

Unique Selves in a Self-Organizing Universe

From an unedited draft of the forthcoming book
*Towards a New Politics Of Evolutionary Love: Unique Self Symphonies, The
Democratization of Enlightenment, and Other Social Miracles*

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The core structural principle from Integral Meta-Theory involved in the formation of a Unique Self Symphony is the scientific principle of self-organization. The idea of self-organization is according to many the single most important scientific idea to emerge in the last sixty years. It exists at every level of reality and across all four quadrants.¹ While many scientific accounts focus only on self-organization in systems and structures in biology or cybernetics (i.e., Lower-Right reductionism), there is a whole history of work in psychology and social theory dedicated to modeling how minds and cultures are complex dynamical systems, that evolve and self-organize in remarkable ways.²

Multiple scientific fields, when held in an Integral embrace, tell us that self-organization is a basic principle of reality at all levels. Most forms of evolutionary

¹ See, Wilber, K. Sex, Ecology, Spirituality; and footnote 43 above.

² This tradition goes back to the ancients, such as Plato, who conceived the city-state as analogous to an organism and the personality as analogous to both. This ancient seed bloomed into the totalizing evolutionary spiritualism of Hegel and then into the social sciences via Marx, Herbert Spenser, Wilhelm Wundt, and James Mark Baldwin. More recently, inspired by Jean Piaget there are a group of Neo-Piagetians, led by Kurt Fischer, who have shown that models of self-organization can be used to explain stage growth and vertical development—the dynamics of Growing-Up are non-linear. In the social sciences there is Niklas Luhmann, who was inspired by the autopoietic theories of Francisco Varela, to work modeling how social systems should be understood as self-organizing, self-replicating, and evolving. See Habermas's critique of Luhmann, which makes the essential point that Luhmann lacks an understanding or *interiors*. This debate between Habermas and Luhmann is perhaps the best introduction to the state of the social sciences understanding of social systems and culture in terms of self-organization theory.

emergence are a function of this ubiquitous tendency of all life and matter toward self-organization. This leads to the idea of an inherently creative cosmos, always evolving and organizing at higher and higher levels. Throughout the evolution of the world it appears that self-organization is often catalyzed via the leveraging of uniqueness. When you look at the emergence of complex processes in nature that display remarkable forms of self-organization, such as an ecosystem like swamp or rainforest, they are always complex symbiotic systems in which there are an endless number of unique niches.

This is why one of the core ideas behind the new politics of outrageous love is *enabling self-organization at the level of human culture*. So we must ask, what enables self-organization at the level of human culture? The answer is clear and in keeping with both the best of what we know about evolutionary theory and the best of our ideas for political and personal Enlightenment: *the catalyst of self-organization in human socio-cultural systems is the Unique Self*. Paradoxically, this means that the “shape” every human needs to assume in order to contribute to the creation of a healthy social organism is unique. Strange as it may sound, a just and healthy society needs to “socially engineer” for uniqueness, especially the institutions that shape human personalities and self-understandings: schools, news media, entertainment industries, computer technologies industries, etc. The whole social system would be like an incubator for uniqueness.³

³ Of course, this does not entail creating a society overrun with narcissists, quite the contrary. Recall the paradox of sameness and uniqueness. A just and healthy society would also instill much that was that was universal, such as promoting schools where *everyone* learns to read and do basic math. Likewise, everyone would be beholden to a system of laws, drafted through deliberative democratic procedures, which institutes a fair and safe system of basic social structures. Nevertheless, these social structures would be arranged to ensure *everyone* the freedom to uniquely navigate the space of social possibilities and to uniquely express the common heritages and cultures. This is unlike the “standardized differentiation” of post-modernism, where the over-emphasis on shallow differences acts to quell and stifle

The new politics of outrageous love aims to create Integral social structures that liberate uniqueness and thrive on leveraging it. This means overthrowing many of today's dominant social structures, which limit uniqueness and colonize it for use in status quo enterprises. The new politics of outrageous love places Integral Meta-theory at the center of theorizing about social futures, and maps out "concrete utopian" projects of social reform.⁴ When social systems are well conceived, and when cultures support identity experimentation and self-expression, Unique Selves emerge, co-evolve, and self-organize into systems of trust and interdependence. Of course, Unique Self Symphonies are always an "all quadrat affair"—they are social and physical events uniquely located in time and space, with interior and exterior dimensions, and they evolve over time. Unique Collaboratives and Cooperatives are chartered in order to pioneer new forms of problem-focused praxis. Each Unique Collaborative and Cooperative is composed of Unique Selves, orchestrating their gifts into a symphony of care and compassionate action. The Unique Collaboratives and Cooperatives themselves are orchestrated in regional, meta-regional, and ultimately global, federated networks of partnership and respect.

the complexity of authentic uniqueness. Legal systems and organizational structures can be created with thousands of differences and categories (think of how many different ways there are to file your taxes), and yet these can still be used to wrongly categorize and misleadingly classify (as in when huge companies hide money that should be taxed using simple loop-holes). Below we further discuss the organizational forms, legal codes, and economic practices (Lower-Right quadrant elements) that enable Unique Collaboratives and Cooperatives.

⁴ The "concrete utopian" political project is an important idea in ethics and philosophy. It consists of articulating preferable futures for society, in a principled and realistic way, painting a picture of the practices and personalities that are attainable. Giving a glimpse of easily imaginable *utopian options*, visible from the present. These then serve to guide praxis for individuals and groups, who act not in light of some ideal or abstract code, but in light of an actual possible and preferable future. See: Rawls, J. *A Theory of Justice*; Bhaskar, R. *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*; Benhabib, S. *Critique, Norm, Utopia*.

The use of the terms *collaborative* and *cooperative* is intentional, that is, as opposed to the terms *organization* or *corporation*. A Unique Self Symphony can emerge at any level of social interaction, including between just two people. As larger projects are undertaken and larger gifts are being offered more complex structures in the Lower-Left and Lower-Right quadrants emerge by necessity, including technologies for communication, economies and metrics for accountability, and space for collective actions and gatherings. Corporations as they are currently run are often not good vessels for Unique Self Symphonies.⁵ When they do emerge they are often on the small islands of freedom where individuals can express unique gifts; islands of freedom within what is an ocean of anti-uniqueness. This is the teacher whose classroom is a Unique Self Symphony, even as the larger school system is not, or the manager who treats everyone in a meeting with dignity, even as the larger organization does not. This is why so often Unique Self Symphonies emerge in spontaneous and unstructured situations, often most notably when structures break down, such as in an emergency when a group

⁵ The details of what Integral organizational governance structures look like are clearly beyond the scope of this book. However, it is worth mentioning several interesting models that have recently emerged, including most recently, Laloux, F. *Reinventing Organizations*, where Integral Meta-Theory is applied to organizational design and governance. See also the important work stemming from the great sociologist Frank Lester Ward and the peace worker Kees Boeke, which today goes under the heading of Sociocracy, see: Buck, J. & Villines, S. *We The People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy*. For an approach based on both Sociocracy and Integral Meta-Theory, see: Robertson, B. *Holacracy: The Management System for a Rapidly Changing World*. Much of this work can be largely classed under the broad banner of *Conscious Capitalism*; see the book by John Mackey with that name. Few other variants of participatory democracy in organizational governance emerged following de-unionization in America and the UK in the 1980s. However, there has been a continued presence of alternatives to “corporations as usual” in some parts of Europe, as exemplified by the largest worker cooperative in the world, Mondragon in Spain. Obviously, the future of corporate forms must change, and the solutions do not lie in the private or non-profit sectors, which are just as corrupt and mismanaged as most business is. The solution lies in fundamentally re-thinking the nature of large-scale human enterprises, including labor contracts, skill definitions and hierarchies, divisions of labor, distribution of profits, control over re-investment of surplus value. We will further discuss the kinds of “social miracles” involved with this fundamental a redesign of human work and life.

almost miraculously 'gels' and saves the day. We need humanity to miraculously 'gel' in the face of the planetary emergency and urgency of the second shock.

This is a very different social vision from the totalitarian nightmares that haunt so much thinking about possible responses to the second shock. As global society is continually shaken by a deepening awareness of humanity's precarious position, especially relative to the biosphere, then humanity as a whole will begin thinking in evolutionary and survival terms. From "eco-fascism" to "geo-engineering," the immanent emergency of securing the survival of the species can easily justify subsuming and effacing the individual according to the needs of group survival. This is the shadow side of the techno-economic optimists discussed in Chapter 1. Also recall the discussion of Eugenics above, and that the worst forms of totalitarianism and fascism were based on evolutionary ideologies of race and national superiority and survival. When systems begin to lose legitimacy and control seems to slip away, one response is to simply grasp harder in an attempt to regain control. This is exactly why authoritarian responses to social transformation remain such a common and dangerous possible pathway for cultural evolution in a time of crisis.

Note also that the vision of a Symphony of Unique Collaboratives and Cooperatives is different from the various forms of alienated and reactionary politics, which are focused on separation and self-sufficiency. According to this popular Western ideology the abstract individual is responsible for their own future in a world of others doing the same. The world system as a whole is left to careen out of control as each individual retreats into self preservation, looking after only their own local economy of family, friends, and place. The dystopian vision here is of a culture of vast inequalities and little sharing, and thus glaring differential impacts of the second shock. The chosen

few build gated arks to weather the flood, while the vast majority is enslaved by the industries used to maintain the lifestyles of the chosen.

Will the emergency of the second shock have us clamping down in an Orwellian perversion of democracy, or fragmenting and re-tribalizing in a scramble for self-preservation? Neither, we argue. In the structure-less and story-less time that is an emergency, there are opportunities for self-organization to be set free as uniqueness flourishes. Unique Self Symphonies emerge in the tension between autonomy and communion, where the individual and the group inter-animate. It is based on a shared recognition of interdependence and a mutual understanding that there are no externalities.

The co-evolutionary dynamic between the individual and the group is the key distinction between Unique Self Symphonies and other configurations of social life. In a Unique Self Symphony the uniqueness of the collective and the uniqueness of the individuals within it are mutually reinforcing. Individuals are integrated into the collective precisely because it embraces and utilizes their uniqueness. Such a collective promotes and supports deepening the uniqueness of its members, because the collective thrives on uniqueness. This is unlike many organizations, which can only be joined by sacrificing uniqueness. Often individuals are simply used to fill roles that could be filled by almost anyone. In fact, this is one characteristic of modern workplaces in general, where divisions of labor have resulted in jobs that are increasingly de-skilled, automated, and indifferent to the personality and capacities (i.e. the uniqueness) of individuals.⁶

⁶ It is often argued that the reason for “standardization” in divisions of labor is because it increases efficiency and productivity: the assembly line or factory farm is simply faster and more profitable than artisan commodity production or small farms. In fact, that is only half the story, and focused mostly on the Lower-Right quadrant (it is also simply not true, but that is another issue). Standardization of jobs and worker practices is in large part a form of social control. It renders all workers replaceable by eliminating uniqueness from what they do. The person in a standardized job has little control or recourse and can be

Unfortunately, this is how many of our institutions work today, from schools and hospitals to factories and farms. A standardized procedure is used to deal with a unique situation; the institution “works” because it colonizes uniqueness, displaces it, or simply ignores it. A spontaneous eruption of uniqueness actuality disrupts systems like these, which are tightly coupled, and sensitive to any deviation from the ascribed standardized roles and procedures. Order is achieved through the suppression of uniqueness, from the top-down.

It might seem that all this has been changing with the increasingly complex and stratified divisions of labor that have emerged in post-modern societies. Indeed, there have been important changes in the structure of organizations, especially in the wake of computer technologies, and the various high-tech start-up bubbles. However, it should be remembered that factories and other forms of large-scale, standardized, and low-skill work still dominate the global labor system, even if the West has been rapidly de-industrialized. Moreover, in the post-industrial economy, populated by service industries and “knowledge economies,” there are new forms of standardization emerging to organize the delivery of services and the circulation of ideas and culture. Consider the sheer paperwork necessary to assure the standardized delivery of medical treatment or

easily disciplined because they can be easily replaced, and they know it. To clarify, imagine an organization in which events transpire so that the entire business hinges on the work of a single man, Garnet Smith. Not someone like him, who took the same training classes, but *him*. Garnet’s uniqueness makes him literally irreplaceable, because he plays a role that *only* he can play. Imagine the bargaining power he would have when negotiating for his salary or the conditions under which he performs his work. An organization that needs your uniqueness must listen to you and respect you. An organization with truly unique roles must empower its employees because they are no longer expendable and replaceable “parts.” This is why the new politics of outrageous love entails fundamental alterations in the nature of most labor contracts, including not only profit sharing that establishes basic income equalities, but also a radical democratization of decisions about collective policy and surplus capital reinvestment. We discuss these implications further below.

psychotherapy, not to mention the vast sea of service workers in the food and entertainment industries, who dish up standardized fare for mass consumption.

The new high-tech jobs, lauded for their uniqueness and freedom, are perched atop a pyramid of standardization, and if all goes according to status quo planning, they will be routinized and simplified, ideally to the point of being automated. Business as usual requires breaking the monopoly of the Unique Gift, which if left intact radically empowers the individual vis-à-vis the organization. It makes sense, in a very basic way, that if you are simply trying to insure the continuation of any organization, you must set it up so that the loss of any single person does not kill the whole venture. But this basic insight alone does not justify the overwhelmingly standardized nature of the world market for skills and labor. Industrial progress has almost always been based on taking what was once a unique process, such as a single small team of men building a car, and distilling out of it some standardized procedure, such as an assembly line. This is why the unprecedented and high-paying jobs of today are set to become the routinized standardized jobs of tomorrow. Even computer programming and many aspects of graphic and website design have turned into a new kind of de-skilled and expendable “grunt work.” Breakthroughs that were the spontaneous work of one or two path breaking individuals are re-packaged and brought to mass-markets by thousands of individuals following standardized procedures. There is a growing and increasingly disenfranchised “no collar” labor force caught up in the volatile dynamics tech-industry growth.

All of this is just to say that business as usual may tolerate or colonize uniqueness, but it will never truly thrive on it until more radical changes are made to the very structure of what it means to be employed and earn a living. But this is ahead of the story. The Unique Self Symphony is not business as usual. It is compelling but non

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coercive; it is organized and efficient, but not calcified and mechanical; it is democratic in the profoundest sense of giving voice to everyone, without being relativist or anti-hierarchical. It is humanity's expression of the tendency of the universe toward self-organization and self-transcendence.