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The world doesn't make sense

The world as it is usually presented to us doesn't make any sense. We know from experience that most people are nice and wish good to others and yet we witness a never ending stream of poverty, war and hunger on our screens.

The economy is always growing. The stock market is always rising. And yet more and more people seem to find it harder to make ends meet and are pushed to work and commute longer hours. Suicides are growing to near pandemic proportions. We produce enough food to feed humanity several times over, and yet millions go hungry even in the richest societies.

We are supposed to live in a democracy and most people would like to receive a bigger piece of the pie. And yet, we consistently vote for governments that implement policies that transfer more wealth from the bulk of the population to a very, very, small few. How is that?

Since in the luckiest economies we are getting so wealthy, there are more and more organizations popping up and devoting more resources to help those in poorer regions of the world. And yet, the flow of people migrating from Africa and South America to the north is not stopping. Many of them desperately, and with non-negligible numbers dying in the attempt.

We are supposed to live in a free-market society where the market magic makes prices cheaper and cheaper as companies compete with each other and improve in technology and efficiency. And while certainly we observe such phenomenon for some bagatelles, for life's essential necessities doesn't seem to be the case. Housing and utilities seem to keep taking bigger portions of our income. Eating out should be a time and money saver, since food is provided by specialized

companies that buy ingredients in bulk, much cheaper than we can buy them at home, and is prepared by specialized labor using sophisticated machinery. Yet, eating out is usually about 10 times more expensive than cooking at home and for most of us it costs more money than the time we save cooking. What's going on?

While on the topic of the labor market: isn't the market supposed to offer job opportunities to cater different preferences of the population? And yet, even those of us privileged enough to find it easy to get well paid jobs, we struggle to find a job where we can work less than full time, so that we can devote some more of our time to, for example, cook and care for our loved ones instead of paying someone else to do it? Or just enjoy more of our time having fun rather than making more money that we don't need.

We have also managed to convince almost every institution and corporation about the need to protect the environment, and virtually all of them have sustainability and environmental programs. Yet the result is that ancient forests and coral reefs are being destroyed at an increasing pace. Species that took millions of years to evolve are disappearing in the blink of an eye.

Those of us lucky enough to live in "western-style democracies" are even encouraged free thinking and gender equality. And yet, even though free-thinkers with vaginas haven't been burned at stake for centuries, incomprehensibly, contemporary witches find themselves smashed against glass ceilings and pushed over glass cliffs. To the bewilderment of their loving fathers, brothers, sons and male partners.

Without understanding we are paralyzed or dangerous

Clearly if we don't understand what's going on, we can't possibly get organized to effect change. We find ourselves shooting in the dark.

Let's take an archetypical example of an article we can find nowadays in the press. It's an article that disparages Amazon, which has become the corporate villain *du jour*. The article explains how much Amazon abuses some of their workers, physically and emotionally. They have to work in warehouses non-stop, like cogs in a machine. They are hired when there are seasonal demand spikes, like around Christmas, and they are laid off without notice, they simply learn that they don't have a job when they arrive at work and their badge doesn't work anymore. At which point they have to wait the whole day for the shuttle bus that drives from their hometown to the Amazon warehouse in the middle of nowhere. The next shuttle that goes back doesn't leave until the end of the shift. We are told that this warehouse is in Bohemia (Czech Republic) and works for German customers employing workers that are paid a fraction of the salary they would make in Germany. All this information is meant to provoke outrage from

the reader towards Amazon. But if the article is minimally honest, it will also have to confess that Amazon pays salaries quite above the average in Bohemia, and people line up to have the privilege to work for Amazon.

This is the typical story that we can read nowadays in the media. A story that leaves the reader with a lot of anger without any clear venue to direct it to. The reader cannot wish Amazon to be dismantled because that would mean that the workers would lose their scarce and well paid jobs. Should the reader wish that the Czech government passes and enforces laws to make it illegal to abuse and dehumanize workers? That would probably result in such coveted crappy but better paid than average jobs moving away, creating more distress for the population.

This example is not meant to provoke despair in the reader. Instead is meant to ask for patience. I believe that there are indeed actions that we can take once we understand what's going on, and we are going to look at tools that will help us understand how the world actually works.

Without such understanding though, people usually get paralyzed, or just protest without knowing what to ask for. Like the outraged movement that started in Spain on May 15th, 2011. Most people who took to the streets had the attitude of “somebody do something about this mess”, but didn't have actionable items on what to do. On the other hand, when people get organized to do something, if they succeed, then the results are usually counter productive, like passing labor laws that make labor more costly, which results in companies moving away and the workers that were meant to be protected becoming unemployed.

Beware of too much simplicity or too much complexity

You might cringe at the thought of a simple model that tries to explain everything wrong that is going on in the world. With reason. Too often we have seen the rise of populist leaders with simple explanations or solutions. Often when such leaders have risen to power the results have been disastrous. Popular simplistic explanations usually involve attributing blame to “the others” (different origin, language, religion, skin color, the rich, the poor,...). And simple solutions tend to involve stuff like mass deportations, imprisonments or outright genocides combined with some sudden economic shock like total de-regulation or mass nationalization. Or bring the world at the brink of nuclear holocaust.

Another example of a popular and seemingly innocuous simple explanation is corruption. Clearly, the corruption story goes, since we live in democracy and we elect our leaders, they should be working for us, for the bulk of the population. If instead they are working for special interests, there must be some corruption, which can be easily solved electing non-corrupt leaders. However, we have hundreds of years of data from representative democracies in hundreds

of governments all over the world. And they have all pretty consistently been ruling against the people instead of for the people.

So, no, we are not going to rely on such simple explanations in this book. Instead we'll study something more nuanced. We'll look at psychology and the emerging dynamics of systems (societies, organizations,...) where humans are put into them

Beware though, that when people talk about nuances in the media, very often use that as a shield from not admitting that they have no idea of what's going on.

- Will such and such policies have a beneficial effect or negative > effect?
- Well, that's very nuanced.
- Who will they benefit? Who will they hurt? Well, there are so many > factors, it will depend. . . .
- Why did that small protest push the government to change policy > while these other massive protests and strikes are not making any > effect?
- Well, the situation is different this time,...

These are the kind of useless dialogues we usually find in the media. Same combination of fanatic blindness and a posteriori negation of reality as we see in cults. "This policy will completely improve the economy if passed! What, it didn't? Well, it's complicated, but I have a new one that will work for sure" sounds very much like "Next Thursday the world will end! What, it didn't? Well, it's complicated, but next year it will for sure"

When things don't make sense it usually means that we are looking at them from the wrong perspective, or using the wrong set of tools. Indeed, what we find if we look carefully at the best science available, is that we can find a happy place in between. There are a few really key tools from human psychology, sociology and economics that allow us to make sense of what's going on in the world. We'll learn them in the following sections.

We need purpose

Before talking about specific tools from different disciplines is crucial to have a clear purpose in mind. One can get very different insights from the wealth of human knowledge if her goal is, for example, becoming super rich or crushing the enemy. Which are popular goals indeed and often cloud the literature.

Our purpose here is of a very different nature. We want to contribute significantly to the wellbeing of humanity and biodiversity on Earth.

Therefore we'll focus our attention in a small but powerful set of tools that will allow us to understand what are the key factors for promoting happiness and

fulfillment, and why, despite the good intentions and efforts of the majority, our collective actions tend to harm more people than they help and also damage the environment.

We need a results-based approach

It might seem that having a lot of people acting with good intentions should be enough. And that the only thing we need to do to make the world better is to convince more people to be “good guys”, and either deter the “bad guys” or convince them to change sides.

Intuition without data is harmful

A recurring theme in these pages will be how often many well intentioned people manage to cause unintended harmful collateral effects from their collective actions. A seminal example in the literature is the "Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study". It's the first randomized social intervention experiment, a longitudinal study started in the 30s which is still going on today. It monitors a social program done in the USA during the great depression. About 250 boys were identified as being at risk, because of being in families with difficult socioeconomic situations and having more tendency to get in trouble than their peers. These kids were paired by researchers, each one of them matched with another one that had a very close situation, in terms of neighborhood and family characteristics. The intervention was randomized so that of each pair, only one of the two kids received the benefit of the program. The other kid and their families were not even informed that they were a control group.

The social intervention consisted in offering counselors to the selected kids. About every two weeks they would visit the family, interact with the boys, help them with their homework, play with them, etc. and in summer they would take some of them to summer camps. They would offer the continuous presence of a stable and socially attuned male role, in a household where the father might have been incarcerated, absent, addict, unstable or not socially well fit.

In the 70s when the kids had grown up to be around 45 years old, they were interviewed to assess the performance of the intervention in 7 different metrics: being still alive, being considered a criminal, mental health, physical health, alcoholism, job satisfaction and marriage satisfaction.

During the interviews, almost all of them had great memories of the mentoring program, and were convinced that, without that, their lives would have turned out significantly worse.

Yet, shockingly, in all 7 dimensions, the men who had had the benefit of the program, scored worse than the control group, in a statistically significant way.

The point here is not that mentoring is evil, that it should be banned and everybody who practices it should be thrown into prison. This kind of simplistic,

black or white, dualistic good or evil thinking, which is everywhere around us, is not very helpful. Mentoring likely has its uses. There is a lot of evidence that in some settings is helpful, for example, in corporate environments is very well regarded. Probably we can figure out how to use it in social intervention programs as well. The point here is that life is complicated, and before devoting massive resources to deploy an intervention at a global scale we should develop first a good understanding on how the intervention is helpful and in what cases it becomes counterproductive.

We need organization

It is not reasonable to expect good outcomes even if we could manage that everybody would act individually on their own good will, with the intention of promoting the greater good. Is not reasonable because as we have seen life is complicated. It needs teams of people to conduct experiments on social interventions during decades, and generations, to see how those interventions perform. To fine tune and repeat them.

Also, once we find successful interventions, scaling them up is a challenge in itself. Which requires different teams with different skills to deploy, monitor, assess and fine-tune it more.

Since it's not feasible for a single individual to understand all the complexities of implementing and assessing such interventions we need to team up and build organizations to do it.

Furthermore, even successful interventions might be nothing more than patches for a deeper structural problem, and they might even be working against other interventions that might look successful in isolation.

Therefore what we need is not only an organization that is capable of running social intervention experiments and scaling them up to deploy at a global scale. We need an organization that is capable of understanding the underlying dynamics of present-day society, envision a different society that would have much healthier dynamics, as well as plan and implement a transition to such better society.

The word “plan” might conjure negative concepts such as bureaucracy, uniformity or forcing people to do something they don't want to do. And although it's true that most people that use that word mean it in that sense, unfortunately we don't have a better word to express that we want to get organized to achieve the contrary.

Even before getting into details about human psychology you have probably already noticed that it is not feasible to force people to be happy and fulfilled. Also it's plain obvious that transforming the earth into a Victorian garden won't help much with preserving biodiversity.

We need a plan, not to promote centralized bureaucracy, uniformity and imposition, but to promote the conditions that enable humans and the rest of living creatures to thrive in diversity and autonomy.

Therefore the plan that we will arrive at doesn't involve forcing or coercing anybody into doing something or embracing an ideology. Instead, the plan involves getting together those of us who have the privileges to see how toxic the world is, and also have the capacity to create healthy and supporting communities. Then, show to the rest of the world that a functioning society is possible, and use our resources to help the less fortunate who want to join us in a network of diverse and mutually supporting communities.

Also this plan will be very flexible and adaptable. We have a lot of data on what works and what doesn't to effect desirable and undesirable change. We also have a lot of data of what kind of social systems, even when the premises look nice, produce instead emerging behaviours that are very undesirable. And which kind of systems produce desirable and stable dynamics.

Therefore we can be quite confident that the general guidelines, the framework if you will, is quite robust. Both on what kind of societies we want to achieve and what kind of tools can help us to get there. At the same time, it will require a lot of experimentation, of trial and error, at small scale, to find what works best, and then, even more experimentation to scale it up.

We need individual and collective growth

We are talking about getting together and organizing to conduct social innovation interventions with the knowledge that many people have attempted that before us and have managed to cause harm rather than good. Therefore we need to be able to take responsibility for the harm that we will do, cope with the failures and with feelings like guilt. Without such abilities we might harm ourselves and experience difficulty moving forward, learning from failures and doing better experiments.

We might also have to deal with impatience. Even though we can start having measurable positive impact right away, It might be challenging to realize that it will take a lot of time to implement lasting change at a global scale, and that many people will suffer and die unnecessarily until then, as well as many species and ecosystems become extinct. To cope with such challenging feelings we might be inclined to believe in silver bullets. That magic events such as getting a charismatic leader elected or an angry mob to revolt, will lead to cascading quick change. Unfortunately real, deep, lasting change requires a long time of sustained and committed effort.

Also, in order to function properly as a part of a group we need to understand ourselves, our inner worlds, what we need and how to express our needs so that others can help us with that. Let's call personal growth the set of tools and

practices for this inner exploration, emotional management ,responsibility taking and communication improvement.

Furthermore, organizations tend to develop a culture with dynamics of it's own. Organizations can become dangerous if, for example, they develop delusional traits that prevent them for critically analyzing the impact of their collective actions. Also organizations tend to create structures that promote inefficiency and inaction. Sometimes people are afraid of taking responsibility for their own actions and they create processes and bureaucracies to prevent responsibility and blame to fall in any given individual, and as a result, things slow down to a crawl. Sometimes organizations generate mistrust and everybody wants to be part of every decision, which leads to massive assemblies with conflicting interests that don't get anything done either.

Let's call collective growth the set of tools and practices that facilitate organizations to develop cultures that promote awareness and critical thinking of the collective actions, a culture that promotes trust, delegation and taking responsibility, efficiency and effectiveness, a culture where it is impossible that somebody causes harm and then excuse themselves with an "I didn't know, I was just following instructions".

Summary and conclusions

Life is so complex that it is very difficult to understand what's going on. As a consequence when attempting to do good we are more likely to do harm.

This fact is not an excuse to be apathetic and give up on having a positive impact in the world. It is just a warning that we need to have a good understanding before being able to do so.

Life is so complex that even if we understand it enough to devise actions that might produce some good, it is still impossible for a single individual to tell if she was right or wrong on that action. In order to effect significant measurable positive change we need to act collectively, to get organized to understand the world, devise social innovation interventions, measure the outcomes, and refine them through the years.

Each one of us is also more complex than it might seem at first sight. It is necessary to embark in a journey of self knowledge at the same time we embark on an activist journey. Otherwise, we are more likely to choose actions that make us feel like we are contributing to something big and imminent, or small but seemingly helping right now the person in front of us, rather than the delayed gratification of contributing to something real, measurable, but in a painstakingly slow process.

When getting together with other beautiful and equally flawed humans is ever more important to do this inner journey and build out together a culture that promotes overcoming such flaws. Otherwise, each one of our individual flaws, if

unattended, can add up or conflict with one another, creating either dangerous or inoperative organizations.

Life is also so complicated that the systems that we create, our societies, develop emerging behaviors that are not apparent in the building blocks that we used to create them. All these behaviors are interconnected. Therefore it is not feasible to divide our efforts into different groups that independently tackle different aspects of our lives. If each group would tackle a single topic such as education, health, civil liberties, environmentalism, militarization, economy, etc. they would end up working on the symptoms, not on the root, of the problems, and even, likely undermine each other's efforts.

Luckily though, with the right perspective, life is not as complicated as it might seem. One clue that all the problems we have might be related and that the same solution will help across the board is that when we look at activists in each one of those spheres we see repeating patterns. One such pattern is the interference of profit into that field. "We know how to cure people, say the health activists, if only money would stay out of the way, we could do it properly". Nutrition activists similarly say "we know what to eat to stay healthy and well fed, if only there were no commercial interest that were promoting junk food we'd be all eating well", while education activists lament that "we know how to educate kids to become functioning, prosocial, active and curious adults, we would be able to do it if money would get out of the way", etc.

Another such pattern is the "politics gets in the way". It is often expressed across the board as "we know how to solve problem X, unfortunately that's politically impossible. Current representatives will never vote for such proposal and anybody who goes to the elections with that proposal will never win".

Once we understand the building blocks of our society and the emergent behaviors when combined in the particular way we do today, we'll be able to see that all these different problems are in reality just consequences of the same flawed social design. We "only" need to solve that basic social design in order to solve all such seemingly separated problems. The solution will involve using different building blocks or combining them differently. And will allow us to express even much more social and environmental diversity than the global pattern we have nowadays.