Governance for the Anthropocene

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Abstract

Recognition of the Anthropocene and that it is human activity that is driving these perturbations to Earth’s nature systems, suggests that the response lies in modifying this collective human behaviour. Societal behaviour change is challenging because it requires simultaneous alteration of individual and societal behaviours. I have framed this process as a Cultural Transformation. This transformation employs a systems approach to influencing the complex adaptive system of human society. An overview of theory, methodology and practice of Cultural Transformation will be given with particular emphasis on governance as both a focus for transformation and a driver of this change. I suggest that a mixed participatory and group representative democracy model of governance best results in regulating the aspects of culture that are harming the ecosystem, and provides the optimum way to achieve social and environmental justice. Such a model of democratic government means decision are taken by those most affected by them, and builds in a method for the less advantaged in society, as well as other species and future generations to have their voices heard. Such a model permits the burdens and benefits of both the situation and the transformation to be equitably distributed. While challenging to create and operate, this form of governance is best able to take the adaptive governance approach necessary.

Introduction

Governing for the Anthropocene is a story with two themes: the first pertains to governance and the second to the transformational process of change to arrive at that new governance regime. Further, in discussing Earth System Governance, I want to emphasise what we are actually talking about governing the human systems that interact with the Earth’s biophysical natural systems. That is we are addressing governance of humans for the purpose of caring for Earth’s systems.

Governance

For this discussion I am defining governance as the structures and mechanisms a community develops to order its internal affairs and external relationships for the common good of its members (this is drawn from multiple sources). Government then is the institutions and bodies that govern. Governance requires decision taking at several levels about matters such as resource allocation, priorities, policies and ultimately, about who makes the decisions about making the decisions (Steinberg 2014).

A spectrum of governance arrangements are seen across a range from authoritarian dictatorships to liberal parliamentary democracies. A majority of nations in the modern world claim to be democratic. These include one party one candidate states, states where opposition to the government party is curtailed or weak, through to nations with a variety of electoral methods for selecting a representational parliament (Dryzek & Dunleavy 2009). In all these situations, the common element is that election of representatives is seen to be what democracy is all about. I want to challenge that belief because it excludes important considerations about what governance needs to be, in order to enable humanity to adequately prepare for, and take on governance in, the Anthropocene.
Western liberal parliamentary democracy, the doyen of democratic styled governance, is in fact at a moment along a governance evolutionary continuum from the mediaeval period, through the reigns of absolute monarchs, and the stages of reaction to that politic which has seen an increasing share of the power, as defined as ability to vote to select a representative, being extended to men of property, all adult men, then women, then younger people, then indigenous peoples. The reality is that in this evolution, the right to vote was extended, but not really a greater share in actual power. That is still held by parliaments assembled, and, as I will show, other non-elected players. And electoral systems are fraught: electoral politics begets organised sectional interests, leading to vote trading, multi-platform package promises and pork-barrelling, ‘core and non-core’ promises, populist policy, attack campaigning, opposition for the sake of destabilising government, all resulting in the real issues being ignored (Burnheim 1985).

It is clear that there is widespread disenchantment with this situation, although there is discussion about causes and consequences (Mair 2013). However, the evolution of governance continues. The question then becomes, over the rest of this century into what do we want it to evolve, why and how?

**New governance required**

The importance of exploring the type of governance we will need for our future is because our 18th – 19th century’s governance model is no longer fit for purpose. The prime reason for this is the co-evolution of the power and influence of the corporate sector and the current socioeconomic system which, while delivering benefits for some of humanity, is also causing damage to society and to the environment (Douglas 2015; Tait 2015). Our epidemics of illness (chronic disease, mental illness) and the ravages of global environmental change are in part attributable to the consequences of our modern lifestyle that is driven by the corporate sector and the economic system that it has both helped to create and to then benefit from (Deetz 1992; Korten 1996; Rockström, Steffen, Noone *et al.* 2009; Wilkinson & Pickett 2009). One could say that the corporate sector, corporations, have created the Anthropocene.

This is not to say that corporations are of themselves bad. They provide benefits to society in terms of economic development, jobs, goods and services. This is good for governments and so governments are favourably disposed to business. However, business, in the personification of corporations, also carries both financial clout and the power to pressure government. Further, they have taken control over the discourses that define how we think our society should operate (Deetz 1992). By corporations here I am mostly referring to large transnational entities who have come to operate outside effective government control. Consequently they are poorly regulated, and so their behaviour and the system that permits this poor regulation has the detrimental consequences listed above. Therefore the corporate sector needs to be better regulated so they provide the benefits without the detriments.

The only entities on the planet big enough to effectively regulate corporations are collaborations of governments. The only way that this is going to occur is if civil society, acting on behalf of citizens, exercises power to make governments take on this responsibility to govern in the interests of everyone, that is, for the common good.

I propose that this is going to require an active process of introducing greater democracy into governance of primarily human society, and secondarily of corporations themselves. Two philosophical traditions support this. Firstly, the primary health care approach holds one of the determinants of health is a person’s involvement in and control over their lives (World Health
Organisation 1986; Commission on Social Determinants of Health 2008). Secondly, autonomy and participation in governance is a component of wellbeing (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005). Any governance model that is to be most effective must also promote health and wellbeing.

**Democracy**

By democracy I mean that at the level of decision taking within the governance system, the decisions are taken by the people who have an interest in the outcomes of those decisions; put another way, decisions are taken by those who have to live with the consequences. Without going into too much detail, interest can be taken quite broadly and at the end of the day the group taking the decision will have to decide on their own boundary conditions.

To assess a model of governance for its ‘democraticness’ one can assess it against a set of principles (Fishkin 1991; Cooney & Lang 2007; Marshall 2008; Ostrom 2008; Brown & Harris 2014). Political equality signifies that in a democracy, each individual has the opportunity to exercise a similar degree of power or influence.

Tyranny is the outcome of undue influence and the tactics used to gain such disproportional influence.

Deliberation means decisions are a dialogic (discursive) process, iteratively reached and informed by the best available technical and logistic evidence and by the lived experience of those who will be affected.

Reflection recognises that this process has to watch itself, be explicit about its values, make its assumptions transparent, review its process, and be mindful of all the knowledges that feed into the deliberations. Adaptiveness is an ability to work in conditions of uncertainty, incomplete knowledge and conflict, taking a learning approach, and changing actions as the situation evolves.

Transparency in order for decision takers to be accountable to their community is fundamental to the good operation of a democratic system.

In parallel to these, the Principle of Subsidiarity (Marshall 2008) has it that decisions are most effective if taken closest to the level they will be implemented and services are delivered at the level that balances economies of scale and scope with economies of efficiency.

Supporting these principles are a set of democratic processes which are the mechanisms to make these principles transpire in practice. I am not going to discuss these here.

Creating more democratic governance will require both short term incremental reform and a parallel process of transformation. Both processes will need to occur within governance and within corporations. As an example of a reform, we can look at representation.

In any polity of more than a few hundred people, direct democratic participation by every citizen becomes onerous. Some form of representative governance is required. The question here is: how to select the representatives. Our western liberal parliamentary model uses selection by election. A variety of electoral methods exist which give rise to different degrees of ‘democracy’. A first past the post, single member constituency, non-compulsory voting model provides the least democratic (as assessed

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Figure 1: Democratic Principles

- Political equality
- Avoid tyranny
- Deliberative / informed
- Reflective
- Adaptative
- Transparent / accountable
- Subsidiarity
against the principles above) outcome. Examples of such polities are the UK and US. At the other extreme, the Australian Senate model is among the best. This is a proportional, preferential, multi-member constituency representation model.

Moving to such a model at all government levels with a few minor additions could provide a very robust form of electoral democracy. These additions are: introduce “partial” optional preferential voting (the voter should be able to vote for as few or as many candidates as they want); rules to allow for recognition of voter intentions (minor mistakes on the ballot paper where voter intention is clear should not invalidate the vote). The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into the conduct of the 2013 Federal Election recommends “partial” optional preferential voting below the line. This has worked well at elections for the New South Wales state upper house since 1999.

Other election systems such as the Hare-Clarke used in the ACT and Tasmania, and the Mixed Member Proportional voting (MMP) system from New Zealand are other examples of useful proportional representation methods.

Further, representation of all legitimate interests can be extended to include structural societal facets such as gender balance and significant minorities, and other groupings such as the disadvantaged, the less powerful (Young 1990), the young and the aged, geographically distant people, future generations, and other species.

Other options for reform exist. However, to move into a fuller process of democratisation, transformative action is necessary. Transformation is another term with multiple shades of meaning. In this discussion, taking a political economy (or even a political ecological) perspective, I understand transformation to be “actions that can result in the over-turning of established rights systems and the imposition of new regimes” (Pelling 2011)(p.124). Governance transformation builds on reform and is a process of setting up and developing alternative systems and models of governance.

**Transformation**

In addressing the second of the opening themes, processes of change, I am talking about such a transformative change to create the system of governance that is essential to ensure focusing human society and particularly corporations onto the longer term, common interest perspective needed to govern ourselves in the Anthropocene.

Governance is a social phenomenon and as such can be seen to sit with in the group of elements that make up human culture.

**Culture**

Culture is variously defined but here I take two definitions and propose another. Formally, the dictionary definitions include: the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively, [which are used to transmit from a deeper level], the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society ... [or] a particular group (OED 2015). Using an analogy, one could say that culture is the operating system for a society. The intention with a cultural transformation is to rebuild the operating system of such a society. So governance transformation is a cultural transformation.

During 2014 and 2015 in the Human Ecology Forum (HEF) at the Fenner School of Environment and Society (FSES) I ran a seminar series to explore the theory and practice of transforming cultures. The conclusions accord with what one would expect, and the scant literature on generic cultural transformations (see Lonsdale, Pringle and Turner 2015) for a broad discussion albeit focused on
I will describe the task of transformation and summarise the outcomes here first. However some key conundrums remain, on which I’ll elaborate along the way.

**Transforming Cultures – changing systems**

The task of transforming cultures is to seek to influence a system from within that system. Clearly that happens all the time; governance systems along with other cultural elements are changed and evolve. However this project intends to push evolution of the system in a particular direction for a particular (albeit openly defined) desired outcome. The outcome is a governance system fit for purpose for leading humanity to meet the challenges of the Anthropocene which requires both mitigation of the drivers (which entails a raft of other socioeconomic system changes which are being resisted by groups with vested interests) and adaptation to the changes which are already underway.

Questions remain as to the possibility of generating change, of the legitimacy of undertaking this, of the ethical position of such a project, and of course, about bringing about unintended outcomes.

Bearing this in mind, contributors to the series formulated a set of values and principles and a reflective process to attempt to best address these concerns. The decision was made to make our assumptions open to ourselves and any who wished to join (see Appendix One). The full findings are presented in Appendix Two; the key points as they related to governance transformation are:

- Culture is socially constructed, political and so subject to being changed
- Transformation necessitates developing and communicating a change narrative and this envisioning requires us to consider what is needed not what is possible. The transformation narrative has to describe the intended outcome, reasons for, process of, potential barriers to and opportunities from the transformation, in a way that speaks to people’s emotions as well as their reason. Speaking to emotions and reason requires use of ‘the arts’ in addition to more academic methods.
- Culture is also a complex adaptive system. It is a systems change process and therefore needs a systems approach. System models provide a method for understanding and analysing a system, and provide a language to negotiate and share that understanding
- In attempting to change a complex adaptive system, one needs to realise that one can design an influence with an intent to provoke a change but systems are resilient, and therefore once generated there is no control over how the influence will play out
- Technology and infrastructure, the hardware of society, affect the boundaries and abilities for change to occur. Putting effort into changing these adjunct systems can facilitate culture change
- Above all else, democratising governance is about developing citizen capacity to exercise their informed, deliberated, collective power

Applying this to a governance transformation requires therefore a strongly articulated narrative of what a more democratic society might look like, how it might function, what advantages it provides, and how it might be brought into being. The narrative will also need to address concerns about the change process and look at barriers and opportunities. However, crafting, telling and promoting this narrative is confounded by the very nature of it being somewhat oped-ended and inexplicit. The spreading dissatisfaction with our governance system among people in liberal democracies (Mair 2013), gives us a point of leverage to initiate a conversation. People can then be assisted to collectively craft their own more explicit narrative as a part of the change process. It would need a participative, collective action method. One such narrative follows.
A process of transformation must needs start in the present, recognising that society can be working better for people and the environment than it is. Growing out of reforms to the current system, it means establishing parallel, alternative governance structures. Early on these would complement and feed into a reformed governance process and over time develop into the actual governance processes of a new system.

Other elements of the narrative include:

- The goal is a biosensitive worldview which emphasises the need to protect the global commons because they underpin human prosperity and wellbeing, which is a foundation for an ecologically sustainable human society. In turn a biosensitive society depends on active, engaged citizens in a robust democratic system
- Reminding people of and emphasising the government’s role in balancing common, social and corporate interests
- Challenging the neoliberal unregulated market worldview as the frame for decisions, highlighting market failures and the damage this worldview is doing
- Challenging unlimited growth in population and material throughput (as opposed to qualitative development) and its logical conclusions
- Sensitively address world and regional population by addressing people’s concerns about fairness to space and resources, promoting a contraction and convergence model of development, and promoting access to family planning and education / schooling
- One possible future governance model might be to have nested citizen assemblies instead of the current parliamentary model. Members would be selected by lot from a citizenry who accepted that a turn in governance is part of one’s civic duty. Subsidiarity would have assemblies taking decisions at relevant scales and scopes; local assemblies leading local matters and international assemblies leading global ones
- This is underpinned by an education system that teaches young people what governance actually might be and how it is achieved democratically
- Acknowledging that resistance from vested interest is to be expected and that non-violent persistence will bring about change, and
- Others too many to enumerate here.

For instance in Canberra, as has happened in many other cities and regions in the world, a group of concerned citizens have set up a Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy (CAPaD). The intention is that this Alliance will both adapt and lead actual processes for citizen participation and deliberation in decision making within the Australian capital region, and also to promote the idea of more deliberative and participatory process to the wider community and to government. The CAPaD employs a methodology based in the Industrial Areas Foundation from the USA.

To assist planning intentional change, the corporate world has a selection of change process models available. One, by Kotter (modified in Figure 1 (Kotter 1996) ), is being explored by the Human Ecology Forum group as a description of a framework for intentional change.
The transformation process begins with a small group of concerned individuals becoming a collective, developing up and then promulgating the change narrative, engaging others and helping to empower them to act, growing the movement, and in a snowballing process achieving wins that further recruits members, redevelops the vision, shifts paradigms (worldviews, social norms and practices), expands the leadership group, and iteratively continues.

Finally, because this approach aiming at governance transformation operates at the higher Meadows’ Leverage Points for Change model (Meadows 1999), it should have more reaching and powerful effects into the societal system we are seeking to change. Further, because of the strategic level of intervention being attempted here, I would argue, if all campaigns were to focus their energy at this governance transformation level for the short to mid-term, then we, the concerned people of humanity, have the best chance of simultaneously addressing all the myriad ills of human kind. This is because the transformed cultures of government will be able to bring corporate behaviour into line with what is required for the common good.

Conclusion

In order to create a governance system that enable humanity to govern itself in the Anthropocene, to live within the boundaries of Earth’s systems, we need to be clear on what model of governance will best enable this to occur, and be able to establish a process for bringing this model of governance into existence. A democratic model best serves the interests of the common good, where democracy means actual deliberative citizen participation in making the decisions that affect themselves. The transformational process to achieve this new model of governance needs a well-articulated, emotionally captivating narrative that engages and motivates people to become part of the change process. Both strands come together in the strategic realisation that were the whole of civil society to come together to focus on the transformation to a democratic model of governance, humanity would be better prepared to address the challenges confronting us in the Anthropocene.

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References


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Appendix One: Governance in the Anthropocene Values Principles Assumptions

Values and Principles:

- The process of change must be ethical and grounded in a set of values
- Value dissent
- Respect for diversity of knowledge and approach
- Recognise change is an emotional process
- Be reflective
- Recognise we are designing influence not change
- Recognition that communication (whatever medium) is an iterative dialogic process

Assumptions:

1. Human collective behaviour as manifest in the dominant cultural world view is disrupting the ecological foundations supporting human society and the existence of other species.
2. Transformation of the current dominant world culture is imperative to ensure human survival and minimise disruption to the ecosystem and other species.
3. This transformation will need to reassert the biophysical realities within which we live and promote a culture which is sensitive to and respects nature and its limits.
4. There is still time to take effective action to minimise disruption to human society.
5. Systems are resilient but adaptable.
6. It is possible to attempt a transformation by designing a change that will influence the system
7. It is possible to influence complex adaptive systems but not to control the effect.
8. While an intent for transformation might be agreed, all other details of all other aspects, even final outcomes, are open to varying degrees of contestation and disagreement, but these are worked out within the larger, collective concordance about intent.
9. Human wellbeing and the natural world would be optimal if human societal behaviour was to accede to a set of values including but not limited to: biosensitivity, better resource use, externalities reflected in decisions, recognising biophysical realities/limits, in other words having ecological sustainability.
Appendix Two: Governance in the Anthropocene Typology of Transformations

A theory, methodology or practice framework, proposed at the beginning of the HEF theme, provides the first take for reflection.

Theory

- Culture is communication between and across the generations of a society
- Culture is about exercising power by establishing the operating system for a society. Therefore it is political, socially constructed and so subject to being changed.
- Cultural transformation as an evolutionary process reveals (unfolds) an approach to systems change that regards influences into the system as selection pressures.
- Recognising culture is a hyperobject provides a method for adjusting frames and identities.
- Change requires thinking “outside the box”, envisioning requires us to consider what is needed not what is possible.
- Change involves transgression and subversion leading to disruption to existing power relationships and hence conflict will occur

Methodology

- System models provide a method for understanding and analysing a system, and provide a language to negotiate and share that understanding.
- Scenario planning gives a methodology for envisioning, and testing out, a set of possible futures.
- The collective mind is a methodology for working with groups of people to help them achieve a common purpose. The agreement about the purpose is the collective mind.

Practice

Practice revolves mostly about marketing, which is about communications that draw on and apply research in psychology and neurobiology.

- Stories (narratives) are central to our identity, and for staying in status quo, and equally critical in bring about change. Our stories give us meaning and understanding of the world. New stories that give new meaning, purpose and describe how things might be are needed to replace the current stories and to help forge a new identity. Changing identity is challenging. It requires changing the frames (including the narratives and metaphors) that give us identity, to permit a new identity to emerge. It requires addressing the emotional responses to the change and using the emotions to shift the frames.
- Because words carry multiple meanings, to appeal to the emotions communications need to draw on multiple media: tell stories, dance, sing, play, draw, paint, cartoon and sculpt.
- Applying the seven ways of knowing and the collective mind process for designing intentional influence into a system opens reframings necessary to trigger change.
• Marketing, applying psychological knowledge and theories of change, can be used ethically
to guide strategy and tactics to reframe situations and help change individual and group
identities to bring about cultural transformation.

• Besides marketing, transgression and subversion leading to disruption to existing power
relationships is necessary.

• Technology and infrastructure, the hardware of society, affect the boundaries and abilities
for change to occur. Putting effort into changing these adjunct systems can facilitate culture
change. Two examples are:
  o More generally novel technologies provide means for changing cultural structures;
    examples the abolition of slavery by machines (industrialised capitalism); creation of
    capitalism by technologies to better harness energy: developments in wind, water
    and lastly fossil fuels technology. So in future synthetic photosynthesis may provide
    opportunity for another change.
  o Specifically energy systems are fundamental to both political and literal power
    within society. Changing the energy system can open opportunity for change in
    political and economic power. This is particularly relevant for the transition from
    fossil fuel to renewable energy sources. Additionally efficient use of energy and an
    overall reduction in the amount of energy used will press for change in cultures, as
    well as being an outcome of the primary culture change.

• Disruption to existing power relationships will provoke resistance to change and the
resultant conflict will need to be managed.

An alternative typology might be:

About culture

• Culture is communication between and across the generations of a society

• Culture is about exercising power by establishing the operating system for a society.
  Therefore it is political, socially constructed and so subject to being changed.

• Recognising culture as a hyperobject directs attention to transformation as a process of
  changing frames and identities.

About change

• System models provide a method for understanding and analysing a system, and provide a
  language to negotiate and share that understanding

• Cultural transformation as an evolutionary process reveals (unfolds) an approach to systems
  change that regards influences into the system as selection pressures.

• Change requires thinking “outside the box”, envisioning requires us to consider what is
  needed not what is possible.

• Applying the seven ways of knowing and the collective mind process for designing
  intentional influence into a system opens re framings necessary to trigger change.
Change involves transgression and subversion leading to disruption to existing power relationships and hence conflict will occur.

Scenario planning gives a methodology for envisioning, and testing out, a set of possible futures.

Stories (narratives) are central to our identity, and for staying in status quo, and equally critical in bring about change. Our stories give us meaning and understanding of the world. New stories that give new meaning, purpose and describe how things might be are needed to replace the current stories and to help forge a new identity. Changing identity is challenging. It requires changing the frames (including the narratives and metaphors) that give us identity, to permit a new identity to emerge. It requires addressing the emotional responses to the change and using the emotions to shift the frames.

Because words carry multiple meanings, to appeal to the emotions communications need to draw on multiple media: tell stories, dance, sing, play, draw, paint, cartoon and sculpt.

Marketing, applying psychological knowledge and theories of change, can be used ethically to guide strategy and tactics to reframe situations and help change individual and group identities to bring about cultural transformation.

Besides marketing, transgression and subversion leading to disruption to existing power relationships is necessary.

Technology and infrastructure, the hardware of society, affect the boundaries and abilities for change to occur. Putting effort into changing these adjunct systems can facilitate culture change. Two examples are:

- More generally novel technologies provide means for changing cultural structures; examples the abolition of slavery by machines (industrialised capitalism); creation of capitalism by technologies to better harness energy: developments in wind, water and lastly fossil fuels technology. So in future synthetic photosynthesis may provide opportunity for another change.

- Specifically energy systems are fundamental to both political and literal power within society. Changing the energy system can open opportunity for change in political and economic power. This is particularly relevant for the transition from fossil fuel to renewable energy sources. Additionally efficient use of energy and an overall reduction in the amount of energy used will press for change in cultures, as well as being an outcome of the primary culture change.

Disruption to existing power relationships will provoke resistance to change and the resultant conflict will need to be managed.