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The Six or Seven Axioms of Social Change: Margaret Mead's Gift

Zaid Hassan, July 2005

The anthropologist Margaret Mead gave us the gift of what can be called Mead's Axiom, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." While I have heard this quote being used hundreds, if not thousands of times, I personally haven't had much of an understanding of how it happens to be true. It seems to be an article of faith, at least amongst social activists, hence an axiom in the technical sense. My intention here is to corroborate it with my personal understanding of mass social change.

On good days my work involves enthusiastically trying to form and catalyze such groups. On bad days I curse and wonder where these small groups of thoughtful, committed people are and what they're waiting for. Regardless of what day it is, I feel that Mead's Axiom provides us with a compelling vision for mass social change. It deserves attention. This essay is animated by a burning desire to understand what could be thought of as the mother of all axioms, at least when it comes to mass social change. I propose a series of lesser axioms, all drawn from trying to understand how Mead's Axiom operates in the world.

Despite the tidiness of Mead's Axiom, mass social change is not usually a nice linear process. There are, of course, situations where social innovation follows a linear path, for example with the take-up of an innovation (See Chapter 9 of [Believing Cassandra](#) by Worldchanging contributor Alan AtKisson). But these situations are rare when it comes to social systems which are complex and stuck. My colleague, Adam Kahane, in his book [Solving Tough Problems](#), explains,

"Problems are tough because they are complex in three ways. They are dynamically complex, which means that cause and effect are far apart in space and time, and so are hard to grasp from firsthand experience. They are generatively complex, which means that they are unfolding in unfamiliar and unpredictable ways. And they are socially complex, which means that the people involved see things very differently, and so the problems become polarized and stuck."

When studying mass social change as a phenomenon there is always a temptation to order events as they happened, in a timeline. Then by implication we assume that one thing follows another and one thing neatly causes another. A very real danger for those wishing to learn from historical social change is the trap of seeing social change linearly. This is a trap is because we know (for example from research on complex systems) that social change, that is changing a complex system, is less about planning and more about creating the conditions for change. To mangle an old adage, no plan survives contact with reality. Mass social change is messy, unpredictable and often ugly.

Modern institutions are not well suited to the work of catalyzing social change because they suffer from a touching need for linear and predictable processes. Such processes in turn

demand that risk be minimized and a plan be proposed, which is often used as a script rather than a point of departure. If we're being honest with ourselves, then we'd recognize when the function of a plan is purely psychological comfort in the face of unpredictable and frightening change.

Some appetite for risk is, however, a key capacity required of anyone with a commitment to sustained social change in such turbulent times. If this appetite does not come naturally then it must be built slowly over time, like an immunity. As James P. Carse, in [Finite and Infinite Games](#) puts it, "To be prepared against surprise is to be *trained*, to be prepared for surprise is to be *educated*."

Risk therefore should not be confused with recklessness or blindness. Risk can be understood, embraced and internalized as an intrinsic quality of the systems that we're dealing with. It cannot be banished and any attempt to do so should be treated with the same sympathy that any other pathological condition demands.

I fell headfirst into the trap of seeing social change as a linear process. I wrote down what I saw happening, one step after another. It took me a little time to see the obvious and to realize that while such an approach might make me feel like I have a handle on my subject, it was largely an illusion. Instead, I offer an unbundling of Mead's Axiom in the hope of prompting further dialogue and thought.

Change Happens

Or to be more precise, positive social change happens often.

Deeply entrenched and traumatic social problems can cause despair. When problems appear to go on for decades with no resolution in sight, it is easy to adopt an attitude that things do not, will not or cannot change. Everything however is subject to the law of entropy, everything decays and everything will die. This is true of institutions, regimes and reigns of injustice. When confronted with monolithic systems that seem to defy time, we are in, fact, confronting our own attitudes towards our own mortality.

While it's true that the existence of an unjust system may be extracting a high price from the people subjected to it, and that should always drive us, there is a more fundamental question that requires attention. Are we willing to see our work as bigger than ourselves, as a generational project if need be, in the faith that things will change? The attitude and commitment that such a position would entail is rare and becoming rarer still. While not a requirement per se, the adoption of such attitudes can liberate us from the paralysis caused by life under the weight of soul crushing social problems.

If we're willing to look beyond the concerns and demands of our own mortality, or do whatever else it takes, in order to believe that change is possible, then this is what we will see. The Quit India Movement, the Civil Rights Movement and the collapse of the Soviet Union are all outstanding examples of mass social change where systems that seemed timeless either collapsed or changed beyond imagining.

A Stuck System is Like a Black Hole

Stuck social problems, or stuck systems, like black holes, rarely come into being overnight. Often they are the result of long historical processes. A system might be stuck because those

in power are benefiting from the status quo or it might be stuck because there are fundamental disagreements as to how it should change.

One way of understanding the increasing “stuck-ness” of social systems is to visualize them as sending out signals during the course of coming into being, as they progress in their development as problems. In the early phases of a problem, the signals from a system may be very localized, visible and audible only to those inside it. A defining characteristic of a “stuck” system is when all signals being sent from it are somehow being blocked or ignored. They arc out into the world but before getting too far, they fall back to the surface. People outside the system, not directly affected by the problem, perceive little. Often, people within the system, those directly affected, become attuned to the very same signals trying to escape. They have lived with the problem so long that they come to believe it as being an unalterable state of affairs. In other words they forget the axiom that “change happens.” The problem, by all accounts, has been left to its own devices, to evolve as it may, into increased conflict which potentially generates louder and more powerful signals.

A black hole is by definition black because no signals from it can ever escape its gravitational field. We see it as a hole, as a non-entity. It does, however, make its presence felt because it has a lot of mass and hence we are affected by its strong gravitational pull. We can know it exists and how big it is without knowing much more about it. The space inside a black hole is known as a *singularity*, and it is a place where the laws of physics, the laws of the universe break down. We do not know what laws operate inside of a black hole. We only know that they are very different from anything we know and understand. Similarly, when a stuck system is left to its own devices, it enters into a phase where all known laws break down, when the most unimaginable things can and do happen.

Luckily, stuck problems are not black holes, they are only like black holes. As the problem grows in complexity, intensity, and urgency, the strength of the signals emanating from the system grow, and sometimes force their way into the public consciousness. They break free of the gravitational pull of the stuck system. Eventually these signals, in the form of eye-witness accounts, refugees, news reports and so on, may become so strong and urgent that action of some sort becomes necessary, as in the case of Darfur or military action in the Balkans. At this stage, the problem can be seen as a crisis or all out warfare. Or the signals may be recognized too late, as was the case in Rwanda.

While these examples bring to mind extreme conflict situations, these very same characteristics arise at any scale, from small organizations to rural communities. It would be a mistake to assume that “mass” social change only occurs at national or global levels.

Unlike a black hole, which is the product of the laws of physics at work, a stuck system is the product of human processes. This means that its qualities, such as the failure of signals to escape its gravitational pull, are somehow human-made. We can change them. When we are stuck, there is essentially something we are choosing not to see, not to feel, and not to do.

The First Move Toward Change is Usually Undemocratic

A stuck system, like a black hole, contains massive energies. These energies can be seen as that which is stuck. They are frozen. The first move that sets these energies into motion, like cutting a stretched rubber band, has been called a “power move” by systems thinker Barry Oshry. The power move then is one in which tremendous energies are unleashed.

What's more, it is usually an individual who, waking up in the middle of the night, gets the idea that he or she must do something. Oshry claims that this thought of what to do comes with great clarity—and is often seen as a betrayal. (As Oshry points out, Abraham Lincoln, Anwar Sadat and Yitzak Rabin are good examples of leaders who went beyond their official mandates in order to change a situation that was dramatically stuck. All three were shot for their troubles.)

The first move, an act of self-nomination, is profoundly undemocratic. It is “paradigm shattering” because it changes the rules of the game. It is a move made by an individual tired of endless committee meetings and discussions that change nothing. It's the move made by someone who is profoundly tired of being subject to power, the logic of which is beyond their rational understanding (think of all those moments of anonymous bravery during periods such as the Holocaust). To make the first move is to risk everything; it is to make the ultimate wager.

Fraught with risk and danger, the first move is made by someone who sees, in a moment, that he or she actually has the capacity to change a world. The defining act of leadership, the first move, increasingly, is rarely practiced by those who call themselves leaders and is more frequently found amongst those that don't.

The Group is Smarter (But Not Braver) Than the Individual

When a previously stuck social system suddenly becomes “unstuck,” a river of possibilities starts to flow. It's as if the system instantly shifts from being a solid to being liquid. In order to cope creatively and constructively with the energies of a liquid system, a vast array of decisions need to be made, usually in a short space of time. While such changes appear to be sudden for many people, for those working to create them, they are often the product of long years of work and preparation. Such moments exemplify the idea of a “tipping point,” when a system shifts from one state to another.

It is in such moments of historic flux that we see dictators seizing power or billionaires being created (the oligarchs of Russia are a good example). These are individuals who have seized the moment for their own benefit. For most people, however, to know how and when to act for the greater public interest during such periods is much more difficult. Few, if any individuals, regardless of how talented or dedicated they are, can turn chaos into positive social change within the complexity of a roiling liquid system. This alchemical task is much better suited to the genius of the group.

A particular and peculiar set of qualities are demanded of a group in order to intelligently cope with such complexity. The group needs to be characterized by collective intelligence, which can be thought of as the capacity to act with a single intelligence or will. Collective intelligence arises out of the process of diverse and dissenting individuals working well with one another within the context of a group.

On the other hand, a group that displays schizophrenic qualities, such as being of two minds, will not be able to capitalize on the possibilities of the moment. Instead of acting, they'll spend their time trying to figure out what they themselves think of the fast-changing situation. Nor will a homogenous group exhibit collective intelligence. Rather, it will exhibit group-think, which is a form of collective blindness.

The existence of a group which can display such demanding characteristics also points to the non-linear nature of mass social change. It is virtually impossible to bring into existence such a group in the short and confused moments after a system becomes liquid. The group needs to be built over a long period of time, with patience and skill.

It is usually the case that any number of lesser opportunities are what practically bring the group together in the first instance. It's working on lesser opportunities that the group develops the capacities to take advantage of a window of historic opportunity. The defining moment in the life of any group is that historic moment where they are called to act in an instant, with perfect trust and co-ordination.

Ideas (and Viruses) Acquire People Through Small Worlds

The most effective way for an epidemic, either of ideas or viruses, to spread widely is through people who don't know each other well. Every time we meet someone new, we come into contact with a distinct web of social relationships from our own. While somewhat counter-intuitive, the existence of a "light dusting" of weak social links makes the world a small place.

We all have a tight cluster of relationships around us. When these clusters are weakly connected to each other, we get what is called a "small world." A small world is a particular network architecture within which every member of a network is connected to every other member through a short number of connections, say six degrees. Airports are small worlds, and this is why they are such dangerous places as far as the spread of disease goes. Every stranger that comes (weakly) into contact with a diseased individual is a vector to an entirely different part of the globe, into an entirely different cluster of relationships. If everyone in an airport were going to the same place, or if people didn't live in dense urban clusters, then stopping a modern epidemic would be child's play. Malcolm Gladwell calls the individuals which provide the weak ties between clusters "connectors." They can also be thought of as "carriers." All social change is a change from one state to another. Where mass social change is concerned, the tipping point is that point when a phenomenon shifts from being localized, that is, affecting a relatively small number of people, to affecting a relatively large number of people in a very short period of time.

The presence of a minimum threshold of connectors along with a number of dense clusters is what determines if an epidemic or an idea will tip or break out of its point of origin.

Mead's Axiom Redux

For a small group of thoughtful and committed people to change the world, they must believe that change is possible. They must be ready to act the moment a stuck system becomes liquid. They will only be effective if they display collective intelligence. Finally, they must live in a small world.

Further Reading

[Solving Tough Problems](#) - Adam Kahane

[Leading Systems: Lessons from the Power Lab](#) - Barry Oshry

[Nexus: Small Worlds and the Groundbreaking Theory of Networks](#) - Mark Buchanan

[Come Together](#) - Craig Hamilton

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