

The Agenda for the Next Wave

Fred Emery, August 1985

My concern is with the next agenda that must be engaged upon in the next couple of decades to overcome the essential failure of social science in the postwar years. It has failed to meet, or to contribute in any really deep way (with exceptions) to the programme initiated by Kurt Lewin in his posthumous paper 'Frontiers in Group Dynamics' in 1946.

Now if one is going to draw up such an explicit agenda, it must be based on the agenda that the society is currently setting itself. It may well be that when drawing up some sort of reasonably convincing agenda of social issues, we might look at it and say 'we are not really in much of a position to contribute to any of the important items on that agenda'; that may well be the case. Or it may be that we can identify some of the items on the social agenda that are significant and to which theoretically we should be able to contribute, but we find that we are not in a position to do so because we lack resources. Apart from our resource of a well educated population, there are also increased resources in social science now. We need only look at the post 1945 expansion of departments of sociology; psychology; psychiatry; and anthropology and biology. We do have vast resources but we may still conclude that there is no way these resources can either be released from their commitment to academic disciplinary pursuits or that for some reason the population will be reluctant to operationalize such an agenda. When a culture draws up an agenda there is an implicit sort of pressure as to when these things need to be achieved, and how they will be orchestrated.

In our considerations we should remember the extensive and radical changes that are starting to take place even in universities. Many of the major advances in what I call Open Systems Thinking (Emery F, 1981) are now being made in areas such as linguistics and ecology. By the social sciences I mean all of those sciences that contribute to our understanding of human ecology. That clearly covers even areas such as physics which is turning to ecological physics, the physics of the world within which humans live. Some physicists continue with the subnuclear quantum universe but there is another physics which quite properly applies here and which the Gibsonians have had to invoke. There is a new science of chemical ecology emerging as we learn about the human effects of pollution, for example. There's also a science of ecological biology which applies to human ecology and takes us a long way from rats in mazes. Underlying these shifts is a basic change in the way we perceive ourselves in our world, our root metaphor. That metaphor or world hypothesis which is emerging is called 'contextualism' and we return to it below. But first, let me explain why it is becoming critical that we raise our consciousness of the emerging social agenda.

Increasingly and internationally, there is a sense of crisis. Both the economic and cultural dimensions of it can be discerned and these need to be analysed if our dimly felt and perceived crisis, and therefore our similarly perceived agenda, is to be clear and understood. For such a task, the first issue is an appropriate time horizon. Is it an agenda for tomorrow or for the 1990s?

It was only after 1970 that we detected the breakdown of our assumptions of assured economic growth. That has turned our attention to the fifty year Kondratiev economic cycles. They have been established empirically over the last two hundred years of industrial society. They are clear through all of the countries involved in the world economy (Emery F, 1978). It was also clear once that was established, that we needed to go back and examine the phases and the depth of these economic crises.

These phases of struggling out of the fifty year depressions were all characterized by a tremendous efflorescence of ideas and institutions built around ideas. Many of the ideas had in fact emerged before this period of efflorescence but people coming out of these depressions were confronted with challenges to the expectations they had had for the previous forty years or so, expectations which had guided the way they brought up a new generation of children. The ideas that were scattered around were treated almost as trivia before, as Schumacher's 'small is beautiful' was treated as faddish for a while. As Karl Marx has said "there's a time when ideas become a material force in the way a society changes". I'm suggesting that these periods following the depths of the depressions are such times.

This current economic crisis is more serious than before because more nations have been brought tightly into the international economy with the growth of the transnationals. A 'post industrial' society may emerge, but as we got further into the matter and tried to examine and identify what are the basic conditions for it in terms of infrastructure, social structure and social control, it became clear that some of those basic conditions were not present. We couldn't even see them on the horizon. Some of them were, but for the others, two or three out of the five, we could see no solution at all. A typical example is a power base. Pulling yourself out of these troughs always seemed to require the emergence and development of a new more broadly usable and cheaper source of power. We thought we had that with nuclear energy in the sixties and the early seventies but the bottom fell out of that; it was not a cheaper source of power. It was not going to do for this depression what gas had done for the one before and steam turbines had done for the one before that. But that just meant that a much higher probability had to be given to the possibility that we were dealing with an horizon which was not a fifty year one, but something more like a two hundred and fifty year horizon. In other words, a movement from an industrial based society to something radically different which is not just a straight line projection of growth in per capita GDP.

It then became clear that the challenges that were emerging were deeper than this type of structural change: they were, in fact, *cultural changes*. When we tied together the series of waves of beatniks, hippies, punks, etc. and the diffusion and internalization of many of the values of the 1960s, we see this fundamental challenge to our traditional cultural assumptions (Emery F, 1978). I'm quite convinced in my own mind that what we are facing is in fact nothing less than a challenge to western civilisation itself. A challenge going back to the choice that was made when the intellectual achievements that Plato made in the latter stages of his life were overruled, turned under and buried by Aristotle's school in Alexandria. The social choice of that time set us on a path that gave us a basic pattern of civilisation and it is now that pattern which is under challenge.

Many of you would have read Stavrianos in his *Promise of the Coming Dark Age* (1976). He has suggested that the challenge might have gone back to the period of 5th century roughly, but I'm going further back because of what I think is involved in the philosophic formation of the foundations for our civilisation, prior to the Roman empire, not after.

This challenge has now to be taken seriously. The question had been raised by Nietzsche and others in the crisis at the end of the nineteenth century; it's been raised by Spengler and subsequently of course by Toynbee. The reason I think it is serious is twofold - that this is the only civilisation to our knowledge - and here I'm basing myself on Toynbee's massive study of all the known civilisations - which has ever based itself or claimed to base itself on what we call design principle two. All the other civilisations, those prior to the emergence of western civilisations and those co-existent with us such as China and Japan base themselves on the first design principle (Emery F, 1977).

The first, the usual design principle for getting stability in large civilisations, which comes with the emergence of urban areas and the network of mutual reciprocal relationships that are required to enable the urban centres to emerge, involves 'redundancy of parts'. One of the ways you can get reliability in a system of unreliable parts is by building in 'redundancy of parts' so if one part fails, another is there to take over. For example, the American shuttle has four computers working in parallel with a fifth on standby. As we see reflected in the price of labour and in the life expectancy of most people in design principle one countries, individuals are prepared for a specific function in life. Enough of them are prepared so that if someone drops dead or is kicked to death, there are still sufficient to get on with the job.

The alternative principle for getting reliability in a complex system is design principle two, building in a 'redundancy of function'. You over educate all the people who are constituent parts of the society so if any one person fails to carry out a particular function during that time, then someone else has the additional functions at their disposal; the capabilities to help out.

If you design on principle one then it is essential that you have a control body, some other specialised group of people who will decide when a person is allocated to one part of the system or another. The parts can only do their own bit, they cannot, not knowing the other bits, decide whether and when they are moved around: the epitome is the assembly line. In other words, you need some hierarchy of control, 'a dominant hierarchy' in such a society; there is necessarily a stratification of the worth of a life and an elitism.

In moving to the second design principle, theoretically all that is required is the multiple functioning parts, parts who are equipped to share a sufficient appreciation of the field within which they are mutually operating, and a sufficiently extensive but commonly known range of values to enable them to individually and collectively decide what ought to be done in certain circumstances. The second design principle should result, in large measure, in a self controlling society and not require a special control section; not require an elite or dominant hierarchy.

Differentiation of functions, heterogeneity leads, in the first design, to increasing complexity of controls and an increasing diversion of the free energy in the system to the internal control function.

In the second design, differentiation of functions (increasing heterogeneity) leads to an enrichment of the qualities of the parts without either, (a) increased complexity of the control system or, (b) diversion of system energy to the control function.

The first point is, therefore, that western civilisation is the first and only civilisation that has attempted to establish a stable and reliable society, with extended interconnections maintained over time, on design principle 2: it is the odd man out and I think that that in itself suggests that you have to watch to see whether it's a going concern. The second is that our particular experiment in time, in western civilisation, has been inherently more unstable than any of the other civilisations that we know; inherently unstable, not just more subject to climatic change or disease because the civilisation that we've had has been built on a lie from the period between Plato and Aristotle. A choice was made there and the lie is pretty simple and straightforward. It is a civilisation dedicated to the notion of the second design and yet it is a civilisation which in practice says 'there's no way all of you characters are going live within the second design. Because of the scarcity of resources it'll only be possible for key people to be in that act; the rest of you are going to have to put up with being redundant parts'.

Now we know that if we've got any situation where there are two system principles operating then we have dire trouble on our hands. That trouble was containable by us, despite our ups and downs until quite recently. While we have historically had instability, it did not prevent the second design principle providing the conditions for a culture which was tremendously more creative than was found in any civilisation built on design principle one. The only sort of thing that would motivate a civilisation built on design principle one to be creative in any significant sort of fashion, was warring against someone else. If you look at the history of technology, even through our western civilisation, you can see that war was still our major force.

The crisis we've lumbered ourselves with is that we did, by 1944, achieve a tremendous mobilisation of our productive forces on the basis of our technical knowledge. In 1944, while masses of our prime work force were in uniform wasting production, not producing, we managed to reach magnificent heights of production. We were producing more guns, tanks and planes than the admirals, generals and air force commodores were literally able to use. We were running short of willing people at the end of the European War and in the Pacific theatre but with a still vast surplus of production. From that point, there was never any question that the argument that scarcity of resources, the favourite argument of the Malthusians and the modern day economists was effectively dead right around the world. That did not prevent us reinforcing the existence of the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. It did not lead to that gap collapsing straight away. It was still there as a primary threat because it was still possible to use the threat of warfare. It was still possible to use that argument to demand that people subordinate themselves to the interest of the nation in order to survive.

But when warfare went from atomic bombs to thermonuclear devices, any such appeal to patriotism, love of god and country wasn't worth a brass razoo to the new generations coming up. There was little point in fighting for your country if there was no country left at the end of the fight. That pulled the last plug out on that which had held together western civilisation with this inherent contradiction.

The final straw landed when we found out that the civilisation most deeply rooted in and probably the best living representative of design principle one, Japan, was beating the pants off the Americans and Europeans. The belief in the sheer ability of our cultural model to meet the needs of its people better is therefore under tremendous threat. The challenges to our western civilisation are mounting. A further problem is coming up which will only intensify demands upon it, demands that either we get our act together or we will almost certainly make the choice to revert to design principle one, and that threat of reversion is not an idle one. [This further factor is the change in climate world wide - Ed.]

In 1917 we saw a major section of our western civilisation, with the same sort of double faced dedication to design principle two, switch over to design principle one and a few others joined it behind the iron curtain. Make no bones about this; the other side of the iron curtain is in fact a reversion to design principle one. We also saw it in Germany faced with the last fifty year crisis. That is a threat as long as we have both design principles in our civilisation, and it's becoming more real. So there is a degree of choice and a question of when we make our choices.

How do we handle that challenge? Well, that is also pretty clear. The first step in meeting the challenge clearly would have to be total commitment at all levels and at every point in society to establish design principle two as the ruling design principle, the system principle. It would have to apply in every sort of group activity which one can engage; international, national, state, regional, community or small informal group. Efforts should be made to move towards establishing design principle two consistently. That's not totally impossible. Engels and Max Weber in 1895, were both convinced that you could not unleash the resources of a large major modern enterprise of the sort that emerged through the 1880s, without autocracy. We went along with that. Autocracy appeared to be the price we had to pay at work in order to live according to design principle two in other areas of our lives. Now in the past 20 odd years, action researchers coming out of the Lewinian post war tradition have shown that we can't manage and get the maximum benefit of the development of that technology without moving into design principle two. So what had looked like an impregnable area of autocracy has already been fundamentally flawed and undermined. If it can be done in places of paid employment, the practical lessons are that it can be done anywhere. One area I would never have thought it possible for these values and practices to infiltrate is the catholic church. But what happened? The catholic church blew itself apart with its Vatican Council and John XXIII. The current Pope (1985) appears to be encountering some resistance to his reinstatement of the more traditional lines.

Given the contradiction between those parts of our society that were based on design principle one and those in design principle two, we have had a pretty good run up till now. Still not enough to give us too much comfort unless we work to get more resources devoted to change. We have to have it clear in our minds what our target is:

we've got to get rid of design principle 1 wherever we find it, in the classroom, in the factory, in the voluntary organisation. Also, we're not going to achieve this at any real speed until people's minds (remembering that people's minds operate between them and other people and the social ecology within which they are operating) are given a chance to crystalize out the ideas and values that they are committed to. Bear in mind that the values which carry through because of that contradiction in western civilisation have been almost totally negative. In Christian society we have the Ten Commandments. Some of the Ten Commandments have come to be phrased in a positive form, but biblical theologians appear to agree that they were originally all in the form of 'Thou shalt not...' (Harrelson, 1980). The idea appeared to be that if people were to hold to those negatives, then that would be sufficient orientation for them to keep a Christian civilisation.

This is hardly adequate and in as far as we have tried to move towards positive ideals, we've had the ideals of plenty, of good, of justice and of beauty. We left the economic machine to look after plenty and it's not doing a very good job of that in terms of distribution of the wealth that's been created, and it's certainly not doing any better today than in 1944. We left the ideal of good to the churches and that seems a good recipe for war. We left justice to the lawyers and the courts and we have seen similar sorts of results. In other words, we've assumed because of this contradiction that positive ideals are carried in and looked after by our institutions. With truth for example, we really believed in universities organising and running themselves in order to look after truth. They are supposed to be the guardians of truth. But we know perfectly well that if there is a challenge to the continued economic wealth of the universities, truth is not the first thing on their agenda. It is their survival. The way the universities acted immediately for the Nazis in 1934 is one example. It tells you about institutions. Now we've got to do better than that.

I have tried to formulate ideals which are appropriate to a culture based on design principle 2, not a mixed bag of principles. I've suggested such ideals were those of humanity, homonomy, nurturance and beauty (Emery F, 1977). They are those which ignore dominant hierarchies and apply across the whole human spectrum. As well, we require a different world hypothesis, from the Aristotelian, the Newtonian and Organicism. Organicism, just like Newtonianism and Aristotelianism, denied that people could have direct knowledge of the world around them. It promoted the belief that information has to be processed by special elite groups before it became meaningful knowledge. It's only with the emergence of the notion of *contextualism* that we've got a world hypothesis that starts from naive realist notions of direct perception and knowledge of the real world. It's the first world hypothesis of that type that we've had although it was and is the foundation of the so called primitive cultures of the hunters and gatherers. Contextualism was rejected when formulated by Pierce (1932) in the 1890s crisis, and again in the last crisis when Pepper (1942) formulated it explicitly as an alternative world hypothesis. It was then given some credence but as soon as we started to recover economically and the old powers got back, it was beaten down again. But it's coming up again.

You'll find contextualism around the fringes of all of the sciences, particularly in those dealing with child development, ecology and perception. This has to be our paradigm because it's the only one that's appropriate to what is happening culturally and in action research. It's the only paradigm based on an epistemology of realism. It

is based on *common sense*. It's the only paradigm which has ever taken change as the reality from which we start, the others have all started from static substance as the real world. Contextualism starts from change in the emergence of quality and if we don't consciously work as action researchers within that, two things follow - we're not going to look at the world around us, the one containing the crisis we are confronting, and we're not going to be able to accumulate our findings, the results of our actions.

In making this case for the priority of educating for a change in design principle, I am of course, arguing for a shift from representative to participative democracy. This is but another way of presenting the major focus. What we've done in developing new educational methods, which we didn't realise at the time, is to work implicitly from those realistic contextualist assumptions. Search conferences would be ineffective unless these assumptions about perceptions and realism were correct. Search conferences, Participative Design Workshops and further development of matrix type organisations involve non dominant hierarchies. You may have a 'hierarchy of functions' as some functions will need to be carried out at a regional or national level, or on a different time scale but that does not imply that we need 'dominant hierarchies', where some have personal dominance over others as in the master servant relation.

Within the learning environments created by the 'deep-slice' groups of the Participative Design workshops and the ground rules followed in the Search Conference and related methods, people can actually experience the conditions for effective democratic discourse and purposeful work. We've made some progress in designing and developing these methods so that both experiential and conceptual understanding of the alternatives is gained; but we've got a lot more to do.

One element in particular involves the status difference between spoken and written language which needs addressing and redressing. Spoken language is probably as old as humanity itself, but written is still an innovation which needs further evaluation. We are hard-wired to speak but not to read and write. It is possible to sustain an argument that the elevation of the written was not more than another highly successful ploy by the already successful to exploit their advantage in a stratified society. Continuous complaints about the destruction of the English language (as it was spoken and written by Chaucer, perhaps?) neglect the fact that any living language is precisely that, living and changing in direct correlation to the changing circumstances of the times.

Written language, text, has been used to keep the great unwashed in their place. Peirce's work has shown how treacherously the rulers can put down the 'unlettered' people who use only their spoken language to communicate their reality. 'If we can prevent them coming together and also believing that their conversations have validity, we can maintain control'. Perhaps the greatest power inhering in spoken language lies in its spontaneous generation of metaphors and these are most dangerous when they are immediate and apart. Far from the abstract form, people use day-to-day metaphors which are immediately recognizable and which they can also draw up as simple diagrams and/or other iconic forms of communication; e.g., the cartoon. Critical and rigorous distinctions can be made at this level and rather than the academic conclusion that these do not convey precise meaning, they show that people

can engage in debates and analysis of highly complex matters by metaphorically illustrating the essences of such debates.

Clearly, if we are to pursue the elevation of design principle two and participative rather than representative democracy, we must also work to return spoken language to its proper place as the prime form of human communication. That can only be achieved by discourse under the conditions of openness and equality laid down by Asch (1952). Only then do we find association rather than dissociation, or any of the other maladaptions (Emery F, 1977).

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