

To Transform Consumption, Throw Out the Modernist Concept of Human Nature

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Let me begin with something I suspect most of you know, but haven't explicitly brought into your thinking about *Transitions beyond a Consumer Society*: the fact that societies are complex. Understanding complexity is essential in designing any kind of transition to a different world. So I will begin today by talking about complexity and its relationship to transitions. I will organize my comments about the five topical areas around which the Conference has been organized.

Since I am speaking to a sophisticated audience, let me offer a typical academic description of complexity:

Earth systems are complex in the technical sense: exhibiting non-linear interactions, multiple stable states, fractal and chaotic behavior, self-organized criticality, and non-Gaussian distributions of outputs. Multiple mechanical, chemical, biological, and anthropogenic processes may be active and interacting at the same time and place.¹

But, now let me offer another definition that fits this conference better.

Complex system: a system with numerous components and interconnections, interactions or interdependencies that are difficult to describe, understand, predict, manage, design, and/or change.²

References to these quotes are in the manuscript.

Complex systems behave in strange ways. They are not amenable to description via the usual deterministic, scientifically based laws we use routinely in mechanical systems, even those that are very complicated. Multiple stable states create the possibility of jumps from one behavioral regime to another, for example, collapse of ecosystems. If an healthy ecosystem is excessively stressed by over-harvesting, it may collapse into a morbid state that cannot be restored. Revolutions, like the French, in human societies are another form of rapid regime change. Alternatively, change can occur more slowly, as in transitions between successive sociological eras of human history. Modernity emerged slowly from the Middle Ages, and now rests on cultural institutions, distinct from those that preceded it. Today, I will be talking only about gradual transitions.

Another feature of complexity is the possibility of emergence, the sudden appearance of order or some distinctive quality from a chaotic or disordered state. Flocking of birds is one example; liquidity or solidity is another. Beauty emerges from the complexity of a Old Master's painting;

1. Kastens et al., 2009. "How Geoscientists Think and Learn." *Eos*, Transactions, v. 90, n. 31, p. 265-266.

2. Magee and de Weck, 2004. "Complex System Classification." available at <http://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/6753>.

individualism from a narcissistic society like ours; and, as I will elaborate shortly, the important quality of flourishing can emerge from the complexity of individual human bodies and collective societies.

The collapse of the US financial system is a recent example of large-scale complex system behavior. That system has a mechanistic set of functions related to capital markets, but also produces several important emergent properties: namely, monetary liquidity, security, trust, confidence, and so on. When the machine broke down in 2007, money stopped flowing, but more critically, these emergent properties evaporated. The solution chosen was a series of technical fixes: first, bail-outs, and then incremental regulatory changes. Few, if any, understood the complex, systemic nature of the situation. As a result, the same systemic roots may, and probably do, remain in place, waiting to cause another breakdown.

How does this story relate to our concerns? I think it is highly relevant. We are brought together by an underlying concern that global natural and social systems are both moving toward a state in which collapse seems more and more possible. I can talk only about possibilities because no one can predict complex system behavior with certainty, except, perhaps, for short time periods. Growing evidence about the unsustainability of the Earth's systems and the possibility of unknown regime changes have created growing concerns about sustainability. At this conference, we focus on one of the most destabilizing emergent properties of modern, capitalistic political economies: consumerism. Others are equally important. Positivism, the ubiquitous use of knowledge produced by the application of scientific methodologies, is another.

Flourishing, a very important emergent quality, is absent. I believe that this quality, flourishing, should be the primary normative target of all human societies. Our modern systems fail to do this because they are constructed on a foundation of two faulty beliefs. The first is that the world is merely a complicated machine producing material outputs. The second is a derivative of the first, the choice of a machine-like, economic model of human behavior, which I will also expand upon later.

I will stop my critique of modernity at this point because, while other factors are also important, these two beliefs are the primary cause of all the ills we will discuss here. The rest of my talk is structured around the five organizing topics that address the Conference's main theme: the need to move beyond modernity, that particular socio-economic-technological complex system that fosters hyper-consumption. Trying to fix this system by applying Band-Aids won't work. Consumption will never go away. All life depends on it. We can, however, replace its pathological domination, but only by changing the modern cultural system at its roots. This is my key message. If it slipped by you, let me repeat it: "We can overcome the domination of consumption, but only by changing the modern cultural system at its roots." The remainder of the talk addresses how to go about this immensely challenging task.

Before turning to this task, *it is critical to replace the central normative vision of modern society* (the first of the conference themes I will address). That current vision is human progress, continually driven by ever more knowledge and technology. This vision of Enlightenment thinkers has changed to an economic version that drives today's societies. That change rests on the simplistic view of the complex human body and brain as a machine, powered by a utilitarian calculus to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, now converted to the even more simplistic proxy of wealth as the criterion to be maximized.

I have been promoting flourishing as an alternative normative vision for some time. Flourishing is an emergent quality that may become present when humans and their surrounding systems are both functioning in such a way that its possibility becomes manifestly real. Flourishing can be interpreted as a sign of attaining one's potential. For all living beings, biological potential is expressed in their genes. A flower flourishes when it blooms, and seeds the next generation. An animal flourishes when it adapts to its habitat and produces progeny to maintain the species. Social species add an additional feature; they flourish culturally when they have become part of a community and exist organically therein. Social or cultural flourishing for humans is related to their capacity to create meaning through language. Flourishing, for humans, requires an assessment that life is satisfactory in terms of some meaningful criteria of societal or cultural wholeness or integrity.

In earlier work, my use of flourishing was relatively ungrounded. I first stumbled upon it during a exercise in a personal training program. I saw it then as a more meaningful normative indicator than progress or wealth, but based largely on its metaphorical power. The Greek equivalent, eudaimonia, was coined by Aristotle to mean living well. Its etymology comes from the presence of good daemons, signaling the grace of the gods. Now, I believe that flourishing is objectively tied and inherent to human existence. All life possesses "viability" as the main driving force that continually reproduces individual (and species) life. All life has an inherently objective purpose: to maintain its existential structure.

Research in cognitive science supports this. The neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, writes this about the consequences of consciousness in his book, *The Feeling of What Happens*.³

Consciousness is, in effect, the key to a life examined, for better or worse, our beginner's permit into knowing about the hunger, the thirst, the sex, the tears, the laughter, the kicks, the punches, the flow of images we call thought, the feelings, the words, the stories, the beliefs, the music and the poetry, the happiness and the ecstasy. At its simplest and most basic level, consciousness lets us recognize an irresistible urge to *stay alive and develop a concern for the self*. At its most complex and elaborate level, consciousness helps us develop a concern for other selves and improve the art of life. (My emphasis)

Damasio's model can be expressed by the term, intentional, to describe human behavior. This fundamental description of human action come from the conflation of consciousness and viability.

Now let me address the next conference topic, *theories of social change*. I am not a sociologist, but I have read widely enough to discover the theory I find most consistent with complexity: the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens. Giddens argues that societies work on top of a four-part structure. First, two sets of rules: 1) signification rules that provide meaning to our perceptions, in the vernacular, our beliefs; and 2) legitimation rules that designate appropriate actions for whatever has been signified, in everyday language, norms. Next come two sets of resources: 1) allocative resources comprising the tools used in enacting the norms; and 2) authoritative resources constituting the ordering of authority of those who control the choice of tasks to enact and the associated tools to use, in common parlance, the power structure.

3. Damasio, A. R. (2000). *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. Boston, Mariner Books

Signification rules provide meaning to worldly phenomena, that is, the situations people find themselves embedded within. Legitimation rules provide collective and personal norms, that is, the intentional actions that ought to be taken in any given, previously encountered situation. Tools are the means to enact the norms. In any collective assembly of people, an ordering of authority develops in which some people dominate others in assigning tasks and in allocating the necessary tools. These rules appear to be similar to the processes that run our human cognitive systems. I have been rather detailed here because these rules will be the basis of the transition strategy I propose.

The next part of Giddens's model is the source of its name, structuration. Structures, Giddens writes, are "both the medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social systems." In a kind of dialectical cycle, people shape the structure, and, simultaneously, the structure determines what people do. As life goes on, the four elements become more embedded in the brains of individuals, and, also, in the metaphorical collective memory. However, when a change takes place in any one of the elements, it creates changes in the others, resulting in a new pattern of behavior. A classic example from the management literature is the resultant reordering of authority that followed the introduction of CT scanner technology into the medical world. After the new tool was introduced, the role of the technician was enhanced relative to the radiologist. A higher skill level was now required in operating the machines. Structuration provides the key to change as I will further elaborate.

Each successive sociological era has come about through the structuration process. Modernity followed feudalism, as new beliefs about the nature of the world and human beings were being produced by the new scientific tools coming from thinkers like Descartes and Newton. Adam Smith's self-interested model of human being—Homo economicus—is another signification rule that has profoundly influenced societal structure, and is the primary, but not the only, causal factor behind present-day consumerist cultures. New power structures arose as other rules—all laws and regulations are legitimation rules—came into being. Inequality and increasingly oligarchical authoritative orderings have arisen from the workings of such rules over time. I find Giddens's model attractive because it sees change as evolutionary, not revolutionary. It suggests that one can discover effective levers of change pragmatically, by modifying one of the four structural elements and adjusting the course according to the results.

This is a good segue to the next part, offering some thoughts on the next conference topic, *specific strategies for successful transitions*. The basic strategic framework, I propose, is to replace those structural elements of modern culture that produce hyper-consumption and other ills with a different set that would, a priori, appear to exert transitional forces going in the right direction. Note that I am using waffle words here, not because I am unconfident of what I am about to say, but in keeping with the inherently unpredictable nature of complexity. Having just said that, I do believe that the most powerful lever of change is beliefs, that is, the rules of signification. Beliefs are particularly important because they form the primary basis for action and lead to the creation of habits, both good or bad.

The connection between beliefs and habits was noted by one of the founders of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce who, in 1896, wrote:

“And what then is belief?

First, it is something we are aware of;

Second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and [most importantly]

Third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a habit.”

So, then, it makes sense to replace these most basic beliefs, the ones that constitute modernity that as I said are: 1) how the world works, and 2) how human beings work. The world is a complicated machine. Its secrets can be revealed by isolating little pieces and, then, applying powerful scientific methodologies to each separate part, a process we call reductionism. We owe this worldview to Descartes who also claimed we acquire a precise image of the world in our minds. Together, these ideas produced today’s dominant view of a separate, objective reality out there. With just a little thought, this belief ultimately leads to the existence of singular truths about the world, and, hence, to domination. The Chilean biologist, Humberto Maturana, says that, “In the ... regime of objective reality, a claim of truth is tantamount to a demand for obedience.” The fate of infidels in history attests to the validity of this statement.

The enlightenment thinkers who followed were strongly influenced by Descartes. They saw scientific knowledge and its fruits in the form of technology as the means of perpetual progress toward the perfection of human beings and of liberation from the shackles of dogma that kept humanity in the dark for centuries. Francis Bacon, touting the wonders of the new science, is said to have written “I am come in very truth leading to you Nature with all her children to bid her to your service and make her your slave.” Following Bacon’s view, we have spent the last 400 or so years enslaving nature, but, I know, she will always have the last word. This Baconian optimism lives today in an almost addictive belief that we can solve any problem, large or small, with technology and technocratic, rational thinking.

The world, however, is not the complicated machine of Descartes, or as conventional reductionist science presumes it to be. It is, as I claim, a complex system. The whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts, meaning that reductionism is doomed to leave pieces out. This is why so many technological artifacts, designed on the basis of incomplete scientific knowledge, produce surprising and serious unintended consequences in the real world. The scientific method and its relative, positivism, cannot escape this problem related to complexity. Conversely, pragmatism, a different path to understanding, fits where science fails. Pragmatism entails a process of collective inquiry, designed to gain understanding—a different kind of resource than reductionist knowledge. Pragmatic inquiry deals with problems obstructing progress towards normative objectives in complex systems, ranging from backyard gardens to whole societies.

John Dewey, the American pragmatic philosopher wrote,

The mind of man is being habituated to a new method and ideal: there is but one sure road of access to truth, the road of patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record and controlled reflection. It is constituted by a method of changing beliefs by means of tested inquiry as well as arriving at them.

Dealing with a complex world is more like gardening than driving a car. Truths emerge from observations within the system we want to understand. Pragmatic processes minimize distortions and omissions resulting from methodological reductionism, and the ineffective use of quick fixes and, thus minimize unintended outcomes. Like formal pragmatism, systems thinking similarly questions the applicability and effectiveness of conventional disciplinary knowledge, based on reductionist science.

The modern model of human nature is the second important constitutive belief. Homo sapiens has become Homo economicus: a rational, narrowly self-interested individual who acts, insatiably to acquire material goods. Erich Fromm, the eminent psychotherapist, argued in his book, *To Have or To Be*, that, during the progression of modernity, we moved from a **being** mode of life to a **having** mode, with a concomitant loss of what it means to be human. The having model of human nature has given us neo-classical economics and its imperative to grow, a market economy, hyper-consumption, and very high levels of stress. None of these is compatible with the realities of the Planet or with the vision of flourishing. The combination of a finite planet and an insatiable predator is ultimately catastrophic.

Accordingly, the second belief change I propose is from Homo economicus to Homo caritas—human existence based on care. Care, not need satisfaction, is, I believe, the primary attribute of human existence. To repeat, ontologically or existentially, humans are caring, not insatiably needy, creatures. We exist as human Beings (with a capital B to emphasize the verbal form of this word), as opposed to other animals, by virtue of our conscious attention to the world, enabled by our extraordinary brain. I pointed to this earlier with a quote from Damasio, who writes that consciousness leads to an irresistible urge to stay alive and to develop a concern for the self, other living selves and to improve the art of life.

Care in this existential sense is not a psychological affect. We perceive, attend to the world, and interact with it; all ways we care for it. Heidegger says that caring is "having to do with something, producing, attending to something and looking after it, giving up something and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining, and so forth." We have evolved biologically and culturally through caring interactions with the world. Our emotional range arose out of our attentiveness to the world and to other creatures. However, caring has retreated into the shadows under the onslaught of the economic model of human Beings.

I didn't invent this caring alter ego. Fromm recognized the importance of Being and so did other great thinkers. Abraham Maslow, whose work evolved from the deficit psychology of need to the positive domain of Being, wrote, 'Being brings with it "a more efficient perception of the world and more comfortable relations with it."' Heidegger wrote, "Authentic Being takes responsibility for the world." and also "Modern humans have forgotten being and have become rich in things and poor in soul."

Being and flourishing are intimately interwoven. The hegemony of Homo economicus and having have overwhelmed Homo caritas and Being. Being is the source of what some call the authentic self, the real me, or the fully individuated person of Carl Jung or John Stuart Mill. Modern market economies are built on transactions; one gets things through exchanges. Being, in its worldly manifestation of care, shows up through relationships, a critical difference. Erich Fromm's provocative book title, *To Have or To Be*, as I mentioned, captures the primary challenge to flourishing because, at least in the US, we live almost exclusively in the having mode. This challenge gets me to the last theme, *insights into the obstacles to a transition beyond consumerist societies*.

I will continue by returning to Giddens's sociological model as it offers arguments both for and against change. Structuration is a fundamentally a conservative model; societies tend to reinforce and hold on to the structural elements that have become embedded. Identity and beliefs become

conflated. People are resistant to losing their place in the authoritative order. The purveyors of routinely used resources want to maintain their markets and so on.

Eric Olin Wright, who some in this audience heard speak at a luncheon meeting about a year ago, discussed four generic transformational strategies. The first, direct confrontation (he called these ruptural strategies), aims at replacing existing institutions, but so far has failed in changing capitalistic systems. Just think of the various Occupy events. Next, sympiotic strategies modify existing institutions by attaching new forms of social empowerment to proposed solutions to other problems being addressed by dominant classes and elites. This approach may provide incremental movement but, perversely, may also strengthen the establishment. He included a third, escape from the society, but, obviously, this cannot affect a change in the society being abandoned.

The fourth path, which he labeled “interstitial,” seeks changes at society’s margins—a sort of stealth strategy. He saw this one as the most likely to work, but, unfortunately, not likely to produce major changes. Not an overwhelmingly hopeful response to the overall conference theme, but, like Wright, I would choose the interstitial path. Here are a few examples. Academic institutions should begin to add transdisciplinary academic and research programs to the highly splintered, reductionist disciplines that have become hegemonic. They should introduce pragmatic methodologies to complement traditional analytic frameworks.

Management schools and schools of public policy should favor pragmatic approaches to policy making and administration over the virtually exclusive technocratic or science-based frameworks in play. Systems-thinking practices should be injected everywhere as they mitigate reductionist thinking. Relational-based local economies, for example, barter, time banking, or sharing, should be expanded beyond the few experiments that have been established. More worker cooperatives like Mondragon would implicitly embed the idea of care and non-hierarchical authoritative ordering.

Damasio and other neuroscientists have important inputs about initiating change in individual humans, the starting place for societal change. Scientists now describe the brain as plastic and structurally coupled to the outside world. Neuronal structure continually changes as perceptions of experiences are received and embedded in the brain through reflection. Learning and doing are intimately coupled. Routine actions embed neuronal structures more and more deeply over time. Merely introducing people to new ideas, especially adults whose brains are already largely fixed, will not replace behavioral patterns that have become habitual. To replace the idea of wanting things with caring, people must act in new ways. Anyone who has already accepted the importance of caring must practice it in ways that are obvious and persuasive to others.

Caring requires skills that have been lost in the relentless pressures of modern capitalistic society’s emphasis on individualism and competition. The premise of scarcity that underlies neoclassical economics and the institutional norms that follow have given competition hegemony over cooperation, a form of action consistent with caring. The introduction of pragmatic inquiry will, by its nature, promote cooperation because the process itself is fundamentally egalitarian. Experts like most of us here are at a disadvantage because our well established beliefs hamper our ability to see what is really happening in the real world.

Individuals can be taught the missing skills necessary for caring. Two such skills are empathy and reflection. Empathy is essential because caring actions are always aimed at serving the other,

whether human or not. Cognitive science findings suggest that humans have neuronal structures that mirror, that is, perceive, another's situation. Modernity has swept away much of our natural empathetic capabilities, along with care itself, as I noted above. Intriguingly, years before he changed his mind and gave us the self-interested model we still cling to, Adam Smith believed that human nature was based on empathy, a prerequisite of caring. I often muse about what the world would be like if he had died before writing *The Wealth of Nations*.

Dealing with a complex world is more like gardening than designing a computer. I believe the road to flourishing is open and clear, but the end is a long way off. The cultural forces opposed to change, especially at the roots, will fight tooth and nail to sustain the status quo. That's one important reason to stop talking about sustainable this or that and start talking about flourishing. I believe that once we practice caring, instead of needing, we will quickly come to appreciate it. Dealing with reductionism may be harder because so many institutions are built on a Cartesian, objectivist foundation. The academic institutions you represent are examples, par excellence, but so are all the other institutions represented here. I have a sense it will be more difficult to give up the comfort of reductionism and positivism than the emptiness of insatiable need. In any case, I leave the specifics of the mechanism of change up to you because the nature of complexity and the pragmatism necessary to cope with it require that solutions come only by inquiry rooted in the very problems that must be solved. Less academic froth and more mundane action. Leave here on Friday and lead by doing. Every mind changed is a step in the right direction.