



Leadership of Social Change in Meta-Systems

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a theoretical approach to leading social change in response to meta-system challenges. Meta-system challenges are defined as those that are global and for which adaptation is required. Climate change is used as the primary meta-system challenge as it has been most fully explored in the literature although existing research does not offer a complete framework that can guide leaders desiring to galvanize social change. The framework presented here differentiates between leadership of a system, in a system, and with a system. The conclusion is that only leaders acting with a system can effect meta-system social change in response to meta-system scale challenges.

Social Change and Meta-System Scale Challenges

Social change refers to the alteration of relationships in a social system or society. These can be changes in situations, systems, practices, or behaviors (Titmus, 1974). Social change is complex and may involve many factors (Shackman, Liu, & Wang, 2002). It can be planned or unplanned and result from acts of nature or humans. It can be gradual or sudden. It can be perceptible or imperceptible, predictable or unpredictable.

No matter its specific characteristics, social change often results from “some significant alteration in the life condition of a society” (Murdock as cited by Shackman et al, 2002). In this paper the significant alternations are global urbanization, climate change, the aging of the developed world, and the exponential growth of knowledge. These have been described as pillar trends (Thompson & McNulty, 2010) in that they are global, have the potential to result in fundamental societal changes, and have trajectories that cannot be significantly altered by any

single individual, organization, or government in the foreseeable future. In short, they are meta-system scale challenges.

In the macro sense, each of these pillar trends has been unplanned but has been and remains predictable in its general trajectory: Some hold that urbanization is as old as human history (Davis, 1965). In 1950, approximately 30% of the world's population lived in urban areas. It increased to more than 50% by 2008 and is projected to reach 60% by 2025 ("Urbanization and Global Change," 2006). As world population heads to nine billion by 2050, all of that population growth is expected to occur in urban areas (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008). The concentration of carbon in the atmosphere has been growing since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution around 1760 (Maslin, 2009, p.9; Coleman, 2008, p.96). The median age of the U.S. population was 37.2 years according to the 2010 U.S. Census, up from 35.3 in 2000 and 32.9 in 1990. The 2010 figure was the highest median age ever recorded in the Census (Murse, n.d.; "U.S. median age..." n.d.). The exponential growth of knowledge is perhaps the most difficult to quantify as definitions of knowledge and acceptable evidence of knowledge vary but such growth in scientific knowledge was written about as early as 1981 (Tague, Beheshti, & Rees-Potter, 1981, p.126). While it must be acknowledged that not all information is knowledge, the amount of information stored digitally in 2002 was 5 quintillion bytes -- equal to 500,000 times the print collections of the U.S. Library of Congress (Testa, 2003). It was predicted to reach 1.2 million petabytes (each petabyte equals one quadrillion bytes) in 2010 (McKendrick, 2010).

Global urbanization and climate change result from both acts of nature and humans in that they are the result of both environmental and economic factors. The aging of the population is largely the result of human actions – the post-World War II baby boom is a significant factor

in aging currently witnessed in the U.S. population as that bubble of individuals advances through their lives. Additionally, demographic transition theory holds that both fertility and morbidity rates decline as societies industrialize and urbanize (Kirk, 1996; Davis, 1965) resulting in an average age increase although exact causality may be difficult to determine. The exponential growth of knowledge results purely from human actions.

Each of the four pillar trends is slow, not sudden. As a result, they may be difficult to perceive except in hindsight or in forecasting models. There may be other meta-system threats that are sudden: the asteroid that may have caused the mass extinction of dinosaurs when it struck the earth is an example (Harmon, 2010). Such a sudden meta-system collapse would, however, be little changed by leadership. Slow moving meta-system challenges present the opportunity for mitigation and adaptation, tasks for which effective leadership is critical.

These are also complex problems. They are dynamically complex in that there is interdependence as well as great distance between cause and effect. We are now seeing the impact of activities from decades ago. They are socially complex in that there are many stakeholders with different perspectives and interests. They are generatively complex in that the desired future state is unclear. We have not been here before and so cannot definitively say where we hope to end the journey (Kahane, 2010). These are similar to “messes” and “wicked problems” (Ackoff, 1974 and Churchman, 1967 as cited by McNulty, 2011) which can only hope to be solved at the system level.

This paper posits that societies are complex adaptive systems and that social change is constant. The role of women, for example, is different now than it was 50 or 100 years ago in all developed societies. The Internet was largely not known outside of academic circles in 1990; in

2011, Internet access is considered a legal right in Spain, Estonia, and Finland and it is estimated that 71% of people in the developed world are online at some point (“State of the Internet...” 2011). Five years ago, the Tea Party was non-existent; in 2011, CNN aired a Tea Party rebuttal to the President’s State of the Union address because they are a “major force” in U.S. politics (Weber 2011). In 2010, if one were asked who occupies Wall Street, the answer would likely be well-compensated financial executives; in 2011, it became the name of a nation-wide protest movement of people railing against those same executives with the cry, “We are the 99%” (“Occupy Wall Street” 2011).

Any stasis is momentary or illusory as complex adaptive systems are dynamic (Wheatley, 1999, p.99). Leadership is thus not a matter of starting or stopping social change but rather of influencing its direction and velocity.

Social Change: A Social Challenge

It is useful to draw upon the extensive research and theory building regarding social responsibility and social change, particularly as it relates to climate change, as a window into possibilities for understanding these issues more generally.

The literature on social change as an act of environmental awareness goes back at least to 1991 with examinations of organizational responses to environmental responsibilities (Bansal & Roth, 2000). Researchers and theorists have advanced explanations for climate change-related social change at individual, organizational, governmental, extra-governmental, and trans-governmental levels (Adger, et al 2009; Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Bansal & Roth; 2000; Den Hond & Bakker, 2007; Shove, 2009).

Examining individual change, Shove (2009) asserted that the standard approach of attempting to change attitudes to alter behavior to influence choice (ABC) is limited. In this approach are embedded assumptions that may or may not be true, such as that attitude dictates behavior and that the responsibility for responding to climate change rests with individuals. She cited the “value-action” gap which demonstrates that while people may support environmentally friendly views, their actions do not often follow suit (Blake, 1999 as cited by Shove, 2009). The gap, Shove argued, is only a mystery if one assumes that values drive action. Further, Shove argued that the ABC framework was not sufficient for discussing significant social transformation as it does not engage on the issues of the responsibility of the state or other stakeholders.

This leads then to work that considers the role of organizations. Aguilera et al (2007) set forth a theoretical model to explain the motives of individuals in organizations, organizations themselves, as well as national and transnational entities. Their model presented motives for each of these multiple levels – instrumental, relational, and moral – and interactions between the levels. For example, they argued that individuals in organizations have a need for control in order to optimize their own outcomes, organizations have a need to satisfy shareholders’ short-term interests, and nations have a need to be competitive. These represent instrumental motives. Individuals also need to belong, organizations need to be seen as responsible members of the community, and nations desire social cohesion. These are relational motives. Individuals seek meaning, organizations may feel stewardship obligations that can ensure their survival for the long term, and nations may want to foster a sense of collective responsibility. These are moral motives.

These are largely, however, external motivations and represent a worldview based in economics. This is not without support in the literature (Basal & Roth, 2000) and the authors do make a case for how each of these actors, driven by these motives, can effect social change through influence on firms' corporate social responsibility activities. Theirs is, however, in the end essentially a component-based approach to social change: dissect each actor, determine the dominant motive, and structure one's actions accordingly. It still does not rise to a system-level approach to the challenge of social change.

Den Hond and De Bakker (2007) examined the activities of ideologically motivated activist groups and their impact on social change. Again, this is limited in that it is a component-level view but they do introduce a model of "frame transformation" that is helpful in understanding meta-system level change. They argued that actors, or stakeholders, move through a process from institutionalization, where the stakeholder is held to have moral legitimacy, to deinstitutionalization, where moral legitimacy is questioned by activist groups, to reinstitutionalization or replacement, where moral legitimacy is either reconfirmed or a new actor replaces the old.

One witnesses this process in the development of both the Tea Party and the Occupy Wall Street movements in the United States. The Tea Party views what they perceive to be excessive government spending and regulation as having a corrosive effect on society. Theirs is a challenge to the moral legitimacy of the governing elite with regard to what they believe were the intentions of the founding fathers for limited government and maximum individual freedom ("Tea party movement," 2011). The essence of the demands of the Occupy Wall Street movement lie in its challenge to the moral legitimacy of the prevailing capitalist financial system which they see as dominated by large corporations overseen by well-paid executives. This is

embodied by their slogan, “We are the 99%” (“Occupy Wall Street,” 2011.) which contrasts them with the one percent which they believe exerts an inordinate level of influence on both the economy and government. While these two movements are ideologically opposed in many ways, they can be seen as siblings when one employs Den Hond and De Bakkers’ model. This commonality begins to reveal a system-level perspective of social change in that each of these movements reflects a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo – even though they have identified different causes -- and each desires fundamental, field-level change.

Kahane (2010) has constructed a model for social change that relies less on the motivations of individual actors than on the relationships between actors. It is built around the tension between power and love. Kahane argued that each of these has two sides: one is positive and the other negative. The power *to* is positive; power *over* is negative. Love which enables is positive; love which disables is negative. He further argued that social change is not possible without both power and love: “Love is what makes power generative instead of degenerative. Power is what makes love generative instead of degenerative. Power and love are therefore exactly complementary” (p. 7).

In Kahane’s view, novel challenges such as the Pillar Trends cannot be met through the application of existing best practices (p. 119-120). Solving such challenges requires stakeholders to “co-create new possibilities and new realities” (p. 113). This is only possible when stakeholders engage with the system and each other with generative power and generative love.

Kahane’s is a system-based view of how one might solve meta-system challenges. He maintained that solving complex social challenges was only possible when one admitted that one is part of the system, that is, part of the problem (p. 132). A limitation of his approach is that it is

based on his experience working with complex problems with a defined universe of stakeholders who can be engaged in co-creation. While it may be possible to identify all of the stakeholders in a meta-system challenge, it would be an exhaustive exercise and even if they were identified, it would be difficult to convene them. This does not, however, negate the usefulness of Kahane's work in understanding leadership of social change for meta-system challenges.

Limitations to social change, particularly with regard to climate change, have been identified by Adger et al (2009). They argued that adaptation to climate change has traditionally been viewed in terms of exogenous factors identified as economic, technological, or environmental thresholds: points beyond which change must occur. Limits to adaptation, however, need not be governed by thresholds, in their view. They may be endogenous, based on "values, perceptions, processes, and power structures within society." For leaders, this greatly complicates their task as different segments of the population hold varying values and perceptions and are part of or subject to diverse processes and power structures. Obtaining agreement on which social change is desired and commitment to embark on a specified course may thus appear impossible.

Leaders must also understand how the populations they hope to lead perceive the risks and benefits of the meta-system challenges in question. Research by Slovic (1987) indicated that individuals tend to inaccurately estimate the risk of those phenomena that are new, unobservable, and with delayed effect – characteristics which all of the pillar trends share. In some cases the risk is over-estimated; in others it is under-estimated. These biases are not necessarily resolved by the presentation of scientific evidence as the original bias affects the perception of any new information presenting leaders with a significant challenge if they are to catalyze social change in response to the pillar trends.

A final aspect of the “wicked problem” of social change is the need for leaders to consider the external as well as the internal dimensions. Each of the researchers above has focused primarily on the internal: motivations, relationships, perceptions, and the like. External factors also play a role.

For example, it may be deemed that decreasing vehicle miles traveled is an appropriate behavioral change in light of climate change – to decrease carbon emissions; urbanization – to decrease congestion and the need for parking and other automobile infrastructure; and the aging of the population – to increase safety. A brilliant effort may be launched that convinces the population that indeed driving less is responsible and worthy behavior. However as Calthorpe (2011), Register (2006), and others have pointed out, if workplaces are ten miles east of a residential area and the shopping district is ten miles west, the likelihood that vehicle miles traveled will decrease is slim at best: the physical infrastructure inhibits rather than promotes the desired social change. These thinkers contended that the physical world must make the desired social activities feasible and desirable, and that the right infrastructure can be a powerful catalyst to social change.

Today, the United States is dominated by a knowledge- and service-based economy where most work takes place in relatively “clean” offices rather than in “dirty” industrial facilities. Even manufacturing is less polluting than it once was. It would be highly rational to place homes, offices, and retail businesses in close proximity yet it is prevented by legacy zoning restrictions that dictate separate residential, commercial, and industrial zones. A typical U.S. city and its surrounding area are still marked by distinct clusters of residential neighborhoods, retail/office parks, and industrial areas. These are linked by miles of roadway and dotted with numerous parking lots and other markers of an automobile-centric culture.

Thus leaders, if they hope to catalyze social change in a certain direction and at a certain velocity, must acknowledge that the system comprises both endogenous and exogenous aspects of the culture as well as internal and external dimensions. They must also decide if those external factors are fixed or variable. Does one attempt to influence social change within the existing infrastructure? Shove (2010) considers this, a role of the state rather than the individual, to be one of the significant short-comings of the ABC approach to social change. Or does one attempt to alter the infrastructure as an integral part of the social change? A truly systems-based approach must embrace this latter challenge.

Three Perspectives on Leading Social Change in Systems

We have seen that there are many stakeholders, multiple motives, diverse relationships, and a multitude of interactions and that each of these can have an impact on the velocity and direction of social change. How then is one to sever this Gordian knot?

The first step may be to consider where the leader perceives she sits in relation to the system: whether the leader sees herself as acting as a leader *of* the system, *in* the system, or *with* the system.

Traditional hierarchical views of leadership, which make up as much as 85% of the literature (Ancona & Blackman, 2010), focus on the effective exercise of authority and control. The authority at the top of the hierarchy is perceived as the leader *of* the system where the system is defined as the hierarchy. Thus we expect CEOs to be leaders of their firms and presidents or prime ministers to be leaders of their countries. Entities such as corporations and nations are, however, only sub-systems within the meta-system. One of the vexing challenges of leadership of meta-systems is that no one can be the leader *of* the meta-system in that no single individual or

entity comprehends or controls enough of the meta-system to dictate its direction or velocity (Wheatley, 1999, p. 44). Another limitation of this perspective is that the leader may or may not perceive herself as working in a meta-system.

For example, the CEO of a company may become aware of climate change and direct her company to create products and services that will create opportunities for profit from these changes. Siemens is one firm which is attempting to do so (Stanant, n.d.). In fact, Siemens has also recognized the impact of the aging population (“Benefiting people and the environment” n.d.) and global urbanization. The CEO of Siemens, Peter Löscher, had declared, “The battle against climate change must be won in cities” (“COP 17...” 2011). If Löscher were to limit his activities to “greening” the company’s own operations and the creation of environmentally friendly products and services, he would be exercising leadership *of* the Siemens system but that alone would not create the social change necessary for the world to adapt to changes in the climate.

One might then look to the concept of a leader *in* the system: one who exercises a combination of authority and influence beyond authority – the balance of which will vary along a continuum – in an attempt to act as a catalyst of social change in a given direction or velocity. The first distinction to note is that in this construction the leader is aware of the system, even if she cannot comprehend it in its entirety. The second distinction is that while the leader *of* a system implies singularity (or if there are multiple leaders that they are connected in some readily apparent way), the concept of a leader *in* the system carries no such implied limitations. There can be many leaders in a system and they may or not be aware of their connectedness to other leaders. The third distinction is that the concept of a leader *in* a system implies that the leader is working beyond the span of his or her formal authority. The leader *in* a system

understands that there are many stakeholders with varied interests, multiple power structures, and numerous channels for action. There is also the implication that the leader cannot achieve the desired result alone; collaboration and cooperation are necessary.

For example, the Environmental League of Massachusetts works toward the enactment of environmentally friendly policies, regulations, and laws. They undertake little direct environmental action or research but rather focus their efforts at the intersection of policy and politics including coordinating legislative initiatives with other environmental groups and engaging non-traditional constituencies such as organized labor. Their focus is on achieving pragmatic, not symbolic, victories on the issues. This requires relating scientific evidence to practical concerns of politicians and their constituents as “science is at the bottom of most politicians’ list of priorities.” Its managing director has said that the organization does this to benefit Massachusetts but also to make Massachusetts a model for other states (Pruitt, 2011). He clearly sees his role as leader *of* his organization as leveraging its capabilities to lead *in* a larger system.

Looking again at Siemens, one finds that they support COP 17, a global meeting on climate change held in 2011 in South Africa under the aegis of the United Nations (“COP 17...” 2011). The company joined the UN Global Compact in 2003 and agreed to its CEO Water Mandate in 2008. They espouse collaboration as a core component of their sustainability strategy and participate in several international organizations addressing climate change issues (“Collaborating for sustainability...n.d.). Löscher and Siemens seek to be leaders of social change in the meta-system as well as of their own sub-system. These two examples demonstrate that the first two leadership positions – *of* and *in* – are not mutually exclusive so long as that system *of* which one is a leader is properly defined as a sub-system of the meta-system.

Löscher, of course, is not alone in undertaking these dual roles. The CEOs of GE, IBM, or any of several other companies could have been used as examples. President Obama can be seen in this same light. There is a long list of individuals whom one could consider to qualify for this list. Yet no major agreement to replace the soon-to-expire 1997 Kyoto Accord was expected to result from COP 17 (Broder, 2011; Petz, 2011a). Global emissions are projected to continue to rise (Petz, 2011b). The United States has failed to find a way to put a price on carbon through either a tax or market mechanism despite support for such efforts by the White House (Broder, 2010). Thus none of them individually or collectively is able to create the social change they espouse.

This leads one to the third level: the leader *with* a system. This level is attained when a leader catalyzes actual significant social change in the meta-system. The leader with a system achieves this outcome not simply by amassing the power to coerce change or even by exercising the collaborative dexterity to align numerous allies. Rather leading with the system occurs when a leader is able to articulate the problem in such a way that it is undeniable and the change as a path toward what people define as meaningful (Wheatley, 1999, p. 149), to the system becoming truer to itself (Alexander, 1979, p. 28). Such a leader integrates instrumental, relational, and moral motives into a transcendent, clear, and compelling purpose. Such a leader also becomes a “tag,” (Plowman et al, 2007) embodying the distilled meaning of why change must occur, the desired end state, and how the change might occur.

The civil rights leader Martin Luther King can be viewed in terms of leading with a system. The struggle for racial equality began long before his birth and continues after his death yet the period of King’s activity is one that reset society’s expectations of what was possible and acceptable in this arena. King controlled little through any formal position yet his impact was

far-reaching in the United States and around the world. He certainly collaborated with other figures inside and outside of the civil rights movement yet it is not from these relationships alone that the power of his leadership emerged. King relied heavily on the moral righteousness of his cause as a way of making racial segregation unacceptable yet he was not the first to do so.

What made King distinctive as a leader in the system? First he anchored his appeal for equality in a concept commonly understood and accepted in the system: it is enshrined in the Declaration of Independence as a “truth,” that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights...: (“Charters of Freedom...” n.d.). Anchoring in the familiar creates “situated meaning” and is important for having a message understood and internalized by individuals. It connects them to the problem (Whitmarsh, Seyfang, and O’Neill, 2011). Further, by including exact words from the Declaration in his speech on the Capital Mall in 1963 (King, 1963), King articulated incoherence in the system: if all people are created equal, why are some people treated in ways that are unequal? The articulation of incoherence is a way to restore coherence to the system (Senge, 2006, p. 226): either the truth must be denied or actions must become consistent with the truth.

Second, King did not limit his efforts to the injustices visited upon African Americans. He advocated for change that embraced all races and ethnicities (King, 2011). He aspired to change not simply for his sub-system but for the meta-system.

Third, he experienced the dysfunction of the system directly: he was a victim of discrimination, violence and imprisonment (Brown, Clark, & Carrasquel, n.d.). He was not an external champion of change but rather one who viewed the system and acted from inside with

firsthand authority. His call for change was thus not abstract and built on experiences shared with many of his followers.

Fourth, King and his followers challenged the moral legitimacy of the existing power structure at a time and in a way that ensured it could not stand. In choosing non-violent action, he led in a way that challenged the paradigm of repression. Following the example of Gandhi, another leader with a system, King understood what Meadows later articulated as one of the most powerful leverage points for change in any system: change the paradigm and its implicit “shared social agreements” (2001, p. 163). King employed what Kahane (2010) would later call generative power and love to disarm degenerative power.

Meadows also noted that the greater leverage at the point of change, the more intense will be the reaction of those elements of the system to resist the intended change (p. 165). The juxtaposition of non-violent protest and violent reactions to those protests brought the entire system and its jarring dysfunction into sharp relief, making it impossible to ignore. It must also be remembered here that both King and Gandhi were assassinated. Strong resistance, indeed.

Finally, King made clear that the change for which he advocated was larger than himself and his own instrumental interests. He did not have products or services to sell. His Nobel Peace Prize award was likely the largest pay day of his life, about \$54,000, and he donated this money to the civil rights movement (“Martin Luther King – Biography,” 1964). He became famous as a result of his activities but there is no evidence that he undertook these actions in pursuit of fame. To lead *with* a system is to lead in service to that system even at personal cost. King articulated his understanding of this in his “Mountaintop” speech (King, 1968) shortly before his assassination:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

While one does not think first of the physical environment when examining the civil rights movement, it is interesting to note the importance of physical infrastructure in some of King's activities. The Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott of 1955-56, initiated by Rosa Parks' refusal to sit in the back of the bus and subsequent arrest, raised King's profile as a civil right activist ("Montgomery bus boycott... n.d.). The 1960 lunch counter sit-in in Nashville also turned on access to physical locations. During this action, King was arrested and sentenced to six-months of hard labor. The intervention of President Kennedy and his brother the U.S. Attorney General resulted in King's release ("Sit ins," n.d.). In both of these, no policy of equality would have been effective had location-based segregation been permitted. A change in the physical environment was required.

One must also note that King's effectiveness was, in part, the result of broader social currents including protests against the Vietnam War that created a general dissatisfaction with the dominant paradigm. It also happened at a time that coincided with the rise of television which allowed images of peaceful protesters being assaulted by authorities to be broadcast across the world. An aspect of leading with a system is leading at a time when the system is ready to be led; the leader *with* a system is acutely aware of the greater context in which he acts.

Leading with a system can be seen as similar to Burns' concept of transformational leadership (1978) through which Burns saw leaders and followers raise each other to "high levels of motivation and morality" (p. 20). Burns, however, did not include systems theory in his arguments and dismissed the idea of influence (p. 19). Still, central to his definition of leadership

is to induce action toward the fulfillment of the true needs and goals of both leaders and followers (p. 19) by understanding each of their values and motives. He saw political leadership as “broadly intended ‘real change’” (p. 434).

Another connection with Burns is that he defined Gandhi as a true leader (p. 27) and about whom he writes extensively. Gandhi is also seen here as a leader *with* a system. King, however, gets only a brief mention by Burns (p. 267) and then it is to note the difficulty of succession after leadership of a movement is embodied in a single person. King is included in a paragraph with Juan Peron, the dictator of Argentina.

Burns’ insights are useful but not sufficient for understanding the leadership of social change in meta-systems. Burns argued that leadership brought about change intended by leaders (1978, p. 414). It implies a great deal of control of outcomes. Some systems theorists, by contrast, argued that control by leaders is an illusion and that complex systems are “inherently uncontrollable” (Wheatley & Frieze, 2011). In this context, the challenge for the leader is to facilitate the outcomes that meet the authentic needs of the system, not those defined by the leader

Implications for Social Change and Meta-Systems

There is no “tag” for any of the pillar trends. Is this because the system is not yet ready? Or because meta-system change is beyond the reach of a single leader? It is not because there is no need: as noted above, the pillar trends are defined as those with predictable trajectories that cannot be altered by any single person or entity. Adaptation is the only option and adaptation requires social change.

Wheatley and Frieze (2011) define the journey that leaders must make as one from “hero to host.” This is a transition from a leader with all of the answers to one where the leader engages the system in collective multi-dimensional problem solving. Think for a moment about the emergence of former U.S. Vice President Al Gore as a leader in combating climate change. His film and book, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) were received with great acclaim yet he never achieved the status of a leader *with* the system. His contribution was valuable yet his impact was ultimately modest. This may be in part because his leadership was heroic in Wheatley and Frieze’s terms: he presented a vast trove of facts to prove that anthropogenic climate change was real and posed a genuine threat to the planet. Gore remains a leader *in* the system but has not become a leader *with* the system. The “host” leader understands that the answers the system needs are in the system and that the full system must participate in divining them. It is not sufficient for a leader, no matter how educated or passionate, to deliver them to the system.

An alternative construct for exploring leadership of meta-system social change is built around the concept of “presence” (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004). Presence involves a three-staged, U-shaped process: sensing – becoming one with the system; presencing – allowing inner knowledge to emerge; and realizing – taking action based on this inner knowledge. It is a process of opening oneself to the system in order to achieve clarity and stepping back from imposing one’s own intentions. It is in many ways the opposite of traditional approaches to leadership exemplified by Burns’ conception of leadership with its emphasis on intentionality.

The Occupy Wall Street offers an example of such an alternative to traditional approaches to leadership of social change. It proclaims that it is leaderless (Occupy Wall Street, n.d.) and in that sense endeavors to act as a system. Its “people’s assemblies” utilize “non-

binding collective decision making” as a way of ensuring that each voice is heard (“About” n.d.). Decisions emerge; they are not dictated. Its members self-organize in response to changing context and have resisted calls to make concrete demands. In this sense one could hypothesize that the members of Occupy Wall Street aspire to be leaders (though they might resist the term) *with*, rather than of or in, the system.

The Occupy Wall Street movement is young. It is too early to determine if any lasting changes will result from these activities. They present, however, fruitful ground for future study.

Conclusions

The study of leadership of social change in meta-systems is not well established although one can draw on several related lines of inquiry. Leaders must understand that systems do not sit in stasis waiting for social change to be initiated; systems are dynamic and so leaders can only hope to influence the velocity and direction of change.

Second, a deeper understanding of both the challenges and possibilities of social change in meta-systems may be found by shifting one’s perspective on the relationship between the leader and the system. Leaders *of* individual entities may see themselves as leaders of the system but this rests false assumptions about what comprises the meta-system. Others may see themselves as leaders *in* the system, working to achieve change beyond the scope of their formal authority. Leadership *with* the system is only evidenced through outcomes though one can pursue it through approaches such as presencing that put the leader in service to the meta-system.

Those aspiring to live with the system may need to incorporate initiatives that address the physical environment as well as the internal drivers such as motivations, attitudes, and behaviors most commonly addressed in the social change literature.

The presence-based approach, when combined with Kahane's insights on power and love as well as Wheatley and Meadows' insights on systems, comes closest to what is meant by leading *with* the system. There is not yet a clearly delineated roadmap like John Kotter's (1996) widely accepted eight-step process for leading change in organizations. There may never be: leading with the system does not lend itself to such neat prescriptions. The achievements of leaders such as Martin Luther King and the aspirations of current movements such as Occupy Wall Street present many opportunities for additional research into the role of leadership in realizing social change that leads to the sustainability of meta-systems.

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