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Embodiment of Change: Comprehension, Traction and Impact?

Discovering enabling questions for the future

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Prepared in response to the *Urgent Appeal to Change the Mindset* (March 2011)
launched by the [Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives](#)

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Introduction

This is an effort to summarize reflections on the capacity to engage with increasingly apparent inadequacy in the response to evident problems -- whether systemic or associated with particular crises. These inadequacies are exemplified by the recent response of the "international community" to the [Gulf of Mexico oil leak](#) (2010), to the [Haiti earthquake and flooding](#) (2010), and to the [Libyan uprising](#) (2011).

More generally the need for such reflection is indicated by the insights of the following:

- [George Santayana](#): *Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it*
- [Nassim Nicholas Taleb](#): *The Black Swan: the impact of the highly improbable* (2007)
- Karen A. Cerulo: *Never Saw It Coming: cultural challenges to envisioning the worst* (2006)
- [Joshua Cooper Ramo](#): *The Age of the Unthinkable: Why the New World Disorder Constantly Surprises Us And What We Can Do About It* (2009)

As included in an early summary (*Acknowledgement of the universe of problems*, 1976), the accumulating urgency was indicated long ago:

- *While the difficulties and dangers of problems tend to increase at a geometric rate, the knowledge and manpower qualified to deal with those problems tend to increase at an arithmetical rate.* ([Yehezkel Dror](#). Prolegomenon to policy sciences, AAAS symposium, Boston, 1969)
- *Social institutions face growing difficulties as a result of an ever increasing complexity which arises directly and indirectly from the development and assimilation of technology. Many of the most serious conflicts facing mankind result from the interaction of social, economic, technological, political and psychological forces and can no longer be solved by fractional approaches from individual disciplines* (Bellagio Declaration on Planning. In: Erich Jantsch (Ed) *Perspectives on Planning*. Paris, OECD, 1969).
- *What finally makes all of our crises still more dangerous is that they are now coming on top of each other. Most administrations...are not prepared to deal with...multiple crises, a crisis of crises all at one time...Every problem may escalate because those involved no longer have time to think straight.* (John Platt. *What we must do*. *Science*, 28 November 1969, pp. 1115-1121).

The challenge has been well described by [John Ralston Saul](#) (*Voltaire's Bastards: the dictatorship of reason in the West*, 1992; *The Unconscious Civilization*, 1995), but most succinctly as a form of *Le Chatelier's Principle* by [Stafford Beer](#) (*The Cybernetic Cytoblast: management itself*, 1969) in the following terms:

Reformers, critics of institutions, consultants in innovation, people in sort who "want to get something done", often fail to see this point. They cannot understand why their strictures, advice or demands do not result in effective change. They expect either

to achieve a measure of success in their own terms or to be flung off the premises. But an ultrastable system (like a social institution)... has no need to react in either of these ways. It specialises in equilibrational readjustment which is to the observer a secret form of change requiring no actual alteration in the macro-systemic characteristics that he is trying to do something about (Chairman's Address to the International Cybernetics Congress, September 1969)

A conventional response to any such call for new thinking is to consider that such a framing exemplifies "negativity". The dangers of simplistic "positive thinking" have however been variously summarized (*Being Positive Avoiding Negativity: management challenge of positive vs negative*, 2005; *Credibility Crunch engendered by Hope-mongering*, 2008). Most notable is the argument of **Barbara Ehrenreich** (*Smile Or Die: how positive thinking fooled America and the world*, 2010). The question is how to enable appropriate "critical thinking" (*Web resources: Critical thinking vs. Specious arguments*, 2001).

A previous effort to summarize and order these considerations, in the light of the following documents, appeared as *Governing Civilization through Civilizing Governance: global challenge for a turbulent future* (2008) -- a contribution on the occasion of the 3rd Annual Conference organized by the **Global Governance Group** of the **New School of Athens (NSOA)**: Theme: *Making Global Governance Work: Lessons from the Past. Solutions for the Future* (Athens, 2008). That summary had been preceded by *Enabling Creative Response to Extraordinary Crises* (2001) and was followed by *Enabling Strategies for Viable Futures* (2009).

The current *Urgent Appeal to Change the Mindset* (March 2011) would appear to be a consequence of the **International Forum for Climate Justice** (Cancun, 2010). This was the subject of earlier comment (*From Changing the Strategic Game to Changing the Strategic Frame: missing cognitive possibility in changing the system not the planet*, 2010).

Conclusion

Perhaps the most fundamental question is why so many well-intentioned initiatives can only be said to have been less than successful in terms of the challenges experienced now as well as those to be anticipated (if only in that their nature cannot necessarily be foreseen). There is a need to learn from the seeming inadequacy of the collective learning process, as suggested by Donald Michael (*Learning to Plan and Planning to Learn*, 1997). What might be required by such collective "meta-learning" -- especially in a group context in which so many acclaimed approaches to dialogue facilitation have proven problematic in their own right?

A particular concern is the appropriateness of assumptions made about "change" and how "traction" is to be achieved -- especially when there is a tendency to use conventional marketing and military metaphors in the quest for widespread "impact" and "visibility" as being the criterion of success. **What undermines the capacity of a self-selected group to elucidate and deliver meaning appreciable by others?** From what does the indifference of others derive? Why do they variously engage with other preoccupations?

The relatively new term "psychic numbing" is used to describe the tendency of people (potentially as voters) to feel less urgent compassion and contribute less, when the suffering is shown to be more systemic and more pervasive, especially when described as affecting larger numbers of people. The observer experiences a sense of powerlessness and helplessness -- a sense that nothing in the world will change that particularly broad, complex situation (Paul Slovic, *"If I look at the mass I will never act": Psychic numbing and genocide, Judgment and Decision Making*, 2007; J. E. Roberston, *'Psychic Numbing': Why does mass suffering induce mass indifference?*, 15 August 2010). This is consistent with the distinction between problem assessment and assessment of remedial capacity (*Remedial Capacity Indicators Versus Performance Indicators*, 1981).

Several factors are implicit in the questions raised by the documents listed below:

- questionable **reliance on an implicit "vision" metaphor** in "envisaging" future strategy -- when other senses ("hearing", "taste", "smell", "touch", etc) clearly serve a purpose in navigation, whether or not their merits are employed in policy metaphors in "recognizing the elephant in the room" (*Strategic Challenge of Polysensorial Knowledge: bringing the "elephant" into "focus"*, 2008).
- rapidly **diminishing attention span** (individually or collectively) in combination with information overload and the unquestioning reliance on the integrative capacity of communication technology -- suggesting an imminent "singularity" (*Emerging Memetic Singularity in the Global Knowledge Society*, 2009)
- radical **differences in logical preferences** and orientations undermining conventional expectations of rationally coherent outcomes (*Systems of Categories Distinguishing Cultural Biases*, 1993). For example, to what extent do the personality/cognitive styles of participants at the World Economic Forum "explain" the differences in the policies they favour from those of the World Social Forum?
- **unquestioning self-confidence** (even self-righteousness) of those subscribing to certain belief systems and worldviews -- necessarily defensive or condescending in their relationship with others (*Guidelines for Critical Dialogue between Worldviews*, 2006; *Dynamically Gated Conceptual Communities: emergent patterns of isolation within knowledge society*, 2004). This typically includes those who "know" what needs to be done, if only others could "see" the validity of the argument.
- existence of **"no go" topics**, systematically avoided even though relevant to any viable future initiative (*Global Strategic Implications of the "Unsaid": from myth-making towards a wisdom society*, 2003; *Lipoproblems: Developing a Strategy Omitting a Key Problem -- the systemic challenge of climate change and resource issues*, 2009; *Overpopulation Debate as a Psychosocial Hazard: development of safety guidelines from handling other hazardous materials*, 2009)

- inability to question whether any one "perspective", however eminent the authority, is capable of **encompassing the meta-challenge** -- complemented by inability to question current capacity to interrelate a requisite variety of "perspectives" such as to engender more widely communicable insight. There is no context for such discourse and no sense of its potential outcome.
- increasing **lack of confidence in authorities**, especially those having agendas with political, socio-economic or religious implications -- as evidenced by the aftermath of the financial crisis, the climate change debate, or "zero risk" reports on the "safety" of nuclear installations (*Credibility Crunch engendered by Hope-mongering*, 2008; *Abuse of Faith in Governance*, 2009)
- increasing **impatience of those with capacity to act** irrespective of the above considerations -- by whomever, and however frequently, they are formulated. The challenge is then framed as relatively simple, requiring only the particular skills of those who claim to understand the problem, focused in a readily comprehensible way -- a "silver bullet" enabling a "logjam" of complexity to be released. Terrorism, geoengineering and nuclear energy offer examples (*Promoting a Singular Global Threat -- Terrorism: strategy of choice for world governance*, 2002; *Geo-engineering Oversight Agency for Thermal Stabilization (GOATS)*, 2008).
- increasing recognition of the **paradoxical nature of the strategic dilemma** and the psychosocial implication of those wanting to act and/or challenged by how they are entangled in it -- as characterized by the insights of such as **Douglas Hofstadter** (*I Am a Strange Loop*, 2007), **Steven M. Rosen** (*Topologies of the Flesh: a multidimensional exploration of the lifeworld*, 2006) or **George Lakoff** and **Mark Johnson** (*Philosophy In The Flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*, 1999). These imply the possibility of "new thinking" of strategic relevance (*Consciously Self-reflexive Global Initiatives: Renaissance zones, complex adaptive systems, and third order organizations*, 2007; *Engaging with Globality through Knowing Thyself: Embodying engagement with otherness*, 2009; *Sustaining a Community of Strange Loops: comprehension and engagement through aesthetic ring transformation*, 2010).

The challenge has been well framed by Albert Einstein:

The significant problems we face can not be solved at the same level of thinking
we were at when we created them.

To repeat the same thing over and over again,
and yet to expect a different result, this is a form of insanity.

Identifying meta-challenges: checklists and documents

Any effort to elaborate such "meta-challenges" -- as below -- is of course subject to many of these constraints. The items are listed primarily to indicate the nature of the issues, merely by scanning the document titles -- irrespective of whether any particular issues are considered to merit further exploration.

Checklists variously framed: These highlight the nature of questions which are typically avoided in considering future possibilities:

- *Cooperation and its Failures (From the 1960s through the 1980s): 12 Metaphors towards understanding the dilemma for the 1990s* (1988)
- *Collective Learning from Calls for Global Action* (1981)
- *Limits to Human Potential* (1976)
- *An Inconvenient Truth -- about any inconvenient truth* (2008)
- *Why We Do Not Thrive: challenges to universal thrival* (1999)
- *Checklist of Nasty Questions: regarding development analyses and initiatives* (1981)
- *Future World Council Creation: reflections of an ancient futurist* (2004), clustering 45 questions as follows:
 - Learnings from the past / Naming the challenge / Calls for self-awareness
 - "Good guys" vs "Bad guys" / Appropriate assessment / Strategic merit
 - Image and metaphorical framing

Denial and question avoidance: These offer various approaches to the nature of denial:

- *Question Avoidance, Evasion, Aversion and Phobia: why we are unable to escape from traps* (2006)
- *Lipoproblems: Developing a Strategy Omitting a Key Problem -- the systemic challenge of climate change and resource issues* (2009)
- *In Quest of Optimism Beyond the Edge: through avoidance of the answering process* (2008)
- *Global Strategic Implications of the "Unsaid": from myth-making towards a wisdom society* (2003)
- *Overpopulation Debate as a Psychosocial Hazard: development of safety guidelines from handling other hazardous materials* (2009)
- *Strategically Relevant Evocative Questions?* (1993)

Misplaced optimism regarding governance and systemic negligence: These explore assumptions regarding misplaced confidence in existing methods:

- *Abuse of Faith in Governance: Mystery of the Unasked Question* (2009)
- *Emergence of a Global Misleadership Council misleading as vital to governance of the future?* (2007)
- *Disastrous Floods as Indicators of Systemic Risk Neglect: implications for authoritative response to future surprises* (2011)
- *Credibility Crunch engendered by Hope-mongering* (2008)
- *Recognizing the Psychosocial Boundaries of Remedial Action: constraints on ensuring a safe operating space for humanity*

(2009)

Neglected issues in dialogue, facilitation and game-playing: These highlight assumptions regarding expectations from dialogue as currently framed

- *Evaluating Synthesis Initiatives and their Sustaining Dialogues Possible questions as a guide to criteria of evaluation of any synthesis initiative* (2000)
- *Epistemological Challenge of Cognitive Body Odour: exploring the underside of dialogue* (2006)
- *Women and the Underside of Meetings: symptoms of denial in considering strategic options* (2009)
- *In Quest of Facilitation -- Beyond the Facile* (2010)
- *Systems of Categories Distinguishing Cultural Biases* (1993)
- *Wrecking an International Project: Notes from a saboteur's vade mecum* (1972)
- *An Inconvenient Truth -- about any inconvenient truth* (2008)
- *Confusion in the Moment of Dialogue* (2004)
- *The "Dark Riders" of Social Change: a challenge for any Fellowship of the Ring* (2002)
- *Emptying Meetings and Fulfilling Participants: ensuring that encounters are fruitful* (1998)
- *Reframing Personal Relationships between Innovators or Leaders: the unmentionable challenge to sustainable paradigm shifting and social transformation* (1998)

Possibilities of anticipating and reframing disagreement: Differences of opinion typically emerge and tend to undermine the coherence of global initiatives.

- *All Blacks of Davos vs All Greens of Porto Alegre: reframing global strategic discord through polyphony?* (2007)
- *Discovering Richer Patterns of Comprehension to Reframe Polarization* (1998)
- *Using Disagreements for Superordinate Frame Configuration* (1993)
- *Configuring Strategic Dilemmas in Intersectoral Dialogue: summary of analysis on the occasion of Earth Summit* (1992)
- *Inter-sectoral Strategic Dilemmas of Sustainable Development* (1992)
- *Sustainable Dialogue as a Necessary Template for Sustainable Global Community* (1995)
- *Beyond Method: engaging opposition in psycho-social organization* (1981)

Neglected conventional cognitive traps: These highlight inadequately explored cognitive issues undermining framing of strategies

- *Framing the Global Future by Ignoring Alternatives: unfreezing categories as a vital necessity* (2009)
- *Interacting Fruitfully with Un-Civil Society: the dilemma for non-civil society organizations* (1996)
- *Missiles, Missives, Missions and Memetic Warfare: navigation of strategic interfaces in multidimensional knowledge space* (2001)
- *Tank-thoughts from Think-tanks: constraining metaphors on developing global governance* (2003)
- *Category Manipulation in Global Dialogue* (2000)
- *Unknown Undoing: challenge of incomprehensibility of systemic neglect* (2009)
- *Distorted Understandings of Synthesis: reconfiguring the challenge of wholeness* (1997)
- *Future of United Nations - Civil Society Relations: 257 questions in assessing the Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons in relation to the challenges of the 21st Century* (2004)

Unexamined implications of the requisite complexity of "new thinking" in response to strategic obsolescence:

- *Governing Civilization through Civilizing Governance: global challenge for a turbulent future* (2008)
- *Distinguishing Levels and Patterns of Strategic Obsolescence* (2006)
 - Denial and positive thinking / Polarization and demonization / Pre-emptive / Defensive appeals
 - Filtering and gatekeeping -- beyond denial / Project Logic / Patterning capacity challenges
- *Consciously Self-reflexive Global Initiatives: Renaissance zones, complex adaptive systems, and third order organizations* (2007)
- *Imagining the Real Challenge and Realizing the Imaginal Pathway of Sustainable Transformation* (2007)
- *Sustainability through the Dynamics of Strategic Dilemmas* (2005)
- *Engaging with the Inexplicable, the Incomprehensible and the Unexpected* (2010)
- *Polyhedral Empowerment of Networks through Symmetry: psycho-social implications for organization and global governance* (2008)
- *Dynamics of Symmetry Group Theorizing: comprehension of psycho-social implication* (2008)
- *Towards Polyhedral Global Governance: complexifying oversimplistic strategic metaphors* (2008)
- *Polyhedral Pattern Language: software facilitation of emergence, representation and transformation of psycho-social organization* (2008)

Unquestioned assumptions regarding forms of presentation of conclusions: These highlight issues relating to the uptake of proposals or indifference to them

- *An Inconvenient Truth -- about any inconvenient truth* (2008)
- *In Quest of Mnemonic Catalysts -- for comprehension of complex psychosocial dynamics* (2007)
- *Governance through Patterning Language: creative cognitive engagement contrasted with abdication of responsibility* (2006)
- *Dynamically Gated Conceptual Communities: emergent patterns of isolation within knowledge society* (2004)
- *In Quest of Uncommon Ground: beyond impoverished metaphor and the impotence of words of power* (1997)
- *Richer Metaphors for Our Future Survival* (1996)
- *Forms of Presentation and the Future of Comprehension* (1984)

Humouristic and poetic summaries: These endeavour to highlight the current tragedy by unconventional means

- *Global Strategic Alternatives for the 21st Century? Contrasting visual caricatures* (2009)
- *Gaia: La Belle Dame sans Merci* (2009)
- *Sets and their Settings: from development to climate change... and beyond* (2009)
- *The Charge of the Light Brigade: revised in celebration of current global strategic management initiatives* (2008)
- *Responsibility for Global Governance: Who? Where? When? How? Why? Which? What?* (2008)

Case studies: sources of potential insights and learnings

These offer a reminder that little effort is made to learn from ambitious collective initiatives of the past -- on which documentation is variously available

- **Deepwater Oil Spill** (2010): *Enabling Collective Intelligence in Response to Emergencies Illustrated by the case of deep oil spill containment* (2011)
- **Phoenix Gathering** of the Phoenix Project
- **Synthesis Dialogues** of the Association for Global New Thought: *Evaluating Synthesis Initiatives and their Sustaining Dialogues Possible questions as a guide to criteria of evaluation of any synthesis initiative* (2000)
- **Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development (GPID)** of the United Nations University: *Complete List of Papers*
- **Parliament of the World's Religions:** *Learnings for the Future of Inter-Faith Dialogue* (1993)
- **Institute of Cultural Affairs:** *Collective strategy making: designing a strategic array* (1995)
- **World Congress on Transdisciplinarity:** *Transdisciplinarity through Structured Dialogue: beyond sterile dualities in meetings to the challenge of participant impotence* (1995)
- **Club of Rome:** *Club of Rome Reports and Bifurcations: a 40-year overview* (2010)
- **Earth Summit:** *Configuring Strategic Dilemmas in Intersectoral Dialogue: summary of analysis on the occasion of Earth Summit* (1992)
- **World Social Forum:** Jai Sen and Peter Waterman (Eds.), *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires* (2007)
- **World Economic Forum:** David Bornstein, *How to Change the World* (2007); Mike Moore, *A World Without Walls* (2003); Geoffrey Allen Pigman, *The World Economic Forum* (2007); David J. Rothkopf, *Superclass* (2008).
- **International Symposium "Research across Boundaries":** *Enacting Transformative Integral Thinking through Playful Elegance: a Symposium at the End of the Universe?* (2010)
- **Society for General Systems Research:** *Metaconferencing: discovering people / viewpoint networks in conferences* (1980)
- **United Nations Climate Change Conference** (2009): *Insights for the Future from the Change of Climate in Copenhagen* (2010)
- **International Forum for Climate Justice** (2010) : *From Changing the Strategic Game to Changing the Strategic Frame: missing cognitive possibility in changing the system not the planet* (2010)

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