

Transformation, Mobility and Status: addressing the meaning of deep change.

Keywords: Transformation, mobility, status, tipping point, change.

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Abstract

This paper assays a preliminary investigation into the linkages between change and transformation. In doing so it straddles diverse areas of social enquiry.

Introduction

An old French proverb provides a good introduction into the cynicism with which societies have often treated change:

“Plus ca change, plus ca reste la meme chose”

-and this from the nation which in the 18th century spawned arguably the greatest transformation, social and political, of the modern era: namely the French Revolution, with its motto of “Liberte, egalite, fraternite”!

At a more individual level, the English adage:

“A leopard does not change its spots” similarly reflects a distrust of the authenticity, or perhaps the permanence, of change.

In both uses of language, from 2 quite different societies (albeit sharing a common European history), the notion of deep change is made suspect.

Yet change is at some level unavoidable; it is often considered desirable, depending on the existing state or condition or status quo. In many cases this will be ‘framed’ as progress. The notion of framing leads inexorably to a

consideration of the contemporary use of the term ‘re-framing’, which can shed a different light on what we mean by change. Consider the following proverb, from the Hebrew scholars ‘Chazal’:

“Meshanem makom meshanem mazal” –transl.: “S/he who changes his/her place ipso facto changes his/her fortune”.

Is the change referred to in this proverb intended as internal or external; i.e. as a social or as an individual or psychological phenomenon? Either way, one can interpret the pithy saying from a positive, or equally accurately from a negative perspective.

Does the proverb has as its root interest ‘transformation’? Or is it more interested in the notion of mobility, of a transference of individuals, groups, communities, from one geographic location to another? By extension the proverb can be equally applied to human as to non-human species –internally displaced persons in addition to refugees, seeking sanctuary; schools of whales seeking a different home as the global climate changes and makes their old sanctuaries decreasingly hospitable. Note that here the mobility from one place, or status quo, to another, is more for purposes of survival than for an orderly process of incremental progress.

Any serious consideration of change therefore seems to open up a quagmire of questions relating to its nature. This brief paper attempts to provide a framework within which to place the contemporary concern with the concept of transformation within the broader meaning of change, since transformation has become such

a popular academic term, at least in the areas of organizational theory and behaviour.

Corpus

The meaning of transformation

Whilst change can be considered an umbrella term, designating any movement from one state to another, transformation means a fundamental change in the form of the subject matter. This would apply equally to the physical universe as to the social; to the natural environment (desertification, coastal flooding, species extinction), as well as to the built ('bidonvilles, shanty towns, aquifer annihilation); to organizations and communities as subsets of a society, (supranational organizations larger than nation states –Lehrer 2014), in addition to society as a whole; to economic and political systems, and perhaps most frighteningly and futuristically, to 'homo sapiens': the human species (via genome mapping, stem cell research etc.)

The degree of reversibility of change might seem to go to the core of any transformation process. In the natural domain a chrysalis cannot revert to its former state, once it has transformed itself into a butterfly; a chicken cannot revert to its egg state. Humanly devised systems seem to be less unidirectional: a dictatorship can be transformed into a democratic state; it can also revert into a dictatorship. Should one say that these were 'false transformations'? Or does it make more sense to admit that in the social and political and economic realm, i.e. the realm of human organization in the broadest meaning of the term, transformations are less than irreversible? Social states then may not irrevocably and permanently change, however much some humans may want to believe that. Hitler's idyll of a Reich surviving a thousand years; Stalin's vision of a centralized communist USSR; Mao's aspiration of a Chinese society

forever cleansed of the impurities of capitalist inequality: all have crumbled within the memories of many still alive today.(Toynbee 1961)

In some areas of human endeavour one might argue convincingly that transformations have occurred which are unlikely to be reversed, outside the realms of major global cataclysm: travel and transportation would seem to fit this category. From pedestrian to animal to wheeled to motorized on land; from human powered to wind-powered to motorized to hybrid on sea; from surface-bound to air-conducted vessels; from gravity-bound to space vessels: these have all transformed the capacity of humans to move themselves and their resources with increasing facility.

Transfers, Mobility, Stasis and Status

In the physical domain the ease of transference of people, animals and resources constitutes an essential element to the promotion of mobility –a more or less easy access to moving from one place or state to another. By extension, social mobility involves a change of status for individuals and groups. After profound movement there may exist the need for a period of rest, or stasis, in both the physical and social domains. Large-scale animal and human migration may exhibit these features. At an individual level, the notion of transference has of course been borrowed by psychology and in particular by the area of psychotherapy. In all of these different cases, the changes which ensue may be more or less profound and irreversible. In other words, the phenomena of transfers and mobility do not necessarily induce a fundamental change in the form or status of the subject. Transfers of knowledge would appear to facilitate and often precipitate many facets of transformation –a major example would be the hydra effect of universal literacy, conjoined with the increasingly ubiquitous access to

information (and misinformation) on the internet.

The transformation of acts of violence

On a more sinister note the ability of humankind to perpetrate acts of violence, against other humans, but also against all forms of animal and vegetable life, has been transformed; again, once discovered and developed, short of global human extinction, that knowledge remains increasingly available and usable. It is difficult to see how this process could be reversed. As with travel and transportation, methods of violence have moved from personal unarmed, through primitive personal weaponry, to the use of explosive devices, such as pistols, cannons, rocket and bombs; to the development and application of nuclear fission, and to poison, radiation, and other forms of chemical and biological warfare. Interesting to note is the symbiotic relationship between the development of travel and transportation systems and weaponry. Hannibal's elephant army was a marvel in its day!

The transformation of meaning?

The above poses a less than sanguine trajectory to the ultimate transformation of human society. Is it possible to proffer a more hopeful one? Perhaps ironically the most fundamental transformations may not reside in technological innovation, however much the 21st century bears witness to its logarithmic rate of change, which rate may make it increasingly difficult for the majority of an aging world population (the former 'lumpenproletariat' –Marx, 1867) to apprehend, assimilate and deploy to their advantage. The rate of change may not equate to the rate of social progress, if by that we mean an increase of overall well-being and a reduction of overall universal inequality; and this is apart from the more gross forms of military and para-military violence, to which

civilian populations in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere, are currently being subjected.

Transformation at the personal level

If technology will not be our transformational saviour, what might be? The irony is that we might have to turn our thinking on its head. This trick of course is as old as the hills. We now have different phrases for it, such as 're-framing' (Brezeale, R. 2012) and 're-forming', reformulating and 're-evaluating' (New, C. and Kauffman, K. 2004); but all imply the enormous potential of re-thinking at the level of the individual in society. One thus confronts the possibility of at present 7-billion-odd paths to personal transformation, which taken together would constitute an irrepressible transformation of world destiny. An ancient Rabbinical saying states categorically that when one person does one good deed, it is as if s/he has saved the whole world. "Soul Food" is an anthology of short stories taken from Zen Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish, Christian and other traditions, all of which have at their base the potential of personal transformation, and its ultimate aggregate ability to move the world on a different, in this case more spiritual and less materialistically obsessed trajectory (Kornfield, J. and Feldman, C. 1991).

Humanity does indeed have the capacity to extinguish itself, and all living organisms, with greater facility than ever before. It is conceivable that the recognition of such a terrifying prospect may increase the consciousness of a sufficient quotient of our species, that a radical transformation of what it means to be human may possibly ensue. This would embrace inter alia, what responsibilities come with such a re-thinking process, what values need to be re-formulated in the context of imminent global annihilation, and what priorities must be adopted. It is possible (although in the opinion of this author not probable) that such a 'tipping point' (Gladwell,

2000) may still be achieved, in terms of social epidemiology, (Krieger, 2001), with which to permanently transform our mental reasoning in order to irrevocably ameliorate the 'human condition' (Arendt 1998). The tipping point theory can be embraced at the level of individual re-thinking and consciousness raising, and at the societal level. A salutary example has been the gradual acceptance of the need to 'reduce, reuse and recycle' household goods, which has been aimed at reducing the level of waste generated at the household level. Many businesses now pride themselves at having embarked on similar paths of conservation, for both manufacturing and distribution; which brings us to a consideration of the topic of organizational and more specifically business transformation.

Transformation of business organizations

"On a clear day you can see General Motors" (Wright, J.P. 1979) was for a while used as almost a scriptural text in business schools, in order to demonstrate how large-scale multinational business enterprise can run into major trouble if they become too self-confident. The book itself was self-congratulatory in the extreme! The author had been close to CEO of G.M. in its heady days, when strong vehicle demand was a given, European and Japanese competition were not considered to be an overwhelming threat, and the contemporary S. Korean automotive giants, such as Hyundai and Kia, just a gleam in some industrialists' eye. . Nowadays G.M. is fighting for its survival, having been bailed out of bankruptcy by massive government (and Union) support, not only by the U.S. and its involuntary taxpaying stakeholders, but more than proportionately to their share of the business, by taxpayers in Canada. (Karakowski and Guriel, 2015) To the extent that G.M. has transformed itself, it has been anything but a voluntary, self-induced process.

"Who says elephants can't dance?" (Gerstner, 2002) was written by the CEO of one of America's major success stories of the 20th Century –IBM. The fundamental difference between the two stories of enormous transformation in these twin icons of U.S. organizational leadership, is that the former was for a multitude of reasons too hide-bound to be capable of voluntarily engineering the enormous transformation required to confront their new industrial reality. The latter, equally smug in its market dominance during the 70s, was alert enough to the deep and irreversible market changes in its industry, to take upon itself the urgent need for fast and painful transformation. It was self-induced, and to the extent that IBM has survived without massive government financial bailout, it can be deemed successful.

Joseph Schumpeter (1942) coined his famous term of 'creative destruction' to depict how the capitalist system actually depended on the annihilation of obsolescent organizations in obsolescent industries, in order to re-distribute more optimally the economic (and human) resources needed for emergent industries and their championing organizations. He was tipping his hat to Charles Darwin (1859), by suggesting that the evolutionary nature of animal and vegetable species might be seen also to operate in the economic realm, where market forces are given precedence. The fittest organizations will survive. The rest will become extinct, or may be bailed out, and then subsequently go to the wall.

The transformation of global institutions

Have we yet developed global institutions to spearhead deep, world-changing transformation processes? It would be hard to answer in the affirmative. The United Nations, The World Bank, the World Health Organization among others, are all global institutions ostensibly dedicated to the transformation of

human society towards increasing egalitarianism –and we note the echoes of the 18th century French Revolution. Their organizational frameworks, their moduli, their internal cultures, all militate against radical reformulation of constraining perspectives. Chris Argyris for one would have a ball instituting his model of ‘double-loop learning’ (Argyris and Schon, 1996) into such bastions of vested political interests and constantly played power games!

Conclusion

Change is a constant in both the physical and social universes. The increasing rate of change has led to increasing realization that at some point change becomes more or less irreversible and permanent: hence the contemporary concern with the notion of transformation. Transformational processes do not necessarily constitute progress. An earlier physical or social state may well have provided more aggregate welfare for the universe than one which follows. When the process of change has itself ‘morphed’ from transformation to metamorphosis, we know indeed that the change has reached the tipping point of irreversibility. Ask Kafka’s cockroach. (Kafka, 1915)

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