

Editorial

Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change

'In-between': The Dwelling Place of Our Time

Oliver Koenig, Eva Pomeroy, Megan Seneque, and Otto Scharmer

In the last two Editorials, we positioned Awareness-Based Systems Change as a journey that moves from transactional to relational (Koenig et. *al.*, 2021) and from duality to complementarity (Koenig et *al.*, 2022), somehow indicating a clear-cut transition from a point of departure (A) to a point of destination (B). Yet taking such a viewpoint can easily be criticized as reifying the same Western-dominated epistemological patterns of thought and practice that we, as a journal, have intentionally set out to challenge by exploring and bringing into relationship different epistemologies and knowledge systems in an intentional effort to better source and expand the knowledge needed for social and systems change. What we sensed was lacking, and what we find ourselves drawn to by the contributions to this issue and by the necessity of our time, is the space in-between, which speaks to the messy and potentially generative process of transition.

Almost 100 years ago, imprisoned by Mussolini's Fascist regime, Antonio Gramsci famously wrote in one of his notebooks:

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” (Gramsci cited in Baumann, 2012, p. 49)

While ‘interregnum,’ according to Baumann (2012), points to the common historical use of the term as denoting the “time-lag separating the death of one royal sovereign from the enthronement of the successor” (p.12), Gramsci infused this term with a new meaning that reached much deeper into the socio-cultural realm.

There have been numerous attempts at deciphering the meaning of Gramsci’s quote. From a socio-historical vantage point, Achcar (2022) sees Gramsci’s use of interregnum as referring to the already incapacitated bourgeois rule and the ‘not yet’ capacitated working-class rule, a situation which, at the time when Gramsci was writing, was in the midst of giving rise to European fascism (p. 385).

Carrying the notion of interregnum into the here and now, we could refer to the decline of an increasingly incapacitated neoliberal-capitalist order and the not-yet-fully-emerged system of global coordination and cooperation needed to successfully face the climate, social and economic polycrises (Dixson-Declève et al., 2022). The morbid symptoms of our times can be witnessed in ever-accelerating global destabilization leading to what Scharmer (2022, para 4) describes as, “pervasive collective depression that shapes everyone’s outlook, in particular that of our youth, who will carry the burdens of our societal failures into the future.”

One concept that has gained much attention due to its ability to capture both the essence and emergence of such interregnum, or in-between states and the problems and tensions inherent in transitioning from one state to another, is that of ‘liminality.’ For Thomassen (2016), liminality refers to:

...moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction. For these reasons, the concept of liminality has the potential to push social and political theory in new directions. (p. 1)

As a concept, liminality was first described by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his 1909 publication *Les Rites de Passage* (van Gennep 1909/2013), in which he studied the importance of transitions for any society. In his culture-transcending empirical work, van Gennep saw that rites of passage appeared to follow a generic pattern. The sequence he identified begins with a phase of separation, characterized by disjuncting and detachment from the given order of things, and moves to a phase of incorporation and integration. The middle phase he coined as the ‘liminal phase,’ with the feeling of liminality leading to feelings of ambiguity and unsettling uncertainty for the liminal subject(s), which include individuals and collectives alike.

“In order to find your way, you must become lost,” says Bayo Akomolafe in a recent symposium of the International Society for Systems Sciences (2022, 1:38:20)¹, referring to a Nigerian proverb. While the subjective experience being freed from forms of structure might be seen by some as exhilarating, and while we know that this experience is ripe with potential for growth and transformation, for many the task of having to navigate through life without a reliable sense of guidance—often accompanied by a corporeal sense of loss—feels daunting and intimidating (Kelly, 2008). The collated articles in this issue provide concrete examples of the ways in which awareness-based practices for systems change can serve as gateways for systems to get un-stuck. To do so successfully, write Buechner et al. (2020), it becomes necessary that we shift our attention,

...from these individual qualities to the dimension of social space or a “container” in which interpersonal relations take place and the roles which shared experiences of liminality and *communitas* might play in creating conditions for transformation at the level of social and personal meaning systems. (p. 106)

Shifting attention from individuals or collections of individuals to the ‘social space’ or ‘container’ requires us to lean into new methodologies and epistemologies that represent other possible ways of knowing and shaping our world at this time, across different cultures, contexts, and positionalities. In these new epistemologies, the sources of knowledge are rarely uni-local and attributable to one individual, but rather surface and become known through experience, with one another, in the in-between. The articles in this issue show how the potential to become unstuck in the liminal space lies in our relations and our relating. As such, these pieces show how the in-between can be *both* a place of frustration, pain, and paralysis *and* the very catalyst for new knowledge and knowing that is needed to activate and support transformative action. The new doesn’t come without pain. Not acknowledging this is why so many transition attempts fail.

Contributions of This Issue

The collated papers in this—the fourth—issue of the Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change point to a variety of theoretical and practical approaches to working with the in-between in a way that supports a shift from a sense of depression toward a journey of collective awareness and co-creative responses.

This issue features our first-ever *invited full article*. In it Thomas Hübl and Lori Shridhare vividly show that while trauma occurs in separation, healing

¹ The symposium entitled *Meeting/Greeting the Future Halfway*—thereby playing with Barad’s (2007) famous proverb (meeting the universe halfway)—was organized by Megan Seneque and Raghav Rajagopalan, two members of our Editorial Team.

happens in relation. Further, the power of collective witnessing is harnessed in the Trauma Integration Process—the framework Hübl and Shridhare introduce for integrating individual and collective trauma for healing. In framing their article, they borrow the 2018 Nobel Laureate in Literature Olga Tokarczuk’s concept of the *tender narrator*, representing a fourth voice in collective experience, one whose perception crosses the boundaries of time and space and sees the whole. By intentionally opening a space for the full emotional spectrum of the liminal state and by providing a scaffolding for holding individual and collective trauma, their practice aims to move beyond trauma-informed to trauma-integrated interventions.

In the first of our *peer-reviewed articles*, Rachel Lilley, Mark Whitehead, and Gerald Midgley document their shared learning, which spans over a decade, in trying to meaningfully address limitations of existing governance systems. The authors guide readers through a theoretically sound and highly applicable exploration of combining Mindfulness-Based approaches with Behavioural Insights instruction. They present research results on a program that was developed for and iteratively tested and refined within Welsh civil service with the aim to develop collaborative and distributed leadership, and encourage emotionally-informed decision-making.

Victor Udoewa provides a thought-provoking account of the failures of traditional approaches to design, which, he argues, have perpetuated societal injustices and have remained a practice largely done *on* or *about* people, and only rarely *with* them. As a viable alternative, he proposes a meta-methodological approach called Radical Participatory Design, a way of approaching design that is participatory to its core. Through a deepening of our awareness of the power dynamics embedded within these interpersonal spaces, he claims we can move beyond Human-Centered Design and towards genuine participation and systemic action.

John Davis – Cobble Cobble, and Rhonda Coopes – palawa, invite you into an experience of Indigenous Knowledge creation through the practice of circle work. As a reader, you have the opportunity to take a place alongside the fire, and witness knowledge production and transmission through deep storytelling, yarning, and narrative capture. Embedded within this unfolding narrative, the authors showcase the philosophy, governance structure, and organizational systems processes of the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lab at Deakin University, all of which are grounded in Indigenous practices and methods of inquiry.

Glen Cousquer’s work extends awareness-based systems change practice beyond the human realm and into the domain of inter-species solidarity and cooperation. His article documents a Theory U-informed Action Research project inquiring into improving equine welfare practices in the Moroccan mountain tourism industry. He explores how *absencing* functions as a relationship-defining barrier to inter-species understanding which supports the (mal-)treatment of mules founded on their objectification. By intentionally creating holding spaces

and attending to the feedback animals are able to offer, a space opens for creative possibilities to “be and become with,” thereby reshaping and regenerating the relationship forged between humans and non-humans.

The second book review to be published in JASC offers Norma Romm’s intimate read of Hilary Bradbury’s new book *How to Do Action Research for Transformations at a Time of Eco-Social Crisis* (Bradbury, 2022). Much more than a simple re-narration of the main points of Bradbury’s book, Romm’s book review serves as an account of her personal engagement and dialogue with Bradbury’s work, both in resonance and appreciation and also at times challenging the very personally-informed experiences and derived conclusions that shape the core narrative of the book.

This issue’s *In-the-Making* features Stacy Guenther’s doctoral research study in which she conducted a phenomenological inquiry into the interpersonal and intersubjective phenomenon of group coherence. In her study, focusing on a series of virtual sessions designed to cultivate a sense of group coherence, Guenther makes an effort to bring empirical research to bear on some of the lived intra- and, most notably, interpersonal experience of this ephemeral phenomenon often theoretically described as group “being- or oneness,” which thus far has rarely been investigated. In her *Discussant Commentary*, Jessica Bockler deepens and expands upon Guenther’s work by offering her insightful reflections on the nature and potential of group coherence to address our global meta-crises. In her highly-balanced article she not only maps further evidence for the potential of awareness-based practices to engender coherence, but also sheds light on the shadow side of inner group life, in particular how the power of group coherence may be abused and directed toward malevolent purpose. Especially concerning the latter, she shows how one of our greatest challenges in cultivating coherence lies in inviting spaces that truly engage with and are able to hold disagreement and fragmentation as a generative source of diversity and creativity.

In what we can now already call a tradition, this issue closes with *In Dialogue*. Thirty years after futurist Sohail Inayatullah and Otto Scharmer participated in a seminar focused on macrohistory held by peace activist and futurist Johan Galtung, this dialogue sees a reunion of these two leaders in their respective fields supported by recent graduate from the London School of Economics Emma D. Paine, in a multi-generational conversation. Taking our current context of polycrisis as a point of departure, their dialogue journeys across topics ranging from patterns of microhistory to collective depression and agency, to the role of futuring and higher education in societal transformation.

Fittingly the *In-Dialogue* plays with the metaphor of the planetary gardener in its title, which bends us back to van Genep’s notion of the study of liminality as a life science and the vision underlying his work. He writes:

Finally, the series of human transitions has, among some peoples, been linked to the celestial passages, the revolutions of the planets, and the phases of the moon. It is indeed a cosmic

conception that relates the stages of human existence to those of plant and animal life and, by a sort of pre-scientific divination, joins them to the great rhythms of the universe. (van Gennepe 2013, p. 194)

As we've seen in this brief review of the various pieces that constitute this issue of the journal, the process of transition is a necessarily messy and generative one. There is no clear-cut easy transition from a point of departure to a point of destination. The way one holds this liminal space is critical if it is to release novelty and imagination, construction and destruction. Thomassen (2016), in the closing of his book, provides a complementary reading to van Gennepe's quote, offering a nuanced description of our relationship with nature and the act of creation:

(T)he role of human beings in the universe is not to erect order, create schemes, concepts and models and then impose these upon an unstructured chaos, to 'build the world' from scratch. This tendency was what Eric Voegelin recognized as the gnostic drive of modernity. Instead, our role in this universe and on this planet—the only one we have—should rather be to humbly 'tune in' to the beauty of the world. Or, as van Gennepe put it, join the great rhythms of the Universe. (p. 229)

Bayo Akomulafe, in the above-mentioned symposium, *Meeting/Greeting the Future Halfway*, uses the term trip epistemologies to describe the ephemeral and vulnerable ways of knowing we enter into in our efforts to tune into the world in this way, including tuning into pain and messiness. He states,

[The] system is not complete without its glitch...we have to find ways of situating ourselves within the glitch, not as a neutral space but as a space that is generous and is available and is inviting us to sit with, or as Donna Haraway (2016) would say: sitting with the trouble is generous work at the end of the world." (International Society for Systems Science, 2022, 1:49:30 – 1:50:10)

It is precisely these much-needed different epistemologies, ontologies, and knowledge systems for navigating troubling transitions that are exemplified in the various contributions to this issue, and which the journal seeks to make visible.

References

- Achcar, G. (2022). Morbid symptoms: What did Gramsci really Mean? *Notebooks: The Journal for Studies on Power*, 1(2), 379-387. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26667185-01020010>
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke university Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2012). Times of interregnum. *Ethics & Global Politics*, 5(1), 49-56. <https://doi.org/10.3402/egp.v5i1.17200>

- Bradbury, H. (2022). *How to do action research for transformations: At a time of eco-social crisis*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Buechner, B., Dirkx, J., Konvisser, Z. D., Myers, D., & Peleg-Baker, T. (2020). From liminality to communitas: The collective dimensions of transformative learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 18(2), 87-113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344619900881>
- Dixson-Declève, S., Gaffney, O., Ghosh, G., Randers, J., Rockström, J. & Espen Stocknes, P. (2022). *Earth for all. A survival guide for humanity*. Club of Rome.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- International Society for Systems Sciences (2022, Jul. 10). *Meeting/greeting the future halfway* [Video]. Vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/731929506>
- Kelly, A. (2008). Living loss: an exploration of the internal space of liminality. *Mortality*, 13(4), 335-350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270802383915>
- Koenig, O., Pomeroy, E., Seneque, M., & Scharmer, O. (2022). Editorial Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change: From duality to complementarity. *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change*, 2(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.47061/jabsc.v2i1.3361>
- Koenig, O., Pomeroy, E., Seneque, M., & Scharmer, O. (2021). Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change: Moving from transactional to relational. *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change*, 1(2), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.47061/jabsc.v1i2.1972>
- Scharmer, O. (2022, Sept. 7). Protect the flame. Circles of radical presence in times of collapse. Medium. <https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/protect-the-flame-49f1ac2480ac>
- Thomassen, B. (2016). *Liminality and the modern: Living through the in-between*. Routledge.
- van Gennep, A. (1909/2013). *The rites of passage*. Routledge.