Embracing an ecological worldview and cosmopolitan localism for sustainable transitions toward more equitable futures

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Abstract: This paper introduces three key strategies for transitioning 21st-century societies towards more sustainable, equitable, and desirable long-term futures. Firstly, it emphasizes the necessity of intentionally shifting from a mechanistic worldview to a more ecological perspective. Secondly, it advocates for addressing wicked problems as a strategy for sustainability transitions, drawing upon the Transition Design approach. Finally, it proposes Cosmopolitan Localism as a visionary concept that fosters new patterns of living grounded in a holistic worldview. Cosmopolitan Localism encourages symbiotic relationships between communities and the natural world with a global awareness and exchange of knowledge and skillsets. By embracing these strategies, societies can navigate the complexities of contemporary challenges and cultivate resilient communities in harmony with the environment.

Keywords: Cosmopolitan Localism - Ecological Worldview - Sustainable Transitions - Equitable Futures - Transition Design

[Resúmenes en castellano y en portugués en la página 37]

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Introduction

In the face of the many wicked systems problems confronting 21st-century societies, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality, there is an urgent need to reevaluate prevailing worldviews and approaches to envisioning and designing more sustainable, equitable, and desirable futures (Capra, 1984; Tarnas, 1993; Boehnert, 2018). This paper argues that intentionally shifting to an ecological worldview is crucial not only for navigating these transitions effectively but also for addressing wicked problems. An ecological worldview, characterized by principles of interconnectedness, holism, sustainability, and stewardship, provides a foundational framework for understanding the complex interdependencies between human societies and the natural world (Capra & Luisi, 2014). Drawing upon insights from transition design, ecology, systems theory, anthropology and social and political philosophy, this paper demonstrates how an ecological worldview offers valuable guidance in designing for transitions toward more sustainable and equitable futures.

This paper also proposes that Cosmopolitan Localism, the theory and practice of interregional and planet-wide networking between place-based communities (Kossoff, 2019, p. 52), is a vision for sustainability transitions (Ceschin & Gaziulusoy, 2020, pp. 124-140) that represents an embodiment of an ecological worldview. Cosmopolitan localism emphasizes the importance of engaging with planetary issues and simultaneously fostering vibrant, resilient local communities (Kossoff, 2019; Manzini, 2011; Sachs, 1999). By promoting a balance between global awareness and local action, Cosmopolitan Localism advocates for the empowerment of communities to address their unique challenges while also recognizing their interconnectedness with broader social and ecological systems and serves as a guiding vision for transitioning towards more sustainable, equitable, and desirable futures. This paper contends that embracing an ecological worldview and adopting Cosmopolitan Localism as a guiding vision is essential to addressing the wicked systems problems confronting 21st-century societies and developing thriving, resilient communities in an increasingly interconnected world.

Two competing worldviews: The Mechanistic and the Ecological (holistic)

Two contrasting worldviews have profoundly influenced human perspectives on the natural and social world: the mechanistic and the ecological (holistic). The mechanistic worldview, which gained prominence during the 17th-century scientific revolution, is characterized by reductionist thinking and the perception of nature as a machine governed by deterministic laws (Berman, 1981; Merchant, 1990). From a reductionist perspective, human and more-than-human phenomena can be understood by being broken down into their smallest components, allowing them to be controlled, predicted and manipulated. Conversely, indigenous and pre-industrial societies across the planet have embraced ecological worldviews rooted in interconnectedness, reciprocity, and harmonious relationships with nature (Watson, 2020; Nelson & Shilling, 2018). Indigenous peoples perceived humans as

integral parts of ecosystems, acknowledging their responsibilities to steward and protect the environment rather than exploit it.

The ascendancy of the mechanistic worldview, particularly in the West, has been propelled by historical forces such as industrialization, capitalism, and colonialism (Merchant, 1990; Shiva & Mies, 2014). These societal shifts prioritized centralized control, efficiency, productivity, and profit maximization, often at the expense of ecological and social sustainability. Consequently, contemporary Western societies have become increasingly rationalized, atomized, and bureaucratized, resembling mechanistic systems in both their organization and function (Mumford, 1974).

The mechanistic worldview's reductionist approach has contributed to the problems mentioned above and many more. Climate change, biodiversity loss, social inequality, and public health crises are all manifestations of systemic dysfunction exacerbated by this worldview. For instance, the industrialization of agriculture aimed at increasing productivity has resulted in monoculture farming, soil depletion, and the extensive use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, leading to environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity. This example illustrates the way in which wicked problems are interconnected and interdependent at multiple levels of scale; they are planetary in scope yet always manifest in place and culture-specific ways (Kossoff & Irwin. 2022; Irwin & Kossoff, 2024).

The mechanistic worldview's emphasis on decontextualized, reductionist knowledge has also led to the marginalization of traditional ecological knowledge and place-based practices (Watson, 2020). The indigenous wisdom which has enabled communities to live sustainably in place for generations through sustainable resource management, has been disregarded in favor of technocratic solutions. This disregard for indigenous perspectives has further exacerbated ecological crises and eroded cultural diversity (Maffi, 2001).

The influence of the mechanistic worldview is embodied in the design and construction of the built environment, shaping urban planning, architecture, and infrastructure. This approach usually prioritizes efficiency, profit, and functionality over ecological sustainability, cultural heritage, and social well-being. As a result, urbanization and infrastructure development have led to habitat destruction, fragmentation of ecosystems, and displacement of communities, exacerbating environmental degradation and social inequality (Jacobs, 1992; Scott, 2020).

Wicked problem resolution as a strategy for sustainability transitions

The concept of wicked problems, first articulated by planners Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber in the mid-twentieth century (Rittel & Webber, 1973), refers to complex systems problems with unique and ever-changing characteristics that defy single, straightforward solutions. This is because of their ever-evolving nature, the fact that they straddle organizational and disciplinary boundaries, their connection to other wicked problems, and their multiple stakeholder groups with conflicting interests and values. Rittel and Webber contrasted wicked problems with those they termed "tame" or well-defined, which lend themselves to conventional problem-solving methods oriented toward the formulation

of a single solution. In contrast, wicked problems are characterized by high levels of complexity and the difficulty (if not the impossibility) of reaching a clear, shared problem definition that can lead to potential solutions (Irwin & Kossoff, 2021; Kossoff & Irwin, 2022).

- *Mechanistic Worldview and Wicked Problems*

Traditional problem-solving approaches, shaped by mechanistic thinking, typically rely on de-contextualized problem frames and linear cause-and-effect processes aimed at swiftly realizing predictable and profitable solutions. They do this by framing problems within small problem frames oriented toward single solutions. Such approaches are not equipped to address systemic, wicked problems (Irwin, 2011). In contrast, the Transition Design approach argues that wicked problems must be framed within radically large, spatio-temporal contexts that include the past (how the problem evolved over multiple decades), the present (how the problem is manifesting in the present and who it affects and how) and the future (what stakeholders want to transition toward during problem resolution). This calls for developing new tools for mapping the systems dynamics within wicked problems (comprising both social and material interactions) and their broader systemic contexts (socio-technical-economic systems embedded within the natural world). This mapping enables a deeper understanding of the complexities involved, facilitating the formulation of systemic interventions aimed at resolving these issues.

Wicked problems exhibit multi-scalar, multi-causal, and interdependent characteristics. Issues such as crime, political and social polarization, forced migration, poverty, homelessness, and climate change manifest at various levels of scale and have multiple root causes. These problems are interconnected at the levels of the household, neighborhood, the city, the region, the nation, and the planet (Kossoff. 2011; Kossoff, 2019). For example, homelessness in a particular urban area can be linked directly to national or global factors such as the 2008 financial crisis, illustrating the intricate web of interdependencies up and down systems levels that contribute to wicked problems.

Wicked problems are systems in their own right, are comprised of complex social dynamics, and display self-organizing and emergent behaviors, which causes them to respond unpredictably to perturbations and disruptions (solutions) from their external environment. (Kossoff & Irwin, 2022). For example, solutions that are implemented to address homelessness often lead to emergent behaviors, such as the formation of improvised settlements by homeless populations, which in turn give rise to new sets of challenges related to public health and safety. The problem, in other words, responds to any solution and evolves in ways that are self-determined and highly unpredictable.

- *Stakeholder Dynamics and Feedback Loops*

The unpredictability of wicked problems is largely due to the multiple stakeholder groups with conflicting agendas, values, and concerns, which further complicate resolution efforts. Stakeholder groups, both human and non-human, often lack a shared understanding of the problem and hold divergent views on potential solutions (Irwin, 2019). These differences stem from differences in socio-economic-political status, beliefs, values, assumptions, and needs, hindering cohesive problem-solving approaches.

Wicked problems are also governed by positive and negative feedback loops, which can either amplify changes or create barriers to them (Kossoff & Irwin, 2019). Positive feedback loops, often exacerbating wicked problems, rapidly amplify changes within the system, leading to instability and chaos. Conversely, negative feedback loops tend to stabilize the system, making it resistant to change (thwarting solutions). Identifying and addressing these feedback loops is crucial in effectively resolving wicked problems.

- ***Wicked problems straddle disciplinary boundaries and require Transdisciplinary Collaboration***

Wicked problems transcend institutional, disciplinary, and sectoral boundaries, posing challenges to traditional, expert-led problem-solving approaches that operate within disciplinary silos. Addressing these issues requires larger problem frames and radical, transdisciplinary collaboration across various domains of expertise. By transcending these boundaries through radical, transdisciplinary collaboration, practitioners in a co-design process with stakeholders can develop holistic, systemic solutions that acknowledge the complexity and interconnectedness inherent in wicked problems.

Transition Design: An approach for addressing complex, wicked problems

Transition Design is a transdisciplinary approach for addressing the myriad ‹wicked› problems facing 21st-century societies by framing problems within radically large contexts and understanding the complex dynamics among the stakeholder groups connected to and affected by them. Transition Design argues that addressing these problems requires new knowledge and skill sets and that wicked problem resolution is a strategy for catalyzing positive, systems-level change and societal transitions toward more sustainable, equitable, and desirable long-term futures (Irwin & Kossoff, 2021a; Kossoff & Irwin, 2022; Irwin & Kossoff, 2024).

The Transition Design approach brings together two prevailing global memes: the recognition that entire societies must transition toward more desirable futures and the understanding that these transitions necessitate intentional, systems-level change (Speth and Courier, 2021). Evidence of these memes can be seen in the proliferation of transition-related initiatives worldwide and the increasing focus on tools and knowledge sets aimed at understanding complex systems and systems problems.

In contrast to traditional problem-solving approaches that can be characterized by 'a single solution to a single problem' mentality, Transition Design advocates visually mapping systems problems in order to develop systems solutions aimed at resolving them. This is done through an approach resembling acupuncture, in which 'ecologies of systems interventions' (solution clusters connected in ways that amplify and scaffold each other) are developed in an ongoing cycle of problem mapping, future visioning, and system solutioning. This cycle (which may extend over multiple years or even decades) aims to seed and catalyze positive, systems-level change and jumpstart societal transitions toward more sustainable long-term futures (Irwin & Kossoff, 2024).

Two key principles of the approach are:

- **Wicked problems are almost always connected to seemingly ‹simple› problems:** Transition Design argues that many everyday problems are actually *symptoms* of larger, wicked problems at higher levels of scale. These wicked problems are, in turn, connected to multiple *other* wicked problems that form problem clusters that extend across multiple system levels. Addressing higher-level wicked problems can have a cascading effect, simultaneously resolving multiple lower-level problems whose connections were invisible. This is a key objective of the Transition Design approach: in addressing a wicked problem, the positive effects ripple throughout the larger context (the socio-technical system).

- **Framing wicked problems within large spatio-temporal contexts:** Transition Design argues that wicked problems take decades or longer to become wicked and will require similarly extensive timelines for resolution. Therefore, wicked problems must be framed within radically large spatio-temporal contexts that include the past, present, and future. This expansive perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how these problems developed and a clearer vision of what stakeholders want to transition toward. This, in turn, facilitates more effective problem-solving strategies.

Transition Design not only aims to address wicked problems and catalyze systemic change but also endeavors to develop more sustainable, equitable, and desirable visions of long-term futures. These visions call for new patterns of everyday life informed by place-based knowledge and a planetary exchange of information and knowledge. Transition Design recognizes the importance of integrating local wisdom and context-specific approaches into the design of future systems, acknowledging that solutions must be tailored to different regions› unique social, cultural, and ecological dynamics. Simultaneously, it emphasizes the need for a planetary exchange of information and knowledge to foster collaboration, innovation, and learning across diverse contexts, ultimately contributing to the development of more inclusive and adaptive societies capable of navigating complex challenges in the 21st century.

Cosmopolitan Localism: New patterns of living in a sustainable, equitable world

Cosmopolitan Localism represents a multifaceted approach to addressing many of the planetary wicked problems that manifest in place and culture specific ways. It focuses on the recovery of the richness and diversity of local communities symbiotically networked with one another at multiple levels of scale, from the local to the planetary (Kossoff, 2019; Manzini, 2011; Sachs, 1999). At its core, this framework embodies several key characteristics that distinguish it as a transformative paradigm for sustainability and social justice.

1. Cosmopolitan Localism prioritizes the cultivation of resilient and self-sustaining local communities. It recognizes that vibrant communities are built on the foundation of strong social ties, cultural heritage, and shared values, and advocates local autonomy and governance structures (De Young and Princen, 2012; Norberg-Hodge, 2016).

2. Cosmopolitan Localism is a vision of decentralized communities networked at multiple levels of scale (the household, the neighborhood, the city, the region, and the planet) to shape their own destinies and respond effectively to challenges that arise. It emphasizes the need for communities to share resources, knowledge, and skills and collaborate in addressing wicked problems and protecting the planet's life support systems (Kossoff, 2011; Bookchin, 2015; Kossoff, 2019).

3. Cosmopolitan Localism emphasizes the importance of ecological sustainability and stewardship. It recognizes that human well-being is intricately linked to the health of the natural world and seeks to promote place and ecosystem-based interventions that connect local well-being to the well-being of the planet. This includes embracing interventions such as regenerative agriculture and circular economies that address local and regional needs and the rewilding and protection of local, regional, and planetary biodiversity (Hopkins, 2011; Jepson & Blythe, 2022).

4. Cosmopolitan Localism connects the local and the planetary at different levels of scale. It therefore values inclusivity and diversity, recognizing that social and cultural richness comes from embracing different perspectives, cultures, and ways of life. It celebrates the unique identities and contributions of each community while also fostering connections and dialogue across diverse groups and cultures. Cosmopolitan Localism seeks to build bridges between people from different backgrounds and create a more inclusive society by promoting solidarity and mutual respect (Delanty, 2009).

5. Cosmopolitan Localism embraces the principles of social justice and equity, striving to address systemic inequalities and injustices at both the local and planetary levels. It advocates for fair distribution of resources, access to essential services, and opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making processes. By centering the needs and voices of marginalized communities, Cosmopolitan Localism seeks to create a more just and equitable world for all (Speth and Courier, 2021).

6. Cosmopolitan Localism is rooted in principles of self-organization, emergence, and interdependence across multiple levels of scale, reflecting an ecological worldview that celebrates the intricate connections between all living beings and ecosystems. It acknowledges the inherent complexity of natural systems and the spontaneous emergence of order and resilience that arises from interactions between diverse elements. It also recognizes that place-based communities, like ecosystems, are self-organizing entities capable of adapting and evolving in response to changing circumstances. It fosters collaborative relationships among diverse stakeholders, enabling the co-creation of contextually relevant and resilient solutions (Lent,2021).

7. The Cosmopolitan Localist approach not only empowers communities to address local challenges but also contributes to broader systemic transformations that promote sustainability, equity, and well-being at both local and planetary scales. In practice, Cosmopolitan Localism offers a holistic and dynamic framework and involves a range of initiatives and actions aimed at fostering sustainable, resilient, and inclusive communities.

This may include supporting local businesses and cooperatives, revitalizing cultural traditions and practices, promoting alternative models of governance, collectively sharing and managing key resources, and advocating for policies that prioritize social and ecological well-being. Through collaborative efforts at the grassroots, regional, and planetary levels, Cosmopolitan Localism offers a transformative vision for the future—one that honors the interconnectedness of all living beings and systems while nurturing thriving, vibrant communities (Kossoff, 2019). Most importantly, as a vision for transition, the principles of Cosmopolitan Localism can inform the 'ecologies of systems interventions' advocated by the Transition Design approach (Irwin & Kossoff, 2021c).

Conclusion: The Need for a Holistic Paradigm Shift/Systems Solutions

In conclusion, addressing the complex challenges of our time often referred to as wicked problems, necessitates a transition toward new, more sustainable patterns of living embodied by Cosmopolitan Localism. This transition requires a fundamental shift in our worldviews, moving towards more ecological and holistic perspectives that recognize the interconnectedness of all living beings and systems. Embracing this paradigm shift opens the door to new, systemic approaches to problem-solving, such as those advocated by Transition Design.

Transition Design encourages the formulation of ecologies of systems interventions; solution clusters that are interconnected in ways that amplify and scaffold each other and that are situated at multiple levels of scale. To develop these solutions, we must ask ourselves a series of critical, practical questions based on the principles discussed in this text:

1. *How can we facilitate the emergence of locally driven solutions that honor each community's cultural, social, and ecological diversity while also fostering connections and collaborations across different localities?*

2. *What mechanisms can be implemented to promote knowledge sharing and capacity building between local communities, enabling them to learn from each other's experiences and best practices?*

3. *In what ways can we integrate principles of ecological sustainability and resilience into local governance structures and decision-making processes, ensuring that actions taken at the local level contribute to broader planetary efforts towards sustainability?*

4. *How can we design policies and initiatives that address the root causes of systemic inequalities and injustices while also promoting social cohesion and inclusivity within and between communities?*

5. *What role can technology and innovation play in supporting local initiatives and enhancing connectivity between communities while also respecting and preserving local traditions and knowledge systems?*

6. *How can education and awareness-raising efforts be tailored to local communities' specific needs and contexts, empowering individuals to become active participants in shaping their futures?*

7. *What strategies can be employed to re-imagine urban and rural landscapes in ways that prioritize community well-being, ecological health, and cultural heritage while also fostering connections with the planetary community?*

8. *How can participatory decision-making processes be institutionalized within local governance structures, ensuring that community voices are heard and valued in shaping policies and initiatives?*

9. *What opportunities exist for fostering networks of mutual support and solidarity between local communities, enabling them to share resources, knowledge, and experiences in addressing common challenges?*

10. *How can we develop holistic indicators of community well-being that go beyond traditional measures of economic growth, incorporating dimensions such as social cohesion, ecological health, and cultural vitality?*

By grappling with these and related questions and embracing the principles of Transition Design, Cosmopolitan Localism and an ecological worldview, we can pave the way for a more just, sustainable, and resilient future for all.

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Resumen: Este documento presenta tres estrategias clave para la transición de las sociedades del siglo XXI hacia futuros más sostenibles, equitativos y deseables a largo plazo. En primer lugar, se hace hincapié en la necesidad de pasar intencionadamente de una visión mecanicista del mundo a una perspectiva más ecológica. En segundo lugar, aboga por abordar los problemas complejos como estrategia para las transiciones hacia la sostenibilidad, basándose en el enfoque del Diseño de Transición. Por último, propone el localismo cosmopolita como concepto visionario que fomenta nuevos modelos de vida basados en una visión holística del mundo. El localismo cosmopolita fomenta las relaciones simbióticas entre las comunidades y el mundo natural con una conciencia global y el intercambio de conocimientos y habilidades. Al adoptar estas estrategias, las sociedades pueden hacer frente a la complejidad de los retos contemporáneos y cultivar comunidades resistentes en armonía con el medio ambiente.

Palabras clave: Localismo cosmopolita - Cosmovisión ecológica - Transiciones sostenibles - Futuros equitativos - Diseño para la Transición

Resumo: Este artigo apresenta três estratégias fundamentais para a transição das sociedades do século XXI para futuros de longo prazo mais sustentáveis, equitativos e desejáveis. Em primeiro lugar, ele enfatiza a necessidade de mudar intencionalmente de uma visão de mundo mecanicista para uma perspectiva mais ecológica. Em segundo lugar, defende a abordagem de problemas perversos como uma estratégia para transições de sustentabilidade, com base na abordagem de Design de Transição. Por fim, propõe o Localismo Cosmopolita como um conceito visionário que promove novos padrões de vida baseados em uma visão holística do mundo. O Localismo Cosmopolita incentiva relações simbióticas entre as comunidades e o mundo natural com uma consciência global e troca de conhecimentos e habilidades. Ao adotar essas estratégias, as sociedades podem navegar pelas complexidades dos desafios contemporâneos e cultivar comunidades resilientes em harmonia com o meio ambiente.

Palavras-chave: Localismo cosmopolita - Visão ecológica do mundo - Transições sustentáveis - Futuros equitativos - Projeto de transição