

Continuous dissent and the limits of reason: Ecocentric decision-making for resistance

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Any action or social movement whose goal is to protect biodiversity and halt mass extinction must be guided by decisions that navigate irreducibly complex interconnections between human groups and the ecological systems that these groups may protect or destroy. Complex systems theory provides models for navigating and understanding these highly interconnected systems, but these models are extremely unintuitive for people immersed in the humanistic cultural constructs (of language, cosmology and identity) that pervade modern society. Complex systems theory also provides a basis for understanding how collective human behaviour is influenced by shared stories or myths. Successful resistance to ecocide must not only physically prevent further ecological destruction, but also re-shape the stories that coordinate and influence collective human behaviour. This implies that groups who actively resist ecocide cannot themselves be guided by the humanistic stories that shape ecocidal behaviour. Rather, these groups should be guided by *continuous dissent*: a form of perception that allows non-rational direct perception of instructions and messages from more-than-human ecological wholes.

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In order to halt mass extinction, individuals and social movements must resist both powerful corporations that actively cause harm and the legal systems that protect those corporations. These destructive forces are highly interconnected and multi-national; the ecological systems they act upon are also strongly interconnected with one another, with human economic systems, and with the resistance movement itself. Successful resistance must be guided by ecocentric decision-making that is capable of navigating this complex interconnectivity.

Complex systems theory provides a basis for such decision-making. It is an interdisciplinary, non-reductive, ecological paradigm useful for navigating the

truly unfathomable interconnections between refuges of biodiversity, global economic systems that destroy those refuges, and social movements that protect them. This paradigm thus has the potential to inform wise action to protect biodiversity. In view of this potential, this article explores some of the key barriers to understanding and implementing complex systems theory as a guiding principle for ecocentric decision-making.

One key barrier is the predominance of *humanistic* cultural constructs. Following Merriam-Webster, 'humanism' can be defined as:

a doctrine, attitude, or way of life centred on human interests or values ... that usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual's dignity, worth, and capacity for self-realization through reason.

This anthropocentric emphasis on *individual* human self-realization is incompatible with complexity. This is because, for complex systems theory, we are inextricably part of various human and more-than-human systems, and these larger wholes are ontologically and epistemologically necessary to explain the behaviour of any system's parts. In other words, to consider an individual human outside of these systems is a futile abstraction. Furthermore, humanism's emphasis on *reason* may limit our understanding when complex interconnections render rational abstractions useless for describing certain phenomena.

If ecocentrics are to act upon (or even fully understand) the implications of complexity, we must overcome the humanistic constructs that shape our language, science, cosmology and identity. These broad constructs shape the *format* of our thought by imposing humanistic containers upon otherwise ecocentric thought *content*.¹ These containers may shape our decisions even when we strive toward ecocentric action (as in the case of well-intentioned but ultimately destructive actions by humanistically-oriented environmental groups).

If we acknowledge the complexity and interconnectivity of human and ecological systems, then we should acknowledge that humanism's hyper-individualism and hyper-rationalism may produce misunderstandings and harmful action. Given the depth to which humanism penetrates our consciousness, it may also be useful to conclude that humanistic cultural constructs actually distort our perception.

Shared stories and decision-making

Collective human behaviour can be described by complex systems theory. For example, Eisler (1987) synthesizes complex systems theory with archaeological evidence in her Cultural Transformation Theory: a model for understanding collective human behaviour as an oscillation between two essentially stable cultural states of *domination* and *partnership*. Cultural Transformation Theory, and other frameworks that use complexity to describe human behaviour, emphasize that human decisions are partially determined by the groups we belong to, and the stories that bind those groups together. These groups are culturally constructed through such shared stories, and even biologically

definable groups (*e.g.* sex) may have culturally constructed definitions (*e.g.* gender). Oftentimes one group may oppress another (*e.g.* patriarchy), and complex systems theory models these relationships as a single group defined by a dialectic of oppressed–oppressor. This approach is borne out, for example, by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s success in liberating oppressed people by illuminating their internalization of the oppressors’ stories (Freire, 1970).

Thus, collective human behaviour – including oppressive and self-destructive behaviour – is partially determined by shared stories that define our group identities and predispose us to that behaviour. Notable examples of dysfunctional stories are: gender (Eisler, 1987); progress (Hine and Kingsnorth, 2009); hyper-reductive science (Bateson, 1979; Bohm, 1980); and humanism in general.

This partial determination of our behaviour should not be construed as an argument against free will: a discussion about struggle or resistance cannot be meaningful without some degree of free will. However, the inescapable influence of these stories upon our behaviour implies that a resistance movement will not be successful simply by preventing physical destruction of biodiversity (*e.g.* by blocking pipelines, mines and developments). Such protective actions are obviously necessary, but a decisive end to ecocide also requires that our actions of resistance lead to a substantial retelling of the stories that shape society as a whole. That is, successful ecocentric resistance must arise from *both* material protective actions *and* the telling of new (non-humanistic) stories through the symbolic interpretation of those actions.

Complex systems and the limits of rational analysis

It is not possible for protectors to rationally determine the correct strategy for materially defending ecosystems against destruction, while also positioning themselves for the best symbolic interpretation of those actions by the general population. It may be possible to assess and manage how a particular project of resistance (*e.g.* disabling a pipeline) will be perceived in the short term by the general population. However, it is not possible to know how that project might, over the longer term, be symbolically connected to simultaneous and future events – many of which are inherently unpredictable (*e.g.* natural disaster, other resistance actions, refugee movements, technological developments); nor is it possible to predict its broader effects upon prevailing ecocidal narratives.

This is because there are theoretical limits to the capacity of any rational analysis to predict the behaviour of large and complex systems. Random events affect complex systems in ways that are theoretically unpredictable (Taleb, 2012). More generally, Prigogine (1980) and others have shown that even apparently tiny disturbances can produce profoundly deep qualitative changes in complex systems. Finally, Damasio (1994) has presented neuroscientific evidence indicating that humans are never fully rational, even when we think we are. This all suggests that attempting a purely rational analysis of complex systems is futile, and that, as a consequence, humanistic hyper-rationality may lead to harmful action.

Messages from larger wholes

An ecocentric perspective should maintain awareness that individual humans only exist within the context of more-than-human systems. Many pre-colonial societies were cognisant of this – finding the idea of abstracting individual humans from larger tribal or ecological contexts to be virtually unintelligible – but centuries of humanistic thinking have eroded this holistic perception (Cajete, 2000).

If we maintain ecocentric mindfulness of our place as a part within larger ecological systems, we might find it reasonable to expect messages from those systems that can help to guide our decision-making. After all, we can observe that most natural systems are coordinated by information that belongs to the system as a whole. For instance, fungal networks centrally coordinate behaviour of trees in a forest (Sheldrake, 2020). When we receive such messages, they may appear to us as random events, so in order to recognize them as messages, we would first have to successfully interpret meta-messaging that identifies them as non-random information. That accomplished, these messages should form a useful basis for all kinds of wise action.

Messages from a larger ecological whole originate from a frame of reference that is larger than our own. This means that although we may be able to receive and act upon these messages, the entirety of their meaning may not be available to us. In comparison, a cell receiving a neurotransmitter has no understanding of the complex series of stimuli that released the neurotransmitter in the first place, but the cell can still respond to this chemical message in a way that promotes the overall function of the organism. Similarly, it is reasonable to expect that we should receive messages from a larger ecological whole that can guide wise action, but that we will not have enough information to fully understand how these messages relate to larger patterns that remain outside our frame of reference.

Given our necessarily limited perspective, rationality may not be a useful tool for recognizing or understanding such messages from the larger ecological whole. This runs directly against humanism's exaltation of rationality as the sole means for understanding ourselves and our world. More broadly, humanism's anthropocentric focus on human interests, individualism and self-realization through reason alone, stands in the way of our perception of, and submission to, messages from more-than-human ecological wholes.

From the limits of reason to continuous dissent

We have seen that complex systems theory suggests that a purely rational analysis will not always be an effective guide for navigating complex human and ecological systems. This is emphatically not to say that rationality is bad or useless – only to say that it, like any other human capacity, has *limits*. We should apply rationality in those domains where it is applicable but adopt other approaches when rationality is not helpful. Rationality is a tool, like a hammer. Hammers are good for pounding nails, but are not useful for fixing radios. Rationality is good for engineering results within limited domains and for

communicating with other humans, but, as I have argued above, it is not useful for understanding our own roles within complex ecological systems. When we are navigating complex systems, there may be times when it is more meaningful – and, even, more *scientific* – to adopt an animist perspective that treats ecologies, economic systems, whole groups of humans and other complex systems as autonomous wholes, with minds and wills of their own (Bateson, 1979).

Holistic perception of every ecological system as a communicating mind (instead of a mechanical system reducible to its parts) is what I am calling *continuous dissent*. The word dissent derives from the Latin roots ‘dis’ (meaning ‘different’) and ‘sentire’ (meaning ‘to sense, feel or perceive’). My use of the term ‘continuous dissent’ is thus meant to suggest a shift in perception that results from a continuous awareness of irreducible complexity, and vigilance regarding unconscious and inextricable biases imposed upon our thought through the humanistic constructs of language, identity and so on. This form of perception is honest about our limited capacity to make rational decisions, and also about the intrinsic limitations of rationality for understanding real world ecological systems. I emphasize the continuity of dissent, because dissent is not mutually exclusive with reason. As noted, rationality is a tool that can be adopted or abandoned depending upon need; dissent, on the other hand, needs to remain continuous.

Continuous dissent is a commitment to a holistic animist worldview. Unfortunately, we lack contemporary animist stories appropriate for coordinating people to protect dwindling biodiversity from rapacious multinational corporations and the humanistic legal systems that facilitate ecocide. Indigenous groups (and others) still possess important stories appropriate for this task, and these stories will indisputably play an important role in coordinating ecological resistance, but it seems unlikely that any existing stories will suddenly become sufficient to halt mass extinction. The goal of ecological resistance guided by continuous dissent is to tell these missing and needed stories through actions that protect biodiversity.

I am thus suggesting that successful protection of the natural world will depend upon small numbers of humans receiving, understanding and acting upon messages from larger ecological systems. These actions could only arise from a substantially different way of perceiving the world – namely, from a perspective in which ecological systems are capable of sending messages in the first place. In this way, continuous dissent is both an animist worldview and a strategy for resistance.

Resistance

Continuous dissent is resilient in the face of the legal system’s formidable forces of rationalized human supremacy. Environmental impact statements, permitting agencies, police forces and other legal constructs exist to enable human exploitation and destruction of the natural world – though our hyper-rational humanist paradigm casts them as protections. It is clear that when corporations have legal rights and the natural world does not, then the natural world will be destroyed.

If continuous dissent were thoroughly integrated into the legal system (for instance by passing comprehensive ‘rights of nature’ legislation, or by providing legal protection for indigenous spiritualities and land rights) there would be economic breakdown. The basis of our extractive industries would collapse (including industrial agriculture). This makes the enactment of such protections highly unlikely. For example, even when poisoned drinking water motivated residents of Toledo (OH, USA) to enact legislation asserting the rights of the Lake Erie watershed to “exist, flourish, and naturally evolve,” federal courts invalidated the legislation, claiming that it was ‘vague’ (Falk and Butler, 2020). In fact, the legislation was not vague; it merely expressed a dissenting view on anthropocentric assumptions about human domination over the natural world, and this dissenting view was not compatible with humanistic economic and legal systems. Similarly, mining companies have denied indigenous claims to sacred land on grounds of vagueness, arguing that there is no way to objectively describe a line between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘not sacred’. If society were to view all lands as sacred right-holding entities, our economic and legal systems would lose much of their meaning and applicability.

It is thus unlikely that large numbers of people will experiment with continuous dissent, especially if this suggests behaviours that are illegal or costly. However, successful resistance does not depend upon a large number of people. It is possible for a small group to materially halt the destruction of key places, disturb key infrastructure, or otherwise disrupt economic systems, in a manner guided by a shared ecological whole. These disruptions (in combination with natural disaster, climate disruption, refugee crises *etc.*) could then form a series of events that are symbolically interpreted into new stories that can shape the collective behaviour of the general population. After all, human societies are complex systems, and – as noted above – complex systems can respond to apparently tiny disturbances with qualitatively new behaviour. This disturbance and transformation should be the goal of ecocentric resistance.

It is tempting to assume that ecocentric resistance movements would have human leaders whose role is to interpret messages from the ecosystem for others, but such a model retains a humanistic bias that would become problematic – potentially leading to authoritarianism. Rather, leadership should be decentralized (or centred in holistic ecology), with most participants relying on continuous dissent to interpret direct instructions from shared ecological wholes.

Invalidating established stories to act in continuous dissent and protect the Earth may result in some confusion. However, this confusion should be small compared to the chaos produced by multi-national corporations destroying the Earth for profit. Continuous dissent does rely on the belief (supported by complex systems theory) that more-than-human ecological wholes can coordinate human behaviour. We should not expect this coordination to eliminate all confusion, but this strategy could promise some success relative to the imminent ecosystem collapse we otherwise face.

For the foreseeable future, the general population (not engaged in dissent) will remain humanistic, and so they will elect or claim particular humans as symbols of new stories that are being told. These human symbols will humanize the resistance and co-opt material successes to bolster humanist narratives. This negative feedback pulls economic and legal systems and the resistance back into established humanistic patterns. Nonetheless, human symbols could help reshape shared stories by translating the resistance into humanistic terms through reasoned language.

In any event, protectors guided by this strategy must expect to create (in combination with natural disasters *etc.*) sufficient disturbance to economic and legal systems such that these systems undergo qualitative change – change that will not be entirely foreseeable in its nature. Reshaping shared stories may enable humans to reorganize on the basis of partnership instead of dominator principles (Eisler, 1987). The histories and stories of indigenous peoples certainly suggest that healthier organizing principles for human society are possible (Kimmerer, 2013).

Cultivating continuous dissent

Given the future we face, it seems wise to attempt disturbance of anthropocentric economic and legal structures with the aim of reorganizing them around stories about animistic ecological partnership. Action that remains within the humanist paradigm is futile or damaging, and the cost of inaction will only be a deepening of the ecological crisis.

The dissenting view proposed here has some commonality with humanism. In both, individual experience is central for constructing meaning. However, a humanist perspective perceives subjective experience as potentially complete, while the dissenting view recognizes that individual experience is always only a fragment of larger patterns. By ignoring these larger patterns, the humanist view produces confusion.

Continuous dissent relies on subjective experience to construct meaning, because messages from an ecological whole cannot be rationally analyzed. The initial barrier to recognizing these messages appears surmountable, because many people already perceive messages in dreams, synchronicities, or other non-rational events; stories about direct communication from nature leading to activist resistance have made award-winning fiction (*e.g.* Powers, 2018). Once the message is recognized, subjective interpretation would be the only way to decipher its meaning.

Continuous dissent recognizes the limits of humanist cultural constructs and the harm these constructs can cause when they shape our language, cosmology, science and identity. We may avoid this harm by cultivating dissent through well-known methods for experiencing altered perception and transformation such as (but certainly not limited to): psychedelics (Sheldrake, 2020); meditation; derivation of basic needs in relationship to land (Feather, 2020); ritual (Somé, 1997); and direct action to protect and heal the Earth (Kimmerer, 2013).

Notes

¹North American indigenous scientists (more likely to speak from animist rather than humanist cultural perspectives) have written extensively on the problems of humanism pervading these broad constructs (Wub-e-ke-niew, 1995; Cajete, 2000; Kimmerer, 2013).

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