



laetus in praesens

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From Changing the Strategic Game to Changing the Strategic Frame

Missing cognitive possibility in changing the system not the planet

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[Introduction](#)

[Vital learning experiences](#)

[Changing the system?](#)

[Practical questions](#)

[Missing conceptual link?](#)

[Enabling stories: "only stories make sense" ?](#)

[Radical engagement with the environment: beyond tinkering?](#)

[References](#)

Introduction

This is a commentary on the argument of Mexican activist [Gustavo Esteva](#) following the [United Nations Climate Change Conference, Mexico, 2010](#) (*The Arrogance of Cancún*, *The Guardian*, 16 December 2010; [Spanish version](#)). He concludes that the lesson of this feeble climate deal is that "governments have played God and failed. It is up to the activists now". He cites the alternative Cancún Declaration by the [International Forum for Climate Justice -- The People's Dialogue](#) (*Foro Internacional de la Justicia Climática -- Diálogo de la Pueblos*) with its slogan: *Let's change the system, not the planet*. Specifically the text of the [alternative declaration](#) [original Spanish versions: *Declaración de Cancún Foro Internacional de Justicia Climática*; *Declaración del Foro Alternativo por la Justicia Climática Cancún 2010*; *Foro Mundial de Alternativas: Declaración de Cancún*; *Declaración de Cancún - Foro Internacional de Justicia Climática*] includes the phrase:

A systemic crisis will only be solved by a systemic approach. It is thus necessary to bring about a fundamental systemic change with real urgency. Neither market-based mechanisms nor their technological fixes can be trusted to deal with these crises because they prioritise profit before the planet and its people. Hence, we strongly reject all false solutions!

The declaration revealed the true counter-productive nature of the official proposals, which are trapped in 'market environmentalism'. It argues that we should abandon developmentalism, establish limits, concentrate in local spaces, and reclaim valid traditions. However Esteva argues that all this falls into **the intellectual and political trap of the dominant mentality by still hanging on to institutions and their abstract slogans**.

Specifically he argues:

To affirm or to deny climate change supposes that we understand our planet well, that we know how it reacts - both now and for the next hundred years - and that we have the appropriate technological fix. This is plain and simple nonsense, and intolerably arrogant. To continue putting our trust and hope in institutions to put things right goes against all our experience and focuses our energy in the wrong place...

We must look down and to the left... to the people, and what we can do ourselves.... Just as we strive to eat and drink sensibly, let us live our whole lives in a different way. If we define the issues in those terms, dealing with them will be in our own hands, not in those of global institutional creatures that will never do what is needed. They cannot play God, no matter how much they pretend to.

The time has come to change the system, not the planet. That depends on us, not on those who gain status and income from the system....activists leaving Cancún were very disappointed with the outcome; but they are determined to finally take control of the whole issue and to live their lives their own way, not in the way dictated by the market or the state.

A possible "missing link" can usefully be identified to render more practical the alternative Cancún Declaration: *Let's change the system of*

thinking, not the planet. Efforts to "change the system" have not proven to be strategically viable or sustainable. The possibility explored here is whether changing patterns of thinking may enable fruitful change in the manner of engagement with global strategic issues.

Vital learning experiences

In the unusual *Wikipedia* entry on [Gustavo Esteva](#) he is reported as indicating that his life has been marked by "many ruptures". He has gone through many phases of organizational involvement and intellectual perspective. As indicated in an interview by Nic Paget-Clarke (*Interview with Gustavo Esteva: the Society of the Different, In Motion Magazine*, 8 April 2006), Esteva is an author, a local and international 'grassroots activist and de-professionalized intellectual', and a founder of the Universidad de la Tierra (Oaxaca, Mexico). He is also a former corporate executive, a former guerrilla, a former high-ranking official in the government of President Echeverría, and an advisor with the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) in Chiapas for the negotiations with the government. He is also part of many national and international networks, including the International Network for Cultural Alternatives to Development (INCAD), and the International Group for Grassroots Initiatives (IGGRI).

As he indicates in the interview, under the heading "only stories make sense":

As an introduction, if I am in a village discussing a problem, any kind of problem, with people in the village and they ask for advice about an agrarian conflict or a technical thing or a productive thing, I will never give them an advice -- to them or to anyone. But I will tell a story, a story of a similar case, of something that happened in the same condition, and then they can pick up whatever they want from it.

The question here is the nature of the relationship between his learning experience through "ruptures" (resulting in his focus on "stories") and his promotion of the Cancún emphasis on: *Let's change the system, not the planet.*

Changing the system?

With the proposed switch in strategic focus to "changing the system", it is useful to consider the learnings of management cybernetician [Stafford Beer](#) (*Platform for Change*, 1975; *Diagnosing the System for Organizations*, 1985; *Beyond Dispute: the invention of team synergy*, 1994). In 1970, he was approached by [Salvador Allende's](#) elected [socialist government of Chile](#) to develop a national real-time computerised system [Cybersyn](#) to run the entire Chilean economy. This project was never completed. When Allende was removed from power by the [1973 coup](#), the Cybersyn project was abandoned. Beer continued to work in the Americas, consulting for the governments of Mexico, Uruguay and Venezuela.

In the light of previous experience he had presented an adaptation of [Le Chatelier's Principle](#) (*The Cybernetic Cytoblast: management itself*. Chairman's Address to the International Cybernetics Congress, September 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 equilibrical 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

This bears reflection in the light of any argument for "changing the system".

Practical questions

Missing from the argument of the alternative Cancún Declaration, as promoted by Esteva, is adequate consideration of the following questions -- when collective action is expected at the local level, without **"hanging on to institutions and their abstract slogans"**, as he appropriately expressed it:

- who: many may be identified in the abstract as "who" should act differently, but it remains unclear who will respond to the argument
- where: there is clearly a desire that action should take place everywhere, at the local level, but without any appreciation of what would inhibit or enable it
- when: again there is an obvious need for action to take place as soon as possible, but again without any appreciation of what may inhibit or enable this
- which: specific actions can indeed be enthusiastically promoted, without it being clear whether they are necessary or sufficient
- what: specifics can be named as to what actions others should engage in, but it is less evident how these actions will interact beneficially or otherwise
- how: for many struggling in their daily lives, the answer to this question may well be elusive
- why: this is of course a more fundamental existential question -- is the proposed action worth the effort at this time

The relationship between such a set of questions, and their implications for any collective action, can be seen as central to governance as explored elsewhere (*Responsibility for Global Governance Who? Where? When? How? Why? Which? What?* 2008). The exploration follows the insights of the widely circulated classic "poem", which exists in various versions:

This is a story about four people: Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody.

There was an important job to be done and Everybody was asked to do it.
Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it.
Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did.
Somebody got angry because it was Everybody's job.
Everybody knew that Anybody could do it,
but Nobody realised that Somebody wouldn't do it.
And Everybody blamed Somebody because
Nobody did what Anybody could have done.

Such considerations, whether interpreted as "cynical" or otherwise, will not prevent some actions from being enthusiastically and successfully undertaken -- and being widely presented as the key to the future. However there is a case for considering the adage used by Abraham Lincoln:

You can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time but you can't fool all of the people all of the time

Perhaps adapting it as:

Some of the people will succeed all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but all of the people will not succeed all of the time

Use of "succeed" here implies a common understanding of "success" when this is quite evidently not the case. Adapting another adage, it might even be said that "one person's success is another person's failure" -- despite belief in the possibility of "win-win" solutions to the global challenge (Hazel Henderson, *Building a Win-Win World: Life Beyond Global Economic Warfare*, 1995). Does this quest correspond, if only thermodynamically, to that for a [perpetual motion machine](#)?

This challenge is compounded by a dimension that is not amenable to formal discussion, namely the distaste that a modality favoured by one may have for another. Rather than referring to differences of strategic "vision", as the favoured metaphor, it is useful to make the point more strongly and personally by switching to a "smell" metaphor. Put simply, for some the approaches of another "stink" -- however much the odour is appreciated by those from whom it emanates !

The failure of cooperation and collective uptake of strategies can then be explored through that metaphor (*Epistemological Challenge of Cognitive Body Odour: exploring the underside of dialogue*, 2006). Enlarging the metaphorical framework allows recognition that other "senses" may be vital to strategic navigation of the future, as they are for navigation of nature and, by extension, the planet (*Strategic Challenge of Polysensorial Knowledge: bringing the "elephant" into "focus"*, 2008). After decades of effort, there is a case for exploring more deeply the failure to learn from calls for global action (*Collective Learning from Calls for Global Action*, 1981).

Any effort to change the "system" then calls for recognition of the radical nature of the encounter with the varieties of "otherness" of which the "system" is composed (*Us and Them: Relating to Challenging Others*, 2009; *Existential challenge of "The Other"*, 2007; *Human Intercourse: Intercourse with Nature and Intercourse with the Other*, 2007). This is only too evident in the mutual incomprehension fundamental to the decade-long, trillion dollar strategic failure in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Missing conceptual link?

The argument here is that the slogan of the alternative Cancún Declaration -- *Let's change the system, not the planet* -- is missing a vital link.

Clearly there are multiple obstacles to "all of the people" changing "the system", however successful "some of the people" may be in doing so in their own areas and according to their own criteria -- and perhaps only for themselves. Stafford Beer makes the point well, as does the *Everybody, Anybody...* "poem".

A possible "missing link" can usefully be identified to render more practical the alternative Cancún Declaration:

*Let's change the system of **thinking**, not the planet*

The current focus of the Declaration on "the system" can usefully be seen as yet another "abstract slogan" -- which Esteva rightly condemns. In fact, as part of the system, it is quite questionable whether individuals or groups can change it -- as warned by Stafford Beer. It is totally unclear that there is any possibility of the variety of groups acting coherently to change the system, when many consider each other to be part of "the problem" and not part of "the solution".

Reframing the focus onto the "system of thinking" poses the challenge in new ways. It suggests that by changing the current focus of thinking:

- the pattern of dialogue regarding desirable changes might become more productive and more capable of sustaining systemic changes
- systemic changes would be more readily enabled and facilitated
- planetary conditions could be seen otherwise, enabling new modes of engaging with them

However the "focus" metaphor is trapped yet again in the optical-vision metaphor, which -- if it is to be taken seriously -- calls for more serious attention to the nature of optical systems in facilitating "focus". Whilst there is now deep understanding of such systems for both microscopy and telescoping, little of this understanding has informed the strategic vision metaphor or the necessity of corrective and enhancing lenses.

Such might indeed be the concerns of a [University of Earth](#) -- of which Esteva's [Universidad de la Tierra](#) (Oaxaca, Mexico) offers a model. As suggested by "epistemological body odour", potentially vital to any such change in the system of thinking is a degree of self-reflexivity, appropriately taking account of how one's preferred strategic initiative may be perceived by any "other" (*Engendering the Future through Self-reflexive Group Initiatives*, 2008; *Self-reflexive Challenges of Integrative Futures*, 2008; *Consciously Self-reflexive Global Initiatives: Renaissance zones, complex adaptive systems, and third order organizations*, 2007).

Enabling stories: "only stories make sense" ?

Esteva himself makes the case for stories enabling individuals and local groups to engage with their challenges in new ways. This follows a long and respected tradition of the role of stories and aphorisms in reframing circumstances. Arguably many of the better known sets of stories are effectively a set of strategic remedies to particular circumstances, and have been used or cited as such:

- [Aesop's fables](#)
- [Anansi tales](#)
- [Nasreddin tales](#) (600)
- [Jataka tales](#) (547)
- [Panchatantra](#)
- [Br'er Rabbit stories](#)

This mode has been used from a management perspective by [Russell L. Ackoff](#) (*The Art of Problem Solving: accompanied by Ackoff's Fables*, 1978) as with the 150 "aphorisms" of [W. Ross Ashby](#) from a systemic perspective and those of [Nassim Nicholas Taleb](#) (*The Bed of Procrustes: philosophical and practical aphorisms*, 2010). Many sets of tales have long been considered a valuable guide to personal and spiritual development. Such stories are designed to serve simultaneously as children's stories and as carriers of deeper systemic insights for those who can distinguish them.

The question is then what sets of tales would be relevant to an "augmented" variant of the alternative Cancún Declaration -- *Let's change the system of thinking, not the planet?*

What tales would offer a form of "cognitive toolkit" to enable people to engage otherwise with their immediate reality -- and to reframe it fruitfully and sustainably? Of relevance is how such tales might be expected to function where injunctions, moralistic discourse and conventional forms of advice have proven to be inadequate. To what extent does any such "cognitive toolkit" necessarily call on other "brains", as suggested by the work on biocultures of [Antonio de Nicolas](#) (*The Biocultural Paradigm: the neural connection between science and mysticism, Experimental Gerontology*, 1997).

Tales offer a form of "cognitive catalyst" through metaphor -- suggesting that many current metaphors may effectively be "impoverished" (*In Quest of Uncommon Ground: beyond impoverished metaphor and the impotence of words of power*, 1997). In this sense the issue for individuals is a form of metaphoric revolution (*Metaphoric Revolution: in quest of a manifesto for governance through metaphor*, 1988).

A classic tale regarding development
A development assistance officer encounters a man lying by the river in a developing country. He suggests the man might get some agricultural training. The man asks why. The response: "Well then you could grow your crops more efficiently". To which the man again asks: "Why?". The response: "Well then you could use the surplus to buy more land from your neighbours and increase your production". Again the question: "Why?". The response: "Well then you could hire people to manage your enterprise... and you could sit and watch the river go by". To which the man sitting by the river responds: "But that is what I am doing now".

Radical engagement with the environment: beyond tinkering?

As argued separately, citing the variety of approaches in the references below, there is no lack of "theoretical" justification for some such approach (*Existential Embodiment of Externalities radical cognitive engagement with environmental categories and disciplines*, 2009; *Enveloping Development through Cognitive Enactivism: engaging with climate change by changing apprehension of climate*, 2009).

The question is what are the psychology dimensions of sustainability, as discussed separately (*Psychology of Sustainability: embodying cyclic environmental processes*, 2002; *Alternative Approaches to Security: towards well-being and psychological dimensions of sustainability*, 2004). Of interest is the nature of any "radical" cognitive reframing (*Post-crisis Opportunities: in quest of radical coherence*, 1995).

Classic Zen tale illustrative of the challenge of engaging with the environment through oneself in order to remedy imbalance
A rainmaker is invited to come to a rural village, to bring rain -- for the village is experiencing drought. The rainmaker requests a cottage far from the village, and asks not to be disturbed. Three days later, rain and snow fall on the village. The rainmaker explains that he did not bring the rain. As he had felt immediately infected by the imbalance of the village people upon arrival, he took refuge to balance himself -- naturally balancing the outside world through that process -- and it rained.

Equally striking, but more "realistic", is the true tale of *Don Justo*, who has spent his life constructing a full size cathedral from discarded building materials (*Don Justo's Self-Built Cathedral: metaphoric learnings for contemporary alternative initiatives*, 2003)

The challenge is the nature of the cognitive "missing link" between alternative representations of reality in theory and allusions to such possibilities in folk tales -- with or without a basis in faith traditions. Somewhat ironically there is a sense in which the "missing link" is forced into cognition by the current evolution of technology and the playfulness it enables -- whether in game playing (in virtual worlds) or through music:

- *Enacting Transformative Integral Thinking through Playful Elegance* (2010)
- *Playfully Changing the Prevailing Climate of Opinion: Climate change as focal metaphor of effective global governance* (2005)
- *A Singable Earth Charter, EU Constitution or Global Ethic?* (2006)

In this sense such evolution implies a degree of relatively unconscious "self-remediation" -- bearing in mind the contrasting strategies of "homeopathic" and "allopathic" remedies (*Remedies to Global Crisis: "Allopathic" or "Homeopathic"?* 2009).

As in many mythical tales, the "marriage" enabled by poetry is the key to that between "North" and "South" -- or between "allopathic" and "homeopathic" -- each perceiving the other to be the "Beast" contrasting with the "Beauty" of its own values (*Poetry-making and Policy-making: arranging a marriage between Beauty and the Beast*, 1993). The argument can be extended to the conflict in relation to "terrorism" (*Poetic Engagement with Afghanistan, Caucasus and Iran*, 2009; *Strategic Jousting through Poetic Wrestling*, 2009). With respect to the values variously articulated at Cancún, the point can be made in terms of the recognition of polyphony (*All Blacks of Davos vs All Greens of Porto Alegre: reframing global strategic discord through polyphony?* 2007). How would the "voices" assembled there be appropriately integrated into a memorable aesthetic form -- and what new kind of cognition would be required to appreciate it?

The more challenging fundamental embarrassment is any implication that a single coherent approach can be discovered and advocated with any expectation of universal appreciation (*Geometry of Thinking for Sustainable Global Governance*, 2009). Beyond the requirements for a degree of self-reflexivity are the implications of paradox which only fundamental physics can be said to have taken seriously. It remains unclear how this might play out with respect to global strategy. Hence the case of exploring the psychosocial insights suggested by the topology of the Möbius strip or the Klein bottle (*Intercourse with Globality through Enacting a Klein bottle*, 2009). The question is the extent to which the individual and collective identity appropriate to the requisite change in the "system of thinking" must necessarily be understood in terms of "strange loops" (*Sustaining a Community of Strange Loops*, 2010).

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