

Editorial

Awareness-Based Systems Change

Embedding in Place and Relationship

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As a biannual journal, we have used and will continue to use the JASC Editorial as a time to take stock and bring our attention to the speed of the tectonic-like shifts that all too quickly fade in the busy-ness of our daily lives. Shortly after the release of our last issue in November 2022, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged from an insider tale to a mainstream phenomenon, enabling us to process vast amounts of data, generate insights, and facilitate communication at an unprecedented scale. As AI bursts onto the scene and into our consciousness, particularly with tools such as ChatGPT, we find ourselves caught between narratives of utopian idealizations of its potential and dystopian scenarios for our collective future. Even those involved in the development of AI predict its impact will range from extremely positive to extremely negative in nature (Stein-Perlman et al., 2022). “Aware” of its own inherited bias, ChatGPT answers a query when instructed to discuss its own pros and cons: “However, the rise of AI models also presents new challenges. The use of AI in decision-making must be accompanied by ethical considerations, transparency, and accountability. The potential for bias, the need for responsible data handling, and the risk of exacerbating existing inequalities must all be addressed as we navigate the integration of AI models into our systems.” (ChatGPT, personal communication, May 24, 2023). As Awareness-Based Systems Change is beginning to emerge as a

global and transdisciplinary community, we hold a subtle awareness that these new transformative, normative forces are already pervading our thinking and doing (De Gregorio, 2023), further prompting us to reflect on and act upon our innate human capacities and responsibilities.

At the same time AI has been entering into our professional and personal lives in surprising ways we, at JASC, have been involved in the ongoing work of clarifying and deepening our understanding of awareness-based systems change through our engagement with authors and articles. The theme that has surfaced for us most strongly in the past six months of preparing this issue has been *embeddedness*. This resonates strongly, with an astonishingly applicable critique of market liberalism, even if written almost eighty years ago. In his introduction to Karl Polanyi's reprint of "The Great Transformation" (Polanyi, 1944/2001), Block writes about the profound contribution and foresight that Polanyi's introduction of the concept and consequences of dis/embeddedness has had on understanding our current global state:

Polanyi argues that creating a fully self-regulating market economy requires that human beings and the natural environment be turned into pure commodities, which assures the destruction of both society and the natural environment. In his view the theorists of self-regulating markets and their allies are constantly pushing human societies to the edge of a precipice. But as the consequences of unrestrained markets become apparent, people resist; they refuse to act like lemmings marching over a cliff to their own destruction. Instead, they retreat from the tenets of market self-regulation to save society and nature from destruction. In this sense one might say that disembedding the market is similar to stretching a giant elastic band. Efforts to bring about greater autonomy of the market increase the tension level. With further stretching, either the band will snap—representing social disintegration—or the economy will revert to a more embedded position. (Block, 2001, p. xxv)

From an awareness-based systems change perspective, we equally see embeddedness as an integrative principle, applicable not only to our understanding of the effects of market forces but also to the non-tangible dimensions, domains, and qualities of human interaction and sense-making we refer to as social fields (Pomeroy & Hermann, 2023). The quality of relationships and relating that characterizes the social field is the leverage point for change that each contribution to this issue points toward across a variety of contexts.

Embeddedness might well be understood as the onto-epistemological counterpart to AI, since the knowledge (rather than knowing) generated through algorithmic protocols, albeit successful in simulating human-like interactions, misses out on the human-to-human experiential and contextual understanding that is derived from lived and embodied experiences emerging from sustained (fields of) social practice and feeding back into it in order to support its

flourishing. This is something we want to emphasize even further as we continue to evolve our journal.

Our first and still rudimentary axiomatic thoughts on embeddedness, see two defining characteristics as crucial for our understanding of awareness-based systems change: its spatial/place-based and relational/relationship-based properties. In our digital world, *place* can be virtual—a psycho-social or psycho-spiritual space with clear purpose, boundaries and membership—as described in Hillary Bradbury’s article in this issue. Often, however, awareness-based systems change is embedded in a physical, geographical place highlighting the importance of place-based and local solutions to addressing planetary challenges. The complexity and diversity of our crises demand context-specific approaches that not only honor but are embedded within the unique characteristics, needs, and knowledge systems of different regions and communities to develop and implement solutions that are deeply rooted in their specific social, cultural, and ecological contexts. Further, if we are to achieve any sort of epistemic justice (Anderson, 2012; Code, 2020), the knowledge emerging from action-in-place needs to be recognized by a greater whole, a point made in this issue explicitly in the *In Dialogue* article focusing on Ubuntu Institute, a pan-African initiative to build capacity for awareness-based systems change using Theory U, and implicitly through Chowdhury’s article, which brings the wisdom tradition of Shiva into dialogue with Western concepts of systemic leadership.

Interestingly, it has become a repeated observation that while many nations of the so-called Global North refute to nationalistic and protectionist agendas (e.g. Woods et al., 2020), the past years have seen a spatial shift in leadership for global causes to countries of the Global south (Pereira et al., 2020) and the recuperation of sources of neglected and silenced wisdom, creativity, and innovation. De Sousa Santos (2020) describes as “heterotopian imaginaries” (Weber, 2022) the post-abysal democracies, which overcome the (abysal) lines that have separated the “dominant” and the “marginalized” social groups and their knowledge systems and move towards ways of democratizing, decolonizing, decommodifying, and depatriarchalizing social relations and practices. Another way to think about this is that we aim to make visible place-based knowledge-in-action that already exists, but that has been discounted through hegemonic structures that organize and disseminate knowledge hierarchically.

Closely connected to the place-based property of embeddedness is the relational/relationship-based property. While AI works on extractivist and immensely energy-intensive operating principles, drawing information deemed to be relevant from sources indiscriminately, relationship requires discernment, and most of all, care and caring (for someone or something). According to Chagnon et al. (2022), extractivism is an egocentric concept that can be characterized as a “complex ensemble of self-reinforcing practices, mentalities, and power differentials underwriting and rationalizing socio-ecologically destructive modes of organizing life through subjugation, violence, depletion, and non-reciprocity” (p. 760). Extractivism threatens the sustainability and well-

being of both present and future generations and, in our current polycrisis, the limitations of this outdated leadership approach become ever more apparent.

The dawn of a post-pandemic era sees the world standing at a range of critical *ruptures*, a concept introduced by Mahanty et al. (2023) to capture the essence of this time of intense and punctuated change. The authors comment that “...ruptures happen in specific places” which then necessarily requires us to address relationship, particularly relationships of power,

Epistemologically, this emplaced starting point is significant because it enables us to grasp rupture’s interactive character: how changes relate in landscapes over time, across scales and between locations. This approach exposes how processes of commodification drive rupture through tangled material, social and political relationships. These insights are essential not just to grasping rupture’s causes and implications, but also the power asymmetries that we must contend with in any efforts towards transformative change. (Mahanty et al., 2023, p. 13)

Although ruptures can be far-reaching and transcend spatial boundaries, they do not necessarily follow a predetermined, destructive pathway. Rather, they also hold generative potential. Our current polycrisis-ridden global situation can also be seen as an “open moment’ where opportunities and risks multiply, new political and material claims are laid, and novel social-political pathways catalyzed” (Mahanty et al., 2023, p. 2).

In the face of ruptures across our natural, social, and political landscape, it is imperative that we shift our leadership paradigm from extractivist to regenerative leadership, organizations, and cultures (Wahl, 2016). As the ecocentric counterpart to extractivism, regenerative leadership and organizing are rooted in place-based and local solutions to global and planetary challenges (Muñoz & Branzei, 2021). As a foundational skillset necessary for maintaining (relational) agency while navigating the complex realities of our time, regenerative leadership is about cultivating a deep understanding of the interdependence between human and ecological systems to enable ourselves to stay within the limits of ethical and ecological boundaries (Heikkurinen et al., 2021).

One key aspect of regenerative leadership lies in the ability to let go of old models and rigid control and to “let come,” to create space for emergent future possibilities to unfold (Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2013). This requires a mindset shift from linear thinking to embracing complexity and uncertainty (Koenig et al., 2022). As we navigate the complex web of interrelated challenges, regenerative leadership offers a powerful framework. It enables us to shift from extraction to restoration, from competition to collaboration, and from short-term thinking to long-term stewardship. By embracing regenerative leadership, we can harness the power of emergent possibilities, engage in place-based solutions, and co-create a future that is regenerative, just, and sustainable for all.

Contributions of This Issue

Our issue opens with a tribute to one of the founding figures of Organizational Development and Board Member of JASC, Ed Schein, who passed away at age 94 early this year. Otto Scharmer describes the foundational influence Schein had on Theory U and the entire field of systems change by decentering and extending the individual awareness in process consultation, focusing on building helping relationships, and teaching more than one generation of consultants, facilitators, educators, and leaders that the primordial task in any effort to be helpful is to learn to access your ignorance, discomfort, and capacity to lean into what wants to emerge.

The original and peer-reviewed publications of this issue all, in different ways, take up the challenge of developing and engaging in these new forms of embedded leadership.

By introducing “Subtractive Awareness,” esteemed Editorial Board member Hilary Bradbury, and colleagues Chris Riedy, Susanna Carman, Susanne Pratt, Bem Le Hunte and Meghna Guhathakurta, coin a new transformation narrative of self that makes it possible to embody mutual collaborative practice with others. The concept is embedded within and emerges from her pioneering work in the global ActionResearch+ network, constituted in part by a series of coLABs—mostly virtual person-centered spaces as dynamos of good Action-oriented Research for Transformation (ART) in domains ranging from education to healthcare, to sustainable organizing. Through coLABs, Hilary Bradbury and others have made the observation of subtle, yet profound transformative shifts in CoLab participants’ thinking, being, and acting. Moving away from acquiring new and additional skillsets and tools, the CoLabs supported participants becoming aware of obstacles that were no longer fit for collaborative purposes and which inhibited creative action with others. In addition to introducing the concept of subtractive awareness and describing ways of scaffolding learning experiences to support such awareness, the article also serves as a strong counter-narrative to the still dominating growth paradigm and how it enfolds in and on us as humans.

Taking the notion of leading by letting go and letting come further and nesting it within Hindu mythology, Rajneesh Chowdhury utilizes the philosophy of Shiva, the god of destruction whose work allows for positive recreation, and blends it with approaches for systems leadership to build a conceptual framework for Conscious Systems Leadership. He asserts that such a consciousness-based framework, if developed and embodied, enables us to undergo a mind-shift from the individual to the collective, from short-term to long-term, from rigidity to fluidity, from holding-on to letting-go, and from results-focus to learning-orientation.

Interweaving between the outer and inner, Elisabeth Walsh and Jessica Abell introduce us to an intra- and inter-personal alignment tool, the Vitality Triangle, a framework to help navigate from the current Capitalocene towards just and flourishing futures. The framework is both practical and conceptual,

having been inspired by diverse lineages of thought and action, as well as being shaped by the authors' introspection and experiences in community-based change initiatives. Embedded in the experience of an action research project in West Denver, USA, where residents grappled with the onset of the pandemic, the authors explore how three principles of regenerative vitality in living systems — liberty, reciprocity, and integrity can be applied individually as changemakers and can serve as a frame and decision-making tool for collective change.

As the second returning author of JASC, Victor Udoewa, with co-author Savannah Gress, further expands on approaches to design that replace extractivist and transactional methods with relational ones. After introducing what can be framed as a relational shift in design, they discuss the connection between systems and relationships and why Relational Design is important for positive systems change and impact. In a collaborative writing process that resembles the modern didactic principle of constructive alignment, they utilize dialogue as a means to discuss a specific relational methodology that they have used in the space of educational systems: a sustained dialogue framework.

As a regular feature, so with this issue we include *In Dialogue*, in this case taking us to the African continent and a dialogue between JASC's Associate Editor, Megan Seneque, and Ubuntu.Lab co-founders Aggie and Martin Kalungu-Banda and facilitator Sharon Munyaka to dive into their experiences co-creating and holding a Theory U-based learning journey informed by and embedded in Ubuntu philosophy. Picking up on the earlier theme from Mahanty et al. (2023) in relation to an emplaced or embedded view of rupture and the nature-society crisis, the dialogue explores the ways in which embodied ways of knowing and knowledge emerging from and embedded in local contexts can contribute to global movements.

This issue closes with our In the Making piece and its accompanying Discussant commentary. This issue's feature is born of the collaboration between researcher and professor of International Political Economy, Fernanda Cimini, and psychotherapist Maria Homen, who come together at the intersection of individual and systems change. In preparation for an action research project with cross-sector leaders in Brazil, they have developed a framework and approach called *Psychopolitical Foresensing for Social Transformation* (PFST), which aims to expand the theories of change (ToC) that underpins the current UN 2030 Agenda to include the less visible, less conscious dimensions of change through awareness-based systems change approaches. Discussant, Michelle Sampaio of the Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), nests the piece in the context of the current decolonization agenda so important in the context of Latin America and Brazil. Through illuminative examples, Sampaio, like several authors in this issue, interweaves globally-applied change frameworks with the specificity of place. In relation to Brazil, she draws on the nature-based solutions emerging from the unique socio-biocultural diversity of the region which are currently guiding and driving change.

The contributions to this issue have helped us to clarify and hone our own understanding of the nature and territory of awareness-based systems change. Each article in this issue provides an example of meeting the ruptures of our time, occurring in place and places with their specific social, political, historical and cultural context, and turning toward that rupture by leaning into and shifting relationship. By doing so, they provide living examples of the embedded, regenerative leadership that characterizes the nascent field of awareness-based systems change we are working together to bring fully into being.

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