Human Systems in the Anthropocene

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Ten years ago, in two books entitled "Measuring Hidden Dimensions" (2005, 2008), I articulated a notion of the complexity of human systems both individual and organizational. The hypothesis put forward was that human systems comprise three fundamental, intrinsically related, dimensions which I called socio-emotional, psychological, and cognitive. By centering the second book (2008) around a theory of work, I included a strong reference to how humans act upon physical nature, focusing on people's *internal workplace* (rather the external one as Marx had done). This yielded a new theory of work in organizations which laid bare the inner obstacles to delivering effective complex work.

Overall, I showed that inside of each of the three system dimensions, one finds three or four subdivisions that are either simply factual (self conduct, task focus, interpersonal perspective as in the psychological dimensions), or stage- and phase-like (as in the developmental realm). I showed in detail that these subdivisions are complex, especially since they are embedded in each other and thus intrinsically related. It became clear that in coaching and consulting only integral thinking would do that could master systemic complexity.

As I look around in my present cultural environment, I see little of this systemic complexity acknowledged. I don't see it having even begun to determine consultants' and politicians' view of human nature and the modes of work by which human nature is increasingly defined. After all, we live in the anthropocene, which means that human activities tend to be directly reflected, not only in our planet's weather system, but in the planetary balance that forms the basis of living on planet Earth, such as food supply, water supply, oxygen supply, not to speak of a balance between different material cultures. Alas, there are only few signs that the complexity of the real world has made a dent in the way educational systems are fashioned.

When I think about the possible reasons for the neglect paid to complex human systems, and the denial of their developmental (and thus transformational) nature, the most likely reasons that come to mind point to a lack of individuals' cognitive development over the lifespan, starkly determined by existing educational systems. Very few of these presently honor humans' potential for highly complex and systemic thinking.

I also showed in volume 2 of *Measuring Hidden Dimensions* (2008) that, especially in the western world, there exists an systemic difficulty for people to advance beyond the formal logical thinking that schools, colleges, and universities impart to them after they turn 10. This kind of thinking to which we owe our present notion of empirical science (now often yielding to profit motives), has become so dominant that it has become exceedingly difficult for people to develop a holistic and systemic grasp of the real world as a transformational entity.

While empirical research by Basseches clearly shows (1984) that late adolescence harbors a *dialectical* potential for different levels of systems thinking to emerge, this potential seems either to wither or get arrested through the onslaught of logic-based algorithms, now invisible in the form of software. Social media have become a source of spreading formal logical thinking as *downloading* even further, to the point where one is able to download hatred as well as compassion, but without any understanding of the systemic effects of doing so.

If you add subservience to algorithms to the western focus on short term outcomes you have a perfect recipe for disaster, not only for the individual but for society at large. This is because what happens on account of downloading is that people remain almost totally removed from the real world their survival depends on, as well as the experience of their own thinking in that world. This "real" world is determined by constantly generative structures coalescing into *natural necessity* that can only be grasped by engaging in one's thinking with the *four moments of dialectic* (Bhaskar 1993) which, however, are taught nowhere.

Alarming!

Up to the present time, this state of affairs was not by definition catastrophic since human technology was too undeveloped to have much of an impact on natural necessity governing the real world. But now that we have entered a new geological epoch, the anthropocene (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropocene), where no human action is ultimately without impact on society and its physical environment at large, it's clear that humans' defensive attitude against the real world -- supported by flimsy epistemologies that equates the real world with what we know about it (Bhaskar's epistemic fallacy), is a recipe for disaster.

And some of these disasters have begun to appear in my lifetime.

My conclusion would be that in the anthropocene, we are in need of a complete revamping of our educational systems in which presently socialization trumps thinking. Given that the human mind is an integral part of the real world -- as much shaped by it as able to shape it -- embracing higher levels of systems thinking found in dialectic, especially in the highly teachable form made possible by Bhaskar's work, could be key to living in the anthropocene with some measure of responsibility.

A central question of our time therefore seems to be: how educational systems are to be transformed to send even a mere glimmer of these reflections into each human brain. Right now, all that these systems do is prepare individuals for short-term success "now". It seems to me that present notions of *teaching, consulting, and coaching* are woefully anachronistic because they still assume that success in the short run, rather than survival in the long run, is the real issue.

And it is here that a longitudinal perspective, as the developmental sciences make available to us, is becoming a very practical tool indeed, although the relevance of development over the

individual life span risks to fall under the verdict that the human past, not the evanescent human present, is really what determines humans' survival.

References

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