

# A PARTICIPATORY WORLD

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From a participative point of view  
we see the world as a creative dance of mind and cosmos.

**M**ANY WRITERS and commentators are suggesting that the current world-view or paradigm of Western civilization is reaching the end of its useful life. There is a fundamental shift occurring in our understanding of the universe and our place in it. New patterns of thought and belief are emerging that will transform our experience, our thinking and our action.

Since the Reformation, the beginning of the era of modern science, and the Industrial Revolution, we have made enormous strides in our material welfare and our control of our lives. Yet we can see the costs of this progress in ecological devastation, human and social fragmentation, and spiritual impoverishment. So if we fail to make a transition to new ways of thinking, our civilization will decline and decay.

Gregory Bateson, one of the great thinkers of our time, argued that the most important task facing us is to learn to think in new ways. He was deeply concerned with what he called the epistemological errors of our time, the errors built into our ways of thinking. So it seems to me that the challenge of changing our world-view is central to our times.

The notion of a paradigm or world-view as an overarching framework, which organizes our whole approach to being in the world, has become commonplace since Thomas Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962). Kuhn showed that normal scientific research takes place within a taken-for-granted framework which organizes all perception and thinking, which he called a paradigm. However, from time to time the paradigm itself shifts in a

revolutionary fashion as a new perspective is deemed to make better sense of the available knowledge. This idea of a paradigm in science can be transferred to the world-view of a whole culture, and the notion that the Western world-view may be in revolutionary transition has been part of intellectual currency for quite a while.

This emergent world-view is multifaceted: it has been particularly described as systemic, holistic, more feminine. These are all important notions. However, more recently a new characteristic of the emerging world-view has entered our consciousness. It is the notion of a participatory world-view.

HENRYK SKOLIMOWSKI, in his book *The Participatory Mind* (Arkana, 1994), sketches out what he describes as the four great cycles of Western mind, each of which provided us with experience of a different world. If we go back to ancient Greece, the experience of people was defined by a world-view we can call *Mythos*: people saw in the stories of their lives the visible presence of the gods, intervening from Mount Olympus. Then there was a radical transformation as classical Greek *Logos* emerged: the search for the coherent and harmonious order of the Universe. The fusion of Greek *Logos* with Roman power provided the hegemony of the Roman Empire.

However, it seems that no world-view can persist: the seeds of decay set in, leading to the Dark Ages. Out of this came *Theos*, the Medieval world-view in which all thought and action was inspired by and dedicated to the glory of a transcendent divinity. *Theos* led to the glories of Chartres, but disintegrated with the rise of a mercantile middle class and

the increasingly corrupt power of the Church. Then Bacon, Galileo, Descartes and Newton gave us a new and powerful world-view: that is *Mechanos*.

*Mechanos* has been the world-view of modern times. It is based on the frighteningly simple yet powerful metaphor of the clockwork universe. In this perspective, there is a real world made up of real things we can identify, operating according to natural laws which govern their behaviour — laws which we can deduce by analysing the operation of the component parts. Mind and reality are separate. The rational human, drawing on analytical thought and experimental methods, can come to know the objective world. So the objective world spawns the objective mind. It becomes detached, analytical and thus in the end uncaring and cold. Human progress is dependent on the processes of science, the purpose of which is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

In the late twentieth century *Mechanos* is no longer a guide to wise action. The ecological, political, social and personal crises we confront at this time need no rehearsing here. Fundamental to all these crises is the way we think and how the way we think separates us from our experience, from each other, and from the rhythms and patterns of the natural world. For example, since James Lovelock put forward the *Gaia* hypothesis in *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford University Press, 1979), it has not been possible to see the world as an assembly of separate parts; we have been pushed to see the planet as a living whole, a complex system of interrelated entities — of which we are a part.

Despite all the challenges, some form of mechanical world-view



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remains the "official" view of knowledge, to which we resort publicly when challenged by BSE, AIDS or other crises. It may not be how our understanding is created, but it remains a central myth of our time. And the fact is that this notion of knowledge is not what we draw on in everyday life, from putting on our trousers to driving a car: there we draw on knowing that is much more intuitive and embodied — and increasingly it is clear that this is true even of professionals such as doctors, who are supposed to practice a scientific profession. This puts us in a strange situation, almost in a classic double-bind, because we know, deep down, that the official knowledge is breaking down, doesn't represent everyday life, yet we don't know how to comment on it.

THE MAIN CHALLENGE to what Charlene Spretnak, in *States of Grace* (HarperCollins, 1991), calls "the failed certainties of objectivist modernism" have been various forms of relativism. The argument here is that what we take for reality is nothing more than a construction of the human mind, supported by various cultural and political forms to create a reality which favours those who hold power. Reality is a human creation embedded in language. All is

relative. The extreme relativist position is "deconstructive postmodernism" which is suspicious of all overarching theories and "grand narratives".

While these perspectives help us immensely in seeing through the myth that is Mechanos, they don't help us move beyond the problems it has produced. If we were alienated from our experience by the separation of mind and matter, we are even more alienated if all we can do is circle round various forms of relativist construction. Any sense of a world in which we are grounded disappears.

One result of all this abstraction is the dishonouring of the body and the separation of humanity from the natural world. Morris Berman drew attention to this in his book *Coming to our senses* (Simon and Schuster, 1989), arguing that in a quite literal sense we need to honour again the wisdom of the body, locating knowing in the experience of sensation instead of in intellectually elaborated paradigms of thought. The body is the lodge of spirit in this life, yet we have an immensely ambivalent relationship to it, often very concerned with the presentation of a "face", powerful or beautiful, to the outside world, yet being quite out of touch with our physical inner processes. The body and the natural world are deeply

connected. Our body is that piece of wilderness that we carry around with us all the time, a living ecology which provides a home to many creatures and life events, which may be in balance or out of balance.

Of course the systemic world-view, as presented by Gregory Bateson and championed in particular by Fritjof Capra in *The Web of Life* (HarperCollins, 1996), does offer an important counterpoint to both the mechanical and relativist world-views. However, systemic thought can miss the important point that we are embodied participants in the co-creation of our world. The human mind makes its world by participating in its being. Our theories and models of the world are grounded in our experiential participation in what is present, in what there is. Therefore, the notion of *participation* must be central to the new world-view.

WORLD-VIEWS MAY BE regarded as sets of basic beliefs about the nature of reality and how it may be known. These beliefs are thrown into relief by three fundamental and interrelated questions: *ontological*, *epistemological* and *axiological*. Let us look at these three questions closely.

*Ontology: what is there to know?* While the mechanical world-view sees a world of things independent of



human thought, and the relativist world-view asserts that there is nothing but the constructions of the human mind, a participative world-view accepts that there is a given cosmos, a primordial reality, and that human presence actively participates with it. Mind and the given cosmos are engaged in a co-creative dance. Mind actively participates in the cosmos. It is through this active participation that we meet what is Other: we call these, trees, rocks, persons, spirits, and so on. This brings about a subjectively articulated world, whose objectivity is relative to the perspective of the knower. Reality is *subjective-objective*, always called into being and shaped by the participation of the knower in what is known.

*Epistemology: what is the nature of knowledge?* While in Mechanos knowledge is based on a dualism between mind and reality, and in relativism all that can be known are the constructions of the human mind, a participative world-view rests on at least four different ways of knowing. We can call this an "extended epistemology" — *epistemology* meaning a theory of how we know, and *extended* because it reaches beyond the primarily theoretical knowledge of academia.

- *Experiential knowing* is through direct face-to-face encounter with person, place or thing; it is knowing through empathy and resonance, and is almost impossible to put into words.
- *Presentational knowing* emerges from experiential knowing, and provides its first expression through forms of imagery such as poetry and story, drawing, sculpture, movement, dance and so on.
- *Propositional knowing* is knowing "about" something through ideas and theories, and is expressed in abstract language or mathematics.
- *Practical knowing* is knowing "how to" do something and is expressed in a skill, knack or competence.

Knowing will be more valid — richer, deeper, more true to life and more useful — if these four ways of knowing are congruent with each other. Our knowing should be grounded in our experience, expressed through our stories and images, understood through theories which make sense to us, and expressed in worthwhile action in our lives.

*Methodology: how do we go about finding out?* While within a traditional scientific view of the world, the creation of knowledge belongs to specialist researchers, within a participative world-view research is something people do together to solve a problem. Hence a collaborative form of inquiry, in which all involved engage together in democratic dialogue as co-researchers and as co-subjects. In co-operative inquiry people work together using the four ways of knowing:

- they define the questions they wish to explore and the methods they will use for that exploration (propositional knowing);

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- they apply this methodology, together or separately, in the world of their practice (practical knowing);
- this leads to new forms of encounter with their world (experiential knowing);
- they find ways to represent and share this experience in significant patterns (presentational knowing);
- which feeds into a revised understanding of the originating questions (propositional knowing again).

Thus co-researchers engage together in cycling several times through the four forms of knowing in order to enrich their congruence and to deepen the complementary way they are grounded in each other. This is most fully described in John Heron's book *Co-operative Inquiry: research into the human condition* (Sage, 1996).

*Axiology: what is of value, what is worthwhile?* The first three questions — the ontological, the epistemological and the methodological — are about truth. What is really, truly, there? What is the nature of truthful knowledge? By what method can the truth be reached? The fourth, axio-

logical, question is about values of being. And the first question is about the value of knowledge itself. In a participative world-view the purpose of knowledge is practical: human flourishing, in its widest sense. This means the flourishing of human communities, and it also must mean reconnecting the human persons and communities to the ecological networks of which we are an integral part.

While it is possible to divorce thought from action, you cannot divorce action from thought. So we learn more profoundly about our worlds when we are more interested in enhancing them with excellence of action than in simply learning about them. So the purpose of learning, of knowledge, of inquiry is to change the world! Our action in the world is based in our values and in our knowing; valid action must be grounded in our experiential, presentational and propositional knowing.

There is another important aspect of a participatory world-view. It is not so much about the search for truth and knowledge as it is about *healing*. And, above all, healing the alienation, the split that characterizes modern experience. As R. D. Laing put it in *The Politics of Experience* (Ballantine Books, 1967), ". . . the ordinary person is a shrivelled, desiccated fragment of what a person can be. . .", alienated at least in part by the abstracted and disembodied qualities of modern life.

To heal means to make whole. We can only understand our world as a whole if we are part of it. As soon as we attempt to stand outside, we divide and separate. Making whole necessarily implies participation. One important characteristic of a participative world-view is that the individual person is restored to the circle of community and the human community to the context of the natural world. To make whole also means to make holy. In a participatory world-view meaning and mystery are restored to human experience. The world is once again experienced as a sacred place. ●

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