology and 'green capitalism' will save us" seems to be the dominant mantra, and the willingness to engage in conversation about what are the necessary safe operating spaces for humanity¹⁶, and what might need to be foregone as a consequence, is almost absent. This monumental hubris is not only dangerous, it is a denial of such existential consequence that it might rightly be characterised as both condoning, yet concealing, intergenerational genocide.

Thus, the deniers and their fellow travellers are distracted by the polemics, and in so doing are 'eating the future'. By 'distraction', I mean an over-preoccupation with the short-term issues of the moment, thus making 'absent' the intentionality necessary to come to terms with the revolutionary consequences of alternative trajectories. By 'future eating', I am suggesting that the time taken in either countering denial or investing in suboptimal, feel-good, light green initiatives diverts precious time and attention away from the quest to keep critical bio-systems within life-critical thresholds.

The dangers of an over-emphasis on dialectic thinking, the quest for certainty and the assertion of the primacy of the contemporary socio-economic system are all reflected in this collective mania, and if the consequences of the ignorance from our discipline obsessed mindsets were not so dire it would be almost comical. They have bought us collectively to a place where the emergency that confronts us all demands more than just a few careful and prudent changes. It requires, as the theorist Scranton argues, that we humans need to learn to let the current civilisation die. At an individual level, be we foot soldiers, worker ants or mere bystanders, this means 'letting go of our predispositions and fear. At a societal level, it means letting go of this particular way of life and its ideas of 'identity, freedom,

success and progress'¹⁷, for it is only in this way that we can come to terms with what it means to live inside the Anthropocene.

New Narratives of Imagination, Anticipation and Aspiration

The narratives of the next system will make space and time intelligible in new ways. They will help us reconceive our identities, provide meaningful frameworks for seeing things differently and reconstitute realities freed from the mechanistic assumptions that now constrain the existence of the many in the favour of the few. (Michael McAllum)

Central to this thesis has been the argument that the symptoms of system disintegration and the issues it creates (the future of jobs, the addiction to growth and the need for certainty) cannot be resolved by populists or authoritarians. Nor can they be resolved by those that offer the 'supposed' moderate alternative within the current system. This is because both (and there are plenty of examples) are attempting, or pretending to attempt, to resolve systemic issues that aren't resolvable by advocating change that doesn't change underlying structures and systems.

If this is the case, and before we all succumb to the nonsense of an existential wasteland that increasingly resembles the war zones of the technological age or dystopic science fiction, new narratives that point to a different system are required. Michel Bauwen's P2P Foundation is just one instance of what 'different' looks like, and there are many others. These stories must begin to frame a counter culture that is 'beyond the system' without using the present system as the basis to always define what those narratives mean. They must in particular address our need to imagine, to anticipate and to aspire, and if they are sufficiently powerful, they will frame a new kind of symbolic language and collective learning that will facilitate a conscious and collective change process.

While imaginative narratives of the post-now are not new (for that is what good science fiction is), the advent of networking technologies that can enable quite different constitutions of time, form and space are. These do and will provide the basis for a global analogical (philosophical) project in a transmodern pluriverse, and the further evolution of thinking, language forms and shapes that become visible in new production and peer to peer 'ecologies of possibilities', released from the shackles of commodified time. While the language that describes these alternatives is at first strange and uncomfortable (for that is part of what difference is) they will create vibrant, localised civics or new forms of community, work and value exchange that looks to isolate itself from the corrosive effects of external globalised interests that seek to exploit the civic for its own benefit.

This will create the platform that offers a new capacity to aspire; “a navigational capacity through which poor people can effectively change the terms of recognition within which they are generally trapped”¹⁸, together with a shared anticipation to divide future risks more equitably, including those legacy dystopias generated by the contemporary system, and in so doing enable individuals and communities to transition past the politics of blame.

As a set of holons (each story connected to and nestled within other stories), these narratives will develop a new ‘sociology of emergences’ and knowledge systems that emancipate humanity from its present dysfunctional state, through different kinds of collective learning and novel ways to apply technologies that are already available. They will allow the pooling of the true richness of human experience, and in so doing, will make the Mercurios of this world who, for so long, have faithfully supported the contemporary status quo, wonder why they tolerated the sterile and often unhappy conditions that are the legacy of the fossil age.

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¹ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (3rd edn.; San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2006) at p. 47.

² Boaventura De Sousa Santos, 'Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide', (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers,, 2013) at loc. 3203.

³ Ibid., at loc. 381.

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- ⁶ *Ibid.*, at p. 20.
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- ¹⁷ Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* at loc. 200.
- ¹⁸ Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* at p. 183.

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