

Social Change in The “Aperspectival World” The Paradox of Social Reproduction and Cultural Innovation

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Abstract: Social constructionists have been advocating for the necessity to animate and lead social change. This posture suggests that change is a panacea capable of solving social and cultural dysfunctions. Though Jean Gebser is not generally considered a semiotician, his work, *The Ever-Present Origin*, raises several socio-semiotic problems. Particularly, Gebser’s notion of “aperspectival world” challenges the social change enterprise, and he argues that societies cannot be transformed (changed) by technocratic rationality or materialistic determinism. Since Gebser thematizes several points, we cannot avoid taking him as a crown witness of social meaning and significance, despite the fact that semiotic specialists have neglected him. Considering the simultaneity and paradoxical relationship between reproductions and innovations in culture and society, the notion of “change” itself warrants a critical scrutiny and triggers basic questions. Drawing mainly on the ideas and vocabularies of Gebser within the framework of Peirce’s infinite semiosis and metalanguage characteristic of semiotics, this paper explores the nature of social change and continuity in the context of the theme of innovation and reproduction in cultures and societies. And by approaching social change as a semiotic phenomenon, it advances a different awareness and understanding of an emerging new teleology of social and cultural change.

Keywords: Change/continuity paradox, consciousness, meaning making

Introduction

It is intriguing for me to contribute to the International Association of Semiotics Studies Conference in Vienna, Austria¹, the place of the very first Semiotics Congress, and where the Austrian University of Salzburg acknowledged the genius of the Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser by offering him a special professorial chair of comparative culturology. It is not a coincidence that the theme, “Innovation and Reproduction in Cultures and Societies,” dovetails well with my interest in social change and continuity, which falls within the core of my teaching responsibility at Antioch’s Center for Creative Change.

Many authors have written about social change and the need for societies and organizations to undergo fundamental changes to adapt to the growing complexity of our time. Ironically, however, a very few scholars have talked about continuity and change as the phenomenon of self-organizing universe (for example, Capra 2002; Jantsch 1980; Mumford 1951; Wheatley 1992). To talk about change we cannot ignore continuity. It’s my intention here to examine the notion of “social change” and reflect on the paradox of

¹ I am grateful to Jeff Bernard for providing the opportunity to participate in the conference, and for his encouragement and valuable feedback.

change and continuity. Throughout this paper, I use the term “social reproduction” as synonymous with continuity, and “cultural innovation” with change.

The Paradox of Social Reproduction and Cultural Innovation

As with any paradoxes, drawn from our ideological social construct, change and continuity seem to have become so complex that we render them appearances of dualism. Social reproduction (continuity) and cultural innovation (change) are seen as paradoxical poles that trigger conflict. Paradoxes are viewed as relationships that must be fixed, favoring one over the other in a tensional pair. This paradox is important for us to consider since the struggle between change and continuity, flux and stasis, permanence and temporality, progress and stagnation marks the very nature of not only western societies but also westernizing cultures.²

The perceived, and in many ways self-imposed, polarity of change and continuity has become overwhelming; and by extension, our concept of cultural innovation and social reproduction appear distorted. Regardless, what do we mean by social reproduction and cultural innovation? Why do they constitute such a paradox? What is their relationship in the context of each other?

1. Cultural innovation

Cultural innovation can be a religious ritual, a genre of art, architecture, etc. Innovation is defined as the actual realization of something new in the world, which becomes a part of social life. Cultural innovation is fundamental for social systems. Simply because innovation while episodic, it functions as a “negative-feedback-loop” in social systems for adjustment and renewal. This is why a society that systemically ignores experimentation and wipes out innovation is destined to decay over time. Innovation can be provoked by two different causes.

More often than not, cultural innovations are provoked by social tribulations or certain problems (technical or otherwise) that people attempt to overcome or solve. But sometimes an innovation that has been made with the best intention may have unintended consequences which makes it less advantageous than expected. The other kind of innovation, which is less practiced, particularly in modernity, emerges out of desire for co-creation and the impulse to imagine a sustainable future. It is worth noting that while rational thinking and extrinsic necessities usually trigger the former, the later is generally motivated by unself-conscious and *intrinsic desires*.

2. Social Reproduction

The reproduction legacy in any society is the fertile soil from which the cultural innovation will emerge. To the extent that social reproduction also depends on cultural innovation for renewal and restoration; in fact, cultural innovation requires social

² Incidentally, this process of westernizing other cultures for the sake of progress is clear evidence that “change” has not always been a positive experience.

reproduction to be realized. Change requires continuity. Social reproduction operates as a “positive-feedback-loop” in social systems enforcing stability and continuity. Amusingly, however, we are both disempowered and empowered by our social inheritance of reproduction.

The acceleration of innovation production, and consumption has adverse effects on social reproduction. This can be seen, for example, in the acceleration of technology and human reproduction, which are on a collision course with each other. As we see later, modern societies tend to overlook that maintaining the balance of regenerative capacity of social reproduction and cultural innovation is the hallmark of sustainable environmental and human ecology.

Jean Gebser and Semiotic Challenge to Social Change

Since Jean Gebser is an extraordinary scholar who thematizes many points about change, we cannot avoid taking him as a crown witness of social meaning and significance, despite the fact that most semiotic specialists have neglected him. Though Gebser is not generally considered a semiotician in the traditional sense of the word, his work, *The Ever-Present Origin*—which was not available in English until 1985—raises several socio-semiotic problems. Particularly, Gebser’s notion of “aperspectival world” challenges the entire social change enterprise, and he argues that societies cannot be transformed (changed) by technocratic rationality or materialistic determinism. More significantly, Gebser’s idea of “diaphanous perception” and the capacity he calls “verition”—perceiving and imparting truth—offer ground-breaking insight into the paradoxical relationship between cultural innovation and social reproduction. Gebser’s elaborate articulation of five modes of consciousness structures (see table below), the foundation for his seminal work, provides an appropriate setting for our discussion about change and continuity.

Structure	World Perspectivity (Modality)	Essence	Emphasis	Social Relationship
Archaic	None	Identity (Integrality)	Prespatial Pretemporal	—
Magic	Pre-perspectival	Unity (Oneness)	Spaceless Timeless	Tribal world Natural
Mythical	Unperspectival	Polarity (Ambivalence)	Spaceless Natural temporicity	Parental world Ancestor-worship Predominantly matriarchal
Mental	Perspectival	Duality (Opposition)	Spatial Abstractly temporal	World of the first-born son, individuality Predominantly patriarchal
Integral	Aperspectival	Diaphaneity (Transparency)	Space-free Time-free	Mankind (humankind) neither matriarchy nor patriarchy but integrum

Table 1: Five Modes of Consciousness Structures and their Characteristics
(A modified synopsis of Jean Gebser’s work)

But before we get carried away, let us clarify what Gebser means by “aperspectival world.” The aperspectival world, Gebser says, “is a world whose structure is not only jointly based in the pre-perspectival, unperspectival, and perspectival worlds, but also mutates out of them in its essential properties and possibilities while integrating these worlds and liberating itself from their exclusive validity” (1985, p. 294). So, in other words, the aperspectival world is not an exclusive mode of consciousness, rather it is sensibly inclusive of others worlds. It is really an insurmountable task to give a full representation of the aperspectival world within the scope of this paper. However, it suffices to use Gebser’s own words:

Just as the magic structure cannot be represented but only lived, the mythical structure not represented but only experienced, and the rational structure neither lived nor experienced but only represented and conceptualized, so the integral structure cannot be represented but only ‘awared-in-truth.’”

He cautions us that the aperspectival world,

which is arational does not represent a synthesis. To be a synthesis it would have to attempt to unite two worlds—for instance, the rational and the irrational—an attempt which paradoxical thinking undertake. But here we are concerned with *at least four worlds or structures*, each of which is valid as well as necessary; and the *fifth* is absolutely required (Gebser 1985, pp. 267-268).

Considering the relationship between innovations and reproduction in cultures and societies, the aperspectival consciousness warrants a critical scrutiny of the prevailing conventional understanding of social change and triggers basic questions. For example, what is the *ultimate purpose* of social change? In what way can change, in a form of cultural innovation, bring about a sense of *wholeness* in a society? We often speak of *change agents*—who are the *real* change agents? What role can a social change agent play in the process of *intervention*? And, who *decides*?

Ever since the term “sociology” coined by Auguste Comte, sociologists have been influence by the doctrine of positivism that insists on rummaging around for general laws of human behavior and rejects intentions and purposes. Even the work of modern sociologists, i.e. Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, rest on social facts as material objects that operate by physical forces. This strategy typifies one-mode of consciousness, the rational perspective, to achieve social change.

Essentially, social science was conceived as an institution of salvation, a way to organize social order in the face of anarchy and chaos. Social constructionists continue to advocate for the necessity to animate and lead social change using the conceptual framework of material forces and linear cause-and-effect relationships (Capra 2002). And supported by consumption, mass-production industrialism is viewed as the best way to attain ever-increasing levels of wellbeing. Despite, the influential work of Anthony Giddens and

Jurgen Habermas in integrating human relationships, values and meaning with natural sciences, most constructionists neglect other modes of consciousness; and, consequently, fail to perceive and engage in social change systemically and wholistically.

For the purpose of this paper, and by considering Jean Gebser's work as the primary resource, I will limit my discussion here to the following five general characteristics of the constructionists' approach to social change. Not only will this discussion be helpful in pointing out the shortcoming, contradiction and challenge constructionists face, it will also form the base for rethinking social change.

1. Socially Constructed Knowledge

Constructionists have aggressively expressed that all knowledge is "socially constructed" in service of diverse power relations; and that there is nothing but social construction in human experience. Granted, however, since our knowledge is socially constructed and communicated *rationally*, it is unavoidably limited by the linguistic discourse, mental models and social assumptions, which we have inherited as an ongoing cycle of social reproductions. Though both the individual and the collective constantly construct and modify knowledge via social network of communications, we still often settle for the dualism of the self-knowledge and collective-knowledge. The need to break the cycle of social reproductions for cultural innovations rests upon the human agency to deal with the paradoxical reality of individualism and collectivism.

Moreover, since our epistemological disposition within the perspectival world, is mainly based on induction and deduction, we are missing what Peirce calls "abduction," the flash of insight fueled by arationality and diaphaneity. In the rational world, our socially constructed knowledge is centered on the need to "know everything" rather than broaden and deepen our understanding through wisdom and sense of wonder (Midgley 1989). Our knowledge, as Gebser (1985) argues, has become devoid of magical and mythical wisdom; and in fact, it has been tarnished by the slogan "knowledge is power," which rendered knowledge as means to control and dominate.

While socially constructed knowledge is essentially a meaningful concept, it has been degraded into mere "estimated knowledge" tinted by rationalization and intellectualization. This estimated knowledge "about given and visible interconnections is insufficient unless it is transformed into living knowledge" (Gebser 1985, 222). The shortcoming and contradiction of this perspective structure are clearly visible.

2. Change is the Solution for Social Problems

Often, as the change frenzy takes hold on elitist constructionists, ethnic way of life and traditional knowledge are considered odd, backward, and archaic. This posture suggests that progressive rational change is a panacea capable of solving all social and cultural dysfunctions. In fact, rationally oriented actions to social change often lead to more chaos and messes than solving any problems (Ackoff 1974). Change is achieved at any price! Ironically, change neither leads to progress nor development. Progress is not necessarily a

“positive concept,” Gebser (1985, p. 41) reminds us, progress is “a progression away, a distancing and withdrawal from something, namely, from origin.”³ In fact, his concept of “mutation” allows us to maintain the appropriate detachment from progress, development, and even evolution.

Frequently, people who are fixated on “change” as the answer to virtually all problems not only are pushing vigorously in the wrong direction, but also their methods are counterproductive to the collective. Seeking change as a *solution* often pushes aside others who question the purpose of change, an alienation strategy that seems to reflect the Darwinian “survival of the fittest.” This hallmark of the perspectival world certainly contradicts the ideological core of social constructionism. And, in this sense, not only is this strategy counterproductive to the collaborative process, but it also compromises the integrity of social justice.

3. Infatuation with Novelty and Originality

The emphasis of societies on novelty, and the value of change for its own sake in conjunction with rationality and individuality appears to manifest idiosyncratic ideals which ironically work against themselves, since novelty, originality and individuality can become meaningful solely as parts of the social constructive discourse. Stability, consistency, and predictability are fundamental if society is to prosper and develop (Hall 1976; Mumford 1951). While social constructionists view change to be essential for human improvement, they consistently overlook that stability and continuity are needed for change to be recognized in the first place. Seeking novelty as an expression of economic progress inherited from Social Darwinism, have led constructionists to believe that technology, or what Stewart and Bennett (1991) call “technicism,” offers solutions to social problems. Oddly enough, the obsession with originality seems to be devoid of the Gebserian sense of “origin.”

4. Idiosyncrasy of Change

The infatuation with novelty and originality often makes both the populace and specialists so occupied with self-fulfillment and self-expression that they are missing purposeful and meaningful social change. As Robert Grudin (1990, P. 31) metaphorically expresses it: “Instead of seeing phenomena through limpid glass, they must look through their own reflected images.” More often, the emphasis on technological and material achievement, “making accomplishments measurable and visible” (Stewart and Bennett 1991, p. 78), trigger another narcissistic yearning for change.

Consequently, the value placed on change with self-perpetuating idiosyncratic ideals contributes to the estrangement of individuals within a society, and by extension to the alienation of other societies and cultures as exemplified in current American foreign

³ It should be noted that Gebser uses the term “origin” in unconventional way. Origin, for him “is not identical with the ‘beginning’ since it is not spatially and temporally bound, whereas the ‘beginning’ is always temporally determined” (Gebser 1985, p. 294).

policy.⁴ As Gebser (1985) argues that in this perspectival world societies do not share a common world-goal but mostly common economic anxiety and political fear. Undoubtedly, this egocentrism is the basis for political rationality. To be politically rational is to be independent and to act in accord with one's idiosyncratic interests. Whenever this mental-rationality self-interest is manifested, not only numerous social and international conflicts begin, but also a separation of culture and nature occurs.

5. Paranoia of Conflict

The eccentric attitude toward social change often triggers clashes. And the perceived paradox of cultural innovation and social reproduction makes the situation even worse. Tension between apparent opposites is usually perceived as abnormal in the perspectival world. In this science-dominated world, tension or conflict must be resolved, rather than valued. As I stated earlier, Apparently, change and continuity are seen as paradoxical poles that trigger conflict. Paradoxes are viewed as relationship that must be fixed, favoring one over the other in a tensional pair. The Euro-American societies have assumed that dominance, or perhaps compromise, are the ways to deal with conflict (Chomsky 2003). Power-over strategies for dealing with conflict are ineffectual and drive from a mechanistic fallacy that is blind to the fundamental nature of creation. This is the hallmark of the perspectival world that some of us call *modernity*.

It is important and healthy to continuously subject the above inherited characteristics and understandings of social constructionism to frequent inquiry in order to invoke a profound meaningful approach to social change.

Rethinking Social Change

Supported by Gebser's aperspectival world, the realm of semiotics seems to be the most comprehensive interdisciplinary method of inquiry into the phenomenon of change and continuity. Regardless of his tendency toward abstruse terminology, I find Charles S. Peirce's semiotics coupled with Jean Gebser's complex ideas to be very helpful here. Drawing mainly on the ideas and vocabularies of Gebser within the framework of Peirce's interpretive, infinite and dynamic semiosis, as well as the metalanguage characteristic of semiotics, I will offer a different viewpoint on the nature of social change in the context of innovation (change) and reproduction (continuity).

It seems that the best way out of the duality of permanence (reproduction) and temporality (change) is to think systemically and wholistically—to become postmodern, or to use Gebser's word, "aperspectival."

⁴ There seems to be a parallel between social constructionists' attitude and the prevailing foreign policy of the USA government. We witness how this attitude takes hold on current international relationships, particularly, in the American's self-righteousness way of democratization of the world. For more on the American dominance, see *Hegemony or Survival* by Noam Chomsky (2003), and *Why People Hate America?* by Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies (2002).

Similar to the spirit of Gebser’s ever-present origin, Peirce’s declaration that "personal existence is an illusion and a practical joke" (quoted in Parret 1983, 34), does not just point at the collective, but it also implies that the process of significance and meaningfulness is an open, dynamic, interpretable and *transparent*. In fact, Peirce's triadic conception of semiotic signs makes our perception of change and continuity utterly open, interpretable and, therefore, transparent (diaphanous).

As Peirce asserts that "the universe ... is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs" (cited in Sebeok 1986, p. 42), and for him reality is signs—one might say *reality is the ever-present origin*. It is a fair assumption then, to consider change, social reproduction, and cultural innovation are also signs. And the meaning of social change can be viewed in a semiotic sense as systems of signification into which social reproduction and cultural innovation are integrated.

Based on Peirce’s semiotic signs, any phenomenon, such as social change must include three elements, which are brought together in a manner that the triad cannot be reduced to one or two elements (Figure 1). A semiotic sign, according to Peirce, is the representamen (sign), the object, and the interpretant (Figure 2). Since this position is *only* at one semiotic moment, each element in the triad shifts its role and never permanently remains as representamen, object, and interpretant (Parret 1983), and therefore, the quality of *integrative and transparent mutation of semiotic signs*. Peirce and Gebser seem to have come together across time and space!

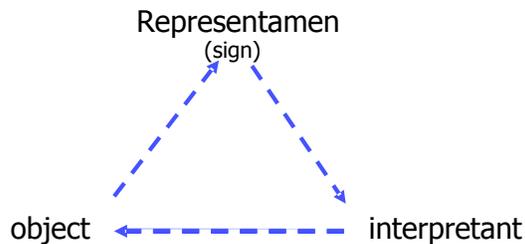


Figure 1: Peirce’s Triadic Sign

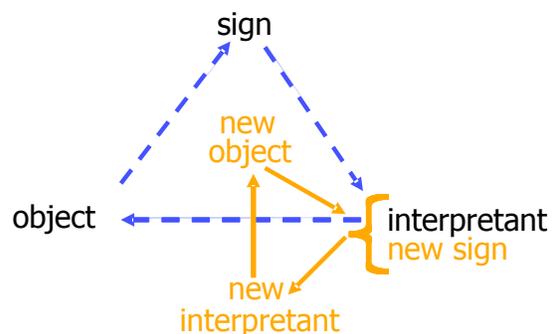


Figure 2: Dynamic Semiotic Process

From this semiotic insight, the phenomena of change and continuity must, therefore, follow Peirce’s sign. Considering the shifting role of the three elements of the sign, we have little trouble perceiving social reproduction at one moment of semiosis and as cultural innovation at another moment of semiosis. As we shall see shortly, Gebser’s idea of the “aperspectival consciousness” is, in fact, in the core of this semiotic process. The ability to perceive all the modes of consciousness simultaneously, which Gebser (1985) calls “synaeresis,” makes perfect sense with the dynamic open semiotic signs. The integration of magic symbiosis, mythic symbolism, and open systems results in a perception of the whole of human consciousness simultaneously, rendering the paradox of cultural innovation and social reproduction a transparent whole (see Figure 3).

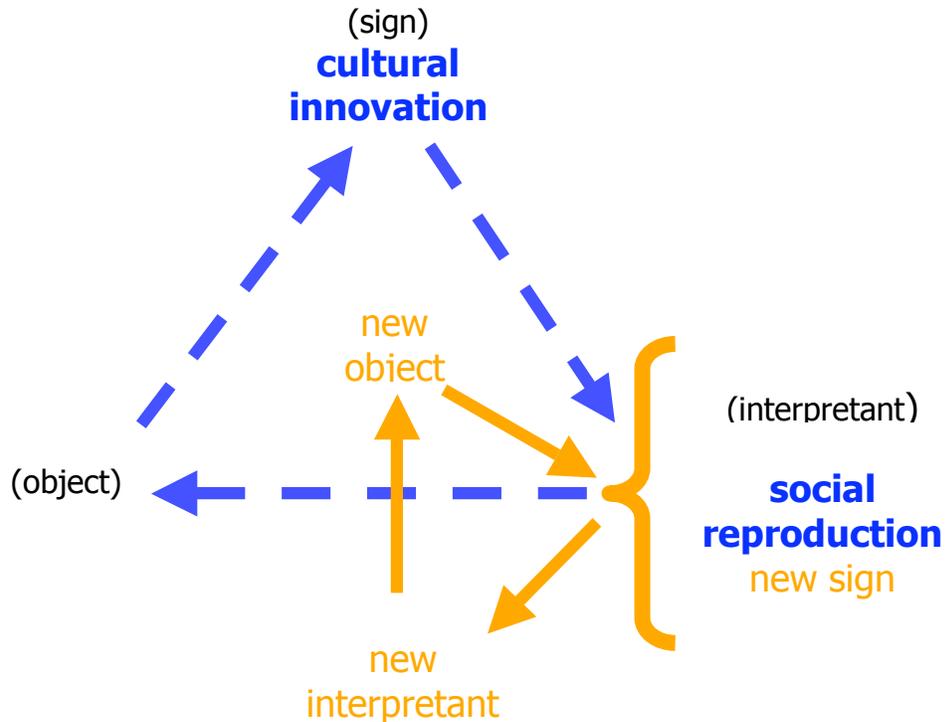


Figure 3: Cultural Innovation and Social Reproduction
A Semiotic Process

Moreover, characteristics of reproduction that may appear to be opposites from those of the innovation end of the spectrum are actually different dimensions of the same complex set of social relationships. When one attribute is revealed, another may suddenly be out of sight. Both reproduction and innovation are the two interdependent phases of social reality. The irony is that it is impossible to see the whole spectrum of this social phenomenon through just one mode of consciousness.

Change does not surpass the past. The “new” presumes the “old” through integration; hence the title of Gebser’s seminal work, *The Ever-Present Origin*. Social change is paradoxical. However, paradoxical relationships are more common than we would like to admit. They are, in fact, an essential nature of the human experience. Paradoxically, new innovative ideas contain the familiar past, the permanent. “Inspiration may be the revelation of something completely new, but it is also the rediscovery of something always true” (Grudin 1990, p. 20). This diaphanous and simultaneous process embodies magical and mystical qualities making the familiar strange and making the strange familiar. And therefore, there are constant opportunities in the experiences of any societies to begin to look at the familiar in new ways and to notice the unfamiliar that they have been ignoring. The challenge for social *change agents* is always to uncover the potential in the legacy of the familiar, perceiving with diaphaneity and simultaneously fully engaging in the cosmic dance between the desire for change and the comfort of hanging on the existing.

What causes change? Is the cause of change external or internal condition? Is change deterministic or volitional? If change is triggered by external conditions, then dealing with such change is often assumed to imply the need for comprehensive analysis and rational decision-making processes. If change is triggered by human intention, then we must understand how we use what Will McWhinney (1992) calls “translogical” modes of making choices to initiate change. Intentionally adapting this arational or translogical modes does not negate what Guy Burneko (2003, p. 218) describes as a “spontaneously and irreducibly self-organizing meaning/opening.” Needless to say, to have an intention is not to follow a predetermined action; rather, it is to aim at an unfolding teleological process. Intention “refers to movement toward something—*tend* toward, *tendency*” (May 1969, p. 229). In this sense, *intention is a journey not a destination*.

Building on Gebser’s (1985) integrated consciousness structure, and Jantsch’s (1980) self-evolutionary process, changes made by human intention and changes made by God, or divine intervention, close the full circle of change (Figure 4). It is useful here to indicate that the notion of God is not to be interpreted as “the definable and defining external creator,” as in religious traditions, “but God the self-eventuating metaconsciousness of and as psychocosm” (Burneko 2003, p. 235). Interestingly, the Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of God may have allured constructionist to adapt an attitude toward social change as a autonomous human affairs divorced from the numinous.

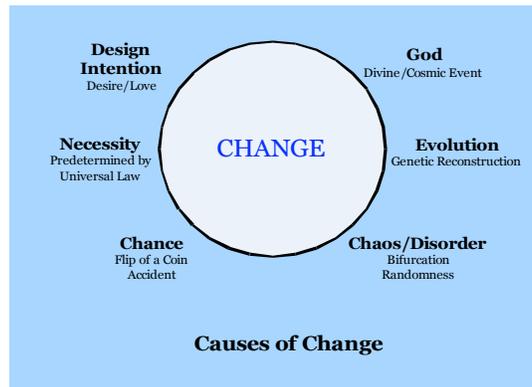


Figure 4: The Causes of Change

Social Change and the Phenomenon of Life

The phenomenon of life is paradoxical and tensional. Change is the fundamental nature of reality, as described by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. However, change implies a movement, a flux, which does not just mean a radical alteration or transformation. Lewis Mumford eloquently illustrates this point: “All life rests essentially on the integration (or composition) of two opposite states, stability and change, security and adventure, necessity and freedom; for without regularity and continuity there would not be enough constancy in any process to enable one to recognize change itself, still less to identify it as good or bad, as life-promoting or life-destroying” (Mumford 1951, p. 181). The flow

of social reality is such that the best appearance of any cultural innovations is but a trace of what was, the permanent, the infinite.

The aperspective consciousness structure, Gebser (1985) reminds us is a consciousness of the whole, or “holos consciousness” (Laszlo 2001), that allows us to embrace both our distant past and desired future as a living present. And “[to] attain this consciously, without abandoning the ‘earlier’ consciousness structures,” Gebser (1985, p. 412) asserts, “is to overcome rationality in favor of arationality, and to break forth from mentality into diaphaneity.” This is particularly significant, since aperspective consciousness is concerned with diaphanous perception of the whole, it cannot disregard the characteristic of simultaneity⁵ that goes beyond space-time limitations. “*Only through this reciprocal perception and impartation of truth by man and the world can the world become transparent for us*” (Gebser 1985, p. 261). With this in mind, the path to cultural innovation (change) and social reproduction (continuity) is one and the same in an ongoing meaning-making journey.

Unexpected Conclusion

In a broad sense, change paradoxically moves things toward being more alike or more different. Either change moves toward monistic (alike) or pluralistic (difference). Creative integration of the conflict between monistic and pluralistic qualities is the source of beautiful and sustainable eco-social change. What is needed is major mutations in the way we perceive change itself, a “macroshift” to borrow a term from Laszlo (2001). Or what we need is perhaps *much slower change*, and in some cases *no change*. This statement may come out as a *counterintuitive* proposition. But as systems theorists, Meadows, Randers, and Meadows (2005) argue that these leverage points are not intuitive. We know, however, from our experiences that when we do discover the system’s leverage points, hardly anyone believes us. This counterintuitive action must be guided by diaphanous perception⁶, and is evoked by what ancient Egyptians sages had called *the intelligence-of-the-heart*. This is needed for any society that seeks integration with a larger whole. “Only someone who knows of origin has present-living and dying in the whole, in integrity” (Gebser 1985, p. 273). Certainly, the aperspectival world conveys Gebser’s genius attempt to render wholeness transparent.

By approaching social change as a semiotic phenomenon, we can advance a different awareness and understanding of an emerging new teleology of social change. *A purpose that is pregnant with love and wholeness*. Both change and continuity are the two interdependent states of the phenomenon of life. Jean Gebser (1985, p. 541) reminds us

⁵ Jean Gebser makes a compelling argument that simultaneity and diaphaneity are essential for the perception of the whole. He articulates, “Simultaneity is magical resolution of time, a regression into the condition of timelessness” (Gebser 1985, pp. 477-478). Gebser elaborates on this characteristic of simultaneity by drawing on visual arts—i.e. Paul Klee’s work and Pablo Picasso’s paintings; and on poetry and literature—i.e. the work of T. S. Eliot, R. M. Rilke, Shakespeare, and James Joyce.

⁶ Jean Gebser (1985) uses diaphanous perception as transparency of perception “that which shines through.” He also uses the notion of “diaphaneity” or transparency as the manifestation of the spiritual.

that “nothing that exists for its own sake; it exists for the sake of the whole.” we continually draw on our origin in forming the future. We must repeatedly go back to *the ever-present origin* for a better start.

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