

## On the nature of change

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The first in a major new series of articles exploring how dialectical systems thinking can direct change making. Radical global change is now a necessity. But even small, everyday changes can be fiercely resisted, resulting in stress and conflict. It is the paradox of our time. This is why I believe we need a sophisticated and widely shared understanding of what change is and how it can be achieved. This series of articles is one attempt to meet that



need. The change we need would involve a rapid evolution to a global economic system that works with and within the global ecological system, the biosphere. Natural systems are fertile places for exploring how this change could happen.

### **Intensely personal**

The one constant in my life has been my inherited desire for change. My parents - Ken and Bernie - were both

highly committed political activists who wanted to change the entire world. They wanted to see an economic system focused on people's needs - from the every day to the extraordinary. I am also of the Watership Down generation. The film is about a rabbit who alone recognises the need for a radical change, and must persuade those around them to take enormous risks to meet that challenge. As a child I wanted to see a different world in which human beings behaved entirely differently towards animals and the environment. Today I find myself editing *The Ecologist*. This platform has called for urgent changes to prevent environmental armageddon for decades. From its earliest days it referred to systems thinking as a theory of change that could help diagnose the problems caused by industrial capitalism and its impact on the natural environment. *The Ecologist* itself has gone through many changes, including going online. It is now owned by The Resurgence Trust, which promotes the values of empathy, oneness with nature, and wellbeing, and has the core aim of "changing people's worldviews so they live in harmony with each other, and with nature". I am very fortunate to be in the change-making business. The five decades since *The Ecologist* was launched have witnessed extreme change - but very few of the kind I have hoped and campaigned for. McDonald's still trades. The Amazon rainforest remains under grave threat. And now climate breakdown is upon us and fascism is the spectre haunting Europe.

## **Individual failure**

This all represents a collective failure of humankind to achieve positive change. It is a failure of human societies to undo the appropriation and exploitation that has characterised civilisation since its inception. It is a failure to address environmental crises. It is the failure of the human species to reach its potential - as a conscious guardian of life on earth. But it also feels to me like an intensely personal failure. I - then and now - wanted to change all of this and I haven't. Fully comprehending the scale of the change we need can be immobilising: how can I, a single human being, really have any expectation that I can effect any real change at all? The Amazon website is heaving with books about success, leadership and change management. The authors present themselves as exemplars of success: How I rose to the top. How I transformed my team. How I disrupted an industry. How I gained power and wealth. Yet these personal successes do not aggregate into general, societal success. Things for most are in fact only getting worse. We have to challenge the assumption that winners are the best advisors. Capitalism is more a roulette wheel than a meritocracy. The secret to making money is simply to have money; you have to take risks, and randomly some succeed. Donald Trump and Theresa May demonstrate that power and wealth is inherited and that it is fiercely protected by those who have it rather than earned by those who 'deserve' it. But those who continually fail have far more data to work from - and have learned more about change - than those who win first time.

## **Building resilience**

In this series of articles I hope to share the core lessons I have learned from failing hard, failing fast, and then failing again. I have failed in personal relationships, failed at improving the organisations I work for, and manifestly failed to create the kind of world in which I want to live - a world where all of us can survive. For some reason, I have even failed at giving up. I cannot stop trying. I think it is fair to say that every time I failed, I failed better. Today, this kind of failure is called 'resilience'. Each time I fail I tend to hit the bookshop. I have failed to rid myself of the belief that the chances of success can only be improved through learning - through more sophisticated strategies, a better understanding of the world and the people who populate it, and a higher level of self awareness. Today, I am in a better position to try and change the world than during any previous time. I am much kinder to myself, and enjoy life to a degree I had never anticipated even a few years ago. My most important relationships are stronger and more reciprocal than before, I've never been happier at work. I've never been more confident that I can play a constructive role in the changes - and the challenges - that lie ahead.

## **Supporting groups**

This may all just be about getting a bit older. But I feel very strongly that it is in large part because I have never stopped wanting to change the world, I felt I had to learn more and I've retained an insatiable curiosity about the world. I have also been able to understand my own weaknesses and limitations. And today I have reached one of those limitations. I think I am doing as much as I can as a private individual, even with the support that comes from working in a small team working for a charity in North Devon. I feel that in order to achieve the changes which are still core to my work and my life, I do need to work with more people. I will soon be joining

grassroots groups and environmental campaigns so that I can do this. But I feel the best contribution I can make right now is to try and share the lessons I have learned from my almost a half century of failure with as many people as possible. Having read so much, and found so much of value, it would seem a waste and a dereliction to keep it all to myself. This series of articles - called *On The Nature of Change* - represents my best attempt to set out everything I have learned about how change manifests itself, in the individual person, in groups and organisations - in society and in nature itself.

### **Dialectical thinking**

This 'On the Nature of Change' series will have three clear sections: 1. The philosophers. 2. Interpreting the world. 3. Changing the world. The first section will examine a philosophical theory of change, and how this has itself developed and evolved over time. The second will apply this theory to three fundamental areas: the self, the team, society. Finally, the third will present clear ways in which this theory of change can be practically applied to real world challenges. The theory of change evolves into and then evolves out of a philosophical logic called dialectics. It begins in Ancient Rome, unfolds into a coherent worldview during enlightenment in Germany, is transformed again in the white heat of the Russian revolution and takes on a new pattern and structure as systems thinking, used in boardrooms today around the world. Dialectics is above all a theory of change. It begins with the proposition that change is constant, indeed it is the only constant. The suggestion is that if we can better understand how change already plays out, we may just be able to direct and influence change so that we evolve in a positive direction. Dialectics as a pure form of logic is presented by the early 19th century German philosopher Georg Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit and Science of Logic*. His works are notoriously complex and difficult to understand. I'm going to pull out a few key concepts that I feel are vitally important to developing an understanding of change today. Hegel sets out how we can understand the world around us from first principles. He uses concepts such as "identity and difference", "the negation of the negation", "sublation", mediated and immediate" in order to describe absolute truth. I will offer a definition of these terms, and explain why the concepts remain useful. In true Hegelian form, I intend to extract what I think is useful but totally ignore (negate) those of his ideas that I feel are less useful.

### **General theory**

The second phase in the transformation of this dialectical concept of change takes place largely in the almost totally forgotten works of Alexander Bogdanov, who lived through the Russian revolution. He developed key dialectical ideas and in doing so presented a general theory that the world was defined not so much by matter, but by organisation, by systems, by patterns. This theory included concepts of "feedback", "homeostasis" and "autopoiesis" - the secret to life itself. I will define these terms, and explain their use. Bogdanov died in obscurity, but his great work was published in Germany in the 1920s. At the same time and in the same place Ludwig Von Bertalanffy began to present ideas which he would later present as a grand General Systems Theory. This theory of change suggests that our universe is made up entirely of systems, and these systems have many of the same properties. This takes the concepts developed by Bogdanov and takes them even further. This

includes the concept of “emergent properties” where the system can exhibit properties that do not exist in any one of its parts. We can understand human beings, teams of people and indeed society as a whole as interacting, nested systems. Systems theory is today even more advanced, and I hope to take in some of the latest concept to complete this presentation of a theory of change. This theory of change, I believe, is the solution to the problem of how I - a single individual - can affect change on a global level. By using these conceptual tools I have a greater chance of managing the change I need to make to myself, to the institutions within which I work, and through them to the world at large.

### **Making change**

My plan to end this series where many people will want to begin. The final phase will take all these concepts, and all the ways they have been used to interpret the world, and then set out some practical examples of how they can be used to effect real change in the world. I will describe how I used this theory of change to better understand my own behaviour and needs - and the behaviour and needs of those around me. I will talk about my success (and failure) of managing changes in the activist groups and workplaces when I have tried to change the world. I will give clear examples of where dialectics and systems concepts can help all of us better direct our efforts towards transforming our society into a sustainable system. The primary claim of dialectics is that everything is in a constant state of flux. It seems fitting to conclude, therefore, with the proviso that I cannot predict the future and that this plan is itself subject to change. A necessary part of making change is being subjected to it. I feel that the information I have stumbled across over the last twenty years in attempting to achieve change is both fascinating and important and must be shared as widely as possible. I believe it can prepare us better for meeting the changes ahead and bringing about the change we desire, the change we so desperately need.

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