DISCUSSION NOTE

Gylany and Planetary Culture: A Personal Exploration

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The emerging planetary culture is viewed from an autobiographical perspective. The author discusses the importance of complex thought (Morin) and the notions of gylany and partnership (Eisler) to address the need to develop a heterogeneous, diverse context which supports creativity and mutually beneficial relations. Systems-theoretical and feminist approaches are brought to bear on the need to develop an ecology of creativity, which focuses not simply on individual genius but on the potential for creative collaboration. Ecological concerns are viewed in the context of our understanding of gender, creativity and progress.

KEYWORDS: complexity, creativity, gylany, partnership, planetary culture, systems theory, social creativity, social change.

The “planetarization” of our world points in two divergent, dialogical directions, captured by the photo of the Earth from space, and in the creation of worldwide “global villages” through the use of communication and transportation technologies: our increasing awareness of our world’s heterogeneity and complexity is coupled with an increasing awareness of its unity. Our future is not determined, and could range from a planetary MacDonaldization to an explosion of tribal warfare, from totalization to fragmentation. But there is also the possibility of moving beyond the dialectic of domination.
In *Origini di Storie*, Mauro Ceruti and Gianluca Bocchi (1993) present a narrative of the origin of our stories about ourselves and the world we inhabit. Darwin's revolution, they point out, is that organisms are their history. We co-create ourselves with our environment in what Morin (1994) calls auto-eco-organization, a recognition of the dialogic *unitas multiplex* of self and environment interacting over time. Our awareness of seemingly opposing trends calls for us now to trace our own roots, our own histories. We can at once pinpoint our own trajectory and location in the larger time and space of Earth's voyage, and recognize that we are indeed part of a larger whole, tracing the events of a path we have laid down in walking. We are creating a world that creates us.

Today, much of the popular "postmodern" emphasis on the *multiplex*, on heterogeneity, relativity, multiplicity, and the burgeoning "little narratives." (Lyouard, 1979, Rosenau, 1992) has thrown the baby of unity, of *unitas*, out with the bath water of homogeneity and metanarratives. But, as the tragic collapse of the former Yugoslavia has shown us, with the collapse of metanarratives, simple stories are reconstructed with a reductive, disjunctive thought (Morin, 1994), for purposes of domination. The little narratives know of only one way to interrelate, and explode in the ethnic cleansing of forced unity, *unitas simplex*, in a continuous oscillation between totalization and fragmentation. As I was to discover later, the concept of gylany (Eisler, 1987) offers an alternative way of relating, beyond domination, and expressing Morin's idea of *unitas multiplex*.

The Space of Knowledge

Everything that is said, is said by an observer, Maturana and Varela (1987) tell us, and every history, whether planetary or personal or both, is told by a storyteller. The observing system’s knowledge emerges in a certain time and a certain space, and here are my coordinates.

I was born in Holland. My father served in the Italian diplomatic corps, and married my Dutch mother in Portugal. When I was 6 months old we moved to Beirut—Beirut the multinational,
multicultural Paris of the Middle East. At age 4 I moved to Greece, and then age 11 to England, where I went to high school and eventually to the University of London. During this time, I was lucky enough to be able to spend my long summer and winter holidays with family in Holland or Italy, or Switzerland.

The issue of planetary culture is, perhaps naturally, therefore, one that is very close to my heart. The 20th century has offered me possibilities and circumstances, relatively common today, which even 100 years ago would have been unthinkable. I have never lived in Italy, the country that issued my passport, but I have lived on three continents, and experienced a right-wing dictatorship in Greece, market socialism in England, free-market capitalism in the USA, and communism in the People’s Republic of China. I now live in the United States of America, the land of individualism, but having lived in China, one of the countries that the West most associates with collectivism, I am aware of the vast differences in the way people conceptualize who and what we are. Profound cultural differences have always been a part of my life. The North/South split is almost built into me: the Dutch/Italian split has replayed itself historically in the English/Greek split too. The East/West split was not far behind.

When I was growing up, the first days away or back home after the holidays were always the strangest. It would typically take me three days to adjust to the new cultural reality. When, much later, I was to study the phenomenon of culture shock in graduate school, I was struck that almost all the research focused on ways of either avoiding culture shock altogether or minimizing its effects. Perhaps this can be traced to the fact that visitors to foreign countries have historically been warriors, merchants, and diplomats, with an understandable desire to avoid psychological disequilibrium. Academia has likewise entertained a somewhat avoidant relationship with disorder and disequilibrium, refusing until recently to acknowledge its potentially generative nature. Yet literature is replete with stories of personal transformation “on the road,” from Gautama the Buddha to Herman Hesse, from Alexandra David-Neel to Jack Kerouac. My own experience, and that of many of my friends and colleagues, indicated that culture shock and psychic disequilibrium created by an encounter with difference could lead
to fresh understandings about ourselves, our culture, and about the way we are shaped by our culture. We understand ourselves in relationship, and we become ourselves in relationship—but the question then becomes the kind of relationship. This is where, without knowing it, my search for what I later found in the concept of gylany began.

Identity and Identification

Postmodernists proclaim the death of the self and the "end of man" at the close of the 20th century, and similar claims are being made for the nation-state. Others argue that what is dying is the understanding of self and state as simple, closed systems, replaced by an appreciation of open, evolving, complex systems, changing over time, and in constant interaction with their environment in a process of auto-eco-organization, shaping, and being shaped by, their environment. But perhaps what is also dying is the old understanding of relationships limited by stereotypical ideas of "human nature."

Any search for a homogeneous, stable historical 'entity' seems to fall apart when we remember that there was a time when, defying popular stereotypes, no tomatoes could be found in Italy, no tea in England, and no potatoes in Ireland, Holland or Germany. And we can trace times when, as Bocchi and Ceruti (1994) and Morin (1987, 1995), have done, diverse interwoven cultural, ethnic, political fibers were weaving the complex web that is Europe, when, with Eissler (1987), we see them recede further and further into a past that radically challenges not only any kind of notions of ethnic purity, but the very foundations for the accepted social relations and organization. The historical complexity of evolving systems, whether selves or nation states, becomes apparent as we trace the polyphonic nature of the whole.

If humans become human in relationship, rather than being static essences, then our attitude towards others can take on a very different coloration. We can let go of the foundations of superiority or inferiority, and value the actions and events in history. If the story is not already written, but written in the living of it, the story can be
very different. We do not judge ourselves by how we comply with the absolute script, but by how we choose to write our own script with others.

Two fundamentally different systems outline themselves: one closed, with hard boundaries, static, simple, and yet fearfully determined to control and dominate its environment. This system would never accept the possibility of personal growth in the experience of culture shock. The other is open, complex, with permeable boundaries, flexible and in process, in a mutualistic relationship with its environment. This system would actively seek out opportunities to explore the destabilizing effects other cultures have on our sense of self...

Barron (1958, 1968, 1995) has developed the important concept of Ego-strength, which paradoxically suggests that the strong ego can be secure enough to allow itself to fall apart, strong enough to become vulnerable, closed enough to be open, developing and growing through an ongoing process of dialogue with the world, continuously interpreting and reinterpreting the world, actively courting disorder to destabilize the existing order so as to establish through that interaction a new form of organization... Dialogue and paradox seem to be at the heart of this creative process, an intertwining of dualities that might not be conceptually resolved, but enacted in the moment of choice. The encounter with other cultures can therefore be seen as a creative encounter, in which we create our experience as our cognitive maps are disorganized and reorganized—an opportunity for discarding stereotypes of what are and are not human possibilities.

The Time of Knowledge

Space shaped my knowledge of the world in a particular time. I was born in 1960, and grew up with Vietnam, the Kennedys, the Moon shots, the ecology movement, the first American TV shows in Europe (*Star Trek, Lassie, Combat, Bewitched, Lost in Space*), 1968, student revolts, the women’s movement, the English TV shows (*the Avengers, Danger Man, UFO*), Prague, the civil rights movement, and the Beatles providing an insistent and often subliminal background.
When a man walked on the moon I was 9. When my Grandmother was 9 there were no cars, and when she died, twenty years after the first moon landing, planetary exploration was already almost a distant memory. The drama of the simultaneous explorations of outer and inner space of the 60’s had given way to the political and economic challenges of the 80s.

The North/South split was paralleled by an East/West split: while ideas, technology, and the spirit of capitalism had streamed from West to East, ideas from the East were also flooding Europe and America, with Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other remarkable worldviews which at times appeared radically "other" to the supposedly bankrupt West... The spiritual hunger was paralleled by a political hunger. China and Vietnam exported their own brand of Communism, and the West also looked with trepidation at the developments in the Red Zone. The East was both nemesis and salvation.

Just as I was getting old enough to grapple with these questions, in the unusually hot London summer of 1976 the hippies made way for punk, and the Modern/Postmodern split appeared in my life. Peace, love, and understanding were replaced by Anarchy in the UK. The culture of my generation was profoundly influenced by this transition. The bright day-glo colors, flowers and toothpaste stripes of hippy clothing were replaced by 'basic black', and cynicism replaced the optimism of the 60s. In the late 70s and early 80s, I performed throughout Britain as a professional musician. I saw first-hand how my generation, which had been too young to fully experience or understand the 60s, turned cynical, growing up with fewer economic prospects, more blatant corruption, political unrest, and, above all, the greatest disparity between what could be and what is, precisely because it was living in the shadows of the dashed hopes of transformation and youth power of the 60s. For my generation, 1976 was really the moment when the boundless optimism and faith in the future of not just the 60s, but perhaps modernity itself, finally ended. Progress was not something to look forward to, but the very reason for the pollution, unemployment, alienation, and industrial wastelands we were seeing. The image of the future I had grown up with—the sanitized, sterilized technological worlds of Star Trek and 2001: A space odyssey—were beginning to make way for the
nightmarish worlds of haves and have-nots in *Blade Runner, Neuromancer, Mad Max*.

And yet... In 1976 at the height of the punk explosion the large record companies briefly lost their monopoly on successful recordings: My band, like many others, self-produced a recording on our own label. But the music we performed was not nihilist punk at all, but worldbeat, a confluence of different rhythms, styles, and influences from all over the world. Propelled into music by my early love of the Beatles I had started playing in rock bands, and become fascinated by how music expressed not simply form or emotion, but also social organization. It seemed to me that the classical symphony orchestra, with its hierarchical structure and fragmented redundancy of parts, paralleled industrial factory organization. The organization of an improvising group performing jazz or progressive rock had not be translated into industrial organization yet, but it struck me as having great potential for new models of organization which were somehow more democratic, capable of expressing a different relationship between order and disorder, a form of emergent interaction and collaborative creativity (Montuori, 1989, 1990; Purser & Montuori, 1994).

**Knowledge of Ignorance**

The fragmentation of contemporary knowledge is reflected in an educational system that is fragmented and disjointed. But despite an obsession with methodology, ostensibly for purposes of getting knowledge 'right', the fundamental premises and method of the social sciences remain largely unquestioned. In graduate school in the United States I found an unwillingness to consider cultural context, which I had already found in the 'new criticism' I had studied at the University of London, an unwillingness to consider relations, connections, wholes. Isolated variables, quantified actors, values and voting patterns were all measured effort to replicate the method of the natural sciences, while at the same time the relationship between the human/social/natural sciences was left unchallenged. In an effort to find simple order, the complexity of life was destroyed, and the knowledge
generated was often of little value to 'real life'. And the pristine image of the natural sciences the social sciences sought to replicate was ancient—corresponding to around the time when they had severed their relationship with philosophy, the abandoned mother of them all...

My interest in systems theory, which I discovered reading the works of Buckminster Fuller, Arthur Koestler, and then, in its most developed and ground-breaking form, with Ervin Laszlo, developed out of the conviction that reality does not divide itself up into neat disciplinary categories, and that fragmentation leads to conceptual mutilation. I did not understand how useful knowledge could be generated about U.S.—Soviet relations, for instance, while not taking into consideration cultural, historical, psychological, economic factors to complement the political dimension. Perhaps as a musician, my attraction to systems theory was obvious. After all, the holistic gestalt psychologists had shown that the notes in a melody make sense because of their organization, as a whole. The sound of a chord can be seen as an emergent property, and in a piece of music, a melodic figure sounds very different depending on the harmony one plays behind it—the context. Performing in a band, the importance of interaction was paramount, the music an emergent property of the organized interactions of the musicians. And yet all these crucial elements were exactly what I was told to eliminate from my inquiry as 'noise'...

**Gylanic Thought**

My encounter with Gylanic thought, in the work and person of Riane Eisler, provided me with a conceptual framework to integrate many of my concerns. Eisler’s rewriting of history shows its importance in shaping who we believe we are, and where we believe we can go.

The contingent nature of history and many of our most fundamental assumptions became even more apparent.

Exploring the concept of gylan in a period of intensive research left me with the realization that "the nature of man" studied in much psychology, and addressed in the political discussions of "rational
economic man" I had come across, were indeed discussions of the male of the species (cf. Elshain, 1981). My study of International Relations had led me to question the fundamental assumptions of human nature in political and social theories, in an attempt to ferret out the way political theorists and policy makers were conceiving of their subjects. My father, a scholar of Greek philosophy, was immersed in the work of Plato, and my reading of the Republic with him showed me the intimate interconnection between the "concept of man" and the concept of the state. I was intrigued to see that the histories of politics, anthropology, and psychology began to converge the further back one went into history, and slowly but surely the great players of this adventure converged in the field called philosophy. Plato, Aristotle, but also Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Mill, Hegel, Nietzsche were part of the same stream of inquiry, which broke apart into almost watertight compartments as disciplines successively split off from philosophy.

But the problem in this quest for disciplinary independence was an unwillingness to examine the historical roots of knowledge, the trajectory of knowledge in time and space, therefore leaving many assumptions unchallenged. Most working psychologists I asked did not feel there were political implications to the dominant "image of man" in psychology (Sampson, 1983). Most political scientists I asked felt there were no worthwhile psychological or cultural factors at play in the dominant "realpolitik" approach to politics and policy. These intertwined roots in the source of philosophy had formed the source of the now fragmented knowledge being generated in academia. And now the feminist critique argued that these discussions could not be anything but extremely partial, and indeed reflecting an almost pathological polarization and concomitant exaggeration of masculine and feminine traits both in humans themselves and in their endeavors.

Eisler (1987) differentiates between two fundamental forms of social organization: the dominator or androcratic and partnership or gylanic systems. The former is marked by a high degree of institutional violence, great disparity between genders, and a preponderance of hierarchical organizations. The latter is marked by little gender disparity, a low degree of institutional violence, and less hierarchical, or "heterarchical" organizations. The gylanic
principle here presents two fundamental templates for human organization and coexistence. It incorporates the critique of domination found in many different approaches, but also presents an alternative in the concept of partnership, and stresses the importance of gender equality in making that alternative possible.

Eisler’s concept of partnership articulated the world beyond the paradigm of domination, which is taken by so many as the one and true reality of human relations. Whereas much debate had focused on the nature and necessity of domination, few had outlined the alternative in such a clear manner. I recognized that the relationship between cultures—and persons—was largely defined in terms of domination. Furthermore, what was crucial to this perspective was its gender-holistic nature: to my North/South, East/West, Left/Right, and even Up/Down, Inner/Outer split, Eisler had added Male/Female. Human beings obviously come in two types, male and female, and almost all the academic discourse I had been exposed to (written by, and concerning, men) essentially ignored this.

The concept of gynacy suggested a fundamentally different way of articulating the polarities I had encountered. Rather than what Morin calls disjunctive thought, where we find the relationship of Domination as we see on top either North or South, either Man or Woman, East or West, a new way emerged which allowed for thinking about them together, dialogically, in partnership. The result is not necessarily a synthesis, but the ability to hold both points at the same time in a dialogical relationship, and the importance is continuing, rather than terminating, the dialogue, unlike our traditional forms of debate and discourse.

This powerful concept of partnership or gynacy brings together in one fell swoop many of the concerns developed in this paper. It forces a fundamental shift in our thinking which parallels Morin’s concern for a complex thought—because today partnership can only be created through complex thought, with the kind of thought that is not reductive, disjunctive, and unidimensional (Montuori & Conti, 1993; Morin, 1991, 1994). A whole other side of the coin I had been studying became apparent to me, as research stressed the tendency for women to be educated to think more holistically, more
contingently, more relationally, to focus on relationship-maintaining above goal-seeking—and at the same time, women were educated for submissiveness in social relations (Baker Miller, 1976; Chodorow, 1978; Code, 1991; Gilligan, 1982; Hare Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Salner, 1985, 1989).

Women and Creativity

Aware of my interest in creativity, Eiser asked me to look into women's creativity. My ensuing research opened a new world of inquiry for me. I remembered my Grandmother, a leading Dutch theater actress before her marriage to my Grandfather. After his death, I remember her going through an old shoe box full of photos and newspaper reviews from the first decade of this century, and her disappointment, expressed to me for the first time, at having to give up her career. I remembered my mother telling me she had wanted to study design, but had been prevented from doing so by my Grandfather, who felt this kind of education would expose her to the wrong sorts of people. I have ended up marrying a jazz singer, and now share my life with a very creative woman. My first question became, assuming that our present discourse and practices of creativity had developed in the context of the dominator system, what would a gender-holistic creativity look like, I wondered—one that did not just include women in the present discussion, but questioned that discussion's fundamental premises?

Germaine Greer's (1979) *The Obstacle Race*, among many other works, showed so clearly women that had been prevented from entering the arts and the sciences. Evelyn Fox Keller's (1985) biography of Nobel-prize winning biologist Barbara McClintock showed what many feminists came to believe was an alternative, feminine approach to doing science at the highest levels. But the absence of women in most historical lists of creative composers, architects, novelists, scientists surely could not mean that women had not been creative all this time?

Since the Renaissance and the rise of the concept of the artist, creativity had been confined to a number of select domains, none
of which women could freely participate in until very recently. And the attitude to those domains where women were applying themselves was quite ambiguous. Albert Einstein (1956, p.227) wrote that "one of the strongest motives that lead men to art and science is to escape from everyday life, with its painful crudity and hopeless dreariness." Perhaps Einstein was right. But my mother had stayed with me (like it or not, and I like to think she did), and made my everyday life as a child a joy. Was this not a creative act on her part? Had she not transcended "painful crudity and hopeless dreariness"? But then, was I her creative product? Or was there something else, something left out of typical understandings of creativity? My mother was performing the function typically assigned to women in a gender-polarized society: she was creating the supportive context for my existence. And the context she created for me was, as I look back on it, an extremely generative context, and an aspect of creativity that our Western understanding has typically ignored. She had transformed "everyday life," and filled it with a creative relationship.

Whereas the Taoists speak of creativity in the same breath as the 'ground of sympathy', with their view of inextricably connected, intertwined dualities (Chang, 1963), we in the West have focused on creator and creative product at the expense of ground of sympathy, what David Loye (1988) has called the feminine, nurturing matrix of creativity, its generative context, which historically has been up to women and minorities to provide. Living in the shadow of systems of domination, our discourse and practices of creativity have emerged mutilated, with creative individuals at times driven to madness by their isolation and separation from their environment (Montuori & Purser, 1995).

A crucial difference is the fundamentally trust-based nature of partnership systems, and the fear-based nature of dominator systems. The research of Erikson (1963), and others, has shown that children are more willing to take risks and explore their environment if they have a basic trust and confidence in themselves and their surroundings, generally obtained through positive initial relations with the mother or other caretaker. In other words, there is a dialogical relationship between trust and fear, security and risk. When there is basic trust, security can be threatened, risks taken,
and some degree of fear experienced. If there is no basic trust, then
the outside world and the self are perceived as fundamentally
threatening, and fear is a chronic state. If risks are taken and creative
enterprises engaged in, Barron's research indicates that they are
accompanied by a greater need for control and expression of
aggression.

Social Creativity

Explorations of collective creativity, can, I believe, assist in
developing a set of models for human possibilities, inasmuch
as they can complement the role models established by the
achievements of great individuals. In focusing almost exclusively on
the achievements of the individual, we have lost the ability to
recognize and reward the achievements of creative teams, groups,
and collectives. From designer labels to director's films, we fail to
recognize the triumph of collaboration, and the possibility for
human creative collaboration in which we transcend dichotomies of
part/whole, individual/collective, leader/follower, but also
equilibrium/disequilibrium, harmony/conflict, order/disorder. And
it is precisely in the area of human collaboration where the greatest
amount of creativity and partnership is required...

Studying the social dimensions of creativity requires paying
attention to context and interaction, rather than isolating single
variables, and also suggests the need for collaborative,
interdisciplinary research addressing social, political, economic, and
a host of other factors (Montuori & Purser, 1995). And
interdisciplinary work and creative collaboration is not rewarded in
the US university tenure system. Co-authored papers are looked
down upon as indicative of the inability of the authors to go it alone,
rather than as examples of the ability to collaborate, a striking
element of how the social context does not support social creativity.
This points to the fact that the issue does not just one of
individualism versus collectivism or communitarianism, but gylany
partnership versus domination and androcracy, and it is indeed
groups of women researchers who are taking the lead in
championing collaborative inquiry.
The Ecology of Creativity and the Creativity of Ecologies

Along with downplaying and indeed blocking the possibilities of collaborative, social creativity, a one-sided view of creativity has also, I suggest, led to the ravages of the unchecked creativity of 'progress', a paradoxically destructive creativity that has not recognized its ecological and social consequences because unable to recognize the role of the ground of sympathy.

The connection made by the dominator system between women and nature, both at the bottom of the culture/nature, man/woman polarities, has led to relationships of domination and exploitation in which no effort is made to the social and natural context from which creativity emerges. The gender polarization of this system has put women into a certain role which appears 'natural' for them, and involves relationship- and context-maintaining, primarily in the home. But this role is absent in those areas of policy-making where women are absent, and furthermore there is nothing at all that suggests it should 'naturally' be divided up on the basis of gender. As we break down the disjunctive relationship between man/woman, we can begin to explore a much vaster realm of personhood, and pay attention to a much larger ecology of creativity and ecology of action.

The disjunctive relationship between creativity and conservation, innovation and tradition, needs to be rethought as a dialogical relationship: Whereas presently there is an understanding of creativity that is captured in Picasso's statement that every act of creativity is also an act of destruction, we must expand that concept from a dyad to a triad, from creativity/destruction to creativity/destruction/conservation, recalling the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu. Creativity occurs in, and is made possible by, a context that is both social and ecological. Destroy that context and we destroy the possibility of creativity. Therefore, we must be able to conceptualize creative conservatism, creative ecologies and ecological creativity.

Planetary Knowledge

A planetary culture will require more from us than ever before. It will certainly force a radical reconceptualization of the very
foundations of thought, from a simple to a complex thought, from domination to partnership or gylany.

We need a knowledge capacity to deal with the _improvisus_, the uncertain, the aleatory, with the times when established ways of thinking and doing fail, and we are left to our own devices. We need to develop knowledge of our own freedom, our own creativity, knowledge of our capacity co-create our world and take responsibility for our participation in our future. But such a knowledge has, almost by definition, to be of a different kind than the knowledge of certainty, of the already known, based on solid foundations. Knowledge shifts from a pure abstract realm of order to the continuous, embodied interplay between order and disorder, interaction and organization. From a discovered, static, never-changing perfection to a co-created, flowing, ever-changing contingency.

Buddhists speak of Prajna and Karuna, Wisdom and Compassion as our two guiding lights, and the "fall into time" from the celestial order to the world of Darwin and history (Bocchi & Ceruti, 1993) calls not for a bloodthirsty survival of the fittest, but for an ever greater awareness and creation of partnership, since, as Bateson (1972) reminds us, the unit of survival is the organism in its environment. If our world is made in our living of it, if we know that our history creates us as we create our history, then the spirit of gylany can invite us to collaborate to create worlds together, to express our solidarity as we learn together how to live together. The search for wisdom in complex thought needs to be augmented by the compassion of trust-creation, since trust is an emergent property of a quality of interaction, rather than an essence or intrinsic nature of this world...

The challenge of the observing system in a planetary culture is to recognize his or her own fundamental participation in the evolutionary process. And once we are not bystanders anymore, observing observed systems, but participants, observing observing systems, and once we cannot call upon timeless and eternal laws and regulations, what we can do is participate as best we can, in an attempt not to enact the rules, embody in our actions the spirit of partnership and complexity. My exploration of gylany and planetary culture continues—indeed has just begun. The challenge for me is not only to understand and develop the conceptual frameworks, but
to find ways of drawing conclusion and application from them and expressing them in everyday life. This, I believe, is the real challenge of gynacy.

References


