

EDITORIAL

Organisational systems and the earth's mega-systems

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We now live in what the earth scientists call the Anthropocene, a planetary epoch that acknowledges the impact that human activity has on earth's mega-systems such as climate, species diversity, and land forestation; and impacts that threaten humanity itself through sea-level rise, floods, earthquakes, extreme heat, wildfires, animal transmitted viruses, to name but a few. Especially affected are people in the countries most affected already by poverty, land degradation, and wars. I won't number here the many issues in climate change and species loss. That is done richly, informatively, and substantially in the articles in this volume and in their sources, as are the arguments locating the aetiology of these issues in particular human cultural assumptions, practices, and mindsets. What I will focus on is possibilities for organisational actions and mindsets now and in the future.

Let me be clear, I am not talking of false or manic hopes that serve only to soothe anxieties or falsely excite with vain promises. What is needed are real potentialities. These are not simply vast steps forward in technology, although some of these may prove useful. Too often the search for new technologies engenders false hopes within a context of maintaining the status quo; small additions to quell fears that we may lose our privileged places in the world. What is needed is the collective courage to face the facts of our environment and to change our ways of thinking. Good technologies will then naturally follow; purpose following transformed beliefs is tantamount. The central problem is that conscious, and especially unconscious assumptions are changed only with great difficulty. We humans are wonderfully adept at denying realities that don't suit and at dissimulating, even to ourselves, about our personal motives and deepest desires. Psychoanalysis has demonstrated that all too clearly. Yet the survival instinct, what Freud named as Eros, is strong and can lead both to selfish and selfless action. It is the latter that can emerge in times of community crises, when people come together to face a common threat.

In many ways organisations are better placed to make positive changes than governments, whose machinery mostly moves more slowly. I don't disparage government and industry collaborations for change. I can recognise and celebrate government and organisational mindsets that see a more sustainable future in moving to non-fossil-fuel-produced electricity and electric cars; in reforestation efforts, small as they are; in the growing recognition that intensive farming is both cruel and not the basis of good dietary health with the attendant growth of the plant-based food industry.

In the last two decades many organisations have become increasingly aware of the need to change their practices. Although these may seem too little, too late, we need also to look to the other aphorism “if you try and don’t succeed, it is better than not trying at all”. Dystopia will not do. We in the West are lodged currently in capitalist methods of production and distribution and the derivatives of this way of working are speedily becoming global. Whole new ways of working may become possible, as are hoped for by some of our authors in this journal, but are perhaps unlikely for the near and mid-future. As one of our authors, Rebecca Nestor points out, there is a “ticking clock” taking us towards a point where change will be altogether too late. So, the changes that are occurring in organisational ways of thinking are occurring within this limiting context. Moreover, it may be that working at reducing emissions and other green practices are simply a political correctness ploy serving pecuniary interest. Nonetheless, the very fact that this may sometimes be the case demonstrates a turn in attitudes on a broader scale. Increasing numbers of people want change, even where it seems immensely difficult.

A look through the ubiquitous search engine Google turns up many case studies of organisations attempting greater sustainability through measuring and reducing greenhouse gas emissions; reducing energy consumption and waste; utilising renewable energy; fighting obsolescence; choosing greener infrastructures and equipment; choosing greener suppliers; and raising awareness amongst employees and stakeholders. However, some of the methods used, such as carbon capture and storage, can and have been criticised by environmental scientists saying that the solutions are as bad as the problems. Our production machines, our work organisations seem caught in a no-win situation because of the contexts (e.g. varying stakeholder and shareholder concerns) and mindsets within which they are constrained. Nonetheless, it is imperative that organisations take action to rid themselves of environmentally destructive practices, and take up environmentally productive ways of working. But how can this be done, in the face of what seems to them almost insurmountable obstacles such as limited availability of green technology, investment returns, and climate policy.

A study by the International Labour Organization (2022) “Greening Enterprises: Transforming processes and workplaces” reports that its:

study found that larger enterprises are more likely to take resource-efficient measures and offer green products and services, partly because they have easier access to green technology and have more legal obligations.

And yet it also reports that whilst government regulation, such as in transport and use of resources is producing some cultural change, strong drivers come primarily from the “values of entrepreneurs and aspirations of workers’ to produce healthy workplaces”. That is, the drivers must come from our human psychology.

Is it then that we must rely on broader cultural changes through groups and individuals—a new earth community—to influence change rather than simply

through current forms of government regulation and organisational strategy? Or, recognising that organisations are the people within them (albeit propagandised and institutionalised as they are), how might minds and actions heal the wounded earth?

A look through the articles in this issue finds that although reporting on the disasters brought about by human activity, they each contain glimmers of possibilities. Hope may at times be delusory but faith in positive life forces and a close examination of both conscious and unconscious human dynamics may yet bring forward new ways of thinking and acting.

Some of the themes that constantly present themselves in this issue of *Organisational and Social Dynamics* are:

1. Human activity, especially through the agency of our organisations, has impacted the mega-systems of the earth. This is no myth but a demonstrated actuality.
2. Social psychological forces, such as capitalist driven economies with their propaganda methods, unconscious collusions, societal assumptions and attitudes towards the earth, its biological species and physical properties and systems, all underpin the devastations found in the Anthropocene.
3. Such assumptions and attitudes are built into our cultures and embedded in their institutions, so that it is extremely difficult to change them and resistances are strongly employed to maintain a status quo.
4. Nonetheless, citizens, industry, and governments are becoming increasingly aware of the dangers posed. Ways to escape the embeddedness of old attitudes and their associated practices are sorely needed.

The articles in this issue also give some constructive approaches to the conundrums that they present:

1. Humanity needs to, and could recognise, its responsibility for the earth. We are not the “top of the evolutionary tree” that we have come to think we are. To think this is a misrecognition of nature and of the reality of evolution. All creatures evolve together in an interwoven ecology.
2. The earth cannot be “tamed” or nature “conquered”. We are an integral part of nature with a citizen-like responsibility for its overall integrity.
3. In this, we need to recognise an “earth-community” where there is a “voice” for all creatures and the earth as a whole. Humans can be the vehicle for this voice. Only then can ecosystems be sustained and cruelty diminished.
4. Systems psychodynamic and socioanalytic concepts and practices can give a deeper understanding of the factors that might lead to a broader democracy of the earth, through the recognition of unconscious forces at play—both in the assumptions held, and in the interests served by humans and their organisations. Such recognition is the first step in change and transformation.

Paul Hoggett argues that humanity has a moral obligation to the earth and its creatures. A new society can only come about with loss of hubris and those

attitudes that hold humanity as somehow “superior” to other species. We are not entitled to use the earth for our own purposes alone. He says, “If we are to find our way in the future we need to learn to listen to that which does not think and speak as we do.” But how can we do this? What is it that systems psychodynamics can offer?

Rebecca Nestor examines the climate crisis through her study of the psychosocial forces underpinning those people and organisations that campaign for the reduction in carbon emissions and that attempt to communicate data about climate change. Understanding the dynamics surrounding climate change that operate even within those who are attempting to bring about changes, is a step forward. This is because we know resistance to change is deeply embedded in the psyche of our communities, not simply in the lack of resources. Social psychological forces are linked to deeply unconscious and conflictual sources.

Looking to unconscious forces, Manab Bose considers that there is a persecutory unconscious at play and argues that we experience psychological distress about the environmental and societal devastation caused by human activities. Recognition of this is important, he says, because the earth is a suffering patient. At the end of his article, he suggests many activities that people and organisations might engage with to work on an earth therapy.

Ryan LaMothe centres his article on the rift or split currently held in human beliefs about the earth and its inhabitants. In concert with our other authors, he demonstrates how humanity has instrumentally objectified other species and hubristically held to the belief that nature can be controlled and managed by human effort. These beliefs and actions, he argues, occur post early childhood. There are no such beliefs that are fundamental. Drawing on a Winnicottian developmental approach he examines the dynamics of hope based on good-enough care, and looks to how such care is needed for the earth in the Anthropocene. Here is an author who believes that unconsciously humans, like other creatures, know that good-enough care is the basis for healthy young; and that this includes care of the environment into which the young are born and in which they grow.

Marilyn Miller also turns to psychological developmental issues in examining the dynamics of propaganda which she says, “are being used successfully today to win the ‘war of spin’ over the status of evidence on the urgent existential threat to planet earth created by the Anthropocene epoch”. She uses an exploration of Bernays’ propaganda methods in his 1929 “Torches of Freedom” March to uncover the psychodynamics of group propaganda. Bernays used the work of his uncle, Sigmund Freud, to underpin his methods, in this case Miller argues, this is not for the better. She uses the example of the “Torches of Freedom” March to illuminate what she refers to as the mindless behaviour in human approaches to climate change.

The much used metaphor of “mother earth” is examined by Margo Lockhart and found wanting. She proposes that a new metaphor is emerging in response to issues surrounding the Anthropocene “and that this represents not just a change in our psychological relationship to the planetary ecosystem,

but a countering of powerlessness, and a claim for a collective, humane, ‘of the earth’, voice”. The ways in which we conceptualise and use language are vitally important in attitude and behavioural change. This article approaches the ways in which philosophical, environmental, life and systems psychodynamics language is changing to open new vistas in how the devastation of climate and the human cruelty towards animals might be transformed for a better, more inclusive, healthier, and more sustainable future. It echoes and further articulates the need for a democracy for all on the earth implicit in some of the other articles.

Frank Owen’s article directly approaches how leaders think and act in the Anthropocene. His study of leaders’ actions during the New Zealand earthquakes is a case exemplifying how organisations might act during earth trauma. His analysis using ideas from the social unconscious, works with how leaders might approach the challenges to deeply held human assumptions about our relation to the earth that such events present. The need for understanding the nature of groups, unconscious beliefs, and collective emotions is again evident in this article.

In his review of the book *Climate Psychology: A Matter of Life and Death* by Wendy Hollway, Paul Hoggett, Chris Robertson, and Sally Weintrobe, Mark Stein concludes:

this volume is a refreshing and provocative contribution to an important area of concern. By the end of the book, I was ever more convinced of the significance of climate psychology to our lives and felt that, in their different ways, the authors helped fashion both a deeper understanding of the problems and a way forward. It has encouraged me to think a great deal, to consider further my own implication in these matters, and to work harder to address these important, pressing issues. For this reason, I wholeheartedly recommend this book.

Ryan concludes his review of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* by Bill McKibben, saying:

McKibben skilfully, entertainingly, and comprehensively has set out the current circumstances and challenges of the “human game”—a metaphor he uses to great effect. In describing eloquently and passionately what is at stake for us all, he has explored humanness and our intimate association with earth and with each other. Whilst lamenting that we are at a crisis point of the “human game” playing out, he offers guarded hope that we can make the important decisions that are needed, if the “human game” is to perpetuate.

These books include many of the issues and questions that the authors in this issue describe and struggle with. The answers tentatively suggested provide some possibilities for the future of humankind and all the earth’s creatures.

In concluding this editorial I thank the general editors and publishers of *Organisational and Social Dynamics* for inviting me to call for and edit this special issue. And my thanks for the help of Aaron Nurick, Matías Sanfuentes, and Christine Taylor. I also thank Jennifer Burrows for taking the role of book review editor. The conundrums and threats we all face in the Anthropocene are of critical importance. If the planet, with its rich diversity of inhabitants is to

continue, at least for millennia to come, for our children, our grandchildren, and more, we must take up a citizenship of the earth community. Just as Shapiro (2020) argues for us to take up our place as citizens in a community of humanity, so I argue, with others, for an earth community with responsibility to care for the planet. This can only be done collectively through our organisations—governmental, for profit, and not-for-profit sectors—working together. But essentially it will be through a new human state of mind.

References

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