

Reconceiving the Self and the Other: Possibilities Beyond the Seduction of Populist and Authoritarian Polarities

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Abstract

This article asserts that the recent attraction towards populist and authoritarian solutions, that give voice to the fear of the other are merely the product of a system doing what it is designed to do. Given this context, it argues that dialectic thinking is insufficient as the basis for dialogue; that the conflation of certainty with security is illusory and that these multiple manifestations are symptomatic of systemic disintegration. Hence it postulates that it is necessary to imagine narratives of a 'next social system', that draw on the wisdom of all knowledge ecologies, in order to change the dynamics of anticipation and aspiration in a reconstituted pluriverse.

Keywords: Post normal Politics, Analectics, Postcapitalism, Sociology of Emergences, Macrohistory

Introduction

While significant schism in the social fabric is a constant feature of many societies, its recent reappearance in western societies, together with manifestations of the 'authoritarian option', has potentially severe, and more than likely chaotic, consequences to the conceptions of 'normality' upon which most western social arrangements are premised. A recent US study found that the fundamental support for this option came not from "an affirmative desire for authoritarianism, but rather as a response to experiencing certain kinds of threats" (Taub, 2016, p.19). This psychological activation was more likely if the threats were of an unknown but physical nature (e.g. the rise of terrorism), or they were characterised as threats to the status quo, such as a visible reduction in living standards (Taub, 2016, p.34). If one assumes that the current 'western' socio-economic system is disintegrating because it is only doing what it is designed to do, then one can assume the nature and diversity of threat will only increase, thus activating even further extreme responses. The question then is how to cast future focused conversations in this environment of 'polarity driven opinionation' (what the Greeks call *doxa*), and whether they close down, or open up, possibility and probability.

This article contends that if futures conversations are situated within the comfort of conventional western-centric, epistemic approaches they are likely to result in the mischaracterisation of the disconnect between the emerging context and the experienced present, and thus generate a set of options that does little to resolve the issues of system dysfunction and the reactions they activate. Indeed, they might exacerbate them. It therefore asserts that the focus should be deliberately and explicitly biased towards transitions, transformations and emergences that are constituted both beyond and post the current system, without being completely defined by the system it is intending to replace, and in so doing, create narratives that reduce the deliberate characterisation of the other as a source of threat and fear. While noting that the ubiquitous dissemination of networking technologies removes many of the obstacles to an understanding of the ‘unknown other’, and that there is also a significant body of futures work concentrated on both limits and the imperative for transformation (Toffler, 1970; Henderson 1996; Dator, 2014), this article argues that the need to contest—indeed reject—particular expressions of identity (sometimes known as worldviews), and certain mythologies, is critical to contextualising transformational openness. This includes the obsession with dialectic thinking; the adoption of false certainties induced by hubris and an over-reliance on widely shared but unsubstantiated assumptions; the use of frameworks and tools that do not question the primacy of Enlightenment driven socio-economic systems; and the assertion of human dominance in the Anthropocene.

In illustrating the seductions and illusions of this authoritarian, doxical driven and existential wasteland, it is posited that the current civilisation is dying, and thus the quest is to find alternatives ‘beyond the abyss’ that divides the present system from a next, which will redefine what it means to be human in the 21st century. While this article concentrates on the insufficiencies noted above, it attempts to do so to both reflect on the current dilemma, and to assert that ‘post abyss’ mythologies must be constituted in a new ‘epistemic commons’ that allows wisdoms from multiple knowledge systems to collide with each other. As these narratives and mythologies are constituted within an ethos that is mindful of the existential relationship humans have with the planet (an unconditional environmental existentialism), the expectation is that what will emerge is a diversity of possibilities within the two conditions described above. These in turn will reimagine institutional and social arrangements in ways that are reflective and accommodating of constitutions of time, form, shape and state that not only make visible the structural inequities in the contemporary status quo, but also make available viable diversities as a counterpoint to the psychological overinvestment in monocultures and monoforms (e.g. nation states) that exists now.

It is recognised that there is a certain discomfort, almost a harshness, in the contemplation of system transformation suggested here, for it is hard to leave behind that which is known, and that has, from time to time, served at least part of the human family well. Yet this might be the only escape from endless variations on the authoritarian theme. Thus as Margaret Wheatley (2006) once remarked:

Into the dark centre (that smoking caldera) we will be asked to throw most of what we have treasured, most of the techniques and tools that have made us feel competent. We know what we must do. And when we finally step forward to do it, when we have made our sacrificial offerings to the gods of understanding, then the ruptures will cease (p.47)

These ideas therefore should be seen as a contribution to sense making of the narratives of escape. It is one that accepts there is a certain paradox inherent in it, as ideas, forms and knowledge integral to the current system are used (certainly in this article) to assert why transformation away from those same ideas is necessary. Alternatively, this apparent paradox might merely illustrate that it is almost impossible to escape from the episteme and social system that one is born into. It is also important to note that it does not assert that there is nothing useful in the western episteme that can

contribute to the future, nor does it claim a right, or only, way forward. What it does assert though is that the need for system transformation has both time and existential dimensions; dimensions that demand the search for dynamic praxis, unimpeded by reasonable, or sometimes cynical, and never ending litigation of the imperative. Implicit in this praxis is the requirement for social acceleration past limits, and in emergences that are premised on the epistemological west reconceiving itself as an epistemological north, in order to contribute to “an ecology of knowledges (that) challenges universal and abstract hierarchies and the powers that through them have been naturalised by history” (Santos, 2013, p.190).

This ecology of knowledges will manifest itself in part in what De Sousa Santos has defined as a ‘sociology of emergences’:

This consists of replacing the emptiness of the future (according to linear time) with a future of plural and concrete possibilities, utopian and realist at one and the same time and constructed in the present by means of activities of care (Santos, 2013, p.183).

As such it informs narrative and praxis beyond the assertions of authoritarians; assertions that prey upon the fear of the unknown and the uncertain (the building of a wall between Mexico and the US to keep out immigrants, for instance).

The Enthralment of Dialectic Thinking

The critical task ahead cannot be limited to generating alternatives. Indeed it requires an alternative thinking of alternatives. A new postabyssal thinking is thus called for.

(Santos 2013 loc. 1064)

Constituting debates in terms of opposites, or poles, is a way of thinking that is commonplace in our globalised, capitalist societies. Sometimes it is done with statistics; sometimes through almost unthinkable distortion. Assertions that the UK would save some £20 bn. were central to the Brexit Leave Campaign, whereas the UK National Audit Office estimated the real figure was more like £5.7 bn.: a recent example of the dialectical contest by statistics. Likewise, an example of distortion through dialectic reasoning can be seen in the preparedness by the Trump campaign to back (or perhaps even create?) a fiction that implicated Hilary Clinton in supporting a paedophile ring, based in a pizza shop she had never been to (and that was later the scene of a shooting by a gunman who believed the fable). This manipulation of what is asserted as true has been a defining feature of recent aforementioned debates in Europe, the USA and across Asia. However, without exploring the nuances and justifications of particular cases, at a systems level these dialectical contests for ‘truth’ where “what is real is rational and what is rational is real” (Hegel, 1820, p.7) have two serious flaws.

The first, and perhaps the most topical, is that in a networked and interconnected world, dialogue designed through dialectic polarity can only produce ‘truth’ possibilities that are either at the end of a spectrum, or somewhere in between. If what is accepted ‘falls somewhere in between’, this is often described as ‘the triumph of reason and sense making’; a balance that often gives little consideration to the validity of the spectrum that defined the ‘reasonable outcome’ in the first place.

Recently the fragility of this construction was exposed when network technology platforms were (and still are) used to disseminate both convenient fictions and/or disinformation into user defined ‘social knowledge’ ecosystems. These disseminations were designed to completely alter perceptions of truth and reality, both by those that created them and those that consumed them. As these complications and confoundments built upon each other, what emerged were not just biased or slanted interpretations but distortions of such consequence, that as James Warren (2016) noted:

[This disinformation] is an assault on the very principle of truth itself: a way to upend the very principles by which mankind has long operated. You could say without exaggeration that fake news is actually an attempt to reverse the Enlightenment (p.1).

In Warren's opinion, this is a world of mirrors, where what constitutes knowledge is indistinguishable from opinion, and any sense of intellectual integrity is not only swept aside, but openly derided by those purveyors of fakery who often conceal their real agenda from those they are seeking to influence.

But Warren's concern exposes a second and deeper mythological flaw; namely, it presupposes that the logic systems and the rationalism of the (Western) Enlightenment are the only way to constitute reality. While as an argument it is almost certainly preferable to the doxa of disinformation pundits, even a brief survey of other epistemologies reveals that:

[I]rrationality is not the only alternative to what is currently considered rational, that chaos is not the only alternative to order and that the concern about what might be less true must be balanced by a concern about what is [asserted to be] more than true" (Santos, 2013, p.9).

This allows the possibility of 'other than dialectic thinking': what the Greeks called *analectics* (literal meaning - beyond) might have value. It asserts that there are epistemes and praxis "beyond the horizon of what is already experienced and contemplated" (Dussel and Mendiata, 2003, p.142). Furthermore it links back to the original intent of the 'western' enlightenment (there have been other enlightenments), which was to open up the future; to go beyond the abyss that confronts contemporary humanity. However, any contemplation of this 'other' as part of the common global narrative requires an acceptance, by those who have been bought up inside the western condition, to allow that the analytical and the empirical are only two of many ways of understanding and that the sense of certainty they purport to offer may prove to also be a fabrication.

The Illusion of Certainty

Uncertainty is pervasive, [it is] written into the script of life.

The temporality of human existence prevents the achievement of absolute certainty.

(Nowotny, 2015, p.1)

While many of those who think about the human condition would scarcely pause to question the obviousness of the above quotation, the reality is that the lived experience of western societies, and those who have been colonised in other parts of the planet by its technologies and economic models, owe much to "the systemic attempt to reduce existential insecurity" that lies at the centre of its *raison d'être* (Nowotny, 2005, p.7). In fact, so successful has been the acceptance of this 'universal norm', we who benefit have come to expect that certainty is a necessary societal condition, and that the inability to guarantee the same is a failure of leadership and governance, or both. This sociology of 'certainty' has become an un-interrogated *de facto* social licence for both institutional framing, and also, at least in spirit if not in substance, economic exchange systems (consumer guarantees for example). It has insinuated itself into all the dominant narratives of economic growth, progress, scientific mastery and the supremacy of modernity. In the process it denies not just the complexity, chaos, contradiction and uncertainty that is demonstrably evident in those systems, but also

the built in ignorance to certain problems we face [because] the answers can only be discovered in the future (known unknowns) [as well as] the ignorance we have and promote because we are incapable or unwilling to look in certain directions (thanks

largely to the established disciplinary structures) or think beyond the dominant paradigms (unknown unknowns) (Sardar, 2015, p.28).

This inattention to ignorance, its significance to social systems, and the maintenance of an illusion of normality premised on simplicity, order, efficiency and certainty, induces a political longing for security that is often conflated with certainty. As the recent Trump campaign demonstrated, it can sometimes, with the use of a particular cunning, translate into a societal tendency towards blind obedience, and hence is the ultimate food source for authoritarianism (Nowotny, 2015, p.20), even if the promises upon which that obedience is based is blatantly broken. Representations, or possible futures, often archaisms, are routinely proposed to address these longings for “the familiar and the orderly and the secure...[to deny its replacement] with something that feels scary because it is different and destabilising, but also because it upends their own place in society” (Taub, 2016, p.9). However, in the longer term, these proposals become the ultimate illusion. What is advocated are ‘closed futures’ that reduce the capacity to aspire and bind the collective to solutions that are either manifestly unworkable or suboptimal (Appadurai, 2013, p.185). As populations invest their hope in the authoritarian promise, and almost always find it cruelly denied (as has been the case in Venezuela recently), what occurs conceptually is a decline in *asabiya* (almost literally – ‘the sinew that binds’) or social cohesion, thus further fragmenting the capacity of the system to sustain itself. In contrast, a rejection of that option requires an embrace of the uncertain that, even with its attendant fears, lets in the unexpected (Nowotny, 2015, p.36). This opens up previously unthinkable and unspeakable ‘beyond’ spaces to allow recombinations of existing and new elements to reorganise, or cohere, into previously unseen patterns; patterns that may provide exciting possibility, and paradoxically, a different kind of certainty that, independent of the whims of external parties, would otherwise never be considered. It is worth re-emphasising that this ‘opening up’ cannot occur inside a dialectic model.

The Seduction of System Primacy

It is as difficult to imagine the end of capitalism as it is to imagine that capitalism has no end.
(Santos, 2013, loc. 672)

While humans exist in multiple systems, our capacity for non-genetic adaptation is determined by our abilities to use symbolic language in a variety of forms; by the ability to transmit collective learning through those forms, and by the way that we use those to shape our engagement with technologies (Christian, 2003; Spengler, 1932). These systems manifest themselves as cultures (or perhaps civilisations) that are both finite and bounded, and for the most part defined by other social systems that either exist, have existed, or could exist. This finitude allows for the potential that humanity might organise in ways other than nation states; that it could conduct beneficial exchanges beyond capitalism and socialism (another polarity) and that there are valid ways of understanding beyond the analytical and the empirical. There are a few scholars who have contemplated the possibilities inherent in this contention in order to understand evident (nomothetic) patterns in these systems, and their potential application to the present condition and the limits of it (Galtung & Inayatullah, 1987).

One of these scholars the macrohistorian, Arnold Toynbee, argues that the rise of the authoritarian and the populist occurs when the creative minority, who have previously committed themselves to addressing challenges to the social system, withdraw their support, and in the process alienate themselves from the bulk of the population (the proletariat) involved in that system. In such situations, Toynbee argues certain kinds of ‘creative personalities’, who may have been at one time been part of the minority, aspire to leadership in this time of withdrawal, and they are

“called upon to play the part of a conqueror who replies to a challenge with a victorious response; in a disintegrating civilisation [they] are called upon to play the part of saviour” (Toynbee, 1947, 1, p.153). Toynbee goes on to assert that these saviours may respond through the sword; act as the controller of a time machine (either forwards or backwards to particular futures); assume the role of unquestioned philosopher-kings and sometimes project themselves as ‘God incarnate in man’ (Toynbee, 1947, pp.533-547). While many may question Toynbee’s assertion of civilisation as the unit of social system analysis, this pithy assessment of leadership responses in times of system disintegration seems particularly perceptive and useful when applied to events of the last decade.

Under Toynbee’s analysis, it can be argued that the creative minority who supported the Second Industrial Revolution, as (Rifkin 2011) has defined it, have been unable or unwilling to resolve critical issues inherent in contemporary socio-economic fabric. Where they have tried to do so they have been seduced into the left-right dichotomy and have defined themselves within the political polarities of their time. Thus there are inadequate responses to increasing economic disparity that arises through either capitalist or socialist ideology; to the putting of national self-interest above the global good, and to assumptions of entitlement and exclusion based on accidents of geography. As this plays into the undermining of the status quo with the attendant desire for authoritarianism, a small group has been able to concentrate wealth and power at both national and transnational scales. This latter cohort, not cynically manipulates the system for its own benefit, it also seeks to actively destroy any activity that would suggest otherwise. Furthermore, it has also reimagined the entire industrial military complex and the insurance industry to extract profits from the many injustices it has created, either directly or indirectly. This has been described as ‘disaster capitalism’ (Klein 2007), which profits from catastrophe and bets on disaster through sophisticated financial instruments (Appadurai, 2013, p.295).

The question then remains: how might a creative minority react in the contemporary condition? One option is for those that define themselves in this manner to continue to act on the existing system in ways that reduce or moderate its excesses and over reach. This might be characterised as ‘the descent option’, and it has the benefit of creating space and time for other options to emerge. A second option is for some of the same to develop a manifesto for change that is so extensive that, if it were to occur, the system “would lose all its essential characteristics and become unidentifiable. Such a change means the cessation of the existence of the system; when a system becomes unidentifiable and loses its sameness it disappears” (Sorokin, 1957, p.654). A third option—which may conflate with the second—is for the creative minority to reorganise in a global commons; one that takes as its starting ethos the imperative to transform. Such a commons would create communities of diverse interest that would look to harness the energy and non-authoritarian dissatisfaction that was present in parts of the Bernie Sanders campaign in the USA, and in parts of the ‘UK Stay’ campaign. One might expect that as groups aggregate in this transformist commons of “Other Voices”, they would begin to imagine coherent options and look to turn them into reality.

Thus one might conclude that recent expressions of popularism and authoritarianism are expected manifestations of a system in the process of disintegration, and that there seem to be few options for any kind of response that will remedy that situation. If that circumstance has a significant probability to it, then uncertainty reigns, and the imperative for dialogues and narratives of ‘the beyond’ are not only vital, but they are in spaces where a disillusioned creative minority can now refocus their energies.

The Hubris of Anthropocentric Dominance

Humanity can survive and adapt to the new world of the Anthropocene, if we accept human limits and transience as fundamental truths and work to nurture the variety and richness of our collective cultural heritage

(Scranton, 2015, loc.200).

While assertions of system disintegration, together with the need to embrace analectics and uncertainty, might be debated by some, the multifaceted existential threats created through the unfettered exploitation of planetary resources, cannot. While popularists and authoritarians may deny some parts of the chain of evidence, particularly climate modification, few deny similar evidence of ocean acidification, increasing desertification, the loss of fresh groundwater, urban air pollution and reductions in biodiversity. The modifications that they have caused are now not just climatic but, as Crutzen and Steffen (2003) have argued, these modifications have altered the geological structure of the planet itself, hence the use of the term Anthropocene to denote a new geological era. This description is not one to be proud of. It is a statement that records with shame our collective hubris and arrogance.

Few popularists and authoritarians accept the need for humans to substantially modify their behaviour to address these astounding consequences. If they do acknowledge it at all, they assert that technology can solve whatever problems confront us, and provide from now on every human need that nature cannot. They have encouraged senses of identity where the maintenance of the status quo is also a pathway to existential threat. Herein lies the hubris and the enormous risks that go with it. This hubris is not just a failure to acknowledge that humans have, as Naomi Klein recently remarked, created a socio-economic system that is at war with the planet, except that Nature doesn't play by our rules (Klein, 2014, p.21). It is also a denial of such existential consequence that it might be appropriately described as intergenerational genocide, or perhaps more appropriately, ecocide. What is even more concerning is that in most of the planetary dialogue, while few are astounded, even outraged, by the outright deniers, there is a widely shared complicity, backed with little evidence, that humans can have everything that they have now, and at the same time 'restore the safe operating spaces for humanity' (Rockstrom et al., 2009).

While clearly such ideas are anathema to the popularists and authoritarians, the key threat these forces pose in this time of environmental emergency is not their cynical opposition per se, but the distraction and future eating that arises from their occupation of political and economic spaces. By 'distraction' I mean the sidelining of efforts to come to terms with the threat of environmental existentialism, as people of good will preoccupy themselves with the short term issues at hand. By 'future eating' I am suggesting that the time span of these 'saviour' experiments, which have an anthropocentric arrogance as part of their ethos, not only eats into the time for adjustment and adaptation, it also facilitates systems crossing thresholds, after which they are forever altered.

The dangers of dialectic thinking, the quest for certainty and the assumption of the socio-economic system's primacy are all reflected in the argument for anthropocentric dominance. The ongoing deterioration of multiple systems and the senselessness of treating them in isolation, rather than together (for that's what our discipline-centric mindsets encourage us to do), reveal levels of ignorance that would be comical if the consequences were not so dire. It is also important to note that, given many of the systems are either close to thresholds or have crossed over them, the time is over to contemplate that state, or what might be done in some kind of careful scientifically neutral academic manner, as this can misrepresent the emergency that confronts us all. The environmental theorist Roy Scranton argues that so severe is the threat that we humans need to learn to let the current civilisation die. At an individual level, be we foot soldiers, worker ants or mere bystanders, this means "letting go of our predispositions and fear. [At a societal level] it means letting go of

this particular way of life and its ideas of identity, freedom, success and progress” (Scranton, 2015, loc.200).

Narratives of Imagination, Anticipation and Aspiration

The narratives of the next system will make space and time intelligible in new ways. They will help us reconceive our identities, provide meaningful frameworks for seeing things differently and reconstitute realities freed from the mechanistic assumptions that now constrain the existence of the many in the favour of the few.

(McAllum)

Central to this article on systemic limits and the case for the reconception of the self and the other has been the assertion that narratives constituted inside the existing system cannot develop the viable alternatives required for the planet and the contemporary socio-economic condition, unless such alternatives require the dismantling of the system itself. Nor can they, for the most part, resolve the issues (jobs, growth, certainty) that the popularists and authoritarians falsely assert they can. If this premise is accepted then new narratives are required that begin to frame a culture of ‘beyond the system’ without using the system as the basis to always define what those narratives mean. These must address in particular our need to imagine, to anticipate and to aspire, and it is there power that will lie in the creation of new symbolic language as the basis for change.

Imaginative narratives of the post-now are not new, but the advent of networking technologies that can enable quite different constitutions of time, form and space are. These will provide the basis for “a global analogical (philosophical) project in a transmodern pluriverse” (Dussel, 2009, p.514), and the further evolution of symbolic language that is reflective of new production and peer to peer ecologies, of possibilities released from the shackles of commodified time and of localised civics unaffected by the corrosion of external globalised interests. It will require a new capacity to aspire; “a navigational capacity through which poor people can effectively change the terms of recognition within which they are generally trapped”(Appadurai, 2013, p.290), together with a shared anticipation to share future risks more equitably, including those dystopias generated in the contemporary system, and so enable communities to transition past the politics of blame.

Taken together these narratives can develop into a new sociology of emergences and knowledge systems that emancipate humanity from its present dysfunctional state, through different kinds of collective learning and novel ways to apply technologies that are already available. They allow the pooling of the true richness of human experience, and in so doing, make those who, for so long, supported the contemporary status quo wonder why they, for so long, tolerated the sterile and often unhappy conditions that are the legacy of the fossil age.

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